

Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation: A Role for Communication

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A plural community and the integrity of communication

One aspect of modernity which is of particular theological significance, and whose existence is intimately linked to the twentieth century's distance-shrinking communications networks, is our new awareness of the sheer diversity of human religiousness. Those who live in a world where TV, radio and the press are commonplace features of a sophisticated media environment, cannot be blind to the fact that different people believe different things. This simple insight has profound implications for the way in which we formulate our theologies, communicate with each other and treat the natural world which is our common home.

Many theologians and philosophers have begun to acknowledge the quantum shift in thinking which the contemporary experience of religious pluralism demands. Langdon Gilkey, for example, considers the encounter with other religions to be 'the most important new issue confronting Christian theology at the present time'.¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith predicts that 'the religious life of mankind from now on, if it is to be lived at all, will be lived in a context of religious pluralism'.² And Ninian Smart has suggested that 'the earth has become in our time more or less a planet, a single globe. It is now a kind of city, the *geopolis*'³ where the different faiths are brought into inevitable contact with each other. 'Our era', says Smart, 'is one of planetary connectedness'⁴ in which 'each religion, each ideology, must have a theory about the others. A mindless coexistence cannot be stable.'⁵

Ours is an age significantly characterized by its experience of pluralism, which occurs in a wide range of guises. An awareness of religious pluralism goes hand in hand with an awareness of cultural, political, social and indeed *species* pluralism. Much of the current 'green' debate stems precisely from the realization that the well-being of a

plurality of life-forms is of vital importance for the well-being of the global ecosystem on which we all depend. In terms of *religious* pluralism, though, despite being a logically, morally and theologically unavoidable fact, it has yet to permeate into the heart of our commitments. All too often, pluralism is either ignored altogether or else briefly alluded to in some token gesture and then passed by.

It is rare enough to find the conceptual interstices of modern statements of faith cemented by an awareness of the fact that, from the new global perspective now open to us, *everyone* is a minority surrounded by other minorities. In such a situation, respect for other points of view is *de rigueur*—especially if we are going to venture to pronounce on matters which concern every human being, not just those belonging to our particular political, social or theological group. Interdependence renders localized debate—of whatever type—increasingly irrelevant and increasingly dangerous.

If we are to talk theologically about global issues in a twentieth century context, we cannot simply ignore the existence of those who have different contours of faith (or of politics, society, or species) from our own. Regardless of what judgement we may finally make regarding our relative positions of worth on some map of ultimate value (if such speculation really warrants our attention at all), for the moment at least, in the urgent, unrelenting context of the present, we share a common environment and depend on each other's good will for the well-being of the geopolis in which we share a common citizenship.

All points on the contour map of human (indeed of organic) existence are, increasingly, seen to be connected. As Chief Seattle put it: 'All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand of it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.'⁶

If, therefore, we are going to talk about 'justice, peace and the integrity of creation', our discourse must try to take account of the *web* of life, not just a single (whether human, Christian, male or Western) strand. If our deliberations are to be anything more than localized tribal monologues in which we sculpt some intricate theological totem merely to mark off the territory of our faith in relation to the rest of creation, then we must recognize the fact of our world's profound pluralism and the interdependence of all the constituent units in its breath-taking diversity.

We cannot hope to uphold the integrity of creation without acknowledging and respecting the enormous diversity of life, each aspect of which is integral to the whole. In the global awareness which is now emerging, a Christian blueprint for justice, peace and the integrity of creation formulated in isolation from other points of view would be a contradiction in terms. We live in one world in which there are many voices.⁷ How can we hope to address global issues unless we take seriously the singularity of our fragile and beautiful geopolis and the

plurality of its countless inhabitants?

