

Communicating The Word of God

by J. N. M. Wijngaards

The Word of God is addressed to people, to individuals and communities. To understand what this means in concrete circumstances, consider for a moment the following typical communities in Andhra Pradesh, India¹.

Mutluru in Guntur District: 1350 persons, practically all Catholics; caste people, mainly Reddy. The village was founded by a Catholic community that goes back to the 18th century; now parish headquarters with primary school, high school and dispensary. Community composed of small farmers; literacy 37%; per capita income a month Rs 32. Personnel: one priest, five sisters, 16 lay teachers.

Kavuluru in Krishna District: of the population of 3000 only 312 are Catholics, baptized in 1974–1975. The Catholics belong to the lower castes: Malas and Gollas. They form their own community. The village can be reached by bus once a day. Literacy 25%; per capita income a month Rs 25, earned as coolie on paddy fields and sugar plantations. Personnel: occasional visits by a priest and a team of sisters, one resident catechist.

Gunfoundry: Catholic neighbourhood in St. Joseph's parish, Hyderabad city (2 million). The community consists of 160 families, 829 persons; Tamils, Anglo-Indians, Telegus, Goans. Most children attend school: 166 primary, 49 high school, 47 college. Men work in factories, workshops or government offices; women take up casual labour. Average per capita monthly income Rs 63. Attendance at Sunday Mass is low; in spite of a high literacy rate (80%), very few are regular readers of Catholic books or newspapers. Personnel: the parish priest, sisters, lay teachers, members of various apostolic organizations.

The ten dioceses of Andhra Pradesh contain more than 7000 such communities, some old and well-established like Mutluru, many recent and in the throes of formation like Kavuluru. To bring the fulness of Christ to these communities will require, among other things, that they be taken up in a new process of communication between God and man, between one believer and another. This process has many aspects: it includes general education; it presupposes a self-discovery and an awareness of one's own potential; it demands a discussion of values and a judgement on actual situations. Being a *process*, such communication will grow only gradually; at first more in some than in others, more in one field than in the next. Being a process aimed *at the fulness of life*, it will eventually have to involve the community at all levels. Much needs to be done in many different ways before communication reaches the target set down by Paul: "So we shall all come together to oneness in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God; we shall become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature" (Eph 4, 13).

Within this total process, one important element that should never be neglected is the effective communication of the Word of God. The other social and educational aspects of the process, however valuable in themselves, lose their Christian inspiration

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and their truly liberating force if the message of the Gospel is not understood and internalised. This is not defending something that missionaries have always done. It is asking for more. The people of Mutlure, Kavuluru and Gunfoundry have to be given access to Scripture itself, to the inspired Word of God. Only then will the Word of God have been effectively communicated to a community when its members can freely draw on it for their own inspiration; when they possess it as a treasury that provides “things old and new” (Mt 13,52); when it is seen to be sharp as a double-edged sword that judges man’s desires and thoughts and penetrates to where spirit and soul meet (Heb 5,12). As the Plenary Assembly of the World Catholic Federation for Biblical Apostolate stated in April 1978, “Only through a deeply rooted biblical spirituality can Christians play their specific role in the world and contribute towards the building up of a new society based on Christian vision and values.”²

During my thirteen-year stay in India I came to appreciate more and more the part which Sacred Scripture should play in building up a genuinely Indian, creatively Christian society³. To ensure success, dynamically equivalent translations of the text in the vernaculars will have to be produced; literature aimed at cultural assimilation of the message will need to be published⁴. But most of all, we need to give a better formation to the communicators on whom transmission of the message mainly depends: priests, sisters, lay teachers and catechists. I found that the communication of Scripture is almost a science of its own, with its own principles and techniques. If I report here on some of the initiatives in which I was involved I do so with the hope that it may benefit others engaged in the same kind of work.

Catechizing through story-telling

Early in 1974 Bishop Thumma Showry, then chairman of the Andhra Pradesh committee on catechetics, requested me to find a totally new approach to instructing adult catechumens. I was at the time lecturer of Scripture at St John’s Major Seminary and director of planning at Amruthavani Communication Centre, Hyderabad. In the ten dioceses of Andhra Pradesh an average of 20,000 adult catechumens enter instruction every year. The Bishop, who was himself actively involved in giving instructions, had found the current programme highly unsatisfactory. He wondered if a new approach through story-telling on traditional Indian lines might not be more effective.

