

Intercultural Communication and Religious Belief in Eastern Countries

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Abstract

Eastern countries require the same process as Western or Southern, or Northern, to achieve effective religious communication. The process does not differ from one country or another, nor between one religion and another. Four fundamental principles of communication guide effective ministry: Communication is (demands) involvement; Communication is a process; Communication is what is heard, not only what is said, meaning is internal and individual; and The Holy Spirit will guide and empower communication as we listen and trust Him. Spiritual meaning is developed through each principle by involvement with the people, love, and sharing personal experience of Jesus.

Keywords: *Communication, Religious Belief, Intercultural, Eastern Countries.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The best answer for the very challenging context in East Asia lies in implementing the nineteen principles of all effective communication introduced in the Second Edition of *Creating Understanding*.

By 'challenging context' I refer to the religious context, where dominant Asian religions are a seemingly unmovable barrier to the reality of the living Jesus. There have been many, many attempts to break that barrier by godly men and woman such as E. Stanley Jones, whose effort is well-represented in *The Christ of the Indian Road.*, and J. Hudson Taylor, whose passion to reach interior China began the China Inland Mission. Agnes Carmichael also poured out her life so that Jesus could be understood and loved by the people of South India. Her journey through rejection, physical persecution, and ill health is reflected in her many writings.

At several points of time, China 'almost' acknowledged Jesus Christ as Lord of all. Some Chinese did confess Christ as their Lord and Master, but unseeing leaders focused terrible persecutions that nearly wiped out those communities, driving the remnants 'underground.' From there, a faithful but untaught and seemingly ineffective witness was preserved. Then in late years of the nineteenth century, God prepared and brought foreigners to renew the witness, such as J. Hudson Taylor. He, trusting God only, became as a Chinese, totally immersing himself in the habits, culture and lives of the people. By faith in the One God, he confronted idolatry, evil spirits,

demons, and established seed groups in China. With other seed groups resulting from the witness of those like Gladys Aylward, the Chinese church was established. It is remarkably growing despite (perhaps because of) persecution that continues.

1.1 Involvement is Communication

These three are examples of the courageous few who leave their own culture to deeply involve themselves with very different people and culture. They have shown us the first principle “Communication is involvement.” Sadly, very sadly, there are many others who desire to share the news of Jesus but do not follow this principle. Their lives may make a smudge in history leaving little changed, especially the enthronement of Jesus as Lord of all.

1.2 Communication is a process

The grace shown by the Almighty amazed those in seed groups, filling them with the dynamic of the Holy Spirit. The seeds sprouted and spread. New seed groups formed and are still forming today. In a long, steady process Chinese are thrilled at the majestic yet loving Jesus. Communication that bears fruit is a process. Fruit, natural or spiritual, comes by process not by quick but shallow overstated plans, programs or projects. Almost always those spectacular but fruitless efforts come from lack of committed involvement, wanting quick results, rather than carefully sowing seed (Smith, 2021).

What will the seeds we sow become? A strong tree, or a weak little vine that must cling to something, a perpetual dependent. Are the right seeds sown for the soil receiving them? Are we providing for the water needed? A tiny seedling needs shelter and care, the right food from the soil or added by the sower in fertilizer – not too much or too little or the food given will kill the seedling. Then of course, there is no growth and no new seeds. All of this is simply a re-statement of the truth in 1 Corinthians 3:5-9. Plowing, sowing, growing, harvesting – God gives growth, increase. God alone, or the process fails.

1.3 Communication is What Is Heard, Not Just What is Said

A major problem of communication remains, How can we develop correct meaning of the Message? Involvement - total commitment to the receiving community and culture. Through that constant involvement, excellent linguistic skill develops. But words can be sterile and unproductive. Many have finished language school with high marks, yet the messages they give are ignored, even scorned. The problem of creating shared meaning is not solved by mastery of language.