In this brief paper I want to plot some of the aspects of the debate on justice, peace and the integrity of creation which coincide and overlap with the concerns of communication. In fact I will argue that if we are going to talk about such issues at all we are going to *have* to talk about communication too. For, as John Dewey put it: 'Society not only exists *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication. There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community and communication.'⁸

Justice, peace, communication and the integrity of creation form a matrix of mutually inclusive concerns which are focused on our fundamental commonality, i.e. the human community (which in its turn, is dependent on many non-human communities of creatures). It is a matrix in which there are important political, social, scientific and other strands, as well as those which are of predominantly religious provenance. It is perhaps as well to remember that even if we can agree on operative theological strategies, these will depend for their successful implementation on various other factors. It is therefore imperative that we communicate the rationale of any theological strategy clearly to those working in other areas, and take into account their perspectives on the common concerns we are dealing with. Too often, theologians only talk to each other; or, worse still, to themselves.

Theology and communication in the face of critical injury

With these prefatory comments about pluralism in mind, then, it seems apt to begin not with a Biblical text, some extract from a WCC Affirmation or a WACC Manifesto or Declaration, but with a story from the scriptures of that non-Christian faith tradition which has been the dominant influence on such vast numbers of the world's population.⁹ It is a story which I believe can be used to give a vivid pictorial summary of the essential context in which any debate about issues of justice, peace and the integrity of creation must now take place. If we ignore that context our deliberations may end up obscuring (or even undermining) the very issues which we wish to address. It is a story which also powerfully illustrates the central importance of communication in the debate.

The so-called 'parable of the poisoned arrow' is a classic fable illustrating the danger of missing the point. It tells of the behaviour of a man who has been struck by a poisoned arrow. Instead of pulling it from his side without delay, he spends time wondering what sort of feathers might have been used on the flights and what type of wood the shaft is made from. Instead of doing first what needs to be done, namely pulling the arrow out, the injured man wastes time on what, in so urgent a context, is of quite secondary importance. The result of such a muddled set of priorities is fatal. The man dies.

The twentieth-century communications environment has provided

us, for the first time in human history, with an integral (if not yet integrating) vision of the world. Although it has fostered our awareness of pluralism, it has also had the effect of making us realize the singular setting in which pluralism occurs. We can now see our bustling planet of diverse life-forms as an interdependent whole. This new holistic perspective is perhaps best summarized by pictures of the earth taken from space, which surely provide some of the most potent icons of our time. And yet despite our new perspective, our behaviour (mental, physical and indeed religious) still tends to follow old divisive patterns which are preoccupied with sectarian interests.

Whereas a smoking chimney stack might be taken as a symbol of the nineteenth century, innocently pumping effluent into the wide blue yonder with little concept of harm, a more apt symbol for the twentieth century would be a communications satellite flashing pictures onto a million screens. Thus British viewers can see how power station emissions in England cause acid rain to devastate forests and lakes in Scandinavia (some 10,000 lakes in Sweden are now virtually lifeless¹⁰). We are shown (if we have eyes to see) how consumer demand in Europe causes ecological catastrophe in South America or Indonesia. Scores of nameless strangers, the starving, the injured, the brutalized, the terrorized, the oppressed, the subjected, suffer at our electronic hearthsides, demanding our active compassion. The age of TV has given new scope to Christ's injunction to love our neighbour.

Thanks largely to our sophisticated communications technology, we can now see many of the poisoned arrows which currently affect the geopolis and those who live in it. The WCC debate on justice, peace and the integrity of creation usefully identifies some of those which have the deadliest venom on their tips: rampant militarism (especially in its nuclear consequences); the greenhouse effect; deforestation; poverty; acid rain; racism; unlimited resource exploitation; violations of human rights; unbridled biotechnology; manifold injustices; unchecked consumerism.

In such an afflicted situation, where we have received multiple critical injuries, any theology which has not abandoned a sane sense of compassionate, humane priorities must surely be fundamentally geared to performing two key tasks:

- Keeping our wounded (and wounding) condition firmly in mind; making clear the context of critical injury in which *all* our activities are now taking place and the consequent *urgency* of any compassionate curative action.
- Preventing a wedge from being driven between words and behaviour. Or, to put this another way, ensuring that utterance and action are intimately linked, that careful talk is not divorced from caring action.

