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Editorial

Since the time I attended the Berlin Congress on Evangelism in 1966 I have become increasingly convinced that every theologian must be a communicator and every communicator a theologian. As a generalization, theologians use concepts and jargon which only an elite understand while the communicators keep on repeating the ABC of the gospel. All of us are in danger of answering questions people are asking no longer or have not yet asked. We preach forgiveness of sin while some are struggling to eliminate desire in order to overcome suffering. We preach the hope of resurrection to those who look for reincarnation. We are preoccupied with heaven while others are searching for enough food to keep themselves alive. We strive to control creation; others are struggling to harmonize with it.

The Bible is a perfect model of the Word of God contextualized in human culture without losing its message. In the same way Jesus Christ, who became man for others, never lost his identity as the Son of God. There are few good biblical commentaries that are both exegetically faithful and contextually relevant. This sad fact is reflected in modern preaching and in Christian writing. The message may be biblically accurate but dull and incomprehensible, or it may be topically exciting but without roots. Examine the bookshelf of any Christian book shop.

The crisis of our fast changing world is a breakdown in communication which is seen in marriage and family tension, in community misunderstanding and in the fragmentation of political and social life. It is also the cause of much of the division in our churches and the confusion of 'personality cultism' with the true defence of the truth.

This issue of the *Evangelical Review of Theology* focuses on the search for a coherent theology of communication. It is dedicated to the forthcoming ICMC International Working Conference for Christians in Media, 22nd–27th September 1991, at Sheffield, England. The conference expects to draw together over a thousand communicators from many countries. They will be working in four media units: audio and radio; print and publications; video, film and TV; traditional media. Details of the conference are given elsewhere in this issue.

Communication uses a plurality of symbols, theology probes the depths of reality. We are challenged to understand the relation of symbols to reality and to communicate God's reality through the symbols of contemporary living. This task is also central to understanding the Bible, whether it is the first twelve chapters of Genesis or the sacrificial system of the Pentateuch; the poetry of the Psalms or the apocalyptic literature of Daniel and Revelation. Such understanding will unite us and misunderstanding divide us, as is all too evident in the phrase "This is my body". [p. 196](#)

Do we interpret the gospel to our contemporary world or do we inculturate it? What is the relationship of form and content? Can the form be transformed without losing the givenness of the content? Can Jesus Christ, incarnate as a Jew, be communicated as a black African or as a Filipino without Christ losing his biblical identity? Why is the parabolic method used so effectively by Jesus, but largely ignored by us today?

A theology of communication must relate three realities, each with their own symbols: the text of Scripture set in Hebrew and Greek cultures; the people to whom the gospel has been communicated and whose cultures and symbols are generally very different from those of the biblical record; and thirdly, the communicators who (if they are faithful to their missionary calling) will represent a third cultural reality. Doing theology is a colloquy between all three. This demands that we develop a hermeneutical method that is consistent with the methodology of the biblical writers.

The call to articulate a theology of communication is an urgent one. It demands disciplined research commitments, involvement in mission and a spirituality grounded in Christ and his Church. p. 197

Christian Literature and Society in the '90s

Melba Maggay

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There is an African proverb which says, 'When the elephants fight, the grass gets trampled.' Today I shall try to speak from the perspective of people who always get trampled upon in the big events of our history.

The topic assigned to me is 'Christian Literature and Society in the 1990s'. Let me start by quoting a *haiku* from the Japanese poet, Bashra:

Nearing autumn's close,
my neighbour, how does he live,
I wonder.

In brief, Bashra the poet evokes an association of images: autumn's close drawing near ... the leaves fall ... slowly, the colours lose their flaming red ... the gripping chill is in the air ... you can almost picture a desolate twig lacerating the grey sky. And the poet shudders at the bleak prospect of a dark deep winter, and he calls to mind his neighbour, and wonders how he must live in the face of it. A feeling for a common human thread and a sense of the other. A passion for connectedness. For gossip about other people, other worlds. A certain curiosity that wants to know whether they do laugh and suffer there. These have always marked much great literature, till fairly recently.

The modern cult of the artist in isolation, the anti-hero, at odds with society alienated from his community, is precisely that. Modern. It has its roots in the breakdown of the old order of meaning occasioning a disruption of sensibility between artist and audience. And the retreat of literature, like religion, into a highly privatized world of its own invention. Mumbling in corners about the meaning of its own symbols.

In this time together, we shall explore a way of reconnecting somehow the vital currents of our lives. And of life in the mass, what Henry James calls 'swan life', and try to recover again a sense of context, of relatedness, of solidarity, with the life of the world as we bring to it the Word. p. 198

OUR TASK AS WORD KEEPERS

We shall start by examining afresh the nature of our task as Wordkeepers. And then moving on to the implications of this task in the life of our societies today. First the task of Word-keeping.

The Power of Naming

The first aspect of this is what I would call the power of naming. Of finding a word for the world as it really is. We are told that a part of the image of God is the power of naming. That perspicuity in putting a finger in what ails us, what burns our hearts, what lacerates our souls and makes all our dreams destitute.

Literature and its gift for words is especially equipped with the power to articulate a world that most of us only half-understand, because we only half-grasp with the power of a tongue. Modern linguistic theory tells us that we are not likely to know that which we do not have words for. We do not see what has not been labelled for us beforehand. Language shapes our view of the world just as much as the world shapes our language. For example, I am told that Eskimos have at least thirty different words for snow. And the Arabs have many names for horses. And those of us, like Filipinos, who always lived in the reality of community and take this for granted, do not know the meaning of privacy. We have no word in Filipino for privacy. The words give us grip. We feel we have colonized a corner of reality once we are able to put a word to it.

Now ancient imagination long ago was already aware that words and symbolic language are somehow crucial to our survival. Myths and fairy tales tell us that so much hangs on a guess ... a password, a ritual answer to a riddle, the frog can turn into a prince, doors shall open. The curse and wasted earth shall be healed and land formulate certain ritual questions that will wrest answers out of the riddle of our existence. I suspect these are intimations, remnants of a distant past. Memory of the early dawn of history when there was yet a unity between word and deed. When what was said was just as good as done. God said, and it was so.

It is said that part of the power of the Beatles, as cult heroes of the 60s, was their ability to verbalize the half-perceived alienation and restlessness of an entire generation. Likewise, I think, the power of Christian literature in society, or of all literature for that matter, is directly proportionate to its power to name the fears and articulate the hopes of an increasingly complex and hopelessly destitute world. All around us today is the feeling that the world is out of joint, yet most of [p. 199](#) us have no way of knowing why this is so. For the most part, people suffer as a brute suffers with the dumb animal stare and an incoherent yelp of pain.

Many literary critics attribute this crisis of meaning to a loss of a sense of original sin. The death of God, and the erosion of standards by which behaviour may be clearly assessed and sharply judged, has ultimately deprived people of a clear conception of the human dilemma. The substitution of private vision for centuries of a common faith tradition has resulted not merely in the fading of right and wrong into contingent obstructions, but also in the failure of literature to arrive at what an American novelist calls 'an adequate definition of terror'. The literary critic, Walter Aaron, has said that there are really only two kinds of righteous: those who believe in original sin and those who do not. Now those of us who do must tell society what is wrong—and why it is wrong. Others have no such insight. We need to articulate a tragic vision that is deeper and more terrible than a failed social system or a breakdown in our machines. And thus we restore a measure of dignity and coherence to our recurrent agonies and the daily failures of our dreams. 'To be a man,' says Robert Penn Warren, 'is both a crime and a penance.' We wound others because of what we are and suffer because of what we want to be.

As Christians we must name this monster which thwarts our best efforts and in general makes for what Auden calls 'human unsuccess'. Now this is a very bleak truth. But as someone has said, in the same way that man took of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and fell, it is possible that if he takes another bite he may come close to a measure of redemption. Too often, we rush in with answers before we have even

begun to name the problem. We are generous with answers to questions nobody else is asking! Gertrude Stein, in the throes of her dying, asked of the glittering *literati* who were gathered around her deathbed ‘What is the answer?’ Failing to elicit a response from her usually talkative audience, she then asked, ‘What is the question?’ In today’s struggle for insight, it is just as important to be able to pose the right questions—to track down the dragon to its lair. Name the places ‘where evil comes off softly like a flower’. That is a phrase from Budler.

Prophecy

This brings us to the second major aspect of Word-keeping. That is prophesying, or bringing the Word of God to the world as he would like it to be. T. S. Eliot once made the famous remark that ‘a poet has not a personality to express, but a medium’. A sensibility through [p. 200](#) which a way of looking at the world presents itself. Now this is especially true, I think, of Christian literature. Our words have power only in so far as they function as a medium of the Word. Just as prophecy has authenticity only in so far as it can lay claim to the formula, ‘Thus saith the Lord’. Our subjection to the Word must be such that it makes us into a medium of the recreative power of God. Just like Jeremiah who speaks of the Word as fire in his bones. A burning fire so sovereign, so irresistible that he cannot hold it in. He says, ‘I am weary of holding it in.’

The prophetic word is essentially a critiquing word. Prophecy involves primarily the bringing of bad news. It is the announcement that all those idols upon which we base our confidence, and the enthusiasms of our time, are not going to work. The prophets spoke to Israel on two basic themes, which I think we need to recover: idolatry and oppression. They named the powers that had become lures in their culture, and the ways in which Israel had turned away from its calling to do justice and righteousness—violating the laws of love both for God and for neighbour. Likewise we need to name the idols of our time and tear them down; and bring God’s word of judgement against injustice, and the ready surrender of the church to powerful forces that make us hesitate to dissent.

Among modern writers, I think Dostoyevski is a good example of this prophetic naming. As early as the last century, even before Nietzsche, he had already prophesied in many of his novels that with the downfall of the altar of God, one is left merely with either the anthill or the superman. You are left either with the anonymous collective, or with him to whom pretensions to grandeur are such that he makes himself a law unto himself. In the language of Roskolnikov, one of his characters, ‘one to whom everything is permitted’.

In verse 10 of Jeremiah chapter 1, Jeremiah’s prophetic task is described in terms of four negatives and two positives. ‘See,’ God says, ‘I appoint you today over nations and kingdoms, to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.’ The prophetic office is predominantly a critical element in our societies. It is predominantly a literature of doom and gloom even if we don’t like it. It disturbs our peace and is often seen as subversive and unpatriotic. You remember Jeremiah undermining the royal court’s confident expectations that they could throw off the yoke of Babylon. Instead he was suggesting capitulation.

Now all of that sounded unpatriotic and defeatist and negative. But you see, God’s Word is first of all a word of radical rupture—of eruption and upheaval before it can even become a word of [p. 201](#) reconciliation. This is why I find televangelists, and the health and wealth gospel, most disturbing from where I sit in the world. You never get the sense that coming to God would mean a tearing down, a shattering of our cherished orthodoxies and bad commercial habits. A bursting of the old wine skins of tradition and idolatrous culture. Yet our power to critique as a society directly depends on our ability to be

incarnate. The ability to make the Word flesh. To give it a body that people can see, and hear, and touch.

THE WORD IN CONTEXT

Now this brings us to the second part of this morning's reflection, which is the Word in the world and what it means to put it in context. The Word in context means that we need to be able to come down from our ladder of obstruction. Communication theorist Hayakawa has this notion of a ladder of obstruction, and we need to be able to come down and make the word culturally specific. To ask questions, like 'Who, or what, are the powers of our culture?' Is it mammon, materialism, family, tradition? What does it mean to say 'Jesus is Lord' in a society bound by iron tradition or in the West by heartless economic forces? What is God's Word of power to the weak and powerless? To those of us who live in animistic cultures, in constant fear of the spirits? To the poor who live a precarious existence in the face of systemic viscosity and powerful forms of injustice? I think it was Martin Luther who said, 'We are not really preaching the Word if it fails to speak at that precise moment of crisis in our time.' We may be preaching the Scripture verses, but, he says, we are not preaching the Word.

Likewise, I think it is not really preaching the Word to go from culture to culture with a one, two, three point formulation of the Gospel that fails to speak at that joint where a society or a culture most hurts. The fact that a majority of the world is poor means that much of what we produce as Christians ought to be a literature from the underside of history. A literature that takes the reality of the poor and sits where they sit in imaginative empathy. Now unfortunately much of our literature, especially Christian literature, is dominated by the themes arising from the problems of the affluent West.

Decolonizing our Imagination

Those of us in the Third World have a special obligation to put a stop to the massive exportation of irrelevant books and the pamphleteering [p. 202](#) that does not take into account Lazarus sitting at the gate. Those of us who have been educated in a Western way need to de-colonize our imagination. I say this to myself as well. I learned to speak and write from a consciousness of powerlessness and weakness. We must learn, as Third World people who have had the privilege of much education and much Western contact, to write again from the perspective of people who all the time live in extremes.

I think Russian literature, perhaps of all national literatures excluding the Third World, is a good example of what it means to reflect this bias of giving voice to the voiceless. As one of Solzhenitsyn's characters once remarked, 'Have you ever noticed what makes the characters of Russian literature different from those of Western literature? In the West they have no time for anything except their careers, money, and fame. But in Russia, they don't even need food and drink. All they want is justice.'

Sensitivity to Cultural Distinctives

Now, besides the feeling for social need, if the Word is to be in context there must be a sensitivity to people's ways of thinking and feeling. Many in the world today (and I think this is true as much for women as for men) think relationally and in concrete images. This is true for those of us who live in oral societies, as well as for those in the West who are raised in the culture of electronic media. The French sociologist, Jacques Fllul, has written a book recently called *The Humiliation of the Word*, lamenting the eclipse of the word by the dominant influence of the image in modern culture. Now McLuhan long ago has given us the insight that the medium is the message. That the medium itself, regardless of content, does something to us. And one of the things that print does as a medium, he says, is to change our minds so that they think in linear sequence. To think in a detached, analytical way. In contrast, electronic media, especially radio, bring us back to the

wordless, mythic world of tribal drums. To the simultaneous association of words with images.

Now this means, I think, that our young people today are cognitively of the same orientation as a tribal man whose traditional culture is altogether by-passing the 400-year age of literacy which has characterized the West, and is leaping straight into the visceral and oral culture of electronic media. In the Philippines, for instance, 90 per cent of our population is reached by radio and 60 per cent have TV. Even before we have a literate reading population, although we are functionally literate, the Philippines is about the third highest in [p. 203](#) literacy in Asia ... 87 to 89 per cent. So in a way we have come full circle.

Today's children of electronic media are perceptually the same as the illiterate medieval devotee who needed icons to remind him of the great themes of his faith. It is interesting that within the churches, the dominant cognitive culture belongs still to the age of literacy. Analytical, sequential, propositional, verbal. It is a cultural link that I think can be traced to the historically symbiotic relationship between the rise of Reformation faith and the invention of the printing press. I think it is not an accident that the two came together. In the 16th century, medieval Christendom shifted from the altar to the pulpit. From an emphasis on the image to an emphasis on the Word. And since then the Protestant tradition has had a strong propositional quality.

There is no need, however, to criticize this, to drive a wedge between the word and the image. For in the incarnate Christ, the Word has become an image. The invisible God has been made visible. There is both a verbal and non-verbal dimension to the gospel. In other words, people need not only words to hear, but images to see. Sounds ... blowing the trumpet, as well as sights, if people are to believe. Having said this, we must not lose sight of the fact that the gospel is first of all a story rather than a proposition. It is news, rather than views. It is an event. Something that has happened. In the language of Paul, this thing was not done in a corner. It is an event rather than an idea. It is primarily something that speaks to that part of us which longs for poetry. Inside the humblest machine of modern life and culture. It speaks primarily to that part of us which longs for filling and imagination, in the face of so much that is abstract and cold and windowless in our life and in our faith.

Print, I think, need not be a dying medium. All it needs is to recover the language of feeling. And to put across the fact that pain is a language that God understands. In whatever medium we do it, we must go back to story telling. To fiction, rather than exposition. To poetry, rather than analysis. One of the things I lament about much Christian communication is that there is an undue emphasis on the linear and the technical. The bloodless language of the communications specialist ... which unfortunately most of us are, including myself.

In the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel, we read of the book of the law being found in the dusty corners of the temple in Josiah's reign. For a long time Israel had been in apostasy. The finding of the book of the law was shattering. It was first read in the presence of the king, and [p. 204](#) then of all the people. And the effect was electric. There was a rending of garmets and a putting on of sackcloth and ashes. The reading of it brought back the people to the ways of God and the faith of their fathers. Where tradition dies and people forget, a book can provide continuity, can preserve a people's historical memory. Now this is something that electronic media, with its more ephemeral images, cannot do.

Sensitivity to Kingdom Concerns

Finally, to incarnate the Word in the world demands sensitivity to the forms in which the kingdom takes shape historically. If we say that the kingdom has come, where is it in the

mass movements of our time? What is the new thing that God is doing in the world? Often the people of God miss their cues historically. This is true of the Filipino evangelical church. Four years ago in the 1986 revolution, people kept talking about [Romans 13](#), when I thought the relevant passage was [Revelation 13](#). It was time to dissent because the state had become demonic. Now, like the Jews who demand signs, we miss the kingdom when it does come.

One of the saddest verses I find in Scripture is that of [John 1:11](#). 'He came to that which was his own, but his own people received him not.'

For many centuries, the Jews kept looking and looking for the consolation of Israel. When he did come, they had no eyes for him. I think that part of our obtuseness, as people of God, has to do with our inability to see that the kingdom can happen in the most unlikely places—and using the most unlikely people. Who would have thought, for instance, that Gorbachev would become a kind of modern Cyrus, lifting the case that would free masses of people and eventually led to the crumbling of the Berlin Wall?

The kingdom always brings us face to face with that margin of mystery where all our calculations collapse, and we become aware of a power that is other than the kingdoms of men in our history. Also, the coming of the kingdom is uncomfortable, because it often threatens ... it is disruptive and destabilizing ... it splits wineskins ... it turns the world upside down ... breaks window panes to let in all the air—especially for those of us who are trapped by socio-economic forces and windowless ideologists. Everywhere in the world today, we see the axe being laid at the root of the tree. Authoritarian regimes in Asia and Latin America have fallen, or like China are under the threat of [p. 205](#) falling. Eastern Europe is determinedly pushing its iron governments for more democratic space.

America, with its increasing internal poverty and loss of prestige, is suffering symptoms of what a political scientist has diagnosed as 'imperial overstretch'. A tired and an older Western Europe speaks of the end of history. Now that we have seen what someone calls the 'final triumph ... the final triumph of literal democracy and the end of ideology', a foreign policy expert here in Washington, named Francis Fukuyama, even predicts that we are about to enter a *boring* phase in human history. The courage, the idealism which once characterized the old ideological battles between the East and the West will fade and pass away. 'All that we shall be left with,' he said, 'are merely technical questions—of how to produce more growth and make the system work.'

It is obvious from all this that we are seeing in our time the breakdown of a global order which is organized along our artificially imposed ideological lines. In the West there is a crisis of meaning, in the Third World there is a crisis of paradigm. Ideology is to us as an idol that has failed. Neither capitalism nor communism remain credible philosophical systems for organizing an increasingly interconnected and pluralized world. So ours is a crisis moment. It is an exciting historical moment, which I think is cause for a renewed imagination, for a new vision of a just social order.

Christians must articulate afresh a vision which shall engage the tired idealism of a disillusioned world. The Church as the news-bearer of the coming kingdom has a golden opportunity to articulate a vision of what we would like to happen historically. And we need to find a way, as well, of loving the world even as it weeps for its lost gods.

To conclude, first today's crisis of paradigm requires of us the capacity to incarnate historically that part of the kingdom which is now. To articulate a vision in terms that are recognizable to our contemporaries. The best literature that contemporary Christendom has produced so far, has been either historical or mythical, I am sorry to say, like the fantasies of C. S. Lewis, the mythic worlds of Tolkien. I like both of them, but I think they are essentially historical. Or we have works that are historically frozen, like the poems of T. S. Eliot, built on fragments of a dying and derelict culture, and, I suspect, based on a

nostalgic longing for the old order and the stout-hearted sentences of medieval Christendom. What we need is a literature that articulates the great themes of our faith: suffering and salvation, within the sociological boundaries of our time.

