RESEARCH TRENDS IN
RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION

'Teach Ye All Nations': Christianity as Intercultural Communication

The last command of Jesus to the apostles, before his Ascension, is reported by all the Synoptics, but most fully by St. Matthew: 'Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you.'[1] The previous commands are important and form the content of the teaching, but it is this imperative to teach all nations which has given Christianity its mandate for universality and much of its dynamism.

An interest in intercultural communication, therefore, comes naturally to Christians as they seek ways to reach all cultures with their 'good news'. In fact, many leaders in the secular field of intercultural communication research were initially drawn to it by religious motives.

The technical means for missionary extension have never been so abundant as they now are, but many obstacles to it either have newly arisen or have become more daunting in recent years. The Church's understanding of Christ's command also seems to be undergoing massive reinterpretation.

Paralleling the rising nationalism of Third World countries as a major factor in this rethinking is a rising sensitivity in the West to the values in 'pagan' religions, to the importance of human rights and the individual conscience, and to the validity of different cultures as statements of human aspirations. These insights found magisterial expression in the Second Vatican Council, but subsequent theology and pastoral practice as yet have not been able to integrate them fully with the command to 'teach all nations'. The result has been doubt and uncertainty about the whole rationale of the missionary enterprise, with consequent vacillation and confusion among those most responsible for carrying it out.

This supplement will review some of the thinking and research pertinent to intercultural communication which also might contribute to a new and more dynamic missiology.

I: Communication and Contextualization/Inculturation

Leslie G. Howard. *The Expansion of God*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981.

Planting the Church

In the context of Christian missiology, intercultural communication is almost synonymous with what Catholics usually now are calling 'inculturation', and Protestants 'contextualization'—the planting of the Church in a particular culture. At first, this implicitly meant a non-Western culture, a 'mission field', in the old terminology. Quickly, however, most recognised that the same process goes on in all cultures, regardless of when they first were evangelised. The word 'inculturation' was coined to parallel 'incarnation'—the assumption of human form by the Logos.

Leslie G. Howard discusses the process in depth, from a lay (apparently Anglican) perspective and with special application to East Asia. He agrees with the view that Western civilisation is in decline, and that Christianity must find acceptance in the East to keep its relevance for the world of the future. He is not optimistic about its chances of doing so.

In his view, Christianity has been put at a disadvantage in communicating with Eastern cultures by the dualism which medieval scholasticism adopted from Aristotle. A non-dualistic philosophy, like that of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, for example, did more justice to the relations between God and universe as well as between body and soul. Its use might have avoided unnecessary rigidities which have hindered satisfactory explanation of Christian doctrine to Asians. Eastern philosophies and religions, too, have their faults. Many of their assumptions cannot be accepted unchanged by a Christianity which would hope to retain its distinctive character.

Complexities of Contextualisation

The path of contextualisation or inculturation has numerous pitfalls. Insufficiently catechised people have been known to throw out the Christian baby while carefully saving the Western bathwater. Enlightened Western missionaries, and even native clergy, have

struggled to get their flocks to retain local cultural forms which the people recognised to be obsolete and suitable only for museums, not for living faith communities. Traditional forms of ancestor veneration in China and Korea may be given an 'imprimatur' by the clergy, for example, long after their political and economic functions in society have disappeared and their practice has entered into decline. Some symbols are inseparable from fundamentally unchristian meanings; while other symbols, at least superficially pagan, are essential to the self-identity of a society and cannot be discarded without demoralizing its members. To what degree, for example, does the Japanese origin myth—of Imperial and national divinity—still function, deep in the world-view of contemporary Japanese, and inhibit conversions?

According to Howard, true contextualisation requires alertness to the signs of the times and to the 'feel' of a culture, not merely to its logical relationships. Many aspects of Chinese Confucianism, for example, are obsolescent, but they continue to have strong residual effects on contemporary Chinese culture which must be recognised. Hong Kong Chinese of the 1980s cannot appreciate explanations phrased in terms of the values and understandings which dominated China in the 1930s, but neither are they wholly free of their influence. Their contemporary values and understandings have been shaped by their recent history of intensive contact with the West, but they are far from being purely Western. Any successful communication by non-Chinese with Chinese must be based on a deep sensitivity to the changing realities of Chinese culture, the ebb and flow of events to which the Chinese are especially sensitive.

In addition to the Chinese, Howard discusses the Japanese, Thai and Indian settings of Christian mission at considerable length—dealing with the philosophical as well as the cultural, social and psychological dimensions of each. Islam, he thinks, can be discounted as a long-term rival to Christianity, since it is too dependent on economic power and 'too political for its own good'. A more likely competitor, and not only within India, is an all-encompassing Hinduism, which is capable of absorbing Christian tendencies as it has other religions over the centuries.