This principle seems only to increase difficulties. “Communication is what is heard, not only what is said; meaning is internal and individual” (Smith, 2021). How is it possible to know what is heard by someone else, especially when it is internal and individual! Usually the response given shows approximately what was heard. If it is not close to the intended meaning, the message can be altered to overcome difficulties.

Only when embedded in love can the full, rich meaning of Jesus be communicated. Excerpts from letters and other writings by these three representative messengers of

Christ to Eastern Religions show that love pervaded their lifestyle.

A correct meaning may be developed mentally, but nevertheless fail to create a desire to know Jesus. All attempts to proclaim the magnificence of Jesus will be fully understood only as the proclamation is saturated with 1) love (philos), 2) personal experience of Jesus, and 3) interpreted to the hearer by the Holy Spirit. The process of communication is completed by these three elements, all else is preparatory.

This is the essence, the capstone, of fruitful Christian communication to anyone, anywhere. The fruitfulness of proclamation is in the presence of Jesus, not in human capabilities.

Love – Giving Meaning to Words

Amy Carmichael's years in India showed the power of love:

The way of love is never an easy way. If our hearts be set on walking that way we must be prepared to suffer. It was the way the Master went; should not the servant tread it still?

Amy lived more than fifty years in South India, confronting intense opposition, physical persecution, temple prostitution even of young girls, even opposition by the British colonial powers ruling in India. Nevertheless, she walked with the people, adopting Indian dress style, an Indian diet, and mastered Tamil so she could proclaim Jesus even in anti-Christian villages.

Amy formed her own group of Indian women converts, "The Starry Cluster." She began children's meetings, the children loved it. Young girls ran away from home to avoid dedication to the temple. Amy accepted the girls (over 16 years they could legally choose where to live). Younger girls began demanding protection. Amy moved to Dohnavur establishing permanent residence for herself – and 70 children. Dohnavur grew to include nurseries, for boys and girls, schools, hospital and a House of Prayer, becoming a powerful influence in that area, and even in the capitols of India and Britain.

Amy Carmichael's life was poured out in love for the people of India, and for Jesus. Indians joined with her at Dohnavur and the ministry continues today 71 years after her death. In one of her thirteen books, she explained:

There is no force strong enough to hold us together as a company, and animate all our doings, but this one force of Love; and there is a constant attack upon the love without which we are sounding brass and tinkling cymbal. Spiritual influences move where sight and hearing have no place' and unlove in any of us, or even an absence of the quality of love of which we have been thinking, is enough to cause the slow stain to spread till it reaches some soul in a moment of its weakness. And irreparable harm may result (Carmichael, 1965).

1.4 Personal Experience: Giving Relevance to Words

E. Stanley Jones tells of a conversation with Mahatma Gandhi. Jones asked, “What can we do to make Christianity no longer a foreign thing, but a part of national life contributing to India’s uplift and redemption?” Gandhi very gravely and thoughtfully replied, “I would suggest, first, that all of you Christians, missionaries and all, must begin to live more like Jesus Christ.” Gandhi simply stated an obvious principle in communicating – words are completely inadequate to share Truth when actions of those telling the Truth contradict what is said. When languages and cultures are far apart, such contradictions are magnified.

Gandhi continued, “If you will come to us in the spirit of your Master, we cannot resist you. Second, I would suggest that you must practice your religion without adulterating or toning it down. Third, I would suggest that you must put your emphasis on love, for love is the centre and soul of Christianity.” He did not mean love as a sentiment, but as a working force, the one real power in a moral universe (Jones, 1923: 147-148).

Gandhi added a fourth point that emphasizes deep involvement with the people. “I would suggest that you study the non-Christian religions and culture more sympathetically to find the good, so that you might have a more sympathetic approach to the people.”

An Indian philosopher commented, “Jesus is ideal and wonderful, but you Christians – you are not like him.” Not only those who carefully think deeply, but ordinary men and women observe, “Tell me your own personal religious experience.” They forget my lecture, Jones explained, but they bring up this matter again and again. It grips.” Personal experience of Jesus is essential in telling the story of God’s love for mankind. It is that kind of experience that gives meaning to what is otherwise merely correct statement of doctrine.