Secondly, the intense crisis of meaning in modern societies p. 206 demands that we once again, in the language of Tolkien, 'put the monsters at the centre'. In other words, 'to help people look in the eye that which they fear the most instead of turning away literally from the disaster'. That is a phrase from Auden. The German poet Rilke in alluding to the story of the frog that turns into a prince assures us of something.

I would like to quote this, and end with it: 'That which we find most fearful, we shall find in the end also to be the most fateful, like this monster of a frog. At the centre of its terror and of its being is something that needs and wants our help.' And he concludes by saying, 'Perhaps all the dragons of our lives are really only princesses just waiting for us to be at once beautiful and brave.'

This article was a plenary address delivered at the *Media Association International Litt-World '90 Conference*, U.S.A. Melba P. Maggay is General Director of the Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture (ISACC) in Manila, Philippines and is an editor and writer. p. 207

Contextual Theologies: The Problem of Agendas

Harvie M. Conn

Reprinted with permission from Westminster Theological Journal No. 52 (1990).

Evangelism, as the communication of the gospel, never takes place in a vacuum and it never has done so. Historical events and situations have always shaped our confessions of faith. In this article the author, a former missionary in Korea, argues that the application of the biblical message to our contemporary world is necessary but not enough. We must go deeper into the historical and cultural context of the people with whom the gospel is being shared. The gospel must be inculturated, not just applied. This takes clarity and courage, for the danger of syncretism is never far away, but the call to live dangerously is always with us. Doing theology is more than a mental exercise; it comes from on-the-road involvement in the lives of people. It is the right relationship between text and context.

The author discusses the agenda of the Early Church, of AngloSaxon evangelicals today and of the emerging churches in the Two-Thirds World. He discusses how the Early Church Fathers, Justin Martyr, Clement and Origen, in their evangelistic concerns responded to the aspirations of pagan Greek philosophy and to the demeaning accusations of Celsus, yet were themselves captive to the rationalism of the educated few. The consequence of the

inadequacy of their understanding of sin is also discussed. The author then discusses how far the agenda of contemporary evangelicalism in the Western world is relevant to the agenda of the Two-Thirds World. Only when the message is presented in terms understood by its hearers, is the real scandal of the gospel made clear. This important article speaks to the heart of the hermeneutical crisis in developing a theology of communication which is both biblically faithful and culturally relevant.

Editor

Mention the word 'contextualization' in Reformed and evangelical circles and sooner or later another word pops up—syncretism. Why?

There are many answers to that question. Most certainly a basic one is our legitimate concern that the authority of the Bible will become [p. 208](#) lost in the plethora of localized theologies. If we start with our particular, historical situation, what will happen to the once-for-all character of the Bible as norm? In constantly taking account of the receptor cultures, isn't hermeneutic in danger of letting the medium become the message and the message become a massage? Will the 'sameness' of the Bible get lost in a diversity of human cultures?

There are plenty of illustrations to confirm these fears. Liberation theologies often reduce the Bible from canon to paradigm. Korea's Minjung theology often sounds, through the voices of some of its advocates, to be more Korean than biblical.

My purpose in this paper, however, moves in another direction. I wish to suggest that there is still another cause for fears, and this among those committed to the full inerrancy of Scripture. It is not as obvious to us as is the expression of doubts regarding the authority of the Bible. In fact, we are only beginning to recognize its potential for creating trouble. I speak of our lack of sophistication about the circumstantial issues which all theologies, including evangelical and Reformed ones, address.

To put it positively, I wish to underline the place of the historical context in rightly doing theology. I shall use several key figures from the early church to point out the liabilities of misjudging context and indicate how that misjudgment has affected our understanding of theology. And, finally, I shall make a few comments about how evangelicals in the Two-Thirds World are attempting to be more aware of this issue of context.

SHIFTS IN PERSPECTIVE

The basic purpose of theological reflection has never changed—'the reflection of Christians upon the gospel in the light of their own circumstances'.¹ John V. Taylor, the missionary statesman of the Church of England, remembers the heartbreaking moment when his son decided to give up on the Church. 'Father,' he said on one occasion as the two left church together, 'the preacher is saying all of the right things, but he isn't saying them *to anybody*. He doesn't know where I am and it would never occur to him to ask!'

Relevance and irrelevance are the words we have used in the past to justify the dilemma placed before us by Taylor's son. Are our sermons and our theology scratching where the world does not itch? How can [p. 209](#) we live out and share the gospel in such a way that the cultures of the world will respond, 'God speaks my language!?' 'If Jesus is the answer, what are the questions?'

In recent years, however, that question of relevance and what we have called 'application' has become more dominant. Much more attention is being paid now to how

¹ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985).

our context, our setting, is related to gospel response. Recent discussions in hermeneutics have underlined these questions in terms of ‘the two horizons’.² The global agendas of missionary Christianity are reminding us that our Anglo-Saxon applications don’t always fit in Uganda or Uruguay or BedfordStuyvesant. Evangelical cultural anthropologists are exploring this cultural terrain and questioning the ease with which we used to talk. Now, we speak not of application but of inculturation, not of relevance but of indigenization and/or contextualization.

Are John Taylor’s remarks about Africa true of Asia and North America and the Latin world as well?

Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that the Africans are asking, what would he look like? If he came into the world of African cosmology to redeem Man as Africans understand him, would he be recognizable to the rest of the Church Universal?³

In Japan, for example, the same problem can be illustrated another way. The word *tsumi* is used to translate the Christian worldview built into the word *sin*. But in a shame-oriented culture like Japan, *tsumi* comes closer to the English word *imprudent*. To the non-Christian Japanese it does not convey the idea of moral right or wrong or of sinning against God or even against duty. ‘The fearful thing about *tsumi* is rather the inherent potential of being discovered in the act and therefore shamed for being imprudent.’⁴ To the Christian, *tsumi* speaks of rebellion against God, lawlessness. To the non-Christian, *tsumi* points to the fear of being out of harmony with society and nature, of acts disapproved by humanity. How will the Christian cross this p. 210 ‘culture gap’ and still hold the gospel in his or her hands after passing over?

The average evangelical listening to this kind of example and this kind of question might easily respond, ‘This is a question of application.’ And, in a sense, this answer is still a useful one. On the simplest understanding of communication, this kind of response is good enough—if communication is understood simply as the strategic skill needed for gift-wrapping packages of information materials. But there is more to see and more to say than that.

Making the gospel relevant to the Japanese or a disillusioned young Englishman requires more than a ‘gift of words’. It requires a ‘gift for cultural understanding’. You can’t fool a cultural Archie Bunker by changing words like ‘this’ to ‘dis’ and ‘moron’ to ‘meathead’. Behind Archie’s judgments on Poles and Blacks and Jews and Jesus is a cultural world that informs him, a cultural agenda that must be seen, ‘dark glasses’ worn by Archie that tell him what God and his next door neighbour are supposed to look like.

Biblically oriented theologizing is the work of a gospel optician who must assist the reluctant patient in trying on a new set of glasses. Words like *tsumi* are more than crossword-puzzle answers for the right number of squares in a verbal game. They are suitcases in which the user packs all his or her cultural luggage. They are glimpses through a window into someone else’s cultural house. They are furniture arrangements that make the owner feel ‘comfortable’ and ‘at home’. They are cultural fences around a piece of property that say, ‘This belongs to me.’

² Harvie M. Conn, ed., *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 189–94.

³ John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (London: SCM Press, 1963) 24.

⁴ David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 268.

For theology to become theology, it must, at some time or other, rummage through those suitcases and be a Peeping Tom, looking through those windows. Reflecting biblically on what we find, on what we see, is called theology. It is what Bengt Sundkler called 'an ever-renewed re-interpretation to the new generations and peoples of the given Gospel, a representation of the will and the way of the one Christ in a dialogue with new thought-forms and culture patterns'.⁵

Theology, by this definition, is not a gentleman's hobby. Nor is it ever exclusively a Western, white gentleman's hobby. It is not simply the mental exercise of persons sitting on the high front balcony of a Spanish house watching travellers go by on the road beneath them.

The 'balconers' can overhear the travellers' talk and chat with them; they may comment critically on the way that the travellers walk; or they may p. 211 discuss questions about the road, how it can exist at all or lead anywhere, what might be seen from different points along it, and so forth; but they are onlookers and their problems are theoretical only.⁶

A biblically oriented theology is done by the travellers whose questions come from their involvement in the trip. They are questions that call not only for comprehension but for decision and action. They ask not only, Why is this so? but also, Which way to go?

Theology is always theology-on-the-road. And, in this sense, it is not simply a question of relevance or of application. It is not a twofold question of, first, theological interpretation, and then practical application. Interpretation and application are not two questions but one. As John Frame says, 'We do not know what Scripture says until we know how it relates to our world.'⁷ Theology must always ask what Scripture says. But it always asks in terms of the questions and answers our cultures raise. And to ask what Scripture says, or what it means, is always to ask a question about application.

Evangelical theologians in the Two-Thirds World seem more sensitive to all this than we do in the white, Western world. A 1982 gathering in Bangkok expressed their concern 'that our hermeneutic should both be loyal to historic Christianity and arise out of our engagement with our respective situations'.⁸ The same conference report says with concern, 'Churches of the Two Thirds World are in danger of bondage to alien categories. These do not permit them to meet adequately the problems and challenges of proclaiming Christ in our contexts.'⁹

Later in the same year (1982) appeared the Seoul Declaration, sponsored by the Asia Theological Association and bringing together Asia's evangelical theologians. Again, in even more explicit language, Western theology, 'whether liberal or conservative, conservative or progressive', was criticized for an agenda obsessed with problems of 'faith and reason', for abstractionism from life. It was said to have capitulated to the secularistic worldview associated with the Enlightenment. The report charged that 'sometimes it has been utilized as a means to justify colonialism, exploitation, and

⁵ Bengt Sundkler, *The Christian Ministry in Africa* (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1960) 281.

⁶ James I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973) 5.

⁷ John Frame, *Van Til the Theologian* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Pilgrim, 1976) 25.

⁸ Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds., *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 277.

⁹ *Ibid.*

oppression, or it has done little or nothing to change these situations'.¹⁰ Orlando Costas p. 212 comments that 'this situation may lack precision. However it does articulate a well-known criticism of Western theologies.'¹¹

Where can we trace the origins of these alleged problems? And how does the agenda of the Two-Thirds World differ from ours? These are the questions we seek to answer now.

Melba Maggay, a Filipino Christian, suggests where to begin.

Christians in Asia and Africa are taught to answer questions raised by Greek sophists in the fourth century. While we live in a culture still very much awed by the Power that can be clearly perceived in things that have been made, we start from the supposition that we are talking to post-Christian men long past the age of the mythical and therefore must belabour the existence of a supernatural God. We defend the Scriptures as if we speak to the scientific rationalist, and not to men who have yet to see nature 'demythologised,' stripped of the wondrous and the magical.¹²

History also reminds us that the Two-Thirds World's struggles with 'translating' the gospel into their own cultural setting is not unique. The Church did not begin with a prepackaged gospel kit and do its theologizing through a kind of cultural circumcision. Against the challenge of accretions and distortions brought about by tradition and cultural consensus, the message of the gospel was shaped. Even in the early years of the Church, evangelism was never proclamation in a vacuum and theology was not what was done by someone talking in someone else's sleep. Situations have always shaped our confessions of faith.

The early Church was not afraid of letting the culture set its gospel agenda, though it recognized the risks. Origen (c. 185–254) advocated what he called 'spoiling the Egyptians', taking from pagan thought and culture all that is good and true, and using it in the interests of Christian thought. He was not the first to make these demands. A new cultural context was forcing new questions on the church. The physical persecution of the church was shifting to more subtle levels of attack. Intellectual assaults were being mounted. Legal charges demanded answering. The church was increasingly isolating itself from any earlier identification as a Jewish sect. What was its relation to the world Jewish community?

A pioneer and innovator in answering these questions was Justin Martyr (c. 100–165). To the urbane Hellenistic world, he heralded Christianity as 'the only philosophy which I have found certain and p. 213 adequate'. The gospel and the best elements in Plato and the Stoics were seen as almost identical ways of apprehending the same truth. Between Christianity and Platonism 'there is no gulf fixed so great that the passage from the one to the other is impossible or unnatural'.¹³

The centre of harmonization for Justin lay in his concepts of the *Logos*. Using the Johannine vocabulary, Justin saw Jesus as the *Logos* inherent in all things and especially in the rational creation. All who have thought and acted rationally and rightly have done so because of their participation in Christ and universal *Logos* (*Apologia* 2.10.13). So both

¹⁰ Bong-Rin Ro and Ruth Eshenaur, eds., *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts* (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1984) 23.

¹¹ Orlando Costas, 'Evangelical Theology in the Two Thirds World', *TSF Bulletin* 9/1 (Sept.–Oct. 1985) 7–13.

¹² Melba Maggay, 'The Indigenization of Theology', *Patmos* 1/1 (1979) 1.

¹³ Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) 11–12.

Abraham and Socrates were 'Christians before Christ'. Each rational being shares in the universal Logos. We possess a piece of this Logos, like a seed sown by the Divine Sower. Each philosopher speaks the truth according to one's share of this seed, and according to one's ability to perceive its implications.

Without being critical at this stage in the argument, at least we must recognize now Justin's effort to communicate Christ according to the agenda of his hearers. His ultimate intention was not to carry out a kind of philosophical penetration of the Christian message and blend Plato with Jesus. It was to remove the impression that Christianity was just another religion. In view of its universality, it was able to embrace them all. His goal was evangelistic, that of presenting Christianity as the fulfilment of a longing and desire in paganism.

Others followed Justin, speaking also to a context that drove them to underline some of Justin's earlier emphases. The so-called Alexandrian school of the third century faced new antagonists who sought to push the church further into their Greek corner. Fifteen or twenty years after Justin, the Platonist Celsus wrote a blistering attack on Christianity. Celsus' arguments were an exact reversal of Justin's. He may in fact have been answering them directly.¹⁴ The Greeks, he contended, did not borrow from the Hebrews. It was, in fact, the reverse. Jesus had read Plato and Paul had studied Heraclitus. Christianity is a corruption from the primordial truths enshrined in the ancient polytheistic tradition. How does one explain so many Christian deviations, then? Replies Celsus, 'The majority of Christians are stupid!' The dullwittedness of the majority of Christians is no accidental fault to him, and certainly not a virtue. It is symptomatic of the inherently irrational and anti-intellectual character of Christianity. Adding to this assault was the growing strength of Gnosticism, 'a stepping stone from Plato to p. 214 Plotinus'. Obsessed with evil, it consisted essentially in a radical rejection of this world as being at best a disastrous accident and at the least a malevolent plot.¹⁵

Against this context, men like Origen and Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) shaped their presentation of the gospel. Philosophy for the Hellenistic world was *paideia*, the education of rational man. Greek culture was the pedagogue that prepared us for a new world culture. Clement, using [Gal 3:23](#) and its reference to the law as 'the pedagogue', presents Christianity as fulfilling 'this paideutic mission of mankind to a higher degree than has been achieved before'.¹⁶ Before the coming of Christ, he proposed, philosophy was necessary for the Greeks to obtain righteousness. Philosophy was their schoolmaster to bring them to Christ, just as the law was the schoolmaster for the Hebrews. In the philosophies of the ancient Greeks, the Logos revealed himself, though dimly and vaguely. In those philosophies, he prepared that world for the gospel which would be preached to it.

For Clement, there is only one true philosophy, 'the philosophy according to the Hebrew'. And since the Greeks have drawn from it, so we do also. This 'true philosophy' has two streams, Holy Scripture and Greek philosophy. They are like two rivers, at whose confluence Christianity springs forth (*Miscellanies* 6.8).

It was Clement's successor, Origen, who systematized even further this effort at communicating. And like his predecessors, his purposes were evangelistic. Eusebius, the Church historian, notes that 'a great many heretics, and not a few of the most

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 132–33.

¹⁵ Henry Chadwick, 'Philo and the Beginnings of Christian Thought', in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (ed. A. H. Armstrong; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 166.

¹⁶ Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) 60.

distinguished philosophers, studied under him diligently ... he became celebrated as a great philosopher even among the Greeks themselves'. Origen asserts that he does not intend to deviate by a hairsbreadth from the teaching of the Church. 'We confess that we do want to educate all men with the Word of God, even if Celsus does not wish to believe it' (*Contra Celsum* 3.54).

How will we judge these early 'borrowings from the Egyptians'? J. K. S. Reid, for example, sees Clement as roaming 'round the rich intellectual world of his day with a far greater sense of mastery than Christian theologians had hitherto shown, fearlessly rebutting such elements as are incongruous with the Christian faith, and just as p. 215 eagerly putting others to apologetic use'.¹⁷ Henry Chadwick sees Clement seeking 'to make the Church safe for philosophy and the acceptance of classical literature'.¹⁸ Before we dismiss Origen's work as 'biblical alchemy', we need to remember that nothing for Origen was true simply because Plato said it. In *Contra Celsum* and elsewhere he is occasionally prickly to the point of rudeness towards the classical tradition. For all these men, natural religion and natural ethics are not enough. There is salvation only in Christ and good works done before justification are useless. The soul of man is so weakened and distracted that it cannot be redeemed apart from the power and grace of God in Christ (*Contra Celsum* 4.19). Behind all of these formulations is the heart of the evangelist seeking to share Christ with his cultural world.

In short, the intentions of these men could not have been better. In the language of Michael Green, they sought

to embody biblical doctrine in cultural forms which would be acceptable in their society. Not to remove the scandal of the gospel, but so to present their message in terms acceptable to their hearers, that the real scandal of the gospel could be perceived and its challenge faced.... If Christ is for all men, then evangelists must run the risk of being misunderstood, of misunderstanding elements in the gospel themselves, of losing out on the transposition of parts of the message so long as they bear witness to him. Christians are called to live dangerously.¹⁹

Many of their mistakes, and many of ours, we can find understandable. What were they to say to pagan writers who charged that Christians promoted impiety to the gods, that they engaged in immoral practices, that their rejection of emperor worship was treasonable to the state? They answered by focusing on Christian ethics.

What gospel encouragement could they offer to a world fearfully aware of demonic activity and power? Celsus saw such demons as inferior subordinates of the great god. The Christians like Justin answered by focusing on Jesus' redemption as one that destroys the demons. 'The power of exorcism lies in the name of Jesus,' testified Origen (*Contra Celsum* 1.6). What answers could they give their critics who charged them with making blind assertions and giving no proof? They turned to an exposition of Christian as 'the true philosophy'.²⁰ p. 216

At the same time, there were wrong turns taken and lessons to be learned of a negative sort also for us and for the Two-Thirds World. I suggest that at least one part of their mistake may have been made in perceiving their context. They shifted the attention of the church to a new target or receptor audience. About the middle of the second century, a

¹⁷ J. K. S. Reid, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 53.

¹⁸ Chadwick, 'Philo', 180-81.

¹⁹ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 142.

²⁰ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (7 vols; repr. New York: Dover, 1961) 2.209-24.

large body of literature was aiming at the pagan majority of the population masses. But as the decades wore on, Christian writers spoke less and less to the illiterate masses. The Alexandrian School addressed people who read for the purpose of obtaining better information. 'They speak to the educated few, including the rulers of the Roman Empire. They address them individually as men of higher culture (*paideia*), who will approach such a problem in a philosophical spirit.'²¹ Thus the presentation of the gospel was drawn deeper into the pull of a rationalistic orbit. Holistic balance was distorted by the magnetic attraction of a philosophical outlook that cuts up reality into an intricate series of related philosophical problems.

A second related problem was their failure to deal with their own pre-understandings in evaluating the gospel agenda. Their predispositions, the presuppositions they brought to the theological task of hermeneutic, were themselves captive to the same charms of rational speculation. Clement of Alexandria came to Christianity by way of philosophy. Could one expect such a man to see easily the Christian as anyone other than the 'true Gnostic'? Origen was a professional philosopher. Like a dentist who looks at faces and sees mouths, he looked at Christianity and saw the *paideia* of humanity, Greek wisdom at the bottom line of divine providence.

And finally a third problem remained. The cultural agenda they chose to address showed sin's cracks and dents but no serious injury. Sin's side effects could be treated in an emergency room on an outpatient basis. There was no need for intensive care units. Culture was good 'and not an evil,' commented Origen. 'In fact, it is a road to virtue. It is no hindrance to the knowledge of God.' Rather it favours it (*Contra Celsum* 3.47, 49).