He anticipates more possibility of Christian growth in mainland China than in either Thailand or India. Japan is seen as unpredictable, but may eventually be affected by the flourishing Christianity of neighboring Korea. Even in China, however, the entire form and substance of Christianity must come to be perceivable as Chinese, not foreign, to retain any hope for success. Over-zealous efforts which 'try to hustle the East' and make unrealistic demands could cause reactions in any of the four countries, which would set back meaningful Christian expansion there for even more centuries.

II: The Bible in Babel: Preserving Scriptural Meaning

The Translator's Dilemma
The enigmas of intercultural communication have had profound and continuingly troublesome impact on modern Christianity in the realm of scripture scholarship. Consequently, their full significance was recognised earlier there than in most other fields of theology. Translators must constantly juggle concepts and etymologies in a way which both keeps the essentials of the original meaning and at the same time is intelligible and relevant to readers in new languages and cultures. Compromise between these goals seems inevitable. This creates serious problems for the communication of doctrine by Catholics, but even more for Protestants from a 'scriptura sola' theological tradition.

As both 'receptor' and 'communicator' the translator is caught in the middle. In the words of de Waard and Nida, the translator 'must become an intellectual bridge which permits receptors to pass over the chasms of language and culture to comprehend, in so far as possible, the full implications of the original communication'. But even one's subjective attitudes towards the languages he or she works with can cause problems. Nida and Reyburn comment that a classicist in love with the Greek language might, in fact, be a poor translator of scripture, tending to carry Greek forms into the language of the translation. Similarly, a linguistic chauvinist might strive too hard to 'purify' the translation from all foreign borrowings, thereby obscuring the original meaning rather than transmitting it.

On the other hand, foreign words introduced to stress the uniqueness of the Christian concept—such as the Spanish 'Dios', God, in early missions to Latin American Indians—start with a zero meaning, which has to be filled out by catechists. Their explanation often uses the native words which the term was intended to avoid; so the new term goes full circle, to end up with nearly the same meaning as prevailed in the old religion.

A good translation cannot be a word-for-word translation, which would destroy the essential message, but it also cannot be so innovative that it distorts the historical setting of the original. 'Lamb of God' may be difficult for people from a Melanesian culture to understand, for example, since they have no sheep; but the direct substitution of a reference to either of their own usual sacrificial animals—pigs or chickens—would distort the meaning still more. What is required, but often difficult to find, is a 'functional equivalent' which will give the reader of the translation an understanding as close as possible to that in the original language.

'Faith Comes by Hearing'
Klem discusses the even more subtle question of how the contents of scripture can best be communicated to people from predominantly oral cultures. The implications of literacy are extensive. In a country with only five or ten percent functional literacy, the majority cannot read the Bible for themselves. In addition, a class symbolism attaches to the written word which can reduce or eliminate its effectiveness among non-literate people from lower socio-economic classes. As was the case in first century Israel, writing in modern Africa tends to be supplementary to a vigorous oral culture in which memory and recitation play important roles. Oral transmission, including extensive memorisation, therefore becomes the main channel for communicating with the mass of the population. It is, however, a channel easily overlooked by communicators from an entirely literate milieu.

Too many missionaries have approached oral cultures as if they were somehow defective. The urgency behind the establishment of church schools often came from the belief that people could never become fully Christian until they could learn to read the Bible. However, reading and writing are unlikely to become the preferred means of communication for the majority in many of those societies, even should education become more generally available. Klem thinks that if the Church wishes to communicate effectively with the poor in such places it will have to adopt a strategy of evangelisation which relies far more heavily on traditional oral modes of communication, including memorisation, and much less on the assumption that all must become literate before becoming fully Christian.

III: Christianity as Culture or Through Cultures?

Charles H. Kraft. *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979.
Padraig Flanagan, S.P.S. (ed.) *A New Missionary Era.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979.

Anthropologising Missiology

One's attitude towards evangelisation obviously hinges on one's view of what constitutes 'church'. Consequently, Catholic and Protestant interpretations of evangelisation must diverge significantly at the theological level, and that divergence will be bound to manifest itself at the level of pastoral practice. Nevertheless, the discovery of the anthropological concept of culture by both Catholics and Protestants has established some common ground which now makes possible greater exchanges of ideas between them. For Catholics, this meaning of 'culture' already was implicit in the document, *Gaudium et Spes* (the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), of the Second Vatican Council. It was made explicit by Pope Paul VI in his 1975 exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, where he referred to culture as the whole way of life of a community, as Parmananda Divarkar notes, in Flanagan's book. Protestants took to this anthropological view of culture even earlier, as Kraft's summary of H. Richard Niebuhr's 1951 discussion of the concept suggests.[2]

Dynamic Equivalence vs. Literalism

Following closely in the footsteps of Nida, Kraft argues for a 'dynamic equivalence' approach to theologising, which will preserve the essentials of Christianity while re-expressing them in theologies drawn from each cultural tradition. This re-expression must be based on anthropological findings, so that elements of the culture selected to re-express doctrines may be those which already have the closest possible equivalence to the doctrine being expressed. In this way the basic message can be communicated as simply and forcefully as possible. Mentions of disease in Western Bible translations, for example, have soft pedalled the sacred authors' strong insistence on demonic causation of illness, because most Westerners 'know' demons do not cause illness. An African translation, however, might stick more closely to the original, because many African readers, like Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, et al., 'know' that they do!

