

## **Social Communication in Christian Perspective**

### **Some Points for Reflection**

#### ***FABC Roundtable on “Social Communication in Religious Tradition of Asia”***

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### **I.**

The Christian God is a communicating God right from the outset even before the creation of human beings. The very beginning of the biblical text testifies to this:

- “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the Waters. **And God said:** ‘Let there be light’ and there was light...”(Gen. 1,1-3)
- **And God said:** “Let there be an expanse between the waters...(1,6)
- **And God said:** “Let the water under the sky assemble in one place..”(1,9)
- **And God said:** “Let the land produce vegetation...”(1.11)
- **And God said:.... And God said:...**
- **And God said:** Let us make man in our image and likeness.. So God created man in his own image, in the image of Go he created him, male and female he created them”(1, 26-27)...

“And God **said** – to say is to communicate and even to use **words**. It is through his **Word** that God creates. All seven days of creation begin with the same “and God said” and in this Word he creates heaven and earth and human beings.

Such a consideration is further consolidated in the beginning of the Gospel of John:

- “In the beginning was the **Word** and the **Word** was with God, and the **Word** was God... Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made...” (Jn 1,1-3)

This communicating God also creates man in “His image and likeness” which must be considered the reason why human beings are also able to communicate.

### **II.**

The ways and means of communication of the Christian (and Jewish) God are especially reflected in the First (Old) Testament of the Bible. He communicates with the Israelites in many and various ways (cf. Hebr. 1,1):

- He talks to human beings like Adam and Eve, the first human creatures: “The Lord God called to the man: Where are you? (Gen.3,9) and a whole dialogue follows. In a similar way he talks to Cain “Where is your brother Abel?”..(Gen. 4,9) – Interpersonal Communication.
- He uses human dialogue language like in Jeremiah’s complaint (20,7-9): “You have seduced me and I was deceived you overpowered me and was prevailed...”
- He calls in a human way the prophets and other persons in history like the Kings and sends them.
- He talks to Moses “face to face’ in such a way that his face becomes shining and can not be looked at with ‘normal’ eyes (Dt 34,10)..

- He appears to the prophet Elijah on the mountain of Horeb not in the mighty wind, not in the earthquake and not in the fire but in the gentle breeze of silence (1 Kings 19,11-13)
- He expresses his anger: “I will wipe mankind whom I have created from the face of the earth – men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground...”(Gen. 6,7)
- He appears in “thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast.” “Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire...” (Ex 19,16 f)
- He uses all ways and means of non-verbal and verbal communication to deal with ‘his’ people

Cardinal Carlo Martini, a biblical scholar and former Archbishop of Milan has analyzed the constants of God’s communication. He asserts that all “Divine Communication is prepared in the secret silence of God”(No.30) which should also be a characteristic of every Christian Communication which is to be based on the ‘contemplative dimension of life’: “ Every communication is born in silence; but not an empty or melancholy silence, rather one filled with the contemplation of the wonders God has done for his people...”(No.58). (This is of special concern for Asian traditions! ) From here he comes up with six “characteristics” of Divine self-communication which he deduces from Scripture. He presented them June 26, 2005 while receiving a honorary doctorate from Bethlehem University in the following words:

1. “Divine communication to humanity is progressive, cumulative, and historic. Thus it does not take place in a single instant, but it evolves different times and circumstances that must be understood and read as a whole. God’s communication with humanity happens through words and events that are mutually referential and explain one another.
2. Divine communication in history occurs in a dialectic of revelation and hiddenness. It is not a procession ‘from glory to glory’ , a crescendo of light without shadow. It is rather an unfolding of events, some luminous, others enigmatic. God reveals himself also in the shadow and requires that we accept the first hints of his presence. That is, I think, one of the reasons why Jesus spoke in parables: Too much communication cancels out, annihilates the other. Every true communication is gradual, prudent and respectful of the audience.
3. Divine communication entails self-sacrifice and renunciation. This is especially visible in the passion and death of Jesus, but it is true of every act of true communication. We cannot give without renouncing something, we cannot expect always to win, but we have to lose and to risk in order to gain the confidence of the other. For this Jesus said: ‘The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life for the redemption of others’(Mk 10,45)
4. Divine self-communication is never complete on earth. Only in eternal life will we know as we are known and will see God as he is (1 Cor. 13,12; 1 Jn 3,2). Also in human communication we can never know the other completely. There is

