Secular Sound of Satellite Messages

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Let me start with a pair of caricatures—the radical and the fundamentalist concepts of Christian communication.

The radical says this is God's world (though it may not always look like it from the things men do); and our business as Christian communicators is to proclaim and foster 'whatsoever things are true'. We needn't use religious words to do it, in fact we are less likely to communicate if we do, because to those who aren't at home with them the holy words are meaningless and off-putting jargon. So instead we'll talk in the lingua franca, and speak of peace, justice, freedom and so on; by doing that at least we shall be heard with attention. And if anyone asks what is the difference between us and the other voices from Moscow, Munich, Addis Ababa or Peking, we remind them that we also talk of love. More than that, we are not, we like to say, in the power game. We are citizens of one world, with no prior loyalty to the system in which we happen to find ourselves. We obey a Lord who one Friday showed his powerlessness, when all the forces of convention and establishment did him down. But by that Sunday love won through; and our Christian hope points ever to that Sunday.

The fundamentalist is more clearly a Friday man. That Friday 1945 years ago a just God tilted the balance for mankind by accepting the sacrifice of His son for the sins of the world: "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12).

"Go ye into all the world, and proclaim the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15) is the fundamental communicator's brief, and no bother about the end of Mark's gospel being a late addition. We are not, as fundamental-
ists, primarily concerned about justice, peace and so on. Our job is to make everyone Christians first. The rest follows. Hence we can be well-content to be law-abiding citizens: "The powers that be are ordained of God" (Roman 13:1). It is not our job to offer any critique of the system, especially one that, unlike atheistic communism, leaves us free to proclaim the gospel.

These are crude caricatures. At least I hope they highlight why, however nice we are to each other, however much we say that we would like to co-operate with each other as far as we can, we shy off. We have something like these stereo-types of ourselves and of each other, and they seem to be mutually exclusive. So to name one obvious example now, south of the Zambesi you have radicals supporting the Patriotic Front in their just struggle against the illegal regime, and fundamentalists supporting the elected government as bastion of Christianity against Communist infiltration. Are the divisions between us all as clear?

I don't think they are, and as I can go quickly round the map of the areas that concern us. In the Middle East --and the conflict now erupts in the Lebanon,--who naturally talks of the Christians in their brave struggle to protect themselves against alien domination? And who uses the language of 'rightists' and 'Phalangists' out of sympathy for the Palestinians? Maybe continents divide us on this matter, as well as convictions, and later Gabi Habib will have a chance to focus thinking more closely on the question.

In Latin America, who wants to focus attention on the theology of liberations, who on charismatic renewal? In the conflict of East and West, do we divide tidily in the legions led by Pastor Wumbrand and the associates, let's say, of Milan Opanoce, engaging in Christian-Marxist dialogue? In the largest area of global conflict, which we identify as north and south, do we separate into those who man their off-shore short-wave radio stations and those who swell the lobbies of UNCTAD to press for equitable world commodity agreements?

I sketch the questions, only to suggest that in these large areas of conflict radicals and fundamentalists don't automatically go opposite ways. We are part of one another, have learned from one another, and as we all try faithfully to read the signs of the time, and hear what directions God is urging us in as Christian communicators, we have to come together, as we do here today, and together
take trouble to examine things more attentively.

Or, if I can make the point from the area of conflict that I know best, Northern Ireland: from further away than London, these past ten years, the issue may have looked simple. A fundamentalist could see a Protestant bastion under siege; a radical could see Britain clinging to its last colony, against the claims of civil rights, justice and a united Ireland. I promise you it is immensely more complex. I invite anyone interested to study the report by Philip Elliot of the Centre of Mass Communication Research at the University of Leicester, in which he painstakingly demonstrates the inherent bias of even the most objective reporting of that struggle, depending upon the audience whom any reporter or communicator is addressing. This is a point we can take to heart.

Our standing as Christian communicators gives us no superior platform, from which we can survey, judge and address the world. We are encumbered with our own origins. It is an obvious point, and we easily forget it. But if I can just give two illustrations: last time I was in this country, at an international religious gathering, a bishop from Texas said "of course in this part of the country", oblivious that he had crossed the 49th parallel and was, as I would say, abroad. In Nairobi, another American was non-plussed when I referred to a Nigerian working there as another expatriate; in his terms 'expatriate' was a word meaning a white man working in a black man's country without saying so. You can all think of examples for yourselves.

