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CHRISTIAN COMMUNICATION IN ASIA

by

Neville Jayaweera

- * When asked to discuss communications, you are tempted to talk straight away in conventional categories.
- * *We may have all the conditions and the best communication skills but if we are not likely to be believed, we cannot claim that communication has taken place.*
- * One asks such questions as whether there are transmitters and how far the transmissions reach, whether there are printing presses and publishing houses and what sort of circulation publications enjoy, whether those who broadcast and those who write are proficient in handling their media, whether sufficient funds are forthcoming to sustain the broadcasting and publishing efforts, and whether the content of the message is consistent with the goals of the total communications effort.
- * The final test of credibility is the recipient wanting to test the validity of the message in his own experience or his disposition to act upon it.
- * To use a crude analogy, if a bald man were to try to sell to another a one-hundred percent sure remedy for baldness, it is unlikely that the prospective customer would even want to try out the remedy.
- * So the debate on communications invariably centers on the adequacy of apparatus and hardware, skills and training, financial resources and funding, and on the need for a refinement of content.
- * *Christian communications today is somewhat in the position of that hapless salesman.*
- * My first premise is that while all of these elements may be necessary in some measure or other for ensuring effective communications, they cannot by themselves achieve that end.
- * My third underlying premise is that a communications system is never value-neutral.
- * *This means that while they may be necessary conditions, they do not by themselves guarantee effective communications.*

VALUE BIAS

CREDIBILITY

- * My second premise is that the most important element in any communication effort is *credibility* — both of the message and of the communication system as a whole.
- * It is invariably owned by the dominant class within a society. It tends to reflect and propagate the values of that class.
- * *Even where communication systems claim to be autonomous — like the BBC in Britain or the CBS*

in the United States — they are in fact the custodians of the class that dominate those societies.

or, finding it expedient to accept the religion and culture of the conquering race, meekly became Christians.

* Christian communication in Asia is hampered by the failure to take cognisance of the first premise — that hardware and software are enough. Most organizations that concern themselves with Christian communications seem to assume that if buildings, equipment, technology, skills and financial resources are brought together in an appropriate mix, the Gospel can be communicated as a matter of course.

* These conversions which were really proselytizations on a mass scale brought into existence minority but privileged Christian communities within the local societies.

* From the 17th and well into the 20th Century, Christian elite minorities remained privileged and dependent upon the imperial power.

* At best they were a conduit through which metropolitan values flowed into the local society.

* Even after independence came to Asian societies, the role of the Christian minority vis-a-vis the dominant economic class did not alter basically.

* The Church aligned itself with the economically powerful class and remained, principally through the instrument of missionary schools, a weapon in the hands of the foreign and local bourgeois in their effort to preserve the status quo.

* The responsibility for championing the cause of the poor and the underprivileged subsequently passed substantially into the hands of Socialist political parties. As a result, there emerged a false dichotomy, completely untenable by Biblical criteria — namely the identification of spiritual Christianity with capitalist values and the relegation of the responsibility for liberating the down-trodden to 'materialist' Marxism.

* This cleavage is the principal impediment to Christian credibility in Asia today. We try to communicate the Gospel across classes from positions which through historical factors and current socio-economic relations, have been rendered implausible.

ASIAN ELITES

* Credibility is undermined secondly by the very nature of Asian social structures. As with all Third World societies, Asian societies are class ridden.

* They are characterized by a minority elite owning the means of economic and social power and enjoying life styles wholly dissimilar to those adopted by the majority of people in them.

* The communication systems of these societies are invariably owned or dominated by the minority elites. When the Christian Gospel moves in the channels of such a system, it naturally loses credibility.

SELF-DENYING ROLE

* What are the options open to the Church in Asia today?

* Quite obviously, it cannot undo the facts of history. Whether it likes it or not, the associations the Church has acquired over the past four centuries weigh down the Christian communications effort like a millstone.

* But where it failed in the past, it can today take its place alongside the poor and the oppressed.

* This will require a near total reversal of its former role of being the ally and agent of imperial power. It will also have to divest itself of its own economic power base which makes its claim to being the champion of the poor and the oppressed sound somewhat implausible if not absurd.

* It will have to take sides unequivocally at a political level, against all forms of exploitation however costly such a posture might be in terms of lost patronage and influence.

* The crucial question is whether the Church's ostensible concern for a just society is genuine enough to push it into such a costly self-denying role.

* Two things resulted from this — firstly, the Christians remained Christians only as long as it was politically expedient to do so.

* This meant that with the withdrawal of imperial patronage, their adherence to the Christian religion diminished.

* Secondly, the local Christian community came to be identified by the mass of the local people as an alien element professing a different language and generally adopting completely different life styles.

* It became thereby a social class owing allegiance to a metropolitan power.

* The provision of transmitters and radio sets, the dissemination of literature and literacy, the search for funds and the training of skills can yield results only if that initial political commitment is undertaken.

* But, because the Churches are not prepared to make that initial commitment, for reasons which should be self-evident, we tend to salve our Christian consciences by pouring money into the communications infrastructure and by trying to straddle the globe with transmitters and publishing houses.