- always a 'secret', a mysterious reserve, a threshold that is impossible 'and even useless' to cross.
5. Divine self-communication is interpersonal. With unspeakable love, God communicates not only something about himself, but his very self. At the same time, divine self-communication is interpersonal. It calls out to the other, to the person who receives it. Without reciprocity, there is no communication.
  6. Divine self-Communication is courageous and undaunted. It does not fear rejection nor refusal, neither becomes discouraged by failure. God gives himself in sincere love again and again, without considering the poor response of us human beings. We can say about Communication what Paul says about love: communication 'bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.'" (1)

### III

In Christian understanding God not only communicates and reveals himself in words and deeds which are reported in the Old Testament. He communicates and reveals himself in a very special way in his incarnation through his son Jesus Christ who was according to John's Gospel in the beginning with him and "became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1,14)., Or as the letter to the Hebrews says: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe."(1,1f) This Jesus reflects and practices the perfect 'social communication' within society.

Based on his permanent communication with the Father in prayer he communicates to people of all walks of life. He starts his communication from the life experiences of the people around him using them as starting points for his messages. He communicates through storytelling and parables. He speaks with individuals like Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, with Lazarus and his two sisters in Interpersonal Communication. . He shares with the group of his disciples and others in Group communication, he preaches and teaches to the bigger crowds from the Lake and the mountain in 'Mass' communication.

Jesus communicates in words and deeds. The circumstances of his life like the birth in a manger communicate already in a non-verbal way. He communicates non-verbally by silently writing on the ground, looking at people and actions like expelling the vendors from the Temple. He communicates in a special and mostly non-verbal way through his Passion and Cross...The early Church continues his way of communicating as is reflected in the 'Acts of the Apostles'.

### IV

It is from the teachings of Jesus Christ that we learn from the inner life of the Trinitarian God in one person. We learn from him that there is an ongoing Communication within the Trinity between Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Carlo Martini brought these testimonies together and summarized them in the following way:

“ The intimate life of God as far as we can comprehend in this world is a profound and ongoing inexhaustible communicating between the divine persons. The Father ‘speaks’ the Son and in doing so he generates and communicates everything he is and he has. The Son calls the Father and gives himself in totality with perfect obedience. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and is the living bond, the perfect and personal fruit of the love dialogue between Father and Son... From the Gospel word transpires that sense of profound communion and the exchange which lives in mystery of God and which is at the root of all our human communication.”  
(Martini, 1990, no.26)

Avery Dulles (1992, 39) quotes Bernhard Haering in summarizing this:  
“Communication is constitutive in the mystery of God. Each of the three Divine Persons possesses all that is good, all that is true, all that is beautiful, but in the modality of communion and communication. Creation, redemption, and communication arise from this mystery and have as their final purpose to draw us, by his very communication, into communion with God. Creating us in his image and likeness, God makes us sharers of his creative and liberating communication in communion, through communion, and in view of communion.”

## V

From all this it appears that communication is at the heart and center of Christianity. Martini reflects this in saying that the biblical testimonies are like the ever and ever repeated theme of a musical symphony (Martini, 1990, no. 36).

Avery Dulles (1992,22) thus maintains that the whole of Christian Theology can be considered under the perspective of Communication and thus sees communication as a theological principle. He concludes “that Theology is at every point concerned with the realities of communication” He further unfolds this conviction under the heading of ‘symbolic Communication’ also into different areas of Christian theology like Fundamental Theology as well as Systematic and Practical Theology.

Concluding with the Trinitarian view he calls Christianity “preeminently a religion of communication, for God in his inmost essence is a mystery of self-communication. The entire work of creation, redemption and sanctification is a prolongation of the inner processions within the Trinity...”