'Preaching the Gospel' or 'Conversion to Others'

Flanagan's book is the product of an Irish National Missionary Congress, held at Knock in 1979. The papers collectively illustrate a developing Catholic attitude towards mission which is significantly different from that of the Protestant mainstream, represented by Nida, Klem and Kraft. Most of its papers are concerned with dialogue in its many shapes and forms, in contrast to the mainstream Protestant emphasis on preaching. The authors stress that the Church must learn—from the poor, from cultures and from other religions—as well as preach. Enda McDonagh, in the first chapter, goes so far as to suggest that Christians might, in a sense, have to be converted to Hinduism in order to bring Christ to that religion from within, and thereby fulfill its potential. 'Conversion to the others'—mutually enriching—is seen as part of the missionary vocation today.

The 'New Reformation'

While explicit Catholic interest in communication research, in general, not to mention intercultural communication research, has been minimal, compared with vigorous Protestant activity in the field, Catholic concern with the same questions has been expressed in theology and practical social-pastoral movements. This latter response could be unsympathetically labelled 'muddling through', or—perhaps more sympathetically—as a Christian parallel to Marxist 'praxis', in which philosophy and theory are developed more in streets, homes and marketplace than in classrooms or libraries.

Some aspects of the Catholic movements which receive considerable mention in several of the papers in Flanagan's book have been so revolutionary as almost to merit being called a 'New Reformation'.[3] The focus of Catholic concern in many places has been more on interclass communication than on intercultural communication. It has come, in part, from a realisation that the Church's identification with the upper classes during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to its alienation of the working classes—the vast majority of the people—in both Europe and Latin America.

Vatican II inspired the Church in South and Central America to strive to reverse its increasing isolation from the masses while some opportunity remained to do so. Two well known results were liberation theology and basic Christian communities. The same tendency has manifested itself with significant effects elsewhere in the world, by an enhanced awareness of a need for religious leaders to identify closely with the poor and oppressed.

The kind of communication this represents may not be 'intercultural', but it has resulted in enhanced dialogue between Church leaders and the lower socio-economic classes in the various countries concerned. Critical to the ultimate success of this reform in its varied cultural manifestations around the world will be the levels of intercultural, as well as interdisciplinary and inter-status communication which it can attain with Rome and with Church authorities. Failure to establish understanding between the cultures of southern and northern Europe was, it may be remembered, a significant cause of the breakup of Western church unity in the first Reformation.

IV: Dialogue and Proclamation

Michael Amaladoss, S.J. 'Evangelization in Asia: A new focus?' *East Asian Pastoral Review.* 23:4, 1986, pp.440-461.

To Build the Kingdom

Amaladoss clarifies and amplifies this developing Catholic view from the perspective of an Asian theologian. He notes that many traditional concepts have been thrust into a completely new light in recent years. 'Salvation', for example, is no longer thought of simply as 'saving souls' but as 'liberation and fulfillment for the whole human person-in-community'. Evangelisation, then, comes to have the primary focus not just of proclamation of the Gospel out of 'building up of a new humanity', 'building the Kingdom'. Here Kingdom is understood not as the Church, but as the totality of the activity of the Holy Spirit in the world, whether in the Church or outside it. Around that central task are grouped the other tasks of evangelisation—inculturation, dialogue and proclamation—integrated and interacting with one another.

The dialogue of 'intercultural communication', in the context of recent Church documents, no longer can be a simple encounter at a sharply defined interface between two clearly different cultures. It must, rather, become an active identification of religiously motivated people with the poor, with the different perspectives of other cultures, and with the other religious traditions, insofar as they complement and broaden Christian perspectives.

V: Relating Inculturation Research

Trinitarian Ancestry

The volumes in this series are, for the most part, based on interdisciplinary workshops which have brought together theologians, anthropologists, philosophers, psychologists, and representatives of other disciplines in an effort to gain a wide range of perspectives and thereby achieve clearer insights into the challenge inculturation poses for the Church. Although the focus is different, the interdisciplinary aspect of the challenge is comparable to that facing secular scholars in the field, as we saw in the main section of this issue.