To understand the situation, it may be worthwhile to briefly sketch the system as it then prevailed. Once a group of Hindus in a particular village such as Kavuluru had expressed their desire to become Christians and proved their determination in concrete ways (for instance, by providing land for a community prayer hut), the parish priest would appoint a catechist to that village for a number of years. The catechist would call people together on evenings twice or three times a week for prayers and instruction. Being normally poorly educated himself, he would rely heavily on the penny catechism of ready-made questions and answers, with the standard catechist handbook for further explanations. His ultimate aim would be to make people learn some of the questions and answers by heart. He would also teach everyday prayers such as the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Creed and the Glory-be-to-the-Father. The parish priest, who typically would have twenty or more outstations and catechumen villages on his hands, would drop in once or twice a month to supervise the instruction and supplement it with his own teaching. During the final months before baptism the priest would come more frequently, examine the people regarding their knowledge and prepare them for the liturgy.

Both the penny catechism and the catechists' handbook were straightforward translations in Telugu of French books imported by missionaries one hundred years ago⁵. The books fail in many respects. Their scholastic treatment of Christian doctrine, which may have had its use in post-Reformation Europe, is completely out of place in the Indian context. Much of the instruction consists in explaining new terminology specially coined to accommodate the old scholastic concepts. Within the section on original sin, for instance, the converts are presented with more than twenty new terms, many of which have been artificially composed⁵. The word for "original justice" is a Sanskrit compound of twelve syllables: *parishudhdhamunubhagyamainasthiti*. Unnecessary difficulties arise from the insistence on scholastic distinctions that cannot be readily understood and that have little theological relevance. The words used for "will" and "intellect" are synonymous in Telegu. This preoccupation with notional terms and with making people learn phrases by heart frequently made such instructions a soul-destroying business, not unlike forcing people to eat indigestible glue. There was little regard for the real needs and thinking of the audience; there was hardly any feedback; there was no scope for engaging emotion or imagination. That the system did produce results at all may be ascribed to the commonsense of the priests and catechists who made up for some of the obvious deficiencies by adapting the presentation.

Through the collaboration of the catechetical centre, the multi-media communication centre and a group of theological students of St John's Seminary, a whole new approach was developed, which received the name of "Mukti Margam" (the path to liberation in God)⁷. The approach incorporates some new features, revolutionary from the point of view of both catechetics and communication.

In rural India, story-telling is still an influential social form of communication. Indian tradition possesses a treasury of thousands of stories, preserved in epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and in the thirty-six major and minor Puranas. Professional actors and narrators bring these stories in traditional forms: the harikatha, kathakalakshepam and burakatha. The stories have the outspoken purpose of instilling religious and social values. Indian narrative has another distinctive feature in that it often presents stories within stories. A treatise on moral virtues, the Pancha Tantra, offers a long narration about the animal kingdom which is frequently interrupted with smaller stories to illustrate individual points. Against this background, Mukti Margam was designed to contain twenty-five units, each of which consisted of one main story (from Scripture) and three sub-stories (from everyday life).

To show how it works in practice, consider unit twenty-one on forgiveness of sins. The instruction is based on the story of the leper Naaman who is cured by the prophet Elisha. The story is interrupted three times to allow for explicit instruction on: the need for acknowledging one's own sinfulness; forgiveness of sins through the sacrament of penance; renewal of life. Each of these three items of instruction is promptly illustrated by a sub-story: about a beggar who became a thief; about Ananias and Sapphira; about the conversion of a rich man who had exploited his fellow-villagers. With examples from the Gospels thrown in, the whole unit is welded into one big story with instructions and illustrations intermingling in true Indian fashion. To tie in with existing catechetical practice as much as possible, each unit leads up to a portion of the prayers that have to be learnt by heart. The first six units, for instance, lead up to successive parts of the Our Father so that the catechumen can associate the Our Father with the stories heard and the lessons learnt.