What of an antithesis between darkness and light? What of sin? Sin was the result of ignorance, not an inherited evil nature, argued Justin. With a highly optimistic confidence in human reasoning and free will, he fully expected that if the barriers of ignorance and misinformation were removed, the truth of Christ would shine in its own light. And if not, you could always blame the deceptions of demons. 'The devils made me do it.' Sin's darkness was no more apparent in the Alexandrian p.217 School. Clement was interested in free will, not inherited bondage or corruption of nature. And Origen reduced the fall to the state of preexistence, before the beginning of earthly life. Original sin became pre-original sin.

Given these perspectives, accommodation became an easier way to deal with the cultural agenda issue than antithesis. But searching in good will for points of contact can become like falling on pitchforks in haystacks. Borrowing too many things from a neighbour, no matter how well intended, left the Western world with a very cluttered theological attic.²²

Out of this came eventually a new understanding of how theology was formed. Theology saw itself as more and more an abstractionist task, a searching for essences untouched by the realities of the cultural context. The goal of theology became a rational display of the Platonic ideal. The Latin Fathers, with their legal training, reinforced this perception. The Cappadocian Fathers, Basil of Caesarea and the two Gregorys, in the second half of the fourth century, carry it on. In the language of Werner Jaeger:

Even in their high appreciation of Origen, to whom they often refer, they show that they, like him, think of theology as a great science based on supreme scholarship and as a

²¹ Jaeger, *Early Christianity*, 27.

²² For amplification of this criticism, consult C. Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969) 109–18.

philosophical pursuit of the mind. And this science is part of the entire civilization that is theirs and in which they feel at home.²³

Out of this, we suggest, comes a confusion of the Bible as norm with theology as a neutral search for the rationally ideal, the 'heavenly principles'. True theology is seen as *sui generis*, the liberating search of the mind for essence, core, unhindered by any kind of historical, geographical, or social qualifier. Theological pursuits are freed to become the Platonic search for abstract, rational principles.

Anglo-Saxon evangelicals are today properly concerned over current attitudes to biblical authority. Is the history we have just sketched also part of the reason why they become more fearful that any thinking which explores the tentative nature of theology will lead to a downward slide to syncretism? Do they see the rational core 'ideal' of theology being threatened? How much of that fear is biblically proper? And how much is controlled by a hidden agenda that assumes that theology, wherever it originates, is a rational given ontologized p. 218 out of reality? Has the evangelical in the Two-Thirds World seen this history better than we have?

THE AGENDA OF EVANGELICAL TWO-THIRDS WORLD THEOLOGIES

The emerging theologies in the Two-Thirds World share many things in common with Western models.

(1) They are intentionally contextual and occasional, as is all theological effort. One will not always find great theological systems. But these systems have come late to the Anglo-Saxon world as well. The first centuries of church history did not produce a systematician like Calvin or Luther until there had been an Augustine writing on soteriology or an Anselm on the atonement to feed into the larger stream. In fact, there may be those who do not want to build such systems in the church of the Two-Thirds World. On the part of some, this could very well be a part of the criticism of the Anglo-Saxon world of theology. Some apparently might fear any theological system that appears to be timeless and culturally universal.

(2) There is also a sense that this occasional, local character of theology is crucial if Christianity is to survive in its particular settings. And this too is a feeling shared with Justin and the Alexandrian School. We are aware, for example, that we must Christianize Africa. The African theologian shares that commitment with us. But with it, there is another question. How will we Africanize Christianity? How will we move from Christianity for Africa to Christianity in Africa? If Christianity is to survive in Africa, it must be seen as more than a relic of the colonial period. It must be truly African; it must speak to actual African concerns with an authentically African voice. The authenticity of all theology, argues one evangelical, depends on two factors: its Christian integrity and its cultural integrity.²⁴

(3) We share together as well an inability to break ourselves free from our cultural pre-understandings. The same weakened view of sin that encourages accommodation to our Greek and Latin cultures often inhibits theology in the Two-Thirds World. Is this not a major flaw, for example, in liberation theology? In its necessary protest against a reduction of sin to the merely private, is liberation theology still encumbered with too shallow a view of sin? Are some of the richest descriptions of sin in the Bible blurred? Is liberation theology willing to see sin as such a state of corruption that the elimination of

²³ Jaeger, *Early Christianity*, 74.

²⁴ Dick France, 'Christianity on the March', *Third Way* 1/21 (November 3, 1977) 3-5.

poverty, p. 219 oppression, racism, classism, and capitalism cannot alter the human condition of sinfulness in any radical way?²⁵

But, after we have admitted the similarities, we are still left with differences that may be pointing to more hopeful learning signs for the future of theology. It is to a few of these signs that I point now in closing.

1. There appears to be a more conscious awareness among Two-Thirds World theologies of the human, cultural context and contextuality as a key in the process of theologizing. These evangelicals appear to find it easier to admit that all theology has always been situational. It has always been a case of theology in context. At the same time, these evangelicals also distance themselves from those who argue that context takes precedence over text. Old doubts concerning the authority of the Bible can emerge again, they warn, under the cloak of an enculturated hermeneutics.²⁶

But even admitting this, there is still a lesson for us to learn whether it be from Korean Minjung theology or American Black theologies of a liberal orientation. Theology cannot be done in an ontological vacuum. Theology speaks out of the historical context; and theology must speak to that context.

2. There also appears to be in Two-Thirds World theologies a deeper appreciation of the social and cultural dimensions of the historical context than one finds elsewhere. These theologies have not made the mistake of the Alexandrian School and focused on the purely ontological and epistemological. Their setting does not seem to have allowed them that luxury. They have done their theologizing in a world of vast poverty, a world of oppressor and oppressed, a world of dependence and marginalization.

Where was theology to turn to respond to these issues? The agenda of inherited Anglo-Saxon theology did not speak to these issues. If theology was to speak to Two-Thirds World needs, it would need a new agenda. It would have to search for new answers. What does the Bible say about poverty and oppression? About nation-building and torture, racism and, dare I say it, sexism? The indices of Anglo-Saxon theological texts yield little fruit for these kinds of questions.

3. There also appears to be in Two-Thirds World theologies a p. 220 deeper interfacing with non-Christian religions. The churches of Asia especially have found it necessary to make the growth of the great traditions of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism a central emphasis in their theological development. Again, there seems to be little help in meeting this challenge from contemporary Anglo-Saxon theologies. Our world has left behind the interest in pagan religions shown by Justin and the Alexandrian School. We live in a post-Enlightenment world where we must spend our energies on Anglo-Saxon secularization and antisupernaturalism. There are some who fear an escalating self-preoccupation even of evangelical theology with its own welfare.

In the Buddhist context of Sri Lanka and Thailand, by contrast, theology finds itself oriented to questions of the nature of suffering, of impermanence and the non-self, of enlightenment. In Africa the dialogue is with Africa's traditional religions. What is the connection, if any, between Christian theology and African religions? Can Africa's religions become bridges, points of contact, for the development of a distinctly African sound to Christianity?

Anglo-Saxon theology will have much to learn from these studies. As our countries become increasingly pluralistic in religions, we will have to ask the same questions. We

²⁵ For a fuller exposition of these problems, consult Harvie M. Conn, 'Theologies of Liberation', in *Tensions in Contemporary Theology* (ed. S. Gundry and A. Johnson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986) 404-18.

²⁶ Ro and Eshenaur, *Bible and Theology*, 9-12, 23-24.

are already doing it with Judaism. Now our study of Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism must begin.

4. Finally, there is a new recovery in Two-Thirds World evangelical theologies of the missiological nature of theology. That missiological dimension was present in the classical theologians we paid attention to at the beginning of this paper. But the results of their encounter led theology further away from that dimension. By contrast, this missiological dimension is being recovered in the Two-Thirds World theologies. In some settings, such as Asia or most of Africa, theology is forced to do its work without the benefit of the *corpus christianum*. In this setting theologizing has a more 'missiological' sound to it. It is done with more consciousness that the non-Christian world is eavesdropping.

In settings like Latin America and among blacks in South Africa and North America, the church also sees itself as a marginalized minority. But in this instance their world is the world of institutionalized Christendom. But, either because of oppression or racism, they are forced to do their reflective work 'from the underside'. In these context, they carry on their efforts in spite of the *corpus christianum* or directly to it. In both of these contexts, theology then sees itself as a witness of a prophetic sort. The theological tone is more 'missiological'. Theologians sound more like evangelists. p. 221

THE REAFFIRMATION OF 'SITUATIONAL' THEOLOGIZING

The lessons from the early Church and from the Two-Thirds World converge. Contextualization is not a new discovery; it has always been a characteristic of theology as such. Paul's 'task theology' is a biblical pattern for our own theologizing. Adrio König puts it this way:

All theology, all reflection about the Bible should be done contextually, i.e., taking into consideration the context or situation of the theologian and the church. Everyone who thinks systematically about the meaning and implications of the biblical message should deliberately take up his own situation in his thinking. Theology is practiced in and from within a specific situation, but also in terms of and with a view to a specific situation.²⁷

This is just saying that theology must be biblical but it need not be borrowed. Even evangelical theology will have a different look when it is shaped in a context where Confucius, not Kant, is king.

So a different twist to theology seems to be developing in the Two-thirds World. It is addressing questions not usually dealt with by evangelical mainstream theologians in the northern hemisphere—ancestor practices in East Asia and Africa, Buddhist worldviews oriented to suffering. Muslim misunderstandings of Jesus, political and economic issues. 'It offers critical evaluations of western theology and affirms at the same time its shared commitment to the authority and integrity of the Bible. It fears bondage to alien categories and confesses its loyalty to historic Christianity. It does not ask for approval but for affirmation.'²⁸ One will hear sounds from the evangelical of the Two-Thirds World that may appear strange at first to Anglo-Saxon ears tuned to a Reformation credal history through which the Two-Thirds World has not passed. Why will it sound different?

After a lengthy study of the 1982 Bangkok and Seoul statements referred to earlier, Orlando Costas answers our question this way:

²⁷ Adrio König, 'Contextual Theology', *Theologia evangelica* 14/3 (Dec. 1981) 37–43, p. 37.

²⁸ Harvie M. Conn, 'Looking to the Future: Evangelical Missions from North America in the Years Ahead', *Urban Mission* 5/3 (Jan. 1988) 28.

Evangelical theologians in these parts of the world are appropriating the best of their spiritual tradition and are putting it to use in a constructive critical dialogue with their interlocutors in and outside of their historical space. For them the evangelical tradition is not locked into the socio-cultural experience of the West. They insist that they have the right to p. 222 articulate theologically the evangelical tradition in their own terms and in light of their own issues.²⁹

Is not that our common calling in every age and in every cultural setting? And from it will there not come ultimately perhaps the richest contribution of all to the task of theology—the reminder to us all of what theology truly rooted in biblical revelation and addressing our real contexts can offer us? The ultimate test of any theological discourse, after all, is not only erudite precision but also transformative power. ‘It is a question of whether or not theology can articulate the faith in a way that is not only intellectually sound but spiritually energizing, and therefore, capable of leading the people of God to be transformed in their way of life and to commit themselves to God’s mission in the world.’³⁰

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Christian Communication and Religious Pluralism: Capitalizing on Differences

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The author of this article, who has had missionary experience in Japan, questions the rightness of always looking for similarities, bridges, common ground and redemptive analogies in our task of communicating the gospel to people of other faiths. He thinks that emphasizing likenesses among religions is illusive, and the risk of emasculating propositional truth while ‘coronating’ personal experience is very real. He quotes with approval Hendrik Kraemer and Hans Reudi Weber in their emphasis on contrasts and differences. By contrast he argues that the Christian faith is qualitatively different from other faiths and that it is through comparison and contrast that the uniqueness of the gospel can be most effectively communicated. In an age of religious pluralism and relativistic dialogue, this warning needs to be carefully considered. However, the article raises for us the fundamental issue of the scope and limits of revelation itself. Is there a valid distinction between God’s universal creational revelation and his particular salvific revelation as recorded in the Bible? Unless our theology of communication tackles this basic issue our practice of communication is in danger of being faulty and misleading.

²⁹ Costas, ‘Evangelical Theology’, 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

Editor

In recent times mission thinkers especially have expended a great deal of time and energy to discover one or another kind of similarity between peoples, cultures, and religions. Many have become convinced that the key to effective missionary communication is to be found in locating 'bridges', establishing 'common ground', looking for 'points of contact', ferreting out 'eye-openers', and discovering 'redemptive analogies'. Others are preoccupied with a type of interreligious dialogue that overcomes religious rivalry and antagonism by engaging on a quest for commonalities and agreement.

Far be it from me to argue that this pursuit of similarities and [p. 224](#) commonalities is wholly a mistaken one. But, focusing on the area of religion especially, I will argue that likenesses are far more elusive than much of the literature would seem to indicate: that the resort to similarities entails some clearly identifiable risks: and that the differences between the various religious faiths possess tremendous potential for Christians when communicating Christ to people of other cultures and people of our own culture as well.

ELUSIVE LIKENESSES AMONG RELIGIONS

Fearing the erosion of the Christian uniqueness on the one hand and feeling the necessity of communicating the Christian gospel on the other, the brilliant Hendrik Kraemer gave a great deal of thought to the whole idea of common ground before writing his classic in 1938, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, Kraemer concluded that one must have a *totalitarian* view of the world's religions—i.e, that the 'parts' can only be understood within the context of the whole—and that the gulf between Christianity and these religions is unbridgeable apart from the attitude and disposition of the missionary. He writes,

It seems rather upsetting to make the missionary the point of contact. Nevertheless it is true, as practice teaches. *The strategic and absolutely dominant point in this whole important problem, when it has to be discussed in general terms, is the missionary worker himself.* Such is the golden rule, or, if one prefers, the iron law, in this whole matter. The way to live up to this rule is to have an untiring and genuine interest in the religion, the ideas, the sentiments, the institutions—in short, in the whole range of life of the people among whom one works, *for Christ's sake and for the sake of those people.* Whoever disobeys this rule does not find any real point of contact. (1963:140 [italics Kraemer's])

To understand Kraemer at this point one must take into account the fact that he had witnessed the seduction of missions by universalists at the Jerusalem Conference of the International Missionary Council in 1928. Also he had been shaken by the 1932 report of the Laymen's Inquiry under the leadership of William Hocking—a report which says concerning the non-Christian faiths,

... all fences and private properties in truth are futile: the final truth, whatever it may be, is the New Testament of every existing faith.

We desire the triumph of that final truth: we need not prescribe the route. It appears probable that the advance toward the goal may be by way of the immediate strengthening of several of the present religions in Asia, Christian and non-Christian together.... We will look forward, not to the destruction of these religions, but to their continued coexistence with [p. 225](#) Christianity, each stimulating the other in growth toward the ultimate goal, unity in the completest religious truth. (1932:44)

Writing out of similar concerns for the preservation of Christian uniqueness in the face of this challenge. Edmund Perry made the gulf between the Christian faith and non-Christian religions just as wide or wider than did Kraemer. Perry (1958:88) writes,

Since from the viewpoint of Gospel faith the one true and only Living God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and since the Gospel alone brings men to this God, all other faith claims and systems lead men away from him. Religion is therefore, first of all, the *generic* term comprehending the universal phenomenon of men individually and collectively being led away from God in manifold ways by diverse claims and systems.

Kraemer and Perry make some very telling arguments for their conclusions. I only cite them here to demonstrate that the search for similarities between the Christian faith and false faiths is not an easy one and, in some significant sense, may be an impossible one. In the final analysis, it may be that one must confine the search for similarities to spheres of culture other than that of religion—perhaps (as Kraemer did) in the nature of man himself.

THE RISKS OF EMPHASIZING SIMILARITIES

If we claim any significant uniqueness for Christ and the Christian message, the resort to similarities entails certain very real risks. For the sake of this discussion, let us assume for the moment that certain aspects of the various religions somehow reflect divine initiatives and represent common human strivings, and therefore do yield similarities of whatever kind. Even then, unless the Christian communicator is cautious in the use of the teachings, values, practices, or strivings that appear to be shared by the various religious faiths, the end result may be to compound confusion rather than to increase clarity.

At least four risks should be recognized when emphasizing seeming similarities between religions.

First, there is the risk of reinforcing the mistaken idea that differences between religions are merely historical accretions and that, if one presses behind apparent differences, one will discover that all religions are essentially the same and involve the worship of the same God.

Following a recent lecture that I gave on the challenge of the New Age Movement, a man claiming to be a Christian believer rather indignantly assailed me for using such words as ‘challenge’, ‘confrontation’, p.226 and ‘deception’. ‘After all,’ said he, ‘the walls of misunderstanding have been built up only gradually through the centuries. If you go back to the early scriptures and doctrines of the various faiths you will find that they are in basic agreement. The same God is behind them all.’

Tragically, from my point of view, this kind of thinking is common today and has been throughout history. The Vedas, for example, insist that ‘The Real is one, but sages name it variously’ (*Rig Veda* I: 169). But if this thinking is tragically common, it is also partly erroneous. It should be seriously challenged, not unwittingly encouraged! It is impossible to read the Old Testament on its own terms, and conclude that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was somehow, behind the Baals and the Ashteroth of the Canaanites. As for the New Testament, Paul even goes as far as to say that Satan himself is the ‘god of this age’ and that he blinds the eyes of unbelievers so that the light of the gospel is hidden from men and women! ([2 Corinthians 4:4](#) NIV).

Second, there is the risk of adding fuel to the pervasive idea that whatever the differences in their origins and teachings, the various religions lead to a common goal. This assessment is expressed in a variety of ways, depending on the historical and cultural

circumstances, but the idea is both persistent and pervasive. In our culture, for example, people often look at world religions and conclude that ‘all roads lead to Rome’. Upon hearing the Christian message, many of my Buddhistically inclined Japanese hearers responded with the familiar Japanese adage, ‘There are many paths on Mt. Fuji, but they all lead to the summit.’ This is stated despite vague but commonly held notions that Japanese eventually become some kind of god or *hotoke*, the more explicit Buddhist teaching that the goal for which people should strive is Nirvana, and the obvious conclusion that neither of these analogies is in any way compatible with biblical teaching.

Third, there is the risk of an implied agreement with those who hold that doctrinal statements and credal confessions are relatively unimportant while personal faith and religious experience are all-important.

Consider, for example, the position of the Muslim scholar Mahoud Ayoub. He speaks of the ‘sin’ of ‘... reducing *faith* as a dynamic interrelation of human beings to an abstract theological doctrine or dogma’ (1985: 53–54). While all of us can recognize that possibility, we must also recognize the danger of divorcing ‘concept, creed and doctrine’ from subjective faith and religious experience in such a way as to make the latter mean anything that we want it to mean. Ayoub (1985:53–54 falls into this trap of his own making and as a result p. 227 makes all the ‘prophets, sages and saints’ of the various religions—whether Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, or Christianity—exemplars and models of one faith, the content of which cannot be clearly defined to anyone but the nobility of which can be wholeheartedly enjoined upon all.

My point is not that all employments of the similarities and commonalities approach lead to this kind of confusion, but only that they entail the risk of emasculating propositional truth while coronating personal experience. This is done in disregard to the recurring biblical emphasis on their complementarity and John’s warning that ‘anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching (*didache*) of Christ, does not have God’ ([2 John 9](#), NASB).

Fourth, in the pursuit of employment of commonalities, there is the risk of overlooking the profound differences that almost invariably lurk behind the very similarities to which we resort. The result is miscommunication with its varied and unwelcome concomitants—confusion, rejection, and syncretism. The examples provided in the section of this paper below will serve to illustrate this danger, and also to show how communication can be enhanced by emphasizing differences.

‘UNCOMMON GROUND’—THE IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENCES

When we say that the Christian faith is unique, we do not simply mean that it adds something to the other faiths. It is not the fulfilment of other faiths—not in anything approaching the sense in which it is the fulfilment of Old Testament Judaism, in any case. No, the Christian faith is *qualitatively* different from other faiths. To fail to make that fact crystal clear is to open the door to misunderstanding at best and syncretism at worst. This is true both in our attempt to communicate the Christian message to those of the Third World, where false religions have reigned for centuries, *and* in our attempt to reach people of a Western world that has now been invaded by those same false faiths.