* What therefore passes for Christian communications today is for the most part an excuse for not adopting the more costly political posture.

* There is a deeper premise underlying all of the submissions made in this paper and that is that a Christian cannot support an acquisitive and individualist society and yet remain a Christian.

* The search for private profit, and the free enterprise market economy which is necessary for it, must inevitably lead to competition, greed, conflict, corruption, theft, and war.

* This is not a hypothesis that needs empirical proof. It is deducible logically from one's knowledge of human nature.

* A society which manifests these qualities cannot be a society owing allegiance to Christ.

* Christian LOVE is virtually the opposite of the individualism which operates in a profit-oriented, free enterprise society.

* This then is the basic problem for Christian communication in Asia today — that, if the Gospel is to be believed and accepted, the Churches and the Christian communities which stand behind the Gospel will first have to liberate themselves from the captivity of economic, social and political elites.

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* Actually, this way of thinking continues to persist only because Christian communicators fail to take account of the second and third premises of this paper: credibility and values.

* The Christian message is undermined in the minds of millions of non-Christians to whom the Gospel is to be communicated.

EVANGELISM AND COMMERCE

* Credibility is undermined firstly through historical factors.

* Although individual Christian missionaries from the West had carried their evangelical work into Asia from the time of Christ himself, Christianity, as we know it in Asia today, was largely the product of European economic and political expansion that followed in the wake of trade from about the late 16th Century.

* The rapid extension of trade from the 16th Century onwards was motivated principally by the desire to acquire and accumulate wealth.

* In their greed for the riches of the Americas, Africa and the Orient, the Europeans did not hesitate to put down not only existing political structures but, deliberately, cultures and local religions as well.

* Christianity — which followed in the wake of these penetrations — depended for its spread upon the patronage of the imperial power. It was used by it as a cementing factor in the growth and consolidation of its political hegemony.

* The local societies reacted in one of two ways.

They either resisted foreign penetration and were ruthlessly put down,

MALNUTRITION, AND THE CHILD'S BRAIN

by

Jack Tizard

* The brain, like the rest of the body, requires food in order to grow.

In recent years scientists have become concerned about the long-term consequences of malnutrition for brain growth. Malnutrition hinders the development of higher nervous and mental processes which are functions of the brain.

* A great deal is known about brain growth from animal studies in the laboratory, and from autopsies on children who have died through accidents.

* The relationship between brain growth and psychological development is less understood.

BRAIN GROWTH

* In all animal species including man, brain growth occurs early in life, is very rapid, and is virtually complete by the end of early childhood.

In man the "brain growth spurt" starts during the last three months of pre-natal life and continues throughout the first 18 to 24 months of post-natal life.

* AT BIRTH THE BRAIN IS ALREADY ABOUT 25%, AND BY SIX MONTHS NEARLY 50% OF ITS MATURE WEIGHT.

* The whole body, by contrast, is at birth only about 5% of its young adult weight. It is not until a child is ten years of age that it attains 50% of its young adult weight.

The timing of the brain growth spurt is determined genetically. If it does not take place during a certain critical period — which varies in different species — no "catch-up" in growth is possible later.

* Since the brain is the organ of the mind, this early critical period of brain growth spurt is significant for the whole of a child's future.

* Animals starved during infancy may be stunted as compared with well-fed litter mates; but the brains of well-fed and ill-fed animals will not, on superficial examination, appear to differ strikingly.

Closer examination, however, shows that even mild under-nutrition throughout the whole of the period during which the brain growth spurt is occurring does affect the size, weight, structure, cell number and chemical composition of the brain.

* These effects are not reversible later even if the animal is subsequently placed on a good, well-balanced diet. The bad effects persist throughout life.

* If an animal is well-fed during the developmental period and ill-fed later in life, the effects on the brain are slight, and full recovery is possible.

MALNUTRITION AND BEHAVIOUR

* In man, more than in other animals, the brain is exceedingly complex.

It contains many more cells than are needed by an animal to carry out everyday activities competently.

* Large numbers of brain cells can be destroyed with remarkably little effect upon behaviour — depending of course on the site of the lesion.

* With very few exceptions, malnutrition is found only among the children of the very poor.

It is difficult to separate the specific effects of poor diet from the concomitant effects of the other disadvantages: inferior living conditions, disease or debilitating illnesses, a family environment which is deficient in many ways.

* Major scientific studies carried out around the world, indicate that malnutrition interacts with other adverse environmental conditions to retard growth and development.

* A thorough study conducted in Mexico in 1966 showed that factors in the family environment were of profound importance in influencing the course of children's development.

For instance one quarter of the homes of the children who later became malnourished scored below the level of any of the homes of children in the control group.

* These children were not different at birth nor in their earliest development.

* However, delays in language development were already becoming striking before the malnourished children became ill.

When they recovered from severe clinical malnutrition they continued to lag behind.

* Other studies show that children who have recovered from malnutrition remain physically smaller and intellectually backward.

When supplementary feeding is supplied to pregnant women and later to their babies the intellectual and behavioural results showed remarkable superiority.

* Taken as a whole, the evidence points to the great importance for brain growth of intra-uterine life and the first two years of childhood.

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