The whole approach will eventually incorporate the following aids: a catechists’ hand-book; a parallel correspondence course; cassettes with Telegu Christian songs related to the various units; a series of slides at four key points within the course; posters to accompany the stories of each unit; training courses for catechists in the Mukti Margam approach; dramatised versions of the Mukti Margam stories to be broadcast in the Telegu radio programmes of Radio Veritas. Mukti Margam was launched for experimentation in six dioceses two years ago. It has found a very favourable initial response.

Focus on communicators

A system of communication as outlined in the Mukti Margam approach will have little effect unless we tackle at the same time the formation of those communicating Scripture. From a study of what actually goes on in communities such as Mutluru (M), Kavuluru (K) and Gunfoundry (G), we may identify the following activities:

- reading Scripture in the liturgy M K G
- preaching by the priest M (K)G
- catechumen instruction K
- religious classes in school M G
- Biblical introductions in group work G

In all of these the leader – whether priest, religious, catechist or lay teacher – plays a key role. Success or failure in transmitting the message depends mainly on him or her.

When I started teaching Scripture I concentrated on exegesis as, I am sure, most of my colleagues do. Soon I discovered that religious instructors need to be given much more than static information about the text. I came to see that the lack of training in communication was a serious deficiency in the syllabus. With their heavy emphasis on academic formation, Scripture courses often fail to teach future priests, teachers and catechists how to pass on their knowledge. The students are taught how to think critically, not how to express themselves creatively. They are given information about Scriptural texts, not shown how to communicate these texts effectively to different audiences. An analysis of sermons preached by young priests showed unexpected anomalies. The Old Testament, which constitutes 75% of the volume of Scripture and to which much instruction had been devoted, was hardly ever referred to. The use of Scripture was generally restricted to a thematic approach or a citation of examples. Many priests ignored the new exegetical insights learned in the seminary and reverted to their own high-school sources for ideas and inspiration. It was clear that if the teaching of Scripture was to have any meaning at all, it would have to include a course on its effective communication.

It is not just a matter of communication as such that is needed so that someone good at teaching will automatically do the right thing. There are elements of *scriptural* communication that require specific attention. Take, for example, the question of narration. It is not by accident that most of Scripture is made up of story. Many religious instructors are inclined to present christianity in the form of “argumentation”, a category that belongs to the realms of philosophy and science. Scripture, however, uses “narration” and by this fact itself places the Word of God in the category of history and experience. It will have to be communicated as such⁸.

We live in an age in which the art of story-telling is said to have been eclipsed and which consequently has been called post-narrative. Perhaps the Word of God has a special task in our age. It could free us from the closed circle of endless speculations

and put us back where we belong in a history of salvation. Communicators of Scripture should learn how to narrate: not only to present a story well, but especially to bring it in a way relevant to a present-day audience.

To help communicators of Scripture prepare for their task, I gradually developed a course on attitudes and techniques. These include: forms of narration; presentation of portraits; the exposition of motifs; models of public Bible reading; witness and prophecy; theological perspective and other imaginative forms of elaboration⁹. The course has now been published as a book in slightly adapted publications for India and Great Britain under the title: “*Communicating the Word of God*”¹⁰. Opening a new field, its defects are many and future reviewers will not fail to spot them. My one justification for defending its value is the fact that it grew from a real situation. The techniques discussed and recommended in the book arose from actual experience.

Conclusion

Christian faith has the nature of a response. The Christian believes that he owes his existence and his salvation to a loving Word spoken by God. Both in creation and redemption God communicates. He discloses himself with power and grace. Christ himself meets us as the Word to seal our relationship with the Father through sacramental realities. In theology communication lies at the root of things; it is a privileged concept for understanding God’s inner relationships as well as his deeds *ad extra*.

Coming down from these lofty heights of theological reflection to everyday life, we find that much more down-to-earth forms of communication, too, play their role within the Christian community. Sacred Scripture stands chief among them. It conveys inspired words that may spark off in the believers a living contact with God. It enshrines the sacred traditions on which faith and the Church are founded. It is proclaimed afresh through every generation and provides the source material for every new theology. Sacred Scripture shares the ambiguity of all Christian realities – while possessing a dimension that cannot easily be defined (in as far as it comes from God or leads us to God), it also has dimensions that fall within the scope of ordinary human management.