Clearly both tasks demand very careful attention to the role of communication. Indeed to identify these tasks is to identify the way in

which communication ought to be seen as integral to all theological endeavour (assuming, that is, that such endeavour intends to be curative). It is therefore a matter for considerable concern that the whole issue of communications seems to be given so marginal a role in many of our deliberations. Given the enormous positive contribution which communication could make in fostering justice, peace and the integrity of creation (or, conversely, given its profoundly damaging potential), it is surely important that good communication and the responsible use of media are supported by a clear theological mandate.

Whilst, on the one hand, communication can act to facilitate a global vision which allows us to see ourselves as diverse denizens of a single geopolis, and though it can alert us to the many arrows which threaten the integrity and peace of our common environment, it can also act to take our mind off precisely these fundamental familiar issues. Communication can distort and distract, threatening the rich diversity of humankind with the grossness of a media monoculture where power, wealth, consumption, possession, excitement and violence are elevated to the status of enviable life-goals. The babble of advertising on TV, radio and in the press can act to fragment rather than unite.

Communication can parody the rich pluralism of human life, devaluing our diversity with a handful of impoverishing stereotypical images. The technological and financial forces behind the familiar face of TV and other media, can exert undesirable but formative influences on a society, centralizing enormous power in the hands of an unaccountable elite. The integrity of communication is shattered when the existence of those who suffer injustice is ignored and their right to communicate their plight is denied. In such a situation the integrity of creation is likewise assaulted. Communication and community are intimately connected. Without careful, caring communication, theology can all too easily be reduced to little more than a constituent part of the distracting babble behind which appalling inhumanity and injustice are allowed to take place.

Identity, difference and community

Writing in *Media Development*, William Fore suggests that 'it is necessary to speak from within one's own situation.'¹¹ Clearly our individual history and situation will, as Fore points out, colour our perspective. It is therefore an important lesson in communication skills and media consumption to become sensitive to what specific context is operating in any given situation.

But whilst it is important to respect the unique individual situations out of which we all speak, it is equally important to recognize that despite the enormous differences, inequalities and injustices which separate person from person in this world of unfair distribution, there is still a substratum of identity, if not equality, on which the human community is founded.

Underlying our pluralism is a singular dependence on one common reality. If we fail to see this underlying reality, the greenhouse effect, poverty, racism, acid rain, militarism and so on risk being perceived as 'someone else's problem'. Our commonality, our community, is, in the end, part of one world from which many voices draw the breath to speak. No matter where we happen to live, what stratum of wealth and society we are born into, what schooling we receive, what political party is in power (or what god we believe in), the fact remains that there is a single, original, primal environment for *everyone*—regardless of age, class, sex, colour, creed, intelligence, or any other variable. That primal (indeed sacral) nurturing reality is, of course, the natural world. If this fundamental basis of our commonality incurs a multitude of injuries (most of them self-inflicted), how can we expect justice or peace to flourish? 'If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves.'¹²

Though modern urban *homo sapiens* may seldom witness a sunrise or a sunset, the measure of all our days is irrevocably marked out by the setting of the sun and the rising of the same. The immutable, elemental facts of being human are dictated by the realities of germination, growth and decay, not by interest rates, investment and speculation. Yet it is precisely such primal, sacral realities which are sometimes omitted altogether in our theological endeavours, just as they have been ignored in those political and financial transactions which have done so much damage to this planet.

In a world which insistently communicates via its media alienating values of wealth, power and aggression, and sets as its marks of achievement goals which are radically out of line with any natural, still less theological, order, can we be surprised if justice is denied, if peace is broken, and if the integrity of creation is shattered by a thousand shards of exploitative self-interest? When communication distorts and overlays the primal environment with a secondary one of self-interest, consumerism and trivial entertainment, can we be surprised at the arrowstruck situation the world is now experiencing and at the widespread refusal to recognize the situation or to do anything about it?

No matter how sophisticated we become, our existence depends, at the end of the day, on a very few elements. If we foul nature's water, earth and air, if we treat them with careless irreverence and ignorant disrespect, we threaten the foundations on which our lives are based. The integrity of creation is the foundation on which, ultimately, justice, peace, communication and other such fundamentals of human well-being all depend.