The basic principle that is involved here is the ‘principle of contrast’. James P. Spradley, whose works on culture and ethnography have enjoyed wide acceptance, explains the principle in the following way:

Category systems not only divide up the world, they also define it. In order to make sense out of human behaviour we must begin with the actor’s definition of the situation, and a crucial feature of such meaning systems is the principle of *contrast*.... The meaning of a

concept cannot be made clear without specifying what it contrasts with. The principle of contrast p. 228 suggests that what something *does mean* is intimately linked to what it *does not mean*. (Spradley and McCurdy 1972: 68).

I have often referred to this principle as the ‘principle of comparison and contrast’, but the idea is the same. And its importance to our present concern can be demonstrated with reference to both intercultural and intracultural communication.

First, think of how intercultural Christian communication suffers when we do not take seriously the ways in which religious categories are described from the emic or adherents’ point of view—the way they define their own religious faith. By way of illustration, consider basic Hindu and Buddhist beliefs concerning incarnation and ‘saviour beings’.

Hinduism present numerous *avatara* (literally, ‘descents’ or incarnations) of its various deities. Krishna, for example, is one of the most popular incarnations of the god Vishnu. Rama is another, less well known in the West, but well known in India. Mahayana Buddhism emanated from the same ideological soil (the Samkhya school of Hindu philosophy). As it moved from India to Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, and elsewhere, it introduced two types of saviour beings. One was the bodhisattva, who had earned the right to buddhahood, but delayed final emancipation in order to assist others ‘on the path’. The other was the buddha of this or that age—Buddha reemerging on earth in times of crisis in order to show people the ‘true path’ of salvation.

Now to attempt to communicate Christ to people who entertain such concepts without contrasting them with the *biblical* teaching on the incarnation of Christ is a monumental error. For starters, Hinduism began with numerous gods, many of whom have had a variety of incarnations in human and animal forms. Buddhism began with no god at all, and then (particularly in its Mahayana expressions) evolved numerous gods out of its enlightened founder and similarly enlightened masters. But, as a radio announcer might say, ‘Any similarity between Christ and these *avatara*, *bodhisattvas*, and buddhas—whether living or dead—is strictly coincidental.’ The incarnation of Jesus the Christ is of the one God, historical, unrepeatable, and absolutely unique. It is the fulfillment of only one revelational ‘line’—that of the Old Testament Scriptures. Though Hindus, and even Buddhists, may find a place for him in their rosters of gods or godlike beings, everything that Jesus Christ was and is, and said and did, defies such an inclusion. *That being the case, there is a very real sense in which Christ has not been communicated in Hindu and Buddhist contexts until differences such as these have been made clear. Or, to put it the other way* p. 229 *around, only when these differences have been made clear have Christ and his gospel been communicated with precision and clarity.*

Again, unlike the acculturated Christianity of the West and more like the religion of the Bible, much Third World religiosity abounds with spirits and spirit activities of all kinds. Still, there is a world of difference between the ancestral, totemic, and other spirit beings of the animistic worldview and those of the Bible. And there is a great gulf between the capricious nature of spirits and the ‘proper’ way to deal with them as described in false faiths on the one hand, and the teachings of the Holy Spirit regarding the spirit world and our relationship to it on the other. Much the same can be said with regard to the various conceptions of a high god that are to be found in various cultures, whether Njambi, Allah, Shang Ti, or Ame-no-minakanushino-kami. As we have indicated previously, in some cases it has been determined that the similarities between the God of the Bible and high gods such as these are so great as to warrant the use of those names to refer to the true God, or even to conclude that one or another of them *is* the true God known by another name. Questions as to when and where such conclusions might be justified cannot detain us here, but the fact remains that conceptions accruing to the names Njambi, Shang Ti, and even Allah are usually far enough removed from biblical depictions of the ‘God

who is there' as to necessitate frequent comparisons and to resort to such phrases as 'the true God', 'the God of the Bible', 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ', the 'Triune God', and the like when communicating the Christian gospel. *When comparisons are made and contrasts are drawn, the Triune God stands apart, exalted by the attention given to aspects of his essential nature!*

A contemporary and classic example of what we have in mind is provided by Hans Reudi Weber in the illuminating account of his evangelizing and catechizing experiences in Luwuk-Banggai, Indonesia. The story is much too long and involved to be rehearsed here. But the larger lesson of his book has to do with the importance of the entire Bible in communicating the gospel even to non-literates. The whole of his experience constitutes a reinforcement of the principles of comparison and contrast which is in view here. But the principle is perhaps most graphically illustrated in a section where Weber explains how he supplemented verbal communication with chalk drawings:

On our journeyings through the Banggai Archipelago we came to Taulan, a small island consisting of one village only. A number of the inhabitants had been baptized a few years ago. p. 230

The village assembled—animals and humans, Christians and non-Christians, babies in arms and old men (among the heathen priest)—all of them illiterate. A few planks served as a blackboard; my imagination and powers of expression are too impoverished to follow the example of the illiterate and make the Bible message come alive in words only. So we decided to make use of simple drawings.

Beginning with the story of the Creation, I illustrated what I said by somewhat clumsy drawings on the blackboard. Then the old heathen priest related the ancient creation legends of the district, and we compared the two reports. Next, the story of the Fall, related and illustrated by 'talk and chalk', was contrasted with legends about the origin of evil and the fall of man as they had been handed down in the tribe. It was long after noon before we stopped for lunch, and in the afternoon this unique celebration was continued. (1960:6)

We conclude, then, that whether the audience is composed of literates or non-literates, or adherents of developed religions or believers of tribal myths, gospel communication entails a concentrated and explicit examination of differences if it is to be meaningful and effective.

Second, consider *intracultural* Christian communication directed to people of our own (Western) culture. The common 'wisdom' seems to be that, when preaching and teaching in North America at least, all that is required is to 'teach and preach the truth'. Reference to the teachings of other religions is totally unnecessary. Consequently, our theological schools send out thousands of graduates annually—graduates who have been trained in Bible and theology, psychology and counselling, homiletics and education, and much more, but who have not had one course in the living religions of the world. For at least three reasons it should now be obvious that this is a monumental error.

In the first place, in the public schools our children now study Islam, Buddhism, Shintoism, Hinduism, and lesser religions as integral parts of other cultures. Then they come to our churches and Sunday schools only to meet with silence or ignorance or sweeping generalizations concerning those very religions. As a result they seldom, if ever, are brought face-to-face with the uniqueness of the Christian faith *vis-à-vis* other faith systems.

In the second place, whether young or old and in the church or out of the church, our citizens are now being bombarded with ideas inherent in the Eastern religions and even with ideas found in animism. Most are confused by these ideas and some are seduced by them. In the face of this challenge a cursory study of the New Age Movement, Yoga, or Zen,

as the case may be, is insufficient. Without some understanding of the religious soils that provide the rootage for ideas p. 231 put forth in these movements, no significant understanding is possible. And without significant understanding, our interpretations and explanations become vapid and vacuous. Claire Booth Luce once said that there was a time when she had nagging questions about *yin* and *yang* and kindred concepts. She went to various clergymen for help but found satisfactory answers only when consulting with Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen. She reasoned that if he was sufficiently concerned for the spiritual welfare of his hearers to have delved deeply into other faiths as well as Christianity, she could trust him to lead her in affairs of the soul. What a challenge to contemporary Christian communicators!

In the third place, in the context of religious pluralism, one of the most telling ways to teach *biblical* truth is to contrast it with *unbiblical* error. Take, for example, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the Hindu idea of the *Trimurti* mentioned above. Absolutely central to the Christian faith, the doctrine of the Trinity is beyond our ability fully to comprehend, to say nothing of our inability to explain it adequately. Granting that, it nevertheless is uncumbent upon us to know what the Scriptures teach about the Trinity and also to know what they *do not* teach. One important aid to clarifying the biblical teaching on the subject would be to compare it with the *seemingly* similar Hindu teaching on the *Trimurti*—the teaching that at the apex of the pantheon of deities are to be found Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (Preserver), and Shiva (Destroyer), all three of whom are separate and distinct personalities, but all of whom lack the ‘real reality’ that is the attribute of Brahman alone. A comparison of the difference between the Trinity and the *Trimurti* (or Muslim or Jehovah’s Witnesses aberrant views of the Trinity, etc.) can have salutary results. Not only does this approach enhance understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, *it also helps to guard against the inroads of false ideas and faiths.*

CONCLUSION

Similarities? Probably. And though they may not be essential similarities, they can be profitably used in gospel communication if used cautiously. Differences? Assuredly so if we hold to any significant uniqueness in the Christian faith. And the time has come to learn what those differences are, what their importance is, and how best to capitalize on them. They hold largely untapped potential for meaningful and effective communication of the biblical gospel!

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Social Action and Communicating Christ

Dhyanchand Carr

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I hesitated to reprint this article, knowing that many of our evangelical constituency will reject it as being 'liberal', despite the evangelical heritage of its author. Its ethos and methodology is in stark contrast to the preceding article by David Hesselgrave. I think it is a very significant article on the issue of the relationship of evangelism to social justice and deserves careful reading and theological analysis. It is important because it gives an authentic and penetrating insight into the sufferings and oppressions of ordinary village people who, for generations, have lived in bondage and suffered injustice. It reflects the dark side of the powerless villagers, not only in India but across Asia. These insights are the costly fruits of living an incarnate life for an extended period of time, in a community in the grip of bondage to satanic power. The itinerant evangelist, who comes into the village to hold an evangelistic meeting, complete with jeep, flannelgraph and film projector, may never experience the pain of such human degradation and sin. In story after story, the author shows that sin and evil are not just a personal and private matter but are communal, involving social customs and structures. To preach a purely individualistic gospel, on the assumption that once people are converted, the social evils of the community will slowly go away, is just not true. But it can happen when the church is formed as a redeemed fellowship and through word and deed confesses Christ as Saviour and Lord. Unfortunately the article does not state whether or not the long term goal of the so called 'secular' approach to justice, is the establishing of a church as salt and light in the world. Human solidarity for justice is not enough and I think our author would agree. Further, this article is important because it shows that a non-confrontational and living dialogical approach to people does, in fact, lead people to accept Christ as Saviour and Lord. Confrontational evangelistic preaching may be effective in an urbanized secularized society or where the church is well established, but in rural Asia where the name of Christ is not known, a more typically Asian approach to communication may be more effective. As we reflect on the lifestyle and message of our p. 234 Lord and Paul's approach to a purely pagan people, it is clearly not 'either/or' but 'both/and'. To preach sin and guilt to people who inherit a culture of shame calls for a special understanding of both the gospel and the context. The article is also significant because the author and his students were willing to accept a status of powerlessness and nonviolence, refusing money or using their superior education as instruments of power. They were able to point inquirers to the power of Christ lifted up on the cross and risen from the dead. My disappointment with the article lies in the fact that the author does not give us enough clues on how to bridge the gap between proclamation and justice, between justification by faith and justice in society and the boundaries between an incarnate Christ-centred life style and syncretistic practices which deny the uniqueness of the gospel. Perhaps the answer will be

found, not in the classroom and the library, but in the living Church, incarnate in the world but not of it.

Readers of these two articles are invited to respond to them and to the issues involved in the apparent gulf between them.

Editor

The Rural Theological Institute (hereafter RTI) of the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary was established eight years ago in November, 1979. Its programme was chartered with the specific aim of getting involved in the surrounding poverty stricken villages to work in and along with the people for the eradication of poverty. This programme was to provide opportunities for practical involvement and theological reflection for the Seminary students.

The moment we decided that we had to work in and along with the poor, enlisting their active participation, we had to face the question of the role of faith. We were a Christian institution existing for the purpose of training its full time workers. The village people, however, were mostly Hindus. Except for the three small congregations among thirty villages chosen for our involvement the entire population were Hindus. Two major questions and some related issues had to be faced. First, if we said matters of faith did not matter would we be doing justice to our commitment to the gospel? Could the training given to pastoral candidates under such an attitude of total secularity be proper? Second, what would we do when we came across hurdles for development based on religious values and sentiments such as the entrenched caste system, the subordination of women to men and the general acceptance of poverty and adversity as destined by Karma, all p. 235 such sentiments being strongly undergirded by Hinduism? Would we challenge such values or values or leave them untouched for fear of offending religious sentiments?

By the time the RTI was established, its parent institution, the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, had learnt several lessons. First of all that we are to be motivators and supporters of peoples' movements for justice and development rather than to assume the role of agents of development channelling funds. This was a hard learnt lesson, because in its initial phase of enthusiasm for involvement our pattern of involvement had been project-oriented. A lot of money was pumped in as loans. It was when we threw in our lot and stood shoulder to shoulder with the slum dwellers in their fight to secure squatting rights that we first experienced real solidarity and the latent potential within the people came out. Therefore, it was clear from the outset that in the RTI too our major role was to be one of motivating and enabling.

Given such an orientation it was imperative that we did nothing to upset enlisting the full co-operation of the oppressed. Giving priority to the question of faith affiliation was bound to create suspicion against us and division among the people themselves. Therefore, the option to be totally secular was a predecided option. The fact that we were a Christian institution motivated by the love of Christ, however, could not be hid under a bushel. We were naturally inclined to provide pastoral care for the three Christian congregations. Then as an institution of training young pastors we had prayers and services of worship at the farm where the Institute was housed. Therefore, while we had clearly decided to be secular in our work of organizing the poor in concerns of justice to fight the forces that kept them poor, our Christian commitment and our religious expressions of that commitment could not be kept a secret. Nor did we try to. This openness made it necessary for us to explain very clearly why we were there and how we were going to work with a majority of people who did not share our faith. Our introduction went something like this:

We are Christians. We have come to get involved in your problems mainly because of Christ's constraining love. We have understood God and his purpose for the whole of humanity only through Jesus Christ. However, the pursuit of justice for all is a common purpose that binds us together. Therefore we shall not make faith affiliation an issue in that common pursuit for justice.

Such a stance naturally helped to build up rapport and we began to be involved through a number of local struggles, identifying ourselves fully and being prepared to court arrest and become targets of slander p. 236 and even physical assault at times by the powers, whose authority began to shake under the impact of the gathering momentum. Such willingness and readiness to suffer in an alongside the people created a great sense of solidarity. This growing solidarity was further strengthened when it also became obvious to them that we did not treat the Christian congregations in any way preferentially and when we were not in the least enamoured by some who expressed their option to become Christians if we would channel special aid to them. Further, we abstained obstinately from distributing tracts and indulging in open air preaching in spite of repeated pressures from the Madurai Christians and even at times from within the Seminary.

While on the one hand we rejoiced greatly at the growing solidarity with the poor and because the people motivated and enabled by us had won several struggles, from time to time the question whether we had become another secular social movement did haunt us from within. Where was the specific Christian content in this involvement and how did this help the young pastors to grow in theological understanding and in their commitment to mission?

We were to learn gradually that such a guilt complex was totally uncalled for. For on the one hand we were able to discover how close their understanding of God was to ours and on the other hand how a communication about Christ was indeed taking place. We were led into true dialogue.

First of all, then, let me outline what we learnt about the understanding of God that existed among the poor villagers who are all Hindus:

GOD IS ONE AND FORMLESS

In one of the villages called Ramankulam they worship a deity called Kanilyalan (The Lord of the Land). At the very entrance to the village underneath a huge peepul tree, stands a stone pillar. On it is carved no image. They anoint this stone pillar with oil and offer puja. The village people could give no account of the myth or legend which gave rise to this cult. However, on one occasion one of the members of this village came to the Institute and during the course of the conversation on several things he said how happy they were because they were blessed with rain that year. He then went on to say that their village people thought that it was due to our (the Institute's) *punga* (merit) that they got the rain. Although flattered by that remark I felt constrained to say that it was not due to any special merit on our part. This remark evoked an off-the-cuff and irrelevant remark. The villager went on to say, 'yes, P. 237 yes, of course you think that we worship idols. But do you know why we have placed that stone pillar at the entrance and call it Kanilyalan? It is because we are not theologians like you folk to be thinking about God all the time. We tend to forget God who is indeed everywhere and who is formless. We need to be reminded that he is very much present right among us. That is all. God is only one. He is everywhere but people like us need reminders. We only worship that One God ...'. One might be tempted to think that this was a defensive apology. But not so, we have clear

proof to believe that he was being very honest and sincere. The following two episodes prove that.

GOD'S SPECIAL PRESENCE WHEN PEOPLE GATHER TO DISPENSE JUSTICE

In that very same village once I had been invited to chair a village Panchayat (people's court). A young man in a moment of emotional outburst had attacked an old man and an elderly woman and had caused physical hurt. He realized his fault and was ready to make amends.

The court was called to decide the nature of punishment. The court's decision was that he should prostrate three times and openly apologize in addition to paying a fine to be given as compensation to the two persons who had been hurt. Sitting as the Chairman I became acutely embarrassed when the young man got ready to prostrate himself before me. So I tried to stop him and asked him to go to the temple and seek God's forgiveness. Quickly came the retort from the people, 'No! No! He should do it only here for this is God's assembly. God is wherever we are gathered to render justice. He need not go to the temple. Don't be embarrassed, he is prostrating himself only before God.'

This understanding is fairly widespread and by no means limited to this particular village. On another occasion when there was a village trial the culprit didn't own up to the charges levelled against him. He was guilty. Someone suggested that he should be made to take an oath in a temple of a fierce goddess. Once again there was a chorus of protests from among the members of the Panchayat (the court). They said, 'This is God's assembly and if he dares to defy this assembly then God would punish him. There is no need to make him swear before any particular deity.'

GOD HAS NO BIAS TOWARDS HIS DEVOTEES IN MATTERS OF JUSTICE

On another occasion when we were spending a lot of time discussing and planning for an action against a local tyrant suddenly a quarrel **P. 238** broke out in another corner. One man who had great big marks on his forehead (a sign to indicate that he had just been to a temple for worship) had come into the village quite drunk and had provoked a quarrel. Immediately, one of the village elders told him that he could not expect to escape because he wore signs of his piety on his forehead. He then went on to tell a mythical story. The God Vishnu was one day reposing on the lap of his wife Lakshmi. Suddenly he got up, ran madly and just as quickly came back to his repose. His wife Lakshmi was perplexed. She pestered him to explain his sudden run and immediate return. Lord Vishnu then told her with some 'reluctance' the reason for his action.

One of my devotees cried out to me for help so I rushed. But I came back without helping him because he had presumed too much. He had trodden on washed clothes spread on the ground and dirtied them. When the washerman saw his work spoiled he scolded my devotee. My devotee instead of apologizing beat up the washerman. When the washerman retaliated in anger and beat him back he cried out to me for help. As soon as the cry was heard I rushed to help but when I learnt that it was my devotee who was really in the wrong I returned without helping him!

Telling this story the elder warned the pious man not to indulge in mischief presuming upon God's succour because he regularly and meticulously participated in worship.

After listening to this story I asked the elder to explain why the Lord Vishnu was reluctant to tell this to his wife at first. 'Oh!' he said, 'that is because the Lord was afraid

that his wife would then think badly about all his devotees.' Surely, the elder had some profound understanding about God although he had come to this perception through a myth.

Once we realize that God's truth, love and justice have not gone unheeded in spite of a prevailing culture which legitimizes injustice and falsehood, what is needed is a deliberate attempt to identify genuine perceptions of truth, love and justice and accord maximum recognition. The next task is to make it possible for the people to develop discernment between myths and legends which promote just values and those which promote unjust values. Even then one could not assume that once they develop this discernment adherence to these values follows on automatically. As such an adherence would demand a great deal in terms of a changed life style and change in culture we cannot see any immediate results. However, once a discernment becomes the general discernment of the majority, possibilities for changes in culture as a whole would become greater.