The Word of God is addressed to people, to individuals and to communities. As in every form of communication, it is the recipients who complete the process and bring it to maturity. Mutluru, Kavuluru and Gunfoundry may not be left out of consideration. It is there that the Word of God happens again, there that its meaning is reborn. “But how shall they hear it, if it is not proclaimed?” (Rom 10,14). That is: if it is not communicated effectively?

Notes:

- ¹ The information is derived from case studies undertaken by *Jyotirmai*, the pastoral planning commission for Andhra Pradesh; unpublished manuscript, Secunderabad 1975.
- ² Published in “Scripture Bulletin” 9 (1978) pp. 2–4.
- ³ J.N.M. Wijngaards: The Function of Sacred Scripture in the Evangelization of India, in “The Biblical Apostolate”, Quarterly of the WFCBA, 10 (1973) pp. 3–13.
- ⁴ J.N.M. Wijngaards: The Bible in an Indian Setting, in: The Bible is For All, ed. J. Rhymer, Collins, London 1973, pp. 154–175.

- ⁵ The catechist manual discussed here is the *Sathyopadesha Vyakhyanam*; my edition Nellore 1950.
- ⁶ Ibid. pp. 124-129; see also: Purvaveda Charitra Sanksepam (Bible History), Nellore 1947, pp. 6-8.
- ⁷ J.N.M. Wijngaards et al.: Mukti Margam, Hyderabad 1976; joint publication of Amruthavani, Jyotimai and Sathya Sri Seva Kendram; 389 pp.
- ⁸ Cf. about the place of "narrative theology": J.B. Metz: A Short Apology of Narrative, and H. Weinrich: Narrative Theology, both in „Concilium“ May 1973, pp. 46-56; 84-98; H. Frei: The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative, Yale University Press 1974; W. Neidhart and H. Eggenberger: Erzählbuch zur Bibel, Benziger, Einsiedeln 1975.
- ⁹ Some of my earlier experience was published as: Preaching from Scripture, serial in "Nene Velugu" 1966-67; Existential Forms of Preaching, "The Living Word" 79 (1973) pp. 143-168; *Yes. Read the Word to Others, – but make them Understand*, Asian Trading, Bangalore 1973.
- ¹⁰ Mayhew-McCrimmon: Great Waking 1978; Theological Publications India, Bangalore 1979.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Kommunikation des Wortes Gottes vollzieht sich jeweils in einer bestimmten Situation menschlicher Gesellschaft. Um drei Beispiele aus Andhra Pradesh in Indien zu geben: In Mutluru sind bei 1.350 Einwohnern alle katholisch, denn das Dorf wurde im 18. Jahrhundert von Katholiken gegründet. Die Einwohner sind weithin Bauern, 37% können lesen und schreiben, monatliches Durchschnittseinkommen: 32 Rs. In Kayuluru leben unter 3.000 Einwohnern nur 312 Katholiken, die erst in den Jahren 1974/75 getauft wurden; sie gehören zu den niedrigeren Kasten und bilden eine eigene Gemeinschaft; 25% können lesen und schreiben, Durchschnittseinkommen: 25 Rs. Gunfoundry ist eine katholische Nachbarschaft der Stadtgemeinde St. Josef in Hyderabad mit zwei Mio Einwohnern. Die Gemeinschaft besteht aus 160 Familien, 892 Personen. Die meisten Kinder gehen zur Schule, die Männer arbeiten in Fabriken, Werkstätten und Büros, der Kirchenbesuch ist schwach; 80% können lesen und schreiben, Durchschnittseinkommen: 63 Rs. Die zehn Diözesen von Andhra Pradesh haben 7.000 solcher Dörfer und Gemeinschaften. Um die Fülle Christi zu bringen, brauchen diese Gemeinschaften einen neuen Kommunikationsprozeß zwischen Gott und Mensch und untereinander. Dieser Prozeß hat verschiedene Aspekte: er umschließt die allgemeine Ausbildung, er setzt die Selbsterkenntnis und das Bewußtsein der eigenen Möglichkeiten voraus; er verlangt eine Auseinandersetzung mit den Werten und eine Beurteilung aktueller Gegebenheiten.