Meanwhile I want to take us nearer the heart of our business and try and talk theology. The classic distinctive feature of Christian doctrine is the Trinity. You can, I think, even say that different Christians emphases --e.g. radical and fundamentalist--are to be plotted in terms of how they take this most abstract of central Christian formulations. To Orthodox Christianity, Trinity is the ikon of ikons, the previous symbol of universal mystery. In Catholic Christendom it stands enshrined in the creeds, like a national flag. Traditional Protestantism could be seen as bi-nitarian, with the Holy Spirit as an also -ran. Contemporary Pentecostalism and its charismatic spin-offs redress this imbalance by exalting the Holy Spirit, but to do so has to put excessive emphasis upon group religious experience, saying more about Christians than about God.

What I want to suggest is that the important theological
insight in the Trinity doctrine is that God is activity. "Does God exist?" is thus, for Christians, a bad question. For He doesn't primarily exist, and then do things so as to occupy the time and space that He has created. Rather, God does; and also suffers. He is a verb, rather than a noun: "I am that I am". Christianity rescues God from staticness by making him plural. The minute you talk of Trinity, of 'unmoved first mover'. God acts, loves, undergoes, and communicates. Being is a full time job.

I suspect that there is a close link between our views of God and our views about the ordering of society. Solzhenitzin suspects as much. Anyone who read a report of his recent speech to 12,000 people in Harvard Square will know that that is his root conviction. Accordingly, he accuses the east of lawlessness and the west of placing all its faith in the letter of the law. I bridled when I read this, but perhaps there is an uncomfortable truth in it. So with our views of God. Just to take one illustration on which I imagine all Christians could now easily agree: the Christian creeds were defined in the fourth century, and took their colour from Constantinople. Nearer to our own time, what White Anglo-Saxon Protestant could now dispute the Third World's charge that the Jesus proclaimed by 19th century missionaries carried the white man's burden? It is not difficult, and not that painful, to see the distortions of the past, to see God made in the image of man.

It is more difficult to be as detached about ourselves, or the phenomena of our own lifetime. Take the Germany of the Third Reich. We say now, with the benefit of hindsight, that the Confessing Church of the Barmen Declaration was right, and the Deutsche Christen were wrong in their complicity with evil. To us now that seems crystal clear. We revere the exiled prophet Karl Barth, just as we listen with respect to Solzhenitzin. Yet the price of exile is credibility.

From the shelter of another country prophets can speak without sharing the pain. From outside, we can condemn the barbarities of the regime in South Africa, for instance. From Monaco, from Manila, from Monrovia, from the Seychelles, Christian short wave radio can beam its message with technical ease across unfriendly frontiers; but however much it may mean to convey the pure gospel, it is coloured by the total system which supports it, and the particular regime that gives it house-room.

That might lead us to turn our attention to satellite
Communication. Satellites are clear of the ground, and do not have to kow-tow to a President Marcos, or see their work destroyed, as RVOG did in Addis Ababa, by a revolution. Already with the United States, and within India, satellites invite Christian attention. Even so, any Christian messages echo the dominant sound of the satellite that carries them. So while I am all for a WACC study of satellite broadcasting, we should be deceiving ourselves if we thought that at last we had found a neutral vehicle for the messages we want to convey. For I suspect too, that we are each of us more vulnerable, than we care to admit, to one dominant danger: of taking one particular politico-economic system, or sub-system, as given; as being of now, of the future. We are probably all of us less bland than we used to be. The events of ten years ago shook our complacency. Since 1968 nobody can see the world as a straightforward confrontation between liberal west and totalitarian east. Even so, the very uncertainties of our world still tempt us to align our God to what we see as given. This or that, we believe, is the secular shape of things; and this way or that, we expect our God to behave.

But God is not necessarily on our side, as western fundamentalists are inclined to assume, and not necessarily on the other side, as western radicals are tempted to think. Open almost any page of the Old Testament prophets and the falsehood of either view is made clear. In particular, again and again I find myself coming back to that particular insight of Jeremiah's when he saw God using Cyrus king of Persia as his instrument. That did not convert him to Zoroastrianism. That did not lead him to conclude that Cyrus was right, and the religion of Israel must be adapted to the new reality. Rather it was a call to accept calamity, confident that in the end God would revenge injustice.