Is this enough? Is there no specific need then to communicate Christ and call for an open confessional allegiance to Jesus Christ the Lord in [p. 239](#) and through whom world history is to find its consummation? This question can be answered only within the context of Christian experience, that is to say that for Christians it is an imperative. Not in the sense, however, as is often misunderstood, that we need to proclaim the gospel notwithstanding the nature of the response. Those who do accept and make an open confession would be saved and those who reject would be condemned. Rather, it is because the friendship of the living Lord is so meaningful, meeting the needs of the depths of our personalities, and because of the conviction that one day all will have to relate to him, in and through whom all lives exist and find their fulfilment, that we seek to communicate. That is to say that we neither make religious affiliation or belonging to the Church now, nor that we make the state of final salvation the chief motivations for this task of communication. It is high time that we came to an understanding which is in accord with the mind of Jesus on these two issues. Jesus spoke of the publican who prayed 'God be merciful to me a sinner' as the one who went home 'justified'. For final acceptance he made 'doing the will of God' and not calling Jesus 'Lord! Lord!' the criterion. He said, 'He that is not against us is for us.' And he also said that all those who had given as much as a cup of water to his disciples would surely be rewarded. We could go on listing more and more such sayings which have not been theologically reflected upon by 'militant evangelists'. The few episodes we shall provide below show that a non-confessional and a non-church membership oriented allegiance to the Lord can and does take place.

CHRIST THE 'SANTHAMOORTY' (THE MERCIFUL)

One of our workers, a Hindu, had a family function. His child's ears were to be pierced and a gold stud fixed. This ceremony is conducted around the age of three. It is a big occasion. Gifts and felicitations are showered on the child by relatives and friends. The ear piercing takes place after a ritual of worship. Karuppiah, one of our animators, insisted that I should initiate the ceremony by pronouncing the first blessing on the child. When I went to his home I was taken right inside their family shrine in which was housed an idol of Siva depicted as 'Rudramoorthy' (ie God of Wrath and Vengeance). The idol was a crudely made clay statue holding a blood-dripping sword in one hand and a chopped off human head in the other. The very sight evoked aversion and not even a sense of awe. I sat in front of this deity embarrassed and uncomfortable. Then came the local VIPs into the same shrine and sat in front of me. They were not in the least worried [P. 240](#) that a Christian had been asked into the shrine. Nor did they seem to worry that, contravening all traditions, I was to preside over a religious ceremony in that shrine. Rather they were

concerned about me and my feelings. The village head man who sat right in front of me must have sensed my discomfort and embarrassment. He opened the conversation saying, 'You must find it very difficult to sit in front of this deity being a Christian who worships Christ the Santhamoorthy (the Merciful)?' I immediately responded, 'Yes', and asked, 'Why have you depicted God, who is merciful, in this horrible way?' 'Well,' he answered, 'you see, for you, one who has been brought up in good Christian nurture, you know how to relate to people in a kind and just manner. But it is not so with me. My culture has made me the headman. People are taught to accept my ways and judgments without question. For fellows like me only such terror-inspiring gods are suitable. Otherwise we shall have little moral restraint.' This provided a good opportunity for me to share that Christian understanding of God does not mean that he puts up with nonsense. It is only because God could not tolerate injustice and tyranny that he has provided a way for repentance by dying for us. And if we spurn his mercy and presume upon it then we have to face his fierce anger. Then I told him and the others that the same Santhamoorthy inspired and led us in our struggles against injustice. After a time of sharing the child was brought and placed upon my lap. I blessed the child praying for the light of God's love to shine in its life and lit the lamp and initiated the ceremony. Then after I left I am sure they would have gone on with their traditional rituals. However, we did rejoice that there was a pre-understanding about Christ, that they were open enough to invite me to preside over their family religious ceremony and that they were extremely sensitive to my feelings. In that context of openness some more clarity was added to the already perceived understanding of Christ the Lord as an incarnation of Mercy.

THE PERCEPTION OF THE POWER OF CHRIST

On one occasion we had got into a terrible conflict with a local tyrant. We had thrown our weight behind a group of peasants whose lands had been fraudulently alienated by a village officer in connivance with the police and the bureaucrats. This man initially took a strong stand in opposing us through many intimidatory tactics and had begun to brag that he would invoke black magic and physically paralyze all the Christian staff of the Institute. Then eventually he began to develop cold feet at the unabated opposition he met with in the organized P. 241 group of the peasants and came one day waving 'the white flag', saying he was prepared for a compromise. However, as he hoped for the restoration of the *status quo ante* without giving in much, we could not agree. Then as the negotiations were breaking up I was led to challenge him on his threat to invoke black magic. In the presence of a large crowd I dared him to invoke black magic and publish his deed abroad so that it would become obvious to everyone whether the evil spirits were powerful or whether Christ to whom we had committed ourselves and on whose behalf we were challenging the powers of injustice was the really powerful one. The people present were quite taken by that open challenge. Many thought we had let ourselves in for great danger. But quite soon it became obvious to all our associates that the Lord in whom we had put our trust was indeed powerful to protect us from the onslaught of evil spirits.

During that same period we visited the farm of one of our staunch supporters. This man was a Hindu Harijan. As he showed us round his farm suddenly he turned and said, 'You think only your Christ is powerful but I can demonstrate to you that our gods are also powerful.' I didn't quite understand the reason for this sudden challenge. He asked us to look into a large open irrigation well and asked us to estimate the depth of the water table. Then he led us to a small round well nearby and asked us to look in to see the level of the water. The irrigation well had water thirty-five feet below whereas the other well had water only ten feet from the ground. This man knew a little physics from practical

knowledge and so asked us to observe the anomaly. Against the principle of water finding its level one well had water at ten feet depth and the other down at thirty-five feet. Then he narrated an incident. It seems some years back a Brahmin family had come to worship in the nearby temple. Suddenly one woman became possessed and shouted that she would not touch water from the large irrigation well because it had been polluted by the touch of a Harijan and then went on to demand a new well be dug at the spot where the present small round well was. When they dug at the command of the possessed woman they struck water very quickly and the water level in that well had remained high ever since in spite of severe drought conditions. After this narration he asked me, 'Now tell me, are not our gods also very powerful like your Christ?' I did not seek to explain to him about the possibility of a top level spring which could not percolate due to a rocky basin. For still the phenomenon of the possessed woman locating such a spring remained. 'Well, I do concede that there was a phenomenon of some supernatural power at work,' I began my response, 'but don't you realize that the nature of [p. 242](#) the spirit that possessed the woman must have been evil, of the devil rather than of God. For God does not consider that water touched by a Harijan is polluted.' This person was convinced by my explanation. Much later this man and his family became Christians, though we never pressurized him or induced him with welfare schemes to become a confessing Christian. Even if he had not become a Christian the fact would still remain that he had understood Christ's power. What he lacked, however, was the perception to distinguish between Christ's power which is always an expression of his love and justice, over against more ambiguous manifestations of the noumenal world.

CHRIST'S CONSTRAINING INFLUENCE ON HIS FOLLOWERS

Although we rarely speak openly about our relationship to Christ as the chief motivating factor in our work for justice this perception has indeed taken deep roots as the following two episodes will show.

In a village called Kasavankundu the high caste people refused to allow Harijans to draw water from the common well when the well specially dug out for Harijan use dried up. We organized a protest public meeting. Then even those who had been friendly with us so far got together on caste lines and planned to disrupt the meeting resorting to violence if necessary. One Harijan supporter of the cause from another village called Ramankulam came to see me in the afternoon. He claimed that he had just returned after a visit to Kasavankundu where the platform was being erected for the evening's protest meeting. He said he overheard groups of high caste people making all kinds of plans to throw stones, to resort to beating up the crowd with sticks kept in a secret place ... and so on. Then he came up with this remarkable concluding statement: 'Well, if they try to stop you from participating you'd reply saying that the Lord Jesus Christ compels you to go notwithstanding all the threats *and I hear your Christ telling me clearly that I should be there with you!*' We were thunder struck by that kind of a confession from an illiterate old man.

The next episode is a less exciting story. In fact, it is no story at all, but nevertheless quite typical of what really is taking place. On New Year's Day the custom is for people to visit those whom they respect and hold in esteem. So on New Year's Day of 1985 a group of five village people came to the farm to offer their greetings and good wishes. They came with a gift of a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Underneath this picture they had written a small poem composed by one of them and signed below by all five of them. The poem invoked the indwelling power of Christ's love to be the constant influence on [p. 243](#) our lives and on their lives as well. It was not a prayer and invocation meant only for us.

The first *stychos* invoked Christ to dwell in our hearts and motivate us by the power of his love. The second *stychos* made the same invocation on their behalf. This picture hangs in my study-cum-office.

CHRIST AND THE SECULAR WORLD OF SOCIAL ACTION

Social action cannot be done in isolation. It can be done only with the support of other movements and organizations also interested in social justice. Therefore our attempts at organizing the oppressed to fight against feudal and caste oppression, and against bureaucratic and political corruption, have earned us many friends who are totally secular. These secular movements, by and large, look upon Christian involvement in social action with suspicion and for very valid reasons. First of all they suspect that behind our involvement in programmes there is a hidden conversion agenda. Secondly, they know that the majority of the church, people and leaders, are reactionary, openly supporting the *status quo* and the powers that sustain the *status quo*. So they cannot understand, quite legitimately, how we can claim to be in fellowship with such persons and under the authority of such a leadership. Thirdly, they are also suspicious of the intentions of the funding agencies from the Western world with a history of Christianity which has enjoyed patronage from rulers and governments who did not and could not subscribe to egalitarian principles. Finally, they hesitate to join hands with us in our programme, or to enlist our support for their programme of action, for fear that our commitment to non-violence may hinder the momentum of the action programme at very critical points. In spite of all these hurdles we have been able to establish friendship and gain solidarity at least with some secular movements and with some of no religious faith. Such friendship ties have paved the way for mutual challenge and sharing of religious and materialistic convictions.

It was during one such occasion a friend raised the question about the legitimacy of the Christian faith in the resurrection. He said he had a two-fold problem. First of all he could not believe rationally how a dead man could be raised from the dead to a radically different and immortal existence. Secondly, he thought that faith in resurrection would provide an escape route and take the wind out of the sails for action committed to establishing justice within history. I told him frankly that my faith in the risen Christ was first of all based on a real experience of continuing friendship and companionship with the risen [p. 244](#) Jesus and that, on careful examination of the available evidence and testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, I found no difficulty in accepting the truth because I did not approach the evidence with a prior assumption about what is and what is not possible. However, I conceded that it would be difficult for those who were schooled in an atheistic view of life to see that the Christians are not superstitious.

While I was able to bear witness to my conviction I also felt that I had to meet his second difficulty. In my own experience my faith in the resurrection of Jesus and in the hope of resurrection for all has only enabled me to get involved without fear and without worry about immediate results. However, until that moment I had not reflected on the significance of the resurrection faith for social involvement. The question of my friend brought a sudden and unpremeditated answer which has ever since been a source of great inspiration and strength. The interpretation I could offer was as follows:

(1) The resurrection of Jesus affirms categorically and unequivocally that *matter* matters to God.

(2) In the context of repeated failures of revolutions and social reform movements to produce permanent, impeccable, and completely unambiguous results, the faith in the

resurrection alone provides a hope that permanent and radical transformation is possible. Therefore faith in the resurrection of Jesus alone provides the single anchor point in history which makes a hope for such a transformation in the future reasonable. For we have reason to believe that what happened to Jesus will happen to all humans and to the whole of human history.

(3) It is faith in the resurrection which enables us to take the failures and disappointments we meet with in our endeavour for justice in our stride because the resurrection of Jesus shows that God in his goodness and by the power of his love can turn tragedies into victories, and make even evil forces and their now victorious conspiracies serve his ultimate purpose for human history.

(4) The resurrection hope for all alone ensures that our history has meaning. For millions pass through life without meaning, in the present order of injustice. Only in the resurrection will this be offset. Finally, because they work with this hope, Christians are like people who plant trees in full confidence that they will themselves be enabled to reap the fruits. Secular humanists, although working for the same aims, are like those who plant trees hoping that some generation in a distant future will enjoy the fruits. They themselves have never been [p. 245](#) able to taste them and they can only dream of them, knowing they will never be a reality in their own experience.

I have narrated a number of episodes which led to meaningful dialogue and which, in the process, helped us to reach better clarity about our own faith as well. However, it may still be pertinently asked whether we could be satisfied as having accomplished much, for the main emphasis of the gospel is a new relationship established with God on the basis of forgiveness of sins offered to us through the Cross of Christ. All the above episodes, admittedly, have at best only drawn attention to the Lordship of Christ without touching upon the question of human inability and unwillingness to respond to God. This indeed is a pertinent question and we must seek an answer.

It was providential that the students who come to spend a semester at the RTI are assigned the Fourth Gospel for study. This was by no means due to deliberate design. The curriculum, already drawn up before the inception of the Institute, had assigned the Fourth Gospel for detailed exegetical study for this particular semester. The Gospel has little emphasis on the Good News to the poor and apparently does not seem to concern itself with questions about temporal justice. Therefore, at the outset, it did not seem a fitting portion of Scripture for theological reflection for students to be trained in social action for justice. It was, however, through the study of this Gospel that we were led into a wholesome and comprehensive missiological perception which fully validated our secular endeavours to create a community concerned about justice issues and which would be ready to stick its neck out to challenge the powers of oppression, tyranny and corruption. It became a wholesome perception because it also provided answers to the question we have set out to answer.

The Fourth Gospel more than any other Gospel is concerned to explain how God judges the world and how he casts out the Prince of the World. This preoccupation also provides an indirect, but very clear, explanation of repentance. It is seen in terms of a turning aside from the world and its ruler and turning towards the Son who is lifted up (i.e. the Son of Man elevated to the cross and not to a position of power: [John 12:31-34](#)). It is by this means all men (people) will be drawn together.

This text is found in the context of the Greeks coming to see Jesus. The narrative seems deliberately to avoid any contact between Jesus and the Greeks who had expressed their wish to see him. And, strangely, at the end of the episode we are told that Jesus went and

hid himself (v 36) almost, as it were, to suggest that Jesus for some reason was not ready to see people of other faiths as yet. p. 246

In order to perceive the Johannine intention, therefore, we need clearly to understand the Evangelist's portrayal of Jesus as the Son of Man. The Son of Man is the One who has come down from heaven (3:14). Judgment is entrusted to the Son of God because he is the Son of Man (5:27). But the judgment takes place by the Son of Man *neither* because of his heavenly origin, *nor* because of his ascended power and glory, but as he draws every one to him while remaining lifted up on the cross.

This deliberate paradox needs to be carefully understood. Especially so because historically speaking, when Jesus was crucified, exactly the opposite of gathering together took place. When the Shepherd was struck the sheep were scattered. Therefore the gathering together of all people must be seen, not with reference to the historical cross of Jesus only, but perhaps as happening everywhere, wherever people are gathered in solidarity around those who suffer unjustly as a result of the continuing conspiracy of the powers of culture, religion and politics. Such a solidarity denounces the Prince of the World. They no longer fear him and have refused to be intimidated by his instruments. We could mention a few such instruments of the rule of this world through which he keeps people captive by blinding them and by creating unreasonable fears. Culture inhibits in many ways. The inhibitions become internalized. As, for example, when a physically handicapped man is made to believe that he is unfit for God; when a woman is made to think that she is a bad woman and that her presence on auspicious occasions would defile their auspicious character, or when a poor person is told to accept his lot as destined by either fate or by God. When such people realize the nature of the conspiracy and are emboldened to gather around the Son of Man who has been lifted up, the world of unjust values and structures stands judged and its ruler is thrown out because he has lost his grip over these people and gets ousted from his power. So far as the victims of oppression are concerned, the gathering around the Son of Man means becoming free from their internalized inhibitions and becoming bold enough to denounce the powers. This is one kind of repentance.

For many others, however, the Son of Man who has been lifted up provides a different kind of repentance. They are made to see clearly that, in so far as they acquiesced in injustice and enjoyed the fruits thereof, it is their sin which sent Jesus to the Cross and it is their sin which continues to oppress and victimize the powerless. They too have to say 'no' to the ruler of the world and learn to distance themselves from all the powers which the world puts at their disposal, making it possible for them to revel in the fruits of injustice. p. 247

This way of categorizing people is perhaps a little simplistic and too neat. For in many of us both aspects are true. We are a mixed bundle. We are victims and tyrants at once. For example a poor person joining hands with the other exploited in a just wage struggle may, at the same time, be a male chauvinist or a man who accepts caste distinctions as valid and joins hands with other communal forces to oppress those whom he considers to be people of low caste. But such categorizing does help us to see that in the 'Son of Man who has been lifted up' there is common cure for both kinds of ailments. The changed lives will be, on the one hand, marked by freedom and, on the other, marked by a strong bond of solidarity with all those who continue to be victims of the joint conspiracy of human culture, perverse religion and corrupt politics. Thus the oppressed and the oppressor are drawn together and all are liberated.

To put it succinctly the Son of God identifies himself with humanity and becomes the Son of Man. This identification is not limited to the incarnate life of Jesus. The incarnate life of Jesus is but one concrete, tangible expression of that ever-continuing identification

(for example, this same idea has been expressed in terms of the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world). Therefore saving faith in practical terms means, as far as the oppressed are concerned, to be liberated from the controlling powers of inhibitions and fears, coming as a result of a realization that these powers are being routed by God. For the oppressor, repentance and faith entail a turning away from participation in the gains of oppressive structures and values and expressing a solidarity with the oppressed. Thus a new humanity is born, a drawing together of all people is achieved by the Son of Man who has been lifted up. God does not save as an outsider. God gets caught up in the process and becomes the power of liberation. In so far as many of us participate in both predicaments, slavery and tyranny, we can experience both aspects of salvation. Salvation thus seen is a continuing process. Therefore the judgment of the world and the casting out of its ruler also is a continuing process. However this process should not be thought of as an unending process. This process will be completed and consummated. This is assured by the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead. Thus those who find freedom and are joined together in a new solidarity will enjoy fullness of freedom and enjoy totality of human solidarity for ever. Let us see this through one concrete example drawn from the secular world of social action.

In the Kodaikkanal Hills near Madurai two hundred families of repatriated stateless Tamils from Sri Lanka were turned into bonded labourers, by the labour contractors of a large company, with the [p.248](#) connivance of a powerful minister of the State Government who had vested interests in the company, and of the District Administration which 'kowtowed' to the political boss. The peoples' bondedness in near-slavery was first identified by a set of school children who belong to a Christian private school run by the American Mission. The local sub-collector, the number two officer of the District Administration, an honest and upright official, was alerted by his wife who worked in the school in an honorary capacity. This sub-collector is a Sikh and he had been a social activist during student days. Rarely do such people become bureaucrats, and, if any do, rarely do they remain uncorrupt. This man, by the providence of God, was different. He jumped into action. Simultaneously a Roman Catholic priest who had been in touch with these people also became aware of the subcollector's integrity and readiness to take action. His role was to encourage the bonded labourers to stand together boldly. For much depended on their willingness to be set free and their readiness to face trouble in the process. As soon as the sub-collector ordered their freedom, however, his boss, under instruction from the minister, revoked his orders and also began to brand the sub-officer as a subversive Sikh terrorist agent out to disrupt the administration and create social disturbance. It was at this stage that some of our friends, a group of young lawyers committed to justice, were drawn into the fray. The supreme court was mobilized through them by enlisting the support of an organization functioning for liberation of bonded labourers headed by a Hindu Arya Samaj Swamiji. While this legal battle was being fought the labourers were laid off from work and denied even the meagre sustenance given to them so far on the pretext of wages. They were also kept under arrest, for suddenly the minister whose vested interests were at stake and who held the portfolio for forests, posted guards around the forests as a conservation measure! So we had to find ways of reaching these people with food. Maintaining them with rice, lentils and salt (no oil, no vegetables, no meat) alone cost around ten thousand rupees per week. This money was raised by public collection; thus many sympathisers were drawn in. The support of the free press made it a nationwide news item. Finally the supreme court set up a commission of enquiry. The people were liberated and presently are supported by government dole pending full rehabilitation. However, the Sikh sub-collector has become the victim of a witch hunt. All kinds of rumours and scandals are spread abroad. Anyone who goes to his

house is noted by the police who keep a close watch simply to scare him and intimidate his friends. The police, we reliably learn, went so far as to try to implicate him in an arms scandal through eliciting a tutored deposition from a friend of his. Fortunately they [p. 249](#) miscalculated the strength of the solidarity of the friendship between the Sikh sub-collector and his Hindu Punjabi friend.