Als *Prozeß* wird eine solche Kommunikation stufenweise wachsen, in einigem mehr, in anderem weniger. Als Prozeß, der zur Fülle des Lebens strebt, wird er die Gemeinschaft in allen Bereichen beanspruchen. Innerhalb eines solchen Vorgangs steht die Kommunikation des Wortes Gottes unverrückbar an erster Stelle. Alle anderen Bemühungen, wie wertvoll sie auch sind, verlieren ihren christlichen und wahrhaft befreienden Geist, wenn die Botschaft des Gotteswortes nicht verstanden und verwirklicht wird. Und dies ist mehr als Missionare schon immer getan haben. Es verlangt eben mehr, und zwar vor allem auch, daß das Gotteswort in dynamischen Übersetzungen in den einheimischen Sprachen zugänglich gemacht und in die kulturellen Gegebenheiten eingepaßt wird. Besondere Aufgabe aber ist es, den Kommunikatoren, von denen die Vermittlung der Botschaft abhängt, eine entsprechende Ausbildung zu geben, den Priestern, Schwestern, Lehrern und Katechisten.

Als ich 1974 Dozent für Exegese am St. John Regionalseminar und Direktor des Amruthavani Kommunikationszentrums in Hyderabad war, bat mich Bischof Thumma Showry, der damalige Vorsitzende der Andhr Pradesh Kommission für Katechese, einen völlig neuen Ansatz für die Erwachsenenkatechese zu finden. In den zehn Bistümern dieses Staates gibt es jährlich rund 20.000 Teilnehmer, die mit dieser Erwachsenenkatechese neu beginnen. Der Bischof hielt aus seiner eigenen Erfahrung die bestehende Methode für völlig unzureichend. Ich selbst hielt damals die traditionelle indische Art des Geschichtenerzählens für eine Möglichkeit. Bei der bis dahin üblichen katechetischen Methode wurde für einzelne Dörfer oft ein selbst wenig gebildeter Katechist eingesetzt, der sich genau an den Frage-und-Antwort Katechismus nach französischem Vorbild hielt. Es ging weithin ums Auswendiglernen von Gebeten und Katechismusantworten. Dabei besuchte der Pfarrer bei seinen 20 und mehr Außenstationen diese Dörfer vielleicht ein bis zwei Mal im Monat, um den Katecheten zu unterstützen und zu korrigieren. Diese Methode entsprach bei ihrer z.B. künstlichen Begriffsdröscherei kaum den tatsächlichen Notwendigkeiten der Empfänger.

Zusammen mit dem katechetischen, dem Kommunikationszentrum und einer Gruppe von Theologiestudenten des St. John Seminars, versuchten wir eine völlig neue kommunikative katechetische Methode zu entwickeln, der wir den Namen „Mukti Margam“ (Pfad der Freiheit in Gott) gaben. Hier versuchten wir einige in katechetischer und kommunikativer Hinsicht neue Elemente einzubringen.

Das Geschichtenerzählen ist in Indien immer noch eine einflußreiche Form der sozialen Kommunikation. Die indische Tradition besitzt einen Schatz von tausenden von Geschichten. Professionelle Künstler und Erzähler bringen diese Geschichten in traditionelle Formen, die die besondere Aufgabe haben, religiöse und soziale Werte zu vermitteln. Diese indischen Formen haben außerdem noch die Eigenart, daß sie sehr oft zusätzliche Erzählungen innerhalb einer großen Erzählung bringen, um so besondere Gesichtspunkte noch detaillierter darzustellen. Auf diesem Hintergrund war „Mukti Margam“ auf 25 Einheiten bestimmt, von denen jede aus der Hauptdarstellung und drei Zwischengeschichten bestand.

Diese Art der Kommunikation enthält so u.a. folgende Mittel: Handbuch des Katecheten, parallel laufender Korrespondenzkurs, Musikkassetten mit entsprechenden Telegu-Gesängen, Dias, Plakate, Ausbildungskurse für die Katecheten, Hörspiele. Diese Programme wurden 1977 versuchsweise in sechs Bistümern eingeführt; sie fanden einen guten Anklang.