Specialization and integrity

One potent factor which can act to fragment any sense of our primal shared reality, and therefore serve to despoil our sense of community, is *specialization*. Obviously we need to specialize if our understanding is to increase. Indeed, specialization has been called the price we pay for the

advancement of knowledge. But if that knowledge is bought at the expense of justice, peace and the integrity of creation, if, in other words, specialization loses sight of those fundamental issues which are of concern to the whole family, then might we not stop to ask if the price of such advanced knowledge is too high?

Marshall McLuhan once described the specialist as 'someone who never makes small mistakes while moving toward the grand fallacy.'¹³ Might not McLuhan's specialist be seen as the man in the parable of the poisoned arrow? He may avoid mistaking rosewood for oak, goose feathers for the plumage of a swan, but such trivial correctness is made to look quite ridiculous beside the 'grand fallacy' of not pulling the arrow out in order to save his life. Avoiding small mistakes can sometimes involve a far from praiseworthy attitude. If our theology is to retain the urgency demanded by the manifold crises of the twentieth century, we must guard against our communication entering a narrow channel of purely academic debate. Specialization has, of course, resulted in much that is good, but it needs to be paired with a more general approach which can see things as interconnected wholes.

Perhaps what we need now are specialists in generalizing, in reminding us of the binding overviews which specialization tends to neglect. Einstein suggested that the unleashed power of the atom (one of the most profound consequences of specialization) had changed everything except our way of thinking and that 'we need an essentially new way of thinking if mankind is to survive.'¹⁴ Perhaps our emerging 'one world' view (vividly summarized, as I have suggested, in pictures of the earth taken from space) indicates the sort of road which such new thinking needs to take. It is interesting to remember Fred Hoyle's prediction, made in 1948, that 'once a photograph of the earth taken from the outside is available, a new idea as powerful as any other in history will be set loose.'¹⁵ TV seems ideally suited to act as the great unifier, reminding us of the global perspective and fostering our sense of wider community. To some extent it does, of course, already perform such a vital religious function, but there seems to be depressingly little theological support for this kind of use of the medium.

One form of specialization which it is particularly important for theologians to avoid is that which sees communication as merely one subject among others, rather than as something integral to the whole endeavour of theology. Such specialization is perhaps particularly damaging when it takes the form of seeing communication in instrumentalist terms, as something that can be *used* in order to achieve a particular goal. As Paul Soukup has pointed out, rather than being an option within the theological curriculum, '*every* course and *every* theological topic has a communicative dimension.'¹⁶

Communication is implicated in almost everything we do. Yet its very fundamentality can act to make it invisible. As I have suggested elsewhere, it is rather like water in this respect—essential for life, but so

basic as to be often taken for granted (until something goes wrong).¹⁷ If, as the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems would have us believe, 'communication maintains and animates life,'¹⁸ theology, as a life science, must pay it due regard. Any debate on justice, peace and the integrity of creation which fails to look at communication as an integral part of whatever curative remedy is formulated, is therefore unlikely to be successful.

Information and transformation

One of Karl Marx's utterances which might find widespread agreement among theologians is that 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it'.¹⁹ Many of the endeavours of modern theology could also come under this same criticism—a more serious matter since whilst philosophy is not committed to change, religion is profoundly concerned with transformation (and theology with establishing what the nature of that change is and how best to carry it out).

When communication in a theological context (whether in the form of a discussion paper, a manifesto, a lecture, book or TV programme) becomes over-preoccupied with information divorced from transformation (when specialization and analysis threaten to obscure any mandate for action) then there is surely a sense in which the integrity of our utterance will be compromised. If a theological statement on justice, peace and the integrity of communication fails to have any impact on what we *do*, then surely we need to look carefully at its adequacy.