Four of the six authors in Volume 9, the latest to be published, are professionally trained anthropologists. In the second paper in that volume, the Tanzanian anthropologist-theologian Charles Nyamiti illustrates the value of combining the expertise of these two disciplines by suggesting how the mystery of the Trinity can be expressed in terms of the ancestral kinship, which is such an important part of most African cultures.

Culture as 'Shared Meanings'

As George De Napoli makes explicit in his paper, 'Inculturation as Communication', inculturation is only a special case of communication. Adopting the contemporary anthropological definition of culture as the 'shared meanings of a people', he notes that evangelisation involves changes in shared meanings, and therefore in culture. The Church constitutes itself as community and grows in awareness of its mission through communication. The initial self-constitution of the Church in a society can be seen as a process of intercultural communication, while self-awareness grows chiefly through intracultural communication—but the two are by no means mutually exclusive.

De Napoli believes that the communication required for the conversion of cultures goes beyond finding Kraft's 'dynamic equivalences'. He feels it would be especially misleading to reify culture in this case, since it is the person, not the mental construct of that person's culture, who is the object of inculturation.

Tzeltal Catholicism

Eugenio Maurer, an anthropologist-missionary among the Tzeltal people of Mexico, describes in detail the ethnocentric and arrogantly brutal way in which early Spanish evangelisation was conducted in Mexico. Efforts to study the native culture were not only discouraged but actually forbidden. Even the familiar foods of the people were condemned as 'unclean', and the totally unfamiliar foods, bread and wine, were required for Mass. Catholic teaching was so poorly communicated that the religion which eventually came to be practiced by the Tzeltal had little relation to the Church's official doctrine and worship. Instead, it was a syncretised re-expression of Catholic and traditional beliefs in forms the people could comprehend.

Maurer notes that today's missionaries have been at great pains to respect Tzeltal culture. But destructive remnants of the earlier attitudes remain in the institutional Church. Only the Tzeltal themselves can ultimately hope to Tzeltalize the liturgy. But marriage is essential for a man to have any standing in Tzeltal society. The current prohibition on ordaining married men as priests therefore presents an insurmountable barrier to the full inculturation of the Church into Tzeltal life.

Paradigms and Rhythms

Edward T. Hall has suggested that the differing rhythms of cultures play a significant role in the success or failure of intercultural communication. The Church, too, needs to tune itself to the rhythms of the people in each culture. In doing so it may more easily inspire the deep faith commitment which it is seeking in all cultures.

Hall's concept of 'primary level culture' is echoed in William Biernatzki's article in Volume 9 in which he suggests that inculturation should occur at the deepest levels of culture. The primary level of a culture contains what anthropologist Victor Turner has called 'root paradigms', the most fundamental patterns of conduct of a culture which stem directly from its most basic assumptions about the nature of the world and human life. [4]

An innovation, such as a new religion, which is compatible with the root paradigms of a culture, is more likely to be accepted by people of that culture than one which conflicts with them. For example, Buddhism was introduced into China almost two thousand years ago, but has never been fully accepted by the elite of Chinese society because of conflicts between its beliefs and Chinese root paradigms. The belief in the holy man as having foresaken the world and consequently being independent of secular authority had been current in India and Central Asia, where Buddhism began. But it had to be abandoned by Buddhist monks in China, where all came under the authority of an emperor enjoying the 'mandate of Heaven'. Christianity, too, cannot be expected to be fully accepted into any culture unless it is expressed in ways compatible with that culture's root paradigms.

The Multiple Dimensions of Dialogue

Many of the cultural interchanges which go on in the Church are far less neat than found in the cases of businessmen, diplomats and immigrants studied by the secular researchers. Church presupposes revelation, a dimension not relevant to the secular studies, and one subject to variable interpretations, even within the limits of the Catholic magisterium. The role of the local church also is a complicating factor. It often is the product of intercultural contacts which have extended over centuries. Dialogue between a foreigner and indigenous Christians in such cases is not quite the same as dialogue with non-Christians, since it is mediated by a Christian subculture more or less different from the cultural mainstream. In turn, dialogue of the indigenous Christians with non-Christians will have to bridge a subcultural gap of greater or lesser width.

FOOTNOTES

1. Mt. 28:19 in *The New Jerusalem Bible*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985.
2. See H. Richard Niebuhr. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper and Row, 1951.
3. Richard Shaull. *Heralds of a New Reformation: The Poor of South and North America*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984.
4. Victor Turner. *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1974. See also, V. Turner and Edith Turner. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. New York: Columbia U. Press, 1978.

Current Religious Research

David J. Hesselgrave (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Bannockburn, Deerfield, IL 60015) is studying meanings in missiological literature, Third World Christians' understanding of the Bible and therapeutic aspects of Buddhist pragmatism and Christian counselling.

Eugene A. Nida (American Bible Society, 1865 Broadway, New York, NY 10023) is studying the options employed by translators to study the universal functions of language as expressed by different formal features with equivalent functions.