Das gesamte Kommunikationsprogramm von „Mukti Margam“ kann natürlich nur funktionieren, wenn dauernd eine Weiterbildung der Kommunikatoren in biblischem Leben und Verstehen erfolgt. Dabei reicht es dann nicht, nur Information über und aus der Schrift zu geben; sie müssen auch aktiv lernen, wie sie das Wort Gottes kommunikativ mitteilen können. Dies ist mehr als nur eine Frage reiner Techniken. Viele kirchliche Lehrer neigen dazu, die christliche Lehre in der Form der Argumentation darzubieten, während die Bibel weithin aus Erzählungen besteht und so eine geschichtliche Darstellung und eine Präsentation von Erfahrungen ist, die auch als solche weiter vermittelt werden wollen. (Der Verfasser hat dazu einen eigenen Kurs entwickelt, der unter dem Titel „Communicating the Word of God“ soeben erschienen ist. Vgl. die Besprechung im folgenden Heft von CS.)

Christlicher Glaube ist von Natur aus Antwort. Gott kommuniziert in Schöpfung und Erlösung. Dieses Wort, Christus, erfordert Antwort. Diese theologische Erfahrung spielt denn auch im Alltag in der christlichen Gemeinschaft als kommunikativer Gemeinschaft eine Rolle, wobei die Bibel zentral steht. Gottes Wort ist an Menschen gerichtet, an Einzelne und Gemeinschaft. In jeder Form der Kommunikation vollenden diese Rezipienten den Kreis der Kommunikation. Auf gleiche Weise muß so das Wort Gottes kommuniziert werden; dies ist eine Frage der effizienten Kommunikation.

RÉSUMÉ

La communication de la parole de Dieu s'accomplit, selon le cas, dans des situations déterminées. L'auteur, à Hyderabad, a été prié par son évêque, en 1974, de trouver un nouveau début pour la catéchèse des adultes. Jusqu'à présent, il était courant d'apprendre par coeur les prières et les réponses du catéchisme, ce qui s'est avéré totalement insuffisant. Ainsi, on adapta la façon indienne traditionnelle de compter des histoires pour une méthode catéchistique et communicative nouvelle qui obtint le nom de „Mukti Margam” (Chemin de la liberté en Dieu). On développa un manuel pour catéchètes, un cours de correspondance marchant parallèlement, des cassettes avec des chants telegu, des diapositives, des affiches, des cours de formation pour catéchètes et des pièces radiophoniques. Les programmes furent introduits en 1977 dans six évêchés; ils eurent un bon écho. La foi chrétienne est réponse. Dieu communique en création et en rédemption. Le mot Christ exige réponse. Cette expérience théologique joue dans le quotidien de la communauté chrétienne en tant que communauté communicative un rôle dans lequel la Bible se trouve au centre. De façon durable, la Bible se compose de récits et offre des expériences qui veulent, en tant que telles, continuer à servir d'intermédiaire. L'auteur développa à ce sujet un cours propre qui est apparu sous le titre “Communicating the Word of God” (cf. le compte-rendu des livres dans le cahier suivant).

RESUMEN

La transmisión de la Palabra de Dios se realiza cada vez en situaciones concretas. El autor en Hyderabad fué encargado por su obispo en 1974 des encontrar un nuevo método para la catequesis de adultos. Hasta entonces era habitual, pero insuficiente, aprender de memoria oraciones y respuestas del catecismo. Se adoptó el sistema tradicional hindú del narrador de cuentos para fijar un nuevo método catequético, que recibió el nombre de “Mukti Margam” (Sendero de la libertad en Dios). Fué elaborado un manual catequético, un curso por correspondencia paralelo, cassettes con canciones, diapositivas, carteles murales, cursos de formación para catequistas y seriales radiofónicos. Los programas fueron adoptados en seis diócesis en 1977; encontraron eco positivo. La fe cristiana es respuesta. Dios se comunica en la creación y en la Redención. La Palabra, Cristo, exige una respuesta. Esta experiencia teológica juega un papel en la cotidianidad de la comunidad cristiana como sociedad transmisora, en la que la Biblia ocupa un lugar central. La Biblia consta en gran parte de relatos y ofrece experiencias que pueden ser utilizadas. El autor desarrolló además un curso propio, que apareció bajo el título “Communicating the Word of God” (ver la Revista de Libros en un ejemplar siguiente).