1.5 Meaning Is Given to Words by the Holy Spirit

We may take all these steps – deep involvement with the people, sowing the seed and waiting in prayer for the harvest, love growing in us, knowing God personally – yet we do not see understanding of God’s magnificence and grace forming in the people with whom we speak. We see desperate need and ache to do something to meet that need. Amy Carmichael felt that way, “From the train window she saw temples in every village, idols under nearly every tree, people working in the fields with Siva’s ashes on their foreheads. You must do something, anything! “Oh, to get... out of the feverishness of human haste. We need to exchange the eagerness of the flesh for the earnestness of the Spirit and so move in the force of that Holy Wind that we shall be carried along by His great calm” (Elliot, 1987: 126-127).

Creating Understanding sums up the pivotal importance of recognizing the Holy Spirit as the powerful Enabler of all mission, “The Holy Spirit will guide and empower communication as we listen and trust Him” (Smith, 2021:62). Without Spirit-driven witness, missions are dependent on human strengths for any effectiveness. And there have been hundreds of missionaries from dozens of nations who have given life itself for the extension of the Gospel. Tens of thousands have shown commitment to the task, sacrificing their health and family life for mission efforts in medical care, education, community development, Bible translation, church planting.

The life of J. Hudson Taylor illustrates the difference between a missionary's uncomplaining sacrificial lifestyle and the joyful and fruitful service flowing out of a life totally given to Jesus' presence.

Taylor mastered the language, he ignored personal discomforts and poverty, his courage sustained him in the midst of riots, war, and intense opposition. Taylor showed the way of full trust in God's ability – and willingness – to meet his personal needs and those of fellow missionaries. Three of his children died in China, as did his wife. Despite deep sorrow, he did not step away from God's call to China. And there were conversions; the church built up to fifteen hundred members. The burdens of churches, persecution, danger to missionaries of the newly formed China Inland Mission, all seemed overwhelming.

Taylor was beyond reproach as a missionary and leader. "I think of him as I knew him, kind, loving, thoughtful of everyone but himself, a blessing wherever he went and a strength and comfort to all with whom he came in contact. . . a constant example of all that a missionary ought to be" (Taylor and Howard, 1932). All who knew him and worked with him found Taylor to be a man full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, of entire surrender to God and His call.

But he saw himself differently. "I cannot tell you how I am buffeted sometimes by temptation. I never knew how bad a heart I have. I value above all else that precious Saviour in whom alone I can be accepted. The Holy Spirit creates hungerings and thirstings after righteousness, so that Christ may fill the longing soul (Taylor and Howard, 1932). His colleagues saw him as humble, a superb leader, but he personally knew there was more for the disciple of Jesus.

By the Spirit's leading, he found "more" through a letter from a colleague. "He is most holy who has most of Christ, and joys most fully in the finished work of Christ." "Abiding," Taylor saw clearly, "not striving nor struggling, looking often to Him, trusting Him for present power resting in the love of an almighty Saviour. It is no longer imitating Christ, but Christ lives in me! I feel as though the dawning of a glorious day has risen upon me. Christ literally seems *all* to me now, the power, the only power for service, the only ground for unchanging joy."

A life so deeply transformed exhibited Jesus to the millions of China. This, more than His words, more than his splendid leadership, more than everything else, gave rich meaning to all he said and did. The transformation came by the Holy Spirit giving light to his mind and life.

Summing up, how can we bring God's light and love to those in Eastern Religions? Simply by first giving God total control of our lives. He will guide us to deep involvement in the lives of those to whom He has called us. As we sow the seed of God's Word, we prayerfully expect harvest in His time. Meaning forms in the minds and hearts of "the people" as they see our involvement in their hard times, their problems, and their needs. Then they can see our personal experiencing of God's love and presence, and understand that can be theirs as well.

That is the fulfilment of a life well spent.

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