This episode seems to me to illustrate [John 12:31-35](#) beautifully. The repatriated bonded labourers found their freedom, not physically only, but spiritually as well in a measure, for they had to muster up great courage and learn to stand together. Many attempts were made at terrorizing them as well as allure them into denying their bondedness. There were the middle class socially conscientized group, the press and the large public who usually acquiesce and continue to enjoy the fruits of oppression, although indirectly. This involvement provided a measure of spiritual freedom to them as well. The principle of Kodaikkanal School, an Australian, has also had to suffer as his visa has not been renewed. His school children, who come from very rich families, in so far as they identified themselves with the bonded labourers and raised a lot of money and gathered clothes and blankets for the poor victims, also experienced a measure of salvation. Finally, the fellowship enjoyed with the Hindu ascetic committed to the task of liberating the bonded labourers brought a new dimension to the solidarity experienced. What has happened *ad hoc* needs to become the order of reality if the degree of freedom and solidarity experienced is to find complete fulfilment.

Alas, however, while this was going on there were groups of Christians who began to criticize all the Christians who were involved as having dirtied their hands by politics. They said that this was not our Christian calling. We ought to be faithful in preaching the gospel and should not waste our time on such temporal matters. One very devout but rich Christian lady exclaimed after listening, 'Are we not all slaves? Then why should we bother about these few slaves?' And she also decried our efforts at feeding them during the period of the struggle as an act which would encourage laziness. 'If the poor get used to free food they will never care to work ...' This lady liberally gives to evangelists, hosts bands of preachers and even, at times, arranges for public gospel meetings completely under her patronage.

For those of us who have been able to see the Son of Man in Jesus all this makes sense and gives us certainly a far greater measure of satisfaction and meaning. Therefore, if people could be drawn into this sphere of perceiving meaning we should do that. Nevertheless we must recognize that we have to work against the weight of a Christian history which has been triumphalistic, narrow and exclusivist. A majority of Christians and the Christian institutions continue to participate in this history. Therefore, whether we should see mission in terms of church growth is a pertinent question. Then there is also the other question arising out of bonds of friendship, established with [p. 250](#) people like Swami Agnivesh, the Hindu leader referred to earlier, whose standing with God is no doubt on a par with profound Christian experience. Therefore what should be our task? This will continue as a daunting question. For a Christian who has tasted the friendship of the crucified and risen Jesus and who has been drawn into the sphere of meaning described above cannot but continue to seek to share his experience. But such sharing has to be with humility arising out of the knowledge that God can draw all people to himself in diverse ways. We need to become able to identify this multi-faceted action of God and seek to cooperate with him. In this task the risen Lord will be with us unto the end of this age.

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A Christian View of Communication

George David

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In this thought-provoking chapter, the author relentlessly pursues the consequences of secularism in our understanding of the relationship of the message and the media. He asks whether we are biblical Christians or evangelical secularists. He affirms that in Christ, the message and the media are inseparable and discusses how this fact changes our understanding of our evangelism. In this person-centred understanding of our task, he discusses how the Church must become the agent of evangelism. He appeals to Christian communicators to go beyond tools and strategies and search for a proper theological basis for evangelism. As an evangelist to educated Hindus, the author clearly puts missiology at the heart of his theology.

Editor

Within a secular frame of reference communication is viewed as the transference of signals from the 'source to the 'receiver'. Although there are such factors as 'noise' and personal distortions in the process of encoding and decoding, the secular communicator views the message and the medium as two distinct elements in the communication process. This must be recognized as an inherent dualism prompted by the approach to knowledge which secularism has absolutized.

This dualism is inevitable if we perceive through a secular frame of reference, as Prof. John Macmurray makes plain in *The Self as Agent*:

... any philosophy which takes the 'cogito' as its starting point and centre of reference institutes a formal dualism of theory and practice; and that this dualism makes it formally impossible to give any account, and indeed to conceive the possibility of persons and relation, whether the relation be theoretical—as knowledge, or practical—as co-operation. For thought is essentially private.¹

This dualism becomes inherent in the very pattern of thinking of those of us who have been socialized in the contemporary cultural p. 252 environment. Consequently, the means and end, the message and medium, are viewed in isolation, independent of each other. When the medium is viewed as an impersonal tool, the message itself becomes an impersonal object, idea, or fact that is conveyed. This not only transforms the nature of the message, but the object of communication then is to coerce or manipulate the audience to think, choose, or act as desired. This impersonal *intent* not only depersonalizes the receivers of the message, but also dehumanizes the communicators themselves.

The assumption is that the end justifies the means. The medium is but a tool to convey the message. The message then becomes objectivized. It becomes a product. It is conceived of as a consumer product, to be neatly and cleverly packaged and distributed *en masse* to the consumers, who are supposed to be the passive receptors of mass media communication. The whole frame of reference within which the secularist views communication is sub-personal.

¹ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p. 73.

THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Could a Christian communicator accept what we have just stated to be in harmony with the gospel? Most of us have never paused to question the secular frame of reference. We have simply taken it for granted as a basic, unalterable fact of life. One of the radical questions we need to ask is: In what ways is the Christian concept of communication distinct from the secular concept of communication?

Would it be Christian to conceive of communication as a mechanistic process? Can we objectivize the gospel without altering its character? Can we package and distribute the gospel assuming that it is a consumer product? Can we assume that either the communicators or the receivers of the gospel message are isolated individuals, not persons-in-relation?

To consider any of the above assumptions valid from a Christian perspective would be to assume a dualism between the message and the medium. To assume this is to imply that the starting point of our thinking is the absolutization of the objective methodology. This is to acknowledge that in practice we are not Christian in our thinking. In our very frame of reference we have become secularists. Evangelical secularists.

The Christian gospel is embodied in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In him message and medium are inseparable. God has spoken to us, says the writer of Hebrews, 'in his Son' ([Heb. 1:1](#)). The apostle John writes, that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn. [p. 253 1:14](#)). And again 'God so loved the world that he gave his Son' ([Jn. 3:16](#)). God has given us in Christ not merely a verbal message but a person. And Jesus Christ has given us not only his verbal teaching but his very life on the cross. In Christ the medium is the message.

In the training of the Twelve our Lord not only conveyed information and instruction to his disciples. He gave himself to them, in love, in communion, and in the community of a shared life together. They had been with Jesus. And even their enemies could not fail to see Christ in the disciples. 'Now as they observed the boldness of Peter and John, and noted that they were untrained laymen, they began to wonder, then recognized them as former companions of Jesus' ([Acts 4:13](#) NEB). The communion that they shared with Christ was aimed at the formation of a shared, divine-human relational self. And this ought to be true of us as his disciples in the twentieth century through the communion of the Holy Spirit ([2 Cor. 13:14](#)).

Christian communication then, is characteristically personal. Both the message and the medium are personal. And consequently, they cannot be wrenched apart. If they are, they both become sub-personal and the gospel becomes another gospel.

THE CHURCH IS THE AGENT FOR EVANGELISM

A Church, or a group of Christians, is able to communicate the gospel when it constitutes a community of disciples who are in mutual personal communion with:

- (a) the Infinite Tri-personal God,
- (b) one another as fellow disciples,
- (c) and the communities of non-Christians in the environment.

This ability to communicate becomes a reality when they co-operate to fulfil the divinely commissioned purpose.

Confronted with the task of world evangelization, have we not been asking the wrong questions? Instead of asking what are the best tools and strategies, we need first to ask

what is the proper theological basis for evangelism. Tools if used merely as a means to an end, without an understanding of their inherent nature, will tend only to objectivize the message. This creates a dichotomy between medium and message. Tools, whether technological or psychological, ought not to be our primary concern.

The primary questions that we need to grapple with, and which are rooted in the theological presuppositions of the gospel, are the following: p. 254

(a) Is our failure in evangelism because our communion with God is weak and superficial?

(b) Is this because our communion with our fellow disciples is weak and superficial, so that we are merely a collectivity of autonomous individuals, instead of being a dynamic Christian community of persons-in-relation?

(c) Is this because we do not have any genuine personal relationships, and communication links with members of non-Christian communities in our environment?

Together with a careless disregard for the above theological reasons for our failure to communicate, there is today an obsession with the tools we have invented for communication. So that now there is the danger of us ourselves becoming unconsciously a tool in the service of these tools. We seem to have become so enamoured with the tools, which are really artefacts of the secular culture, that we fail to ask the basic questions:

(1) What is the nature of these tools?

(2) Is the nature of these tools in harmony with the nature of the gospel?

As we have seen, the very method of approach to knowledge on which the present secular culture is propped furthers a dualism. There is a dualism between thought and practice, means and end, medium and message. In keeping with the spirit of the age, have we too come to assume that the end justifies the means? Do we not look at the means of mass communication merely as tools which transfer the message intact from the communicator to the audience?

NUMBNESS CAUSED BY EXTENDING MEDIA.

Every form of media innovation is an effort to extend one or more of our senses.² This creates a *narcosis* or numbness of the senses involved. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act. It alters the way we perceive the world. This creates a distortion in our 'sensorium', or the dynamic balance and proportion between our five senses. When this balance is disturbed, it alters us psychologically and socially. In other words, the extending medium itself constitutes a message, which beyond the overt verbal message, conveys a nonverbal p. 255 message which influences us subconsciously. This alters us more radically than the verbal message.

The electronic mass media are an extension of our central nervous system.³ When exposed to them, it is our central nervous system itself that is numbed, giving us the illusion of total participation. It draws us into a global village and into a sense of community in which our very individuality is lost.

² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, Sphere Books, London, 1964, 51.

³ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message*, Bantam Books, New York, 1967, p. 49.

The typographical revolution of print had the effect of individualizing us and alienating us from social relationships.⁴ The electronic revolution of instant communication takes the process of depersonalization one step further and drowns us into a totalitarian collectivistic community, in which our individuality and privacy is swallowed up in an illusion of total involvement.

All media that are an extension of our senses diminish the personal quality of face-to-face communication. They range from semi-personal to non-personal. The subliminal, non-rational influence on the users and receivers of mass-media communication is to make them non-persons. If salvation is God's way of transforming us from a splintered person into an integrated person, any means that depersonalizes us must be viewed with caution.

HOW CAN WE BE LIBERATED?

The first concern of a Church caught in the stream of a secularized culture is to refuse to be conditioned by its alien values and premises. The presuppositions of the culture in which we are socialized root themselves deeply in our sub-conscious minds. Although our verbal message may be orthodox and personal, our non-verbal modes of communicating it could so neutralize the message as to make it another gospel.

Instead of asking how we can use mass media in a more personal way, we need to first ask: how can I become a more integrated person? How can I be disengaged from the influence of the presuppositions and values of the secular culture that has depersonalized me?

We need to examine the presuppositions, values, and ideology of the cultural system by which we are surrounded. We have to view every aspect of it from a Christian frame of reference. We have to view [p. 256](#) the worth of each of its components from Christ's perspective ([1 Cor. 2:16](#)). Where these components are not in harmony with his mind, we ought to refuse to conform to the prevalent norms.

As Christians, to be non-cognizant of the nature of the culture in which we live and consequently to allow our minds, attitudes, and habits to be moulded by the prevalent culture, is called cultural containment. Against the danger of cultural containment the apostle Paul has warned us in no uncertain terms:

Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect ([Rom. 12:2](#) NEB).

CHRISTIAN RADICALS

To refuse to conform to the values and presuppositions of the prevalent system, is to be recognized by those around us as radicals and rebels. That is, if we live by a different set of presuppositions and values from those of the people around us, we ought to know what our Christian presuppositions and values are. We ought also to know those of the prevalent cultural system. As committed Christians, we must be able to point out the distinctives of the Christian frame of reference.

If we are ignorant of what constitutes the difference in presuppositions and values of the biblical faith and secularism, we will rightly be branded by those around us as blind fanatics. We will be unable to give a reason for the hope we cherish. Under the

⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1962.

circumstances we will find ourselves taking an anti-intellectual stance, while we become unconsciously the victims of cultural containment. To stress our difference from those around us we will then be forced to make a set of rules related to the secondary issue of the faith and legislate that those who are to be identified with us must conform to these norms.

This may lead to a reversal of Charles Simeon's commendable principle:

In essentials, unity:

In non-essentials, liberty:

And in all things, charity.

An anti-intellectual stance coupled with our becoming victims of cultural containment could reverse this to:

In essentials, disunity:

In non-essentials, legality:

And in nothing, charity. [p. 257](#)

As victims of cultural containment, instead of viewing every aspect of the secular culture through the person-oriented, Christian frame of reference, we begin to view the Christian faith through the spectacles of an impersonal, secular frame of reference. The result is that we begin to see the Christian faith merely as a set of verbal doctrines. What is important, then, is not if anyone cares to practise them, but that every member should hold the right set of doctrines with orthodox verbal accuracy. This leads to a pseudo-orthodoxy which legalizes the gospel and reduces it into a set of formulae.

WHAT DO PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS MEAN TO US?

Viewed through the secular frame of reference, communication is understood as a mechanistic process that transfers information about the gospel, packaged in neat formulas, with the intent of manipulating the receptors. As witnesses of Jesus Christ, we have no excuse to change the gospel into a marketable commodity. The conditioning influence of secular premises on us as Christians may be measured by our attitude to the impersonal tools of mass communication, and our understanding or lack of understanding of the relation between message and media. Those who are consciously or sub-consciously guided by the Christian frame of reference will prefer the personal medium for communicating the gospel. Those who are secularized and individualized naturally prefer to use tools and techniques rather than offer themselves as the medium to convey the message of the gospel.

Only those who have been disenchanted by the secular myth of the worth of mass communication tools and psychological techniques can realize the preciousness and inestimable worth of personhood and personal relationships. The apostle Paul was enraptured by the interpenetration of selves that he experienced between himself and Christ. He was filled with the marvel of the divine-human relational self that was formed in the course of his personal communion with his Lord. He writes:

But whatever things were gain to me, those I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ ([Phil. 3:7, 8](#) NASB).

What value do we place on the integrating power of the New Covenant relationship with God through Christ, and the healing, [p. 258](#) satisfying quality of personal

relationships with one another as fellow disciples of Christ? Are we so enamoured by the tools and techniques of science, that we have unconsciously devalued the worth of personhood and personal relationships?

Paul valued his personal relationship with Christ and with fellow members of the body of Christ as of prime worth. We tend to worship our technological and psychological *tools* so devotedly that we are willing to offer the personal message of the gospel as a sacrifice to it. And when the personal message of the gospel of Jesus Christ passes through the grid of our sophisticated artefacts, it comes out at the other end as an impersonal message and another gospel.

We ought not to allow ourselves to be deceived by the apparent successes that Communists, certain religious sects and business corporations claim to have had with the help of mass communication. Their end or objective, which is to manipulate people to think or act as desired, justifies the sub-personal means employed. What is our objective in evangelism? Is it to manipulate people by subversive means? We may deny any such motive. But our real motives must be measured not by what we say, but by what we do. This means that what we spontaneously prefer may be a better index of the shift in values and presuppositions that we have undergone.

BASIS FOR INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Within the secular frame of reference the unit for human interaction and communication is the individual, the mass, or a group viewed as an aggregate of individuals. Within the Christian frame of reference the unit is person-in-relation or person-in-community. The human person is man in reciprocal relation with the Tri-personal God, with other human beings and the natural environment.

The secular man does not know his fellowman as a person but as an object to be used or manipulated. Today, we tend to perceive society not as communities of persons in relationship. In an earlier age, people belonged to communities in order to have personal identity. Today, we are compelled to be integral members of bureaucracies, whether educational, vocational, religious, recreational, governmental or economic. Within these systems, our relationships are functional not personal, mechanical not human. Consequently, we are but individuals, or individual cogs and screws of complicated bureaucratic machinery.

If this is what we have become, and what we are conditioned to, we can have no ideological basis for interpersonal communion. Where [p. 259](#) there is no interpersonal communion, there can be no community of persons either. Where there is no community of persons in mutual personal relations, there is no basis for meaningful interpersonal communication. Where the basic unit of society is assumed to be the sub-personal individual, there can be no genuine communion, community or communication. All that we are left with is an atomized mass of people, or a totalitarian state of individuals held together by force or fear.

The basic unit of a viable community is 'person'. Where the personhood of man is lost because of an impersonal apperception, no interpersonal communion or community can arise. This rules out the possibility of genuine communication also.

The problem of a breakdown of communication in our day is not limited to the Church. The whole of modern society faces this problem. Outside of the Church it may not seem to be as acute a problem. Societies and governments in the world today do not intend to create a community of persons. They may well try to 'use' the concept of inter-personal communication, communion and community as psychological devices to achieve their non-personal and antipersonal ends.

The message of the Church, which is the gospel of Jesus Christ, has as its goal, on the other hand, the formation of a community of persons in communion with God and their fellowmen. Such a community would also live in a harmonious, responsible relationship with the natural physical universe. This is the ultimate purpose of God in history, and is summarized by the expression 'the kingdom of God'. It is expressed by the apostle Paul in the words:

Through him God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood upon the cross—to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, through him alone ([Col. 1:20](#) NEB).

He made known to us his hidden purpose ...

namely, that the universe, all in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ ([Eph. 1:9, 10](#) NEB).

Consequently, the end and means of the gospel are inseparable. The goal of the gospel, which is person-in-community, must be achieved through personal communion and personal communication.

WHAT MODES OF COMMUNICATION DO WE PREFER?

Have the agents who seek to communicate this message become secularized? Have they individualized themselves with an impersonal **P. 260** apperception? This is the crucial question evangelical churches need to ask with honesty and sincerity. Do we prefer impersonal methods and strategies for the communication of the gospel? Are we investing more of our personnel and resources in impersonal and semi-personal modes of evangelism, while paying proportionately less attention to the business of maintaining genuine personal communion with God, our fellow disciples and our non-Christian neighbours?

The latest fad in the evangelical circle is 'community' and 'group dynamics'. This personal method can be used as an impersonal tool. If used as an impersonal tool, it can only produce impersonal results. The problem today is not with our tools and techniques, our methods and strategies. The problem is us ourselves. This has come home to the writer with startling force at the end of a protracted search for a more effective strategy in evangelism.

The question of prime importance then is: Who am I? A right or wrong self-understanding can make the crucial difference in indicating whether we are biblical Christians or evangelical secularists. Do I think of myself as a 'person' or as an 'individual'? The difference in self apperception could indicate to us whether our real, informal, subconscious frame of reference is biblical or secular. To make an honest self-appraisal is undoubtedly very difficult. There are many hidden reasons why we will want to evade a truthful answer.

This is also a most difficult area in which to bring about a-change, even after we come to accept the truth that our real presuppositions and values are secular. The schizophrenia of which we are victims seems to be that of holding a biblical frame of reference in our conscious minds, while our subconscious, informal frame of reference is secular. Honestly admitting to this as our illness and taking definite steps towards achieving an integrated frame of reference, and consequently becoming integrated persons, could in the gracious providence of God have a reforming and revitalizing influence on the character of our local church communities. Then we can joyfully expect a new day in evangelism.

Failure on our part to conduct an honest self-examination, and to act on the basis of the truth as the Spirit of the Lord illumines our understanding, may close the door to the possibility of reformation and revival for our generation of the Church. let us be quite clear in our minds about this: only a break-through in a rediscovery of biblical truth, by being unshackled from the conditioning influence of secularism, will bring with it a break-through in evangelism in our day. By merely redoubling our efforts or multiplying our tools and techniques, while we cling tenaciously to our secular frame of [p. 261](#) reference and values, will achieve nothing of real value to God. On the contrary, we may bring only judgment upon ourselves.

THE TASK OF THEOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION

The task ahead is one of a thorough-going theological reformation, starting from the very roots, our method of approach to knowledge. Will our evangelical churches rise up to the theological task ahead, or will we continue to be bogged down by secondary problems of tools and strategies of communication with which we are at present preoccupied? Will we choose conveniently to side-step the real issue, because it may cost us the painful dissolution of the bureaucratic machinery we have so laboriously constructed in the name of evangelism?

The task we confront is colossal. We need to be cured of our deep-rooted duplicity in holding simultaneously to a biblical frame of reference and to a secular frame of reference. This goes to make us schizophrenics, with a double set of presuppositions and values, which are mutually incompatible. We need to become integrated persons by rediscovering the biblical, person-oriented approach to knowledge and by understanding what constitutes divine and human personhood. Then a whole generation of Christians who have been socialized and conditioned by the secular culture have to be taught to think and see differently. This will involve the formation of visible Christian communities which demonstrate the social and behavioural form of a culture that is characteristically Christian.