The American philosopher Huston Smith has suggested that: 'If there are things that ought to be believed, this being the whole meaning of truth, there are also sides that ought to be espoused: this is the burden of goodness. To remain neutral in the face of these, or to be over-hesitant in deciding where they lie, is not wisdom but its opposite.'²⁰

Obviously we need information if we are to see what is wrong with the world and how it might be put to rights. Indeed one could argue that in many cases theological training gives insufficient attention to precisely those facts which may carry with them the clearest transformative potential. Is it not a matter of profound theological relevance that some 450 million people in the world are starving or undernourished, that 15 million children die every year, that the rate of species extinction is now running at some 400 times its natural rate, that spending on advertising and armaments far outstrips what is invested in education, that since 1945 there have been about 160 wars, that in many countries abuse of human rights is commonplace?²¹ Too often (whether by theology or by television) we are merely bombarded with information which appears to have no perceptible link with the 'meaning of truth' or the 'burden of goodness'. This is no doubt the reason why Hans Eckehard-Bahr found his class of student teachers of religion and trainee pastors declaring 'Books deceive. Live first.'²²

Theological communication which is not obviously geared to uplifting the burden of goodness is surely of questionable value in our arrowstruck world. Some of the century's most urgent 'burdens of goodness' are clearly identified in the World Council of Churches' draft discussion paper on justice, peace and the integrity creation.²³ However, it seems to me that one 'burden' in particular is given scant attention: namely communication. To some extent this is something that the World Association for Christian Communication is trying to remedy—and its recent publication on 'Communication in Theological Education' is an encouraging sign.²⁴ Education constitutes the vital link between community and communication (as Dewey put it, 'not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication—and hence all genuine social life—is educative'²⁵). However, the apparent absence of any real awareness of plurality from the contributors to WACC's publication (among whom I count myself) is bound to be a matter for some concern.

If the main currents of communication act to push the arrows of our affliction further in (or simply distract our attention from the fact that they are there at all), the prospects for justice, peace and the integrity of creation do not look good. Similarly, unless *everyone* can be kept informed of the fact that they belong to the same interdependent geopolis, then we cannot expect them to act accordingly. The fact that only 14% of TV sets are in the South (with 75% of the world's population), that in the Third World only 9 out of 100 people have a radio, 1 in 500 a TV, is unlikely to be conducive to any real sense of unity or global neighbourliness.²⁶

Creating society through story

'The religious significance of stories told on radio, television, in films and in the press has still to be explored by our theologians.'²⁷ This is, I think, an urgent task. But in looking at and listening to the scores of stories which saturate our media environment (and thus our mental environment too) we should not lose sight of the fact that it is important to *tell* stories as well as listen to them. Whilst many admirable narratives may be encountered on TV, film, radio and so on, our media often seem to be characterized by tales which endlessly rehearse before our benumbed eyes and ears a handful of unimaginative fantasy happenings set in a few unedifying and uninspired scenarios. The themes on which we encounter so many televisual variations are just not worth the time we invest in them.

We need a new *Decameron* tailored to the threats with which we are now surrounded.²⁸ Unlike Boccaccio's band of storytellers, though, we should not recite our tales merely to distract each other from an engulfing, incomprehensible terror. For, unlike them, we understand much of our plight and can identify what could be done to help. We need to inject inspiring stories into the impoverished (indeed perhaps

contaminated) narrative reserves which are now draining our imaginations (failing utterly to enliven, warn or inspire).

It is my belief that the religions of the world are repositories of stories as rich and varied as the life in a rainforest, but like the rainforests they too are under threat. Just as the pluralism of the natural world offers us enormous potential (aesthetic, medical, technological etc), is there any reason to suppose that the religious pluralism so evident in the twentieth century does not offer a similarly fecund potential for enriching and vivifying our spirituality? This is a communication resource which we have only just begun to tap, a narrative gene-pool of enormous promise. Already there are encouraging signs that the stories of the world's faiths have much to say precisely about the integrity of creation and the justice and peace which such integrity alone can support. In an arrowstruck world, tottering on the verge of catastrophe, we desperately need to make these stories known to as wide an audience as possible.²⁹

The best stories will, I believe, act to further our religious education. Alfred North Whitehead has provided a good definition of what such education involves: 'A religious education is an education which inculcates duty and reverence. Duty arises from our potential control over the course of events. Where attainable knowledge could have changed the issue, ignorance has the guilt of vice. And the foundation of reverence is this perception, that the present holds within itself the complete sum of existence, backwards and forwards, that whole amplitude of time which is eternity.'³⁰ But this kind of 'duty and reverence' is unlikely to grow unless close attention is given to the vital role which communication and education have to play.