So we have to learn to see the finger of God behind the setbacks for our Christianity and for the western system that has spread it across the world, without concluding that God is siding with our present opponents. Perhaps the oil sheiks are the Cyrus of today: their huge increase in the price of oil five years ago heralds a great change in the balance of the world we know. History may judge that price-rise, along with the Vietnam event, as the most significant events of our decade. And is it any accident that, along with the ancient religions of the East, we now see a resurgent Islam?

Their resurgence puts under judgment the Christianity
propagated by the western world and its clients. How are we as Christian communicators to react to them? Let me offer you two contrasting approaches. I met a charismatic canon from Nigeria, who told me that the Holy War is coming, praise the Lord! In his city, he said, the Muslims build mosques upwind of the churches and beam the muezzin's call full blast into the middle of Mass. Says he, "It is time to strike back."

I know an Englishman in Jerusalem, a former missionary in India, who runs there what he call a Jotinikatan -- a place of uncreated light--to draw Christians, Muslims and Jews out of their 'poky holes'. And he talks of what he learned of Christ during his time in a Shinto temple in Japan. But even he, dear man, has clay feet, and has been thrown out of the Rainbow Club that links Christians and Jews for siding with the Arabs over a particular matter.

Holy war or dialogue, even if we make mistakes...? The only Christian criterion I can offer is to measure our stand against our peculiar revelation and sign of orthodoxy, Trinity. Against that criterion, we can, for instance, be ready to recognize that the conservative who, let's say, upholds Dr. Vorster, has strong sympathy with Mr. Begin, deplores Archbishop Helder Camera as a subversive, subscribes to Radio Free Europe and the Christian Affirmation Campaign, may be placing too much emphasis upon the Fatherhood of God. The radical who gives uncritical support to Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe, who blushes whenever he hears the word 'Christian' in the context of the Lebanon, who is secretly inclined to think that Georgi Vins is a fanatic deserving scant sympathy, who keeps a tattered poster of Camillo Torres in his bedroom and laps up every word of Ivan Illich...his theology may centre upon a Jesus of Nazareth who was the champion of the dispossessed. Then there are the exaggerations of the charismatic: in Southern Africa he easily hears the breast-beating of Archbishop Burnett of Cape Town, when he says that Christians must first be good Christians before they can judge the regime; elsewhere he will see the mass-baptisms of Indonesia or the official recognition of Tamil in Sri Lanka as signs of a gracious God at work amongst the hears of his people.

He will look to littleness, to simplicity, and shy away from any obligation to study seriously the subtleties of the secular power-struggle. For him there is a different source of power. Or he will look with joy upon the martyrdoms...marthysroms of the Tutsi in Burundi as the hidden headlines of our day, he is the man who enthrones the Holy...
Leisure And Communication Are At Centre

Spirit as the source and author of Christian activity. Yet the crown of our faith, as Christians, is a belief in the Holy Trinity. God does, God suffers, God loves, God communicates. Let us share and argue our different perspectives upon politics. Let us measure what we hold against the crowning Christian mystery. The crown is not the Father, stable ruler of a world that man's revolt has made unstable; the crown is not the Holy Spirit, pouring gifts upon the elect; the crown is not Jesus, incarnate, crucified, risen. The crown is the mysterious activity of God to which the revelation of the Christ gives us access: Trinity!

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To this I want to draw a secular parallel. In our hand-me-down versions of what we have learnt from Karl Marx we easily assume that the means of production and exchange are the keys to the secular systems. So we enshrine manufacture. It seems to us, beyond question, that making and selling is the basic human activity. After that we can start arguing about ownership, capital, labour and the rest of it. And that does seem beyond question. We have to eat, we have to have clothes and shelter. Whether we see the nexus as cash, as Marx did, or more subtly, as credit, our everyday experience tells us that this the basic practical reality. Whatever our theological emphasis, this is common knowledge.

I am not so sure. At least I want to put up the thought that the real central human activity is not work, but leisure and communications. That is all very well, some may say, for a replete Englishman to argue; but in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia, bellies have first to be filled, and production remains basic even if it remains--maddeningly--the production of primary crops. But, first, just remember when Marx wrote, and where--in Britain, in Europe, at a time when steam reigned. He observed the phenomenon that the majority of the population were employed in productive labour. The throne has long passed from steam: to electricity, to oil, nuclear power and now the silicon chip. "Colonialism," said Lenin, "was the last stage of capitalism". The multi-national corporation, the neo-colonialism that rules in Chile; watches elections being rigged in Bolivia; prolongs that stage against a new form of colonisation in which the Cubans are the missionaries.