We need to disengage from the secular myth that we are autonomous individuals, if we are to become churches that are communities of persons in vital reciprocal relationship with God, fellow disciples and non-Christian communities. Only when we become churches that are local communities of Christians in personal communion, shall we be communicating communities.

This amounts to the visible demonstration of the value and power of persons-in-relation in local church communities. The only one who is a perfectly integrated person is the Lord Jesus Christ. It is in the New Covenant relationship that we enter into an act of mutual self-committal with God and with fellow disciples and thus become integrated persons. All other tools and techniques designed to make us integrated persons are but poor substitutes. It is in the experience of being 'in him' and 'he in us' that we become authentic persons. 'The secret is this: Christ in you, the hope of glory ...' ([Col. 1:27](#) NEB).

Evangelism is the function of a community of persons. Our present [p. 262](#) efforts to evangelize in the absence of such church communities must be recognized as pseudo-evangelism. Only a return to biblical presuppositions, and a rediscovery of the biblical truth of personhood, is likely to restore our churches to being genuine, functioning Christian communities. Efforts are being multiplied to 'induce' community by the application of the findings of the sociology of small groups and group dynamics. The insights that these sciences give are useful. But as long as they are applied within a secular frame of reference they can only produce 'results' and statistics which can lead only to the formation of pseudo-Christian communities.

Our theological apperception and our Christian activity is still largely motivated and guided by secular presuppositions and values. Unless our frame of reference itself is biblical and Christian, we are likely to continue to be the victims of cultural containment. We must first become aware of the real problem instead of being busily preoccupied with false ones. Then we need to become concerned enough to act, starting with ourselves and the local church of which we are members.

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Can We Ignore One Billion Illiterates?

According to John Kenyon, 'In the world today there are nearly one billion adults who are illiterate. 98% of them live in the Third World. Of the adults that cannot read or write, about 2/3 are women.' This probably means that about 30% of all the adults of the world are illiterate or are functionally so. And the number is increasing, not decreasing, as more and more children are born in the growing urban slums and large numbers become functionally non-literate, losing the ability to read. Any theology of communication or programme for communicating the good news must take this situation seriously, but I doubt if many are doing so. I am not aware of any theological college which is training its students in how to reach the orally-based peoples of the world. Our training focuses on reaching the literate, and especially the middle and upper classes. Evangelicalism is a middle class suburban religion.

Our theologians are concerned with articulating a biblically faithful gospel, and rightly so. But their understanding of communication is limited to a logical, linear and systematized presentation of the gospel, illustrated of course with a few stories. The approach is confrontational and the appeal is for a cerebral response. However, people who for generations have relied on oral communication live in a very different cultural framework. The majority belong to the Two-Thirds World but the illiterates in the Western world are not markedly different from them. They belong to oppressed minority communities and to the urban poor of the inner city. Such people (from the south or the north) think visually and concretely, rather than abstractly and logically as literate people do. They learn and remember through colourful symbols and pictures and through physical contact and action. Among such people, proverbs are highly developed and skilfully used. The illiterate think intuitively rather than rationally. They are awed by the mysteries of life and, in their struggle for survival, look for synthesis, whereas those conscious of their education give greater priority to analysis, to logical sequence and scientific verification.

The illiterates find it difficult to remember lengthy prose. They are much more at home with poetry, with stories, with song and ballads. In the training of evangelists and pastors, little attention is given to these audio-visual media. I'm not aware of any Theological School that teaches its students how to write poetry or construct parables, or teach theology through stories. But Jesus certainly did this. To those who were conscious of their righteousness and despised others, Jesus told a parable about two men who went to the temple to pray. In answering the question 'Who is my neighbour?', Jesus told a story of how a Samaritan helped a Jew, robbed on the road side. When his [p. 264](#) enemies tried to trick him on a political issue, Jesus asked for a coin and asked, 'Whose inscription is this?'

If we understand our missiological task in terms of evangelism, then we have failed miserably among the poor and illiterate. We have failed to plant churches inside the slums. Our understanding of church structures is too rigid. We find it difficult to conceive of the church on the roadside, under a tree or in a hut just four feet high. If we understand our missiological task in terms of social justice, then as churches we have also failed. We pass our responsibility over to the para-church agencies, who do a good job among the illiterates and the urban poor. It is a known fact that where mothers are literate, the survival rate of their children, especially the female children, is dramatically improved. But this seems to do little to motivate us to initiate literacy programmes among those whose children are dying for want of better understanding. To use our energies in debating the primacy of evangelism or of social justice seems strangely irrelevant when working with the illiterate imprisoned in their poverty and violence.

All too often churches have unwittingly been agents of communal division and of increased oppression of the illiterate poor. By giving priority of ministry to the literate, we have created a new elite, who in turn despise and control the oppressed illiterate.

This article consists of a number of excerpts, reprinted with permission, from an issue of Together (Jan–Mar 1991), a journal of World Vision International. The whole issue is devoted to the problems of the illiterate. (See [journal information](#).)

Editor

MUST PEOPLE READ TO HEAR THE GOOD NEWS?

Bryant L. Myers

No and yes. Everyone knows that literacy is not required for receiving good news, whether we're talking about good news of Jesus Christ or about good health care for all. News does not come only in written form. Even in extremely literate cultures, people often get news verbally, from other people. [p. 265](#)

Nonetheless, literate people often still act as if literacy *were* required for receiving good news, and that everyone *does* communicate from literacy-based foundations—or should if they don't already. But this is not the case.

Two communication channels

There are at least two fundamental communication channels through which people learn. For those who are literate and live in predominantly literate cultures, most information is communicated in written forms that are logical, systematic, and sequentially outlined.

But there are at least one billion people in this world who learn almost entirely through oral communication, relying on stories and symbolic images to convey ideas and information. When we who depend on a written-word culture try to communicate with those who belong to an oral culture, we often unwittingly create barriers to communication—barriers which can prevent non-literate people from hearing or understanding our good news.

This problem is a serious one. Thirty per cent of the world's people are illiterate, and two-thirds of these illiterate people are women. Most of these people live in the Two-Thirds World. (However, the problem is a growing one in the West as well. As many as one-fourth to one-third of the United States' citizens are marginally literate.)

There are two very disturbing consequences of depending too much on writing-culture methods to share the gospel in orally based cultures. First, such sharing tends to exclude the poor. Research has shown that churches resulting from the ministry of missionaries are largely among the middle-class folk who can read. According to a report written by Jim Slack for the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, 'As the evangelical

presence in the cities and towns has been mapped, it is evident that the non-literate, who are largely poor, have fewer churches among them in comparison to the middle classes in the same location.' Thus people who are already marginalized in their societies also tend to be deterred, because of their origins in a preliterate subculture, from hearing the empowering truth of the gospel.

Creating cultural chasms

The second disturbing consequence is the tendency for such methods to create inadvertently a cultural chasm within a culture. Often, unwittingly, teachers tend to encourage disrespect among the literate for those who are not yet literate. In the Two-Thirds World, this often **p. 266** means division between generations. Herb Klem, a specialist in oral communication of Scripture, has concluded after extensive studies that, 'while it was hardly the aim of missions to divide African society against itself, it can be shown that the desire to separate converted youth from the culture of their elders was seen as an essential part of the programme of Christianization'.

Recognition of this problem has led to a lot of research and experimentation with story-telling, what Klem calls 'storying', as a means of communicating truth to pre-literate people. Emotive, dramatic stories are a familiar form of communication to these hearers, and are appreciated because they allow the hearers to interact with the communicator and to use their own imaginations to give tangible specifics to the words.

Research in orally based cultures has shown that the use of topical, systematically outlined information resulted in only 29% of the information being retained by the learners. When chronological storying methods were used, the information retention average rose to more than 75%. And just as important, the drop-out rate of the learners was dramatically reduced.

New ways of sharing

Growing awareness of the barriers that can be inadvertently erected between writing-based communicators and oral-based receivers is transforming the way good news is shared at the grass roots. Following the lead of New Tribes Mission and Herb Klem's work in Nigeria, the Southern Baptists are developing storying as a way of sharing the gospel and the whole Bible. And the United Bible Societies, especially in Asia, have been working with communications specialist Viggo Sogaard to produce audiotaped Scriptures. UNESCO has developed a similar methodology for communicating health care information at the grass roots. In many places, the messages of *Where There is No Doctor* are now being communicated by storying.

How do we share good news? It's certainly important to know the content of the good news accurately. But it's also important to know something about how the receivers of the message learn. How do they communicate ideas, values and news among themselves? Then we have to be willing to empty ourselves of our ways and learn their ways. As Paul said, 'I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means have some' ([1 Corinthians 9:22](#)).

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NON-READING TECHNIQUES IN COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Don Weisbrod

On a blistering day several years ago, I sat on one of 14 rickety chairs circled in the shade of an old church building in rural Haiti. Twelve community leaders and I, plus a World Vision development facilitator, were talking together in the circle.

The Haitian leaders had met a number of times with the facilitator to talk about their community and its needs. Now the facilitator was asking them to review the needs they felt were most important to solve.

As each need was mentioned, we drew a simple picture depicting the need on a piece of paper and placed it on the ground in the centre of the circle. When all the needs had been mentioned, we asked the men to show which needs were most important. To do this each man took three pebbles from the ground and placed one on each of the pictures he felt was most important.

Seeing the different quantities of pebbles on each picture gave the group plenty to discuss. By the time the conversation ended, it was obvious which needs they would begin to solve and why.

In this simple way the group came to consensus on where they would start. What's significant is that all were able to participate because this technique did not require any ability in reading or writing.

Hundreds of techniques

This is just one of hundreds of techniques that can be used to help illiterate people plan, implement, and evaluate—to participate in every aspect of a project. Among some of the other techniques are:

- Using cardboard figures of people with movable joints, which can be used to describe conditions in the community.
- Using creatively drawn charts and graphs, portraying locally recognizable items such as trees, sand dunes or farm produce to show progress toward community goals.
- Using play money to plan the project budget.
- Using large picture maps drawn by community members, showing their community as it is now and how they would like it to be in several years.

Some people may object that these activities seem childish. And certainly we need to be sensitive with any technique, to be sure that [p. 268](#) people are not being patronized and that the group process is being enhanced.

However, having used these techniques in a number of countries, I believe that rather than turning people off, they turn them on. The people become more participative and animated. They forget their inhibitions about speaking up in public because the activities are fun, they build group cohesion, and they don't require an ability to read or write.

During that experience in Haiti, the community leaders were clearly animated in expressing their community needs. But another sign that the picture-and-pebble technique was successful was what happened after the meeting. Several of the men grabbed the pictures we had drawn and said they wanted to take them home to show their families.

Encouraging total participation

Development facilitators typically deal with the poorest in each country—those for whom illiteracy is a given.

Because illiteracy is such a significant factor, we need to be creative in the ways we encourage community participation. Certainly it is not fair to use methods that only the literate can utilize. By doing this we only increase the power of the 'haves' over the 'have-nots'.

In many places those who are literate have gained power, prestige and wealth because of their reading and writing skills. Often these are the first people that outside agencies consult and work with. They understand the documents, graphs, and systems more readily, and seem to be more willing to accept and try innovation. But by working mainly with and through those who are literate, we can substantially limit the larger participation of the community.

Overcoming the barrier of illiteracy is a challenging and long-term problem, and perhaps no one demonstrated the necessary research and vision better than Dr. Y. C. James Yen of China, the late founder of the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) and inspirer of the poem, 'Go to the People'. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of people, became literate because of Dr. Yen.

Dr. Yen's approach was to begin with research (to go and live with the people in order to understand their situation better), and then to design creative, customized teaching methods that had multiplying power in that situation.

For example, he trained children who each evening went home and trained their parents. Eventually the parents, ashamed that they had to [p. 269](#) be taught by children, began requesting help and learning to read. This exemplifies the technique: Start with research and use a creative method that will cause a multiplication of results—encourage a wider circle of people to learn how to read and write.

Which programme to support?

Since readers of this article may already be involved in literacy projects, how can they make sure they are supporting good programmes? The answer is, do research. Then analyze the teaching methods. Do the methods coincide with the findings of the research?

Do the methods encourage transforming development? Do they encourage students' input into the course design, and develop their questioning skills? Do they lead them toward greater understanding of their reality, and the possibilities for change? If the methods we are currently supporting do not do this, then we need to ask how we can encourage change.

It is common to find people who worked hard and became literate, but it has made little or no discernible difference in their lives or their communities.

Another common discovery is 'functional illiteracy'. A functionally illiterate person is one who at one time knew how to read and write, but for lack of using the skills has since lost them. Perhaps the person had nothing of interest to read, or there were few occasions when writing was necessary, but functional illiteracy can move one to wonder why the effort was expended at all.

Begin with research

Before we begin any major literacy programme in a community, we *must* do research.

We need to understand how large the illiteracy problem is, what its root causes are, what the barriers are, what the resources are, why the people want to learn, and what they expect to read and write.

- **Who and how many:** Who and how many people are illiterate, functionally illiterate, or literate?

- **The literate:** Why are some literate? How did they become literate? What do they read and write?

- **Causes of illiteracy:** What are the underlying causes of illiteracy in the community and region?

- **Obstacles and resources:** What are the obstacles to changing the situation? Are there people or organizations who would prefer that the [p. 270](#) people not become

literate? What resources are available? Who are the allies and encouragers? Who could become allies?

- **Past and present literacy training:** What has been done and is being done about literacy training? How and why? What lessons are learned?

- **The Church:** How has the local church been involved? Why? What were the results of this involvement? Does the local church actively use the Bible and encourage its reading? What impact have other local religions had on literacy?

- **The motivation to learn:** How important do the people think literacy is? Which ones give it a high value? How many of these are there? Why do they want to become literate? What do they hope to write and read? To what degree do the illiterate Christians feel motivated to read the Bible?

- **Available reading material:** What material is available to read? Is there enough for all the people to read at one time or another? Are the reading materials easy and inexpensive enough to acquire? Are the Scriptures, or portions thereof, readily available in the local language?

- **Writers and publishers:** Who is writing the reading material? Why are they writing it? What perspective or ideology are they coming from? Who would gain if the people learned how to read and write? How are local readers being manipulated?

- **Local publications:** Are there people in the community who have potential for and interest in writing localized materials, pamphlets and books? What has already been locally published? What was the response?

As this research is done, clearer ideas on proper literacy approaches will begin to emerge. In each case we need to find creative methods that will encourage development which truly transforms—and not only the individual students, but also their communities.

These methods need to have a built-in multiplying factor that will further encourage a more literate and proactive society. And it would be especially powerful if these methods somehow used the Bible as a basis for reflection, to draw people closer to the kingdom of God.

Don Weisbrod is an associate in the personnel development department of World Vision International, Monrovia, Calif., USA.

LITERACY-TRAINING ORGANIZATIONS

World Vision staff have identified at least three organizations with some kind of Christian orientation to literacy training and with links in the Two-Thirds World.

Laubach Literacy International founded by Frank Laubach, the p. 271 missionary pioneer of the adult literacy movement. Runs training programmes in the United States, Mexico, Colombia, India and supports local literacy training in Africa and Asia. So far LLI has made direct grants to local programmes in Bangladesh, Bolivia, Haiti, India, Kenya, Nepal and the Philippines. Contact address: Laubach Literacy International, 1320 Jamesville Avenue, Box 131, Syracuse, New York 13210. USA.

Literacy & Evangelism International. This literacy training group which is based in Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA, conducts a ten week literacy institute from September to mid-November for people from around the world. Programmes and workshops are currently being run in Zaire, Uganda, Nagaland, Burma and China. LEI has produced primers in 100 languages. Contact address: Literacy & Evangelism International, 1800 South Jackson Avenue, Tulsa, Okla 74107. USA.

Christian Literacy Association. This organization of Christian professionals based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, prepares basic adult literacy materials for use through churches and voluntary tutors. It also assists in training tutors and offers supplementary reading material for churches and mission groups outside the USA. Primers have been prepared for use in Angola, Guatemala, Haiti, India, Liberia and Sudan. Contact address: Christian Literacy Associates, 540 Perry Highway, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15229. USA.

p. 272

Parabolic Preaching in the Context of Islam

Martin Goldsmith

Reprinted from Evangelical Review of Theology, October 1980.

I never tire of rereading this article and I make no apology for reprinting it and likewise the poem which follows it. The parables are the classic Eastern way to non-confrontational and dialogical preaching to the cynical and to those who have been warned by their religious leaders to close their minds to Christian teaching. This model, used in a Muslim setting, is equally applicable to people of other faiths—Hindus, Buddhists—and to atheists and Marxists (these are still many zealous Marxists in the Third World). But do not proven evangelists in the West also know the power of a good story?

The poem by Chandran Devanesen may raise some theological questioning but no one can deny its power to motivate for social justice. A Christian group in New Delhi sponsored a mushaira in a community hall in a densely inhabited colony of Muslims. For three hours, fifteen Christian poets recited their own poetry in praise of Jesus Christ. The packed hall of Muslim men again and again expressed their appreciation with their traditional sounds of approval. No stones were thrown. The poets were invited back. Why? Because the mushaira style using Islamic metre is sacred to the followers of the Prophet.

Editor

The European mind is frequently accused of being unduly concentrated on conceptual thinking, whereas Middle Eastern cultures tend rather to a more pictorial approach. The Bible therefore generally stresses teaching through a more pictorial form, although the N.T. with the increasing influence of Gentile thought includes much of a more conceptual nature. God's revelation of himself in the O.T. is fundamentally through his acts in history which are then recorded in verbal form. The language of the prophets is graphic, full of imagery and vibrant with activity—it is in form and character poles apart from our traditional works of conceptual systematic theology. Ezekiel in particular uses under the guidance of God acted visual forms.

In the N.T. also the message of the Word is taught not only with direct verbal communciation, but also through visual signs and p. 273 miracles. The structure of John's Gospel interweaves the visual sign and the preached word. The vital significance of the visual is further exemplified in the Book of Acts, which today's scholars see not only as a book of history but also as a doctrinal teaching treatise.

JESUS THE PREACHER AND TEACHER

Jesus himself taught both by his deeds and also by his words. However, it is important to note that his words were again not merely conceptual, but also conjured up visual imagery and were often in the form of stories and parables. In the context of Asian and Middle Eastern peoples we may need to follow the teaching pattern of Jesus in speaking through such pictorial language. In many Asian languages proverbs and stories form the basis of communication. In English too we use such expressions as 'out of the frying pan, into the fire' without the need to explain in detail the significance of such a proverb. In Asian languages there is liable to be a far greater use of such expressions and we need to learn to teach, preach and express ourselves more in this way.

Jesus particularly used the parabolic form for some of his preaching. He actually states that this was in order that some might not understand! His parables allowed those with ears to understand, while those with closed minds failed to grasp what he was saying. Likewise his use of the expression 'Son of Man' for himself was open to two interpretations. His followers could discern the deeper meaning in the context of Daniel, while his opponents might only see it in the context of Ezekiel where it is merely another way of saying 'a man'.

The N.T. has in fact two different ways of preaching—the one is parabolic and open to differing interpretation; the other is clear and unequivocal. Where people are hungry spiritually and some are open to the gospel of Christ we are to use clear preaching. Paul often prayed and asked for prayer that he might 'make the gospel clear as he ought to speak' ([Col. 4](#)). But where hearts are hardened against the Lord and his gospel we are instructed not to cast our pearls before swine lest they trample our message under foot and also attack us personally. The need for such parabolic teaching is however not only to prevent the gospel being blasphemed and ourselves being attacked, but also for the sake of our hearers. If they are unprepared for the reception of the saving message of Christ, they can only reject it. Rejection of Jesus and his gospel is a hardening process—the more people are put into a position where they have to reject the gospel, the more difficult it becomes for them to receive Christ later. [p. 274](#)

I would like to suggest that in hard Muslim areas we may be wise to use this parabolic approach to the preaching of the gospel. It has at least three pragmatic advantages as well as being a biblical form of preaching.

a) Such preaching does not cause anger, opposition and rejection of the Lord. Even in the most fanatical Muslim society there will be no objection to our telling attractive stories which do not in any way refer to the name of Jesus Christ or to specific Christian doctrine, but which may nevertheless introduce people to the sort of questions which will lead to Christ. There is therefore no reason why such preaching should not be engaged in even in core Muslim lands where our traditional forms of preaching would be illegal and impossible.

b) Parabolic preaching suits traditional story-telling cultures. The Christian may thus gain for himself a reputation as a story-teller which will be quite popular. People will then travel considerable distances just to hear his stories and they will then repeat those stories far and near. In this way he may be able to permeate the whole society with a '*praeparatio evangelii*'.

c) Parabolic preaching is ideal for teaching fundamental religious ideas which are the foundation on which the gospel is built—e.g. the nature and character of God, God's basic desires for man, heart religion as distinct from mere externalism. It is impossible for a man to be truly converted to Christ without some basic idea of such fundamentals as God, sin, eternal life. God patiently waited for many centuries before sending his Son to earth

in order to lay a true foundation of basic religion in the life and thought of Israel—surely we too can be patient and willing to impart basic religious concepts before we present the full message of Jesus Christ, his death for sin and his resurrection unto new life?