Unfortunately such a basic and radical understanding of a ‘Communication Theology’ is not yet common good for Christian Theologians and leaders. Many of them see Social Communication more under an ‘instrumental’ perspective to help for whatever but not as an essential and existential part of Christian teaching and living.

## VI

The development of the means of Communication is historically closely linked to Christianity. After libraries with their scripts were maintained in Roman temples they became regular part of Christian monasteries after the public recognition of Christianity by emperor Constantine around 300 AD. Every monastery had a ‘scriptorium’, a special place for copying books by hand and to preserve them. It is because of this that many treasures and thoughts of Greek philosophers and Roman culture were preserved and kept for posterity. When Johannes Gutenberg invented printing with movable letters to create an easy and more permanent way of producing

books it was the Bible which was printed first. But soon after also the rise of the reformation and painful divisions within Christianity were to a great extent possible because of the new printing method. A bigger number of books with identical texts – not any more copied by hand – were made available for affordable prices also to people who otherwise could not afford to buy books. Thus Luther's treatise on Indulgence and Grace was reprinted 12 times within the first 10 months in 1518 and his discussion with Eck of the same year was sold in 1 400 copies within a few days at the Frankfurt Trade Fair in autumn that year (cf. Eilers 2002a, 66f.). With this technical development in printing, however, the Christian Church also lost the monopoly of producing and storing books. They soon became general commodities also for groups of the population who did or could not read before. Within Christianity they, however, gave the possibility for unified texts and more affordable books for studies in theology, philosophy and other sciences. This way they contributed to a more systematic approach to theology but also opened the door to new and sometimes challenging and unexpected ideas which were not necessarily any more along the main thinking and experience of Christian theology and faith. Such Church related developments are also exemplified in the story of the first printer in England, William Caxton. He opened his printing press 1476 in London's Fleet Street which was that time the quarter of the clergy. Over several centuries till very recently this street became synonymous with press and publishing in London and England. All important newspapers and news agencies had their headquarters here till new printing methods forced them to move to new and other places some 25 years ago...

## VII

Further technical developments in communication from Film over Radio to Television up to the latest developments of new "Information and Communication Technologies" (ICT) had and has also an impact on Christianity. On the one hand Christian Churches are concerned about the proper and responsible use of these new media by their members and the general public but they also use them for their own internal communication and to connect to the outside.

The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church (1962-1965) was the first assembly of this kind in history to treat social communication with a special discussion and document ('Decree') which starts with the following words:

"Man's genius has, with God's help produced marvelous technical inventions from creation, especially in our times. The Church... is particularly interested in those which directly touch man's spirit, and which have opened up new avenues of easy communication of all kinds of news, of ideas and orientations. Chief among them are those means of communication which of their nature can reach and influence not merely single individuals but the very masses and even the whole of human society. These are the press, the cinema, radio, television and others of like nature. These can rightly be called 'the means of Social Communication.' The Church knows that if these media are properly used they can be of considerable benefit to mankind. They contribute greatly to the enlargement and enrichment of human mind..." (Inter Mirifica 1,2).

Over the years there is a whole collection of follow up Church documents on social communication (cf. Eilers 1997,2002b) in the same spirit which shows the stand and thinking of Christianity on Social Communications and which should also underlay her practice and communication approach in daily life and society.

### VIII

A new approach to Social Communication was developed by Pope John Paul II with his Encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio* 1990 in declaring the field of communication the first market place (“areopagus”) of modern times: “The first Areopagus of the modern age is the world of communications, which is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a ‘global village’. The means of social communication have become so important as to be for many the chief means of information and education, of guidance and inspiration in their behavior as individuals, families and within society at large. In particular, the younger generation is growing up in a world conditioned by the mass media.” As to the Church the Pope admits : “To some degree perhaps this Areopagus has been neglected... preference has been given to other means of preaching the gospel and of Christian education.” He points to a deeper reality involved in the relation between Christianity and modern communications: “since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to simply use the media...it is necessary to integrate that message into the ‘new culture’ created by modern communications. This is a complex issue, since the ‘new culture’ originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology.”

### Notes:

(1) Martini, Carlo: Unpublished manuscript. Cf. Martini 1990 no. 30 f.

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