Much talk about Christian communication is about whether or not we should let the world set the agenda. In some sense we must. "I cannot," said a lady to Thomas Carlyle, "accept the universe." "Madam," he replied drily, "you'd
better." But we are not obliged to accept the world's presentation of the agenda. When its priorities are economics, and terms of trade, we must be ready to stand back, if we are to be at all loyal to our calling as prophets. Our priority is man, made in the image of God, not his national per capital income or his purchasing power.

And look at what is happening. All over the western world unemployment rises. Because welfare cushions lack of paid work, unemployment does not seem the catastrophe that it was in the 1920's and 1930's, when hungry marchers looked like the vanguard of revolution. Even so, heads of governments meet in Bremen and Bonn to endorse some device for reinvigorating the western economies. It does not seem that they will really succeed, if real success is to be measured by full productive employment. So we reach a situation of which J.K. Galbraith was warning us twenty years ago, when the countries with developed economies are going to have to encourage their populations to believe that work--paid employment 40 hours a week--is not the primary test of a healthy society.

Meanwhile, the belief that it has only scratched the skin of the developing world. To take our five areas of concern: I would hazard that in Southern Africa the number of migrant workers from North of the Limpopo who earn wages in the Republic is comparable with the number who are fed and trained as guerillas beyond the Zambesi; and both are small in comparison with the number of tribesmen at home on their land, somewhere between subsistence and cash crop farming. Tanzania, with a per capital income reckoned not long ago as $26 pa, can by that measure be counted as Africa's poorest country; but is that the right measure? In the Middle East, three million Israelis employed in a highly productive system stand against twenty times that number of Arabs all around them. But can anyone honestly attribute Israel's survival these thirty years primarily to its greater productivity, per capital income. Latin America, as I understand it, presents the matter even more strongly: Southern Brazil, with Sao Paolo bursting at the seams, may appear to demonstrate that manufacture is the key; but why is the biggest news from that country this year that Argentina won the world cup? Or look East-West: should this Central Committee do better to make public protest against further US-USSR grain deals, or add to the outcry against holding the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow? And North-South, what do we say about the pressure to write a human rights clause into any extension of the Lome Convention?
In mentioning human rights, I do not want to lose my wider focus: namely that we would do well to recognize leisure and communications as the key human activities, rather than letting ourselves be mesmerised by a social critic on the mid-19th century—Karl Marx—into thinking that the manufacture, distribution and sale of goods for profit is the key human activity. For if we let Marx mesmerise us, the world not only sets our agenda but predetermines our answers; and whatever Christian communicating we do risks treating the gospel as a decorative extra; and that is to deny its power.

If instead of leisure and communications I had said 'the spiritual side of man' you would more readily hear the point. But I fasten upon leisure and communications in order to stay grounded in the actual. The radio set in particular is the world's most humanising medium. Hung on the horn of an Indian peasant's beast, blaring into the dark evening of an African village, competing with the clatter of machinery on a crowded factory shop-floor, the universal 'tyranny' can, as George Herbert wrote, 'make drudgery divine'. Transistor radios rarely receive short wave. As Eypen Eypen showed, in the research he did for the WACC in Indonesia and Zambia, it is the national AM stations that prevail, and music of its culture is the mainstream of the output—the Arab chant, the Indian twang, the drumbeat of Africa. In amongst it all the pop music of the west, and its Caribbean parent, makes its way. It is the international language of our day, or the nearest we have to one.

In all this, what I am suggesting is that we have to be critically conscious of our own stands and our own subsidies, and if we are to speak at all, learn to speak in the idiom of our audience. That may mean that we conflict with one another; the good Christian communicator in Dublin is not interchangeable with his fellow in Belfast. Sometimes they may be at odds. So in Lusaka and Salisbury; in Beirut and Amman; on either side of the Berlin Wall, where the best way to help the Church in east Germany develop its new slender links with broadcasting is to leave it alone. As for north-south, a few years ago I had a hand in encouraging African television programmes to be shown in the WACC/Unda International Festival. I think now it is better not to try and do that. Let things happen and develop where they are, in their own way, with their own voice, even if it sets some of us at odds with one another. If our profession of love means anything, we should be able to absorb the misunderstandings that result between us. If we cannot, we should shut up.