- 1 Langdon Gilkey, 'God', in Peter Hodgson & Robert King (eds) *Christian Theology, an Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*, London: 1983: p.85.
- 2 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, New York: 1963: p.11.
- 3 Ninian Smart, *Beyond Ideology, Religion and the Future of Western Civilization*, London: 1981: p.21.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.22.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.33.
- 6 Quoted in Norman Myers (ed) *The Gaia Atlas of Planet Management*, London: 1985: p.159.
- 7 *Many Voices, One World* is, of course, the title of the report of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems which was published in 1980. One would hope that any debate about justice, peace and the integrity of creation would take place in the light of an awareness of the report's recommendations for 'a new, more just and more efficient world information and communications order'.
- 8 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, New York: 1966: p.4.
- 9 'Over 50% of the population of the world live in areas where Buddhism has, at some time been the dominant religious force.' L.S. Cousins, 'Buddhism' in John R. Hinnells (ed) *A Handbook of Living Religions*, Harmondsworth: 1985 p.278. An English translation of the parable of the poisoned arrow occurs in Whitfield Foy (ed), *Man's Religious Quest*, London: 1978 pp.216—219. The story is taken from

- the Mijjhima Nikaya I: 427—432.
- 10 *Gaia Atlas*, op. cit., p. 153.
- 11 William F. Fore, 'The "Narrow Bridge" to Community', in *Media Development*, Special Congress Issue (on 'Communication and Theological Education'), October 1989, p.37.
- 12 *Gaia Atlas*, op. cit., p.159.
- 13 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, London: 1964: p.124.
- 14 *Gaia Atlas*, op. cit., p.255.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.21.
- 16 Paul Soukup, 'Changing the Way Communication is Taught in Seminaries', *Media Development*, Special Congress Issue, October 1989, p.3. My emphasis.
- 17 See my 'Learning to be Responsible for the Media Environment', *Media Development*, Special Congress Issue, October 1989, pp.10—12.
- 18 *Many Voices, One World, Towards a New, More Just and More Efficient World Information and Communication Order*, London: 1988 (first published 1980): p.3.
- 19 Karl Marx, 'Theses on Fuerbach', in *K. Marx and F. Engels on Religion*, Moscow: undated: p.72.
- 20 Huston Smith, *The Purposes of Higher Education*, New York: 1955: pp.36—37.
- 21 These facts are gleaned from the *Gaia Atlas*, a veritable sourcebook of theologically relevant information.
- 22 See Hans Eckehard-Bahr, 'Biblical Literacy in Book-Wearry Europe', *Media Development*, Special Congress Issue, p.31.
- 23 'Towards an Ecumenical Theological Affirmation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation'. First Draft WCC Discussion Paper for the World Convocation.
- 24 *Media Development*, Special Congress Issue (on 'Communication and Theological Education'), October 1989.
- 25 John Dewey, op. cit., p.5.
- 26 *Gaia Atlas*, op. cit., pp. 207 & 214.
- 27 *Media Development* Special Congress Issue, p.1.
- 28 *The Decameron* is, of course, the title of Giovanni Boccaccio's classic work containing a hundred tales, which are supposed to be told in a hundred days. *The Decameron* tells the story of a group of ten survivors from plague stricken Florence who flee the city when it is ravaged by the Black Death in 1348. To amuse themselves and take their minds off the epidemic, members of the group tell each other stories.
- 29 Two recent efforts to bring to wider hearing the many voices of humankind's religious concern for creation are (1) *The New Road*, the bulletin of the World Wildlife Fund's Network on Conservation and Religion. *The New Road* was launched to coincide with the WWF's 25th Anniversary events held in Assisi in September 1986; (2) the 1989 Shap Working Party's publication on 'World Religions in Education' is devoted to the theme *Humankind and the Environment*, and contains contributions from representatives of many faiths.
- 30 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education & Other Essays*, London: 1962: p.23.

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