I personally have used this approach and found it helpful. Let me now share two such stories which I have used often and particularly enjoy! I like to use biblical stories but I islamicize them and do not say that they come from the Christian Bible.

THE WIDOW'S MITE

Two Muslim men went to pay their *zakat*. One was very rich and from his abundance he gave £10,000; the other was very poor, but was nevertheless keen to give something to God and therefore gave the last cent/pence which he still had in his purse. I like to describe the two men in considerable detail with plenty of humour and local colour—and **P. 275** Muslim men join in with gusto in response, for they recognize the rich man's description as apt for some of their particular local figures! Both proud wealth and abject poverty are fun to describe and lead to real rapport with one's audience. Having told the story I ask which gift God was pleased with. The standard answer is that God is no fool and surely prefers £10,000 to a mere one pence! Materialistic men love then to joke about the advantages of £10,000. My story telling has not in any way betrayed my own opinion as to the correct answer. But I then ask the men further: 'Might not God be interested in the motive of the giver's heart rather than the sum of money involved? Does God actually *need* our money?' The hard-hearted and materialistic hardly hear that question and merely leave us with lots of laughter about money and about the particular characters described in the story. Those with open hearts begin to examine themselves and see what their motives are in their religion and how much they actually love God. Some of these come back to the story-teller to ask what really lay behind the story; some will confess that they really don't love God much and their religious motives are poor. They may then ask for a solution to their need. This is actually a confession of sin in its full depth of meaning, whereas so much of our preaching merely touches sins, not sin. But we have come to this stage without any actual mention of Jesus or anything specific to the Christian faith—actually even Islam has its doctrine of the intention of the heart, so we are not in any way going against Islam.

THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE

Two men went up to the mosque to pray. One was a good Muslim who knew all the right actions for his ritual lustrations; his Arabic was perfect (I used to tell these stories in lands where Arabic was a foreign language!) and he was accomplished in the words and movements of the *salat*. He therefore went confidently to the centre of the mosque and prayed, but his mind wandered to think about the pretty girl next door! The men enjoy this and there are often many remarks about the various pretty girls in the vicinity—and also comments that some of the proud religious men of the area probably actually think about such things when they pray so piously! Much laughter and banter may ensue! The second man was a real sinner who had led a rather corrupt life (easily described!) and had not prayed for many years. He could not remember how to perform the lustrations and therefore just gave his face and hands a quick wash. He also could not remember in detail how to perform the *salat*, so he was shy to enter the mosque. On doing **P. 276** so, however, he went diffidently behind a pillar, squatted down and began to pray in his own words: 'O God, forgive me; I have made a complete mess of my life, but I long now to follow and serve you ...' Local people recognize the characters of both men as typical of the hearts of

many around them and they make suitable comments! I then ask the biblical question as to which man's prayer God approved of.

In practice I find that unless Muslims have had considerable contact with Christian thought they tend to give the wrong answers to both these stories. Naturally God prefers thousands to dollars to one penny. And likewise God approves of prayers which are according to the pattern he has ordained through Mohammed. Again one suggests that it would be of interest to ask whether God is actually more interested in the intention of the heart than in mere externalisms.

THE RESPONSE OF THE HEART

Audiences can be divided in reaction. Again some will be so busy laughing at the characters involved and comparing them with local folk that they do not get the point at all. Such people would have reacted violently however to 'clear preaching', for their hearts are hardened and unspiritual. At least with 'parabolic preaching' you have spared them any hardening rejection of Christ and you have spared yourself the indignity and pain of being stoned! Such people have enjoyed your stories and will come again for further 'entertainment' and one must trust that eventually God's Spirit will open their hearts to become receptive to the gospel. But others in the audience will begin to get the point and the Spirit will give them no peace as they wrestle with the issues—how can I pray with a clear heart? Does God approve of me and my doings? What are the intentions of my heart?

In strongly Muslim communities I always suggest to seekers with such vital questions that they look for the answers first in Islam. I tell them that as a Christian I know there are solutions in Jesus, but as Muslims they should look deeply at Islam first before they think more of Christianity. I usually suggest they ask the local imam/mullah for the answers, but I warn them not to be fobbed off with trite inadequate answers and then I give them the usual typical answers in Islam and show why they are not adequate! Personally I am convinced that Islam does not have adequate answers to the deep religious questions of the heart and I trust the Holy Spirit to go on convincing men of sin until they find the answer in Jesus Christ. But if converts to Christ have not examined Islam first, they are very liable to backslide under the intense pressures imposed on all Muslims who convert to the Christian faith. [p. 277](#) The worst possible testimony is an apostate who reverts to Islam—it is better that such a person should never have professed faith in Jesus Christ.

I believe that pictorial and parabolic methods can be used in every form of Christian communication from serious theological training through to basic evangelistic literature. In evangelism we Westerners are sometimes too keen to give all the answers at once; we might do better to tell the sort of stories which provoke deep questions and then ask people to write in for more answers if they want. We are also sometimes too quick to abandon the form of stories, parables and pictorial language in favour of the more scientifically precise conceptual language. Can we therefore learn to teach theology in a non-conceptual manner? Also in worship we may well find that the visual and pictorial, for example, the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, will move the heart to love and worship more than forms based only on the conceptual word.

Martin Goldsmith teachers at All Nations Christian College, near London, England. He was formerly a missionary in South-East Asia. [p. 278](#)

Lines to a Rickshaw Puller

Chandran D. S. Devanesen

I pass you every morning
on my way to the station.
The light is raw and the wind is keen.
All around you the city is stretching its limbs
and wiping the sleep from its eyes.
The raucous voice of the crow is everywhere.
But you hear nothing, you see nothing.
You lie curled up in your rickshaw
with sprawling limbs and inert body
like some tired animal.
Some mother must have cradled you
pressing you against the soft comfort
of her warm breasts.
But now you shape your body
to fit the wooden embrace
of the hard sides of your rickshaw
for its walls are your home, your rented home.
Your intimacy with it is very great.
Your worldly possessions are in the box
under the seat with its torn fibre cushion
keeping company with your oil lamps,
the battered old *topee*
you wear on rainy days,
and a few *beedis*.
The shafts are worn smooth
by the contact of your forearms.
The rickshaw and you—
you belong together.
I have passed you by at other times—
when you were not asleep
and something of your life
has trailed after me.
I remember the laughter of your fellows
as you twitted the grain seller
who sits by the rickshaw stand
until the old hag exposed her gums
in a toothless grin ... [p. 279](#)
I have watched you fight with your creditors
with the ferocity of a trapped beast
over pitiful sums, the price of a packet of fags.
I have heard you whine for a fare
when the day's earnings were poor.
I have seen you resentful and bitter
when you spat on the ground
and talked unconscious communism.

I pass you by like a hundred others
who also pass you by—
and the road may be the road
from Jerusalem to Jericho for all we know.
I would like to put my hand on your shoulder
and say to you, 'Comrade,
there is One who died for us
and dying made us blood brothers.'
But I am filled with the cowardice of the well-dressed—
for clothes are by no means flimsy
when it comes to erecting barriers
between man and man.
I am afraid you will wake with a start
and betray resentment in your eyes
as you see in me what I really am—
your well-dressed enemy.
And then you will acknowledge defeat
and put on your mask of patient stupidity.
You will jump up and dust the seat
and grin and point to it with a flourish of your hand.
You will want us to sell our brotherhood
for eight *annas*.

Day after day I pass you by,
you the man by the roadside
and I the priest and the Levite rolled in one,
passing you by.

The late Dr. Devanesen was Director for the Institute for Development Education, Madras, India. He was formerly Principal of Madras Christian College, Madras, and Vice Chancellor of North East Hill University, Shillong, Assam. p. 280

Book Reviews

Peter Cotterell

[Mission and Meaninglessness: the good news in a world of suffering and disorder](#)

Review by Stephen Gaukroger

Bong Rin Ro and Mark C. Albrecht (eds.)

[God in Asian Contexts: Communicating the God of the Bible in Asia](#)

Review by Gordon R. Lewis p. 281

Book Reviews

MISSION AND MEANINGLESSNESS: THE GOOD NEWS IN A WORLD OF SUFFERING AND DISORDER

by Peter Cotterell

(SPCK: London, 1990) price £12.95

Reviewed by Stephen Gaukroger, pastor of Stopsley Baptist Church, Luton, England. Printed with permission.

Let the Expository Times have the first word: 'The Decade of Evangelism will doubtless spawn many books, but few are likely to be more interesting than Peter Cotterell's ...' The editorial goes on to say, 'It is striking that the book comes from an Evangelical: it would be an arresting study from whatever Christian position it came.'

In this book Peter Cotterell confronts the apparent meaninglessness of the world, 'the sense that things are not as they should be'. 'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the teacher. 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.' From this starting point, and with the reality of a hurting and pluralistic world firmly in the foreground, Cotterell develops his critique of universalism and inclusivism, culminating in his ten theses. Here he presents a biblical understanding of the scope of salvation through Christ, maintains that salvation is not for all and tackles, with challenging honesty, the question of those who have had no chance to hear the good news.

In subsequent chapters, Cotterell deals with mission, particularly the mission theology of Matthew, and discusses Judaism, the Church Growth Movement, the Church in Europe, Islam, Marxism and Liberation Theology. Cotterell challenges Christians to evangelism, to dismantle the unnecessary cultural barriers between Christian and non-Christian, to develop creeds that confront contemporary issues, and, vitally, to reassess attitudes to the poor. Evangelism remains primary but Cotterell, based on the exegesis of the Jubilee, for example, calls on the Church to actively promote legislation for a more just society.

This is a book that asks us to hear, as Jesus hears, the desolate cry of a needy world that has no sense of purpose. It asks us to see people as Jesus sees them and to reach out to them with the gospel of Jesus. A gospel of word and deed. And deep, deep compassion.

An extract from '*Mission & Meaninglessness*' (p. 278)

To be a missionary today, is not merely to belong to a missionary society, nor is it merely to cross high cultural barriers to herald the [p. 282](#) Kingdom of God, though it might involve either of these. To be a missionary is to confront human meaninglessness, the dukkha experience. It is to hear the cry of the world, even the cry which sheer hunger and exhaustion and despair stifle at its birth. It is to hear that cry as God hears it, and to respond not with more books and more international conferences, but with a truly biblical praxis, which is not Marxist, nor yet capitalist, but a praxis which incarnates the will of God in an as yet unredeemed world.

The missionary will understand the reasons underlying the human condition: fundamentally spiritual reasons, but at the second level political reasons and economic reasons and religious reasons. Marx was right: it is not enough to offer a superficial solution to the human predicament. The causes of the human predicament must be identified, and only then can any meaningful resolution of that predicament be expected. But the missionary will be able, then, to move on both to explain the why of the human predicament and to proclaim the central imperative of the Christian good news: Be

reconciled to God. Be reconciled to one another. Come into the community which is the Church.

But more: even where that reconciliation is refused, the missionary, the Church, will none the less still insist on sharing what it has in *koinonia* among the believers, and in philanthropia towards all, in confronting the oppressive powers of the Second Kingdom, and in rebuking the political and economic powers often directed by it. Mission will always be a power confrontation which includes those signs of the Kingdom so confidently announced in the New Testament. Mission is more than the multiplying of missionaries or even of churches. It is rather the confrontation of the human condition, of human meaninglessness, and in the name of God so resolving it that God's Kingdom comes. The Kingdom is the entelechy, the unfolding, of the Church. The mission of the Church is to be that entelechous flower out of which the perfect will come.

GOD IN ASIAN CONTEXTS: COMMUNICATING THE GOD OF THE BIBLE IN ASIA

by Bong Rin Ro and Mark C. Albrecht (eds.)

(Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1988) 274 pages.

Reviewed by Gordon R. Lewis, professor of theology and philosophy, Denver Seminary, Denver, Colorado 80210

These twenty-one scholarly chapters by evangelical theologians, [p. 283](#) pastors, evangelists and educators from twelve Asian countries provide significant assessments of the concepts of God in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, animism, and Islam. In response to each chapter is an evaluation exemplifying scholarly dialogue in good spirit. And each chapter has a helpful editorial introduction and summary contributing a unity and content often lacking in compilations. The varied perspectives of the writers contribute richly to one's understanding of the one Lord of all. The book effectively exhibits the uniqueness of the triune God and the incarnate Logos, effectively countering syncretistic approaches to world religions. Since the move toward the unity of religions is one of the greatest challenges facing the church in the 1990s, the book should be studied by thinking Christians around the world.

The authors, many of whom have studied in the West as well as the East, perceptively interact also with such non-evangelical western theologies as liberalism, Barthianism, Heidegger's existentialism and Moltmann's liberationism. They illustrate some of the same tensions among thinking Christians in the West, and add some further perspectives. Every Western teacher and preacher of biblical doctrine could use this significant contribution to the understanding and communication of the uniqueness of the incomparable God of Scripture. Because of the growing impact of Eastern religions and the New Age Movement in the West, we live and minister in a post-theistic age. Since many non-Christians do not understand the second word of [John 3:16](#), we need to begin presentations with who God is, not with Jesus on earth. Anyone who comes to God, furthermore, must believe that 'he exists, and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him' ([Heb. 11:6](#)). Eternal life begins with knowledge of 'the only true God and Jesus Christ' whom he has sent ([John 17:3](#)). For these reasons in addition to the authors' first-hand acquaintance with non-Christian religions, their contribution is of immense relevance around the earth.

Any negative points in my assessment are not intended to detract from the exceptional importance of this volume for ministry in an age of exploding world-wide information.

Although Wilson W. Chow, dean of the China Graduate School of Theology, views God as personal and transcendent while active in the world, he hesitates to claim that God is

in himself what the prophetic and apostolic authors affirm of him. In his essay on ‘The Old Testament View of God’ he denies that the attributes of God are ‘how He is to himself’ (p. 27). Unless we know that the one we worship is the highest in wisdom, justice, love and power, we worship an idol! Attributes as essential adjectival qualities of the living God are not p. 284 independent concepts in Plato’s world of ideas. God is in himself what he has revealed himself to be. As the ‘Statement on God, the Creator and Redeemer’ from the Seventh Asia Theological Association Theological Consultation affirms, trinitarianism is true of God in himself, ‘the One self-sufficient God ... *exists* and manifests Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’ (p. 3, italics mine). On the same revelational base that we affirm the three persons in the divine existence, we can affirm the attributes of God in himself.

‘The Bible begins with God’—true, but it is irresponsible to allege that God’s existence ‘is assumed and never needs to be proved’ (pp. 14, 62). The existence and power of the covenant-making God was verified by many signs, wonders and mighty acts at the time of the Exodus from Egypt. God’s existence was disclosed by fire from heaven on Mount Carmel to confirm the claims of Elijah during the Baal crisis. Isaiah supported his belief in God by contrasting the idols that knew nothing from God who predicted the future ([Isa. 44](#)). Jesus did many signs to confirm his claims ([John 20:30–31](#)). And the apostles also supported their claims by their miraculous works, supremely Jesus’ resurrection. Hence the existence of God is more like a confirmed hypothesis than a sheer assumption or unsupportable presupposition.

The claim that ‘any form of dualism is contrary to biblical teachings’ (p. 15) needs qualification after the Creation and Fall. It is true that no dualism can be affirmed eternally. After Creation and the Fall, however, the Biblical revelation clearly teaches a dualism in several ways: (1) ontologically, between the Creator and the creation, (2) epistemologically, between truth and falsehood, and (3) morally, between good and evil. In the content of monistic views of ultimate reality Christians ought not to overlook these crucial present dualisms.

Christian ‘theism’, as belief in a personal God distinct from the world but active in it, is not emphasized in the volume as the basis for common ground or points of contact with non-Christians, and so does not even appear in the index. God’s universal revelation of his existence and power seems to be given little value apart from special revelation. Lee Jong Yun, the senior pastor of Chung Hyeon Presbyterian Church in Seoul, does not find Paul’s message to the Athenians to refer to general revelation in [Acts 17:24–26](#) (p.49). Indeed Paul’s content there is close to Old Testament teaching, but he does not appeal to biblical authority. Rather, he notes the agreement of this teaching with elements of the Stoic’s independent view (vv. [28, 29](#)). Doubtless Paul argued that some truth about God can be known by all human beings, and serves as the basis of their accountability to God, and their guilt before God ([Rom. 1:18–3:20](#)). p. 285 Because of that knowledge and the gospel of Christ Paul called the Athenians to repentance. Hence from the New Testament itself it is difficult to concur with Ananda Perea, Dean of the International School of Theology-Asia in Baguio, the Philippines, who in agreement with Lee says, ‘New Testament theology cannot be properly treated in isolation from Christology, Pneumatology, Anthropology, and Soteriology—and vice versa’ (p. 60).

A more balanced statement comes from Hah Chul-Ha, Area Dean of the Asian Center for Theological Studies and Mission, Seoul, Korea. ‘We do not deny that there is an inseparable relationship, even a unity between the two doctrines, the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of salvation, because both creation and salvation are the works of one and the same source: One God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, yet they constitute different kinds and stages of the work of the same God’ (p. 73).

Rodrigo D. Tano, President of the Alliance Biblical Seminary in Manila, properly calls for 'understanding' of modern non-evangelical theologies before rejecting their errors. He then claims that Kant maintained 'the rationality of religious belief'. Does he understand, however, that Kant's 'practical reason' is not what is ordinarily or unequivocally meant by rationality, that is, Kant's 'critical reason'?

Bong Rin Ro provides a condensed survey of the concept of the triune God in church history helpfully culminating Part One on 'Biblical and Historical Viewpoints of God'.

In Part Two, on 'God in Asian Religious Contexts', Ken Gnanakan, President of ACTS Institute, Bangalore, India, and 'The God of the Bible in Hindu Contexts' with its evaluation by Bruce Nicholls who has served thirty three years in India, are particularly helpful to people relating the Christian faith to people influenced by Hindu and New Age concepts of monism, maya, yoga, karma, and avatar. Similarly, from the respective chapters on these topics, readers interacting with the thought of Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, animism, secular contexts and civil religion will find relevant contributions. [p. 286](#)

Coming Issues

(Subject to change)

Women in Church and Mission - October 1991

Evangelism, Conversion and Community - January 1992

The Editor invites readers to suggest themes, articles and book reviews for these issues.

Journal and Book Information

East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology

published twice a year by the staff of Scott Theological College, Box 49, Machakos, Kenya. Subscription US\$12.00 (Europe) US\$15.00 (America, Far East, Australasia).

Case Studies in Christian Communication in an Asian Context

edited by Ross W. James. Published by OMF Literature Inc., PO Box 2217, Manila, Philippines, pp. 266. Price US\$6.00 plus 10% mailing.

The Eclipse and Rediscovery of Person

published by TRACI, E-537 Greater Kailash II, New Delhi-11048 India. pp. 105. Price US\$2.50 including postage.

Missiology: An International Review

published quarterly by the American Society of Missiology, 616 Walnut Avenue, Scottsdale, PA, USA. Subscription US\$20.00.

Together

published quarterly by World Vision International, 919 West Huntington Drive, Monrovia, California 91016, USA. Annual subscription US\$15.00, free to those engaged in Christian ministry in the Third World.

The Westminster Theological Journal

is published twice annually by the Westminster Theological Seminary, PO Box 27009, Philadelphia, PA 19118, USA. Annual subscription US\$20.00. (Institutions \$30.00).