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Evangelical theologians in these parts of the world are appropriating the best of their spiritual tradition and are putting it to use in a constructive critical dialogue with their interlocutors in and outside of their historical space. For them the evangelical tradition is not locked into the socio-cultural experience of the West. They insist that they have the right to p. 222 articulate theologically the evangelical tradition in their own terms and in light of their own issues.²⁹

Is not that our common calling in every age and in every cultural setting? And from it will there not come ultimately perhaps the richest contribution of all to the task of theology—the reminder to us all of what theology truly rooted in biblical revelation and addressing our real contexts can offer us? The ultimate test of any theological discourse, after all, is not only erudite precision but also transformative power. ‘It is a question of whether or not theology can articulate the faith in a way that is not only intellectually sound but spiritually energizing, and therefore, capable of leading the people of God to be transformed in their way of life and to commit themselves to God’s mission in the world.’³⁰

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Christian Communication and Religious Pluralism: Capitalizing on Differences

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The author of this article, who has had missionary experience in Japan, questions the rightness of always looking for similarities, bridges, common ground and redemptive analogies in our task of communicating the gospel to people of other faiths. He thinks that emphasizing likenesses among religions is illusive, and the risk of emasculating propositional truth while ‘coronating’ personal experience is very real. He quotes with approval Hendrik Kraemer and Hans Reudi Weber in their emphasis on contrasts and differences. By contrast he argues that the Christian faith is qualitatively different from other faiths and that it is through comparison and contrast that the uniqueness of the gospel can be most effectively communicated. In an age of religious pluralism and relativistic dialogue, this warning needs to be carefully considered. However, the article raises for us the fundamental issue of the scope and limits of revelation itself. Is there a valid distinction between God’s universal creational revelation and his particular salvific revelation as recorded in the Bible? Unless our theology of communication tackles this basic issue our practice of communication is in danger of being faulty and misleading.

²⁹ Costas, ‘Evangelical Theology’, 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

Editor

In recent times mission thinkers especially have expended a great deal of time and energy to discover one or another kind of similarity between peoples, cultures, and religions. Many have become convinced that the key to effective missionary communication is to be found in locating 'bridges', establishing 'common ground', looking for 'points of contact', ferreting out 'eye-openers', and discovering 'redemptive analogies'. Others are preoccupied with a type of interreligious dialogue that overcomes religious rivalry and antagonism by engaging on a quest for commonalities and agreement.

Far be it from me to argue that this pursuit of similarities and p. 224 commonalities is wholly a mistaken one. But, focusing on the area of religion especially, I will argue that likenesses are far more elusive than much of the literature would seem to indicate: that the resort to similarities entails some clearly identifiable risks: and that the differences between the various religious faiths possess tremendous potential for Christians when communicating Christ to people of other cultures and people of our own culture as well.

ELUSIVE LIKENESSES AMONG RELIGIONS

Fearing the erosion of the Christian uniqueness on the one hand and feeling the necessity of communicating the Christian gospel on the other, the brilliant Hendrik Kraemer gave a great deal of thought to the whole idea of common ground before writing his classic in 1938, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, Kraemer concluded that one must have a *totalitarian* view of the world's religions—i.e., that the 'parts' can only be understood within the context of the whole—and that the gulf between Christianity and these religions is unbridgeable apart from the attitude and disposition of the missionary. He writes,

It seems rather upsetting to make the missionary the point of contact. Nevertheless it is true, as practice teaches. *The strategic and absolutely dominant point in this whole important problem, when it has to be discussed in general terms, is the missionary worker himself.* Such is the golden rule, or, if one prefers, the iron law, in this whole matter. The way to live up to this rule is to have an untiring and genuine interest in the religion, the ideas, the sentiments, the institutions—in short, in the whole range of life of the people among whom one works, *for Christ's sake and for the sake of those people.* Whoever disobeys this rule does not find any real point of contact. (1963:140 [italics Kraemer's])

To understand Kraemer at this point one must take into account the fact that he had witnessed the seduction of missions by universalists at the Jerusalem Conference of the International Missionary Council in 1928. Also he had been shaken by the 1932 report of the Laymen's Inquiry under the leadership of William Hocking—a report which says concerning the non-Christian faiths,

... all fences and private properties in truth are futile: the final truth, whatever it may be, is the New Testament of every existing faith.

We desire the triumph of that final truth: we need not prescribe the route. It appears probable that the advance toward the goal may be by way of the immediate strengthening of several of the present religions in Asia, Christian and non-Christian together.... We will look forward, not to the destruction of these religions, but to their continued coexistence with p. 225 Christianity, each stimulating the other in growth toward the ultimate goal, unity in the completest religious truth. (1932:44)

Writing out of similar concerns for the preservation of Christian uniqueness in the face of this challenge. Edmund Perry made the gulf between the Christian faith and non-Christian religions just as wide or wider than did Kraemer. Perry (1958:88) writes,

Since from the viewpoint of Gospel faith the one true and only Living God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and since the Gospel alone brings men to this God, all other faith claims and systems lead men away from him. Religion is therefore, first of all, the *generic* term comprehending the universal phenomenon of men individually and collectively being led away from God in manifold ways by diverse claims and systems.

Kraemer and Perry make some very telling arguments for their conclusions. I only cite them here to demonstrate that the search for similarities between the Christian faith and false faiths is not an easy one and, in some significant sense, may be an impossible one. In the final analysis, it may be that one must confine the search for similarities to spheres of culture other than that of religion—perhaps (as Kraemer did) in the nature of man himself.

THE RISKS OF EMPHASIZING SIMILARITIES

If we claim any significant uniqueness for Christ and the Christian message, the resort to similarities entails certain very real risks. For the sake of this discussion, let us assume for the moment that certain aspects of the various religions somehow reflect divine initiatives and represent common human strivings, and therefore do yield similarities of whatever kind. Even then, unless the Christian communicator is cautious in the use of the teachings, values, practices, or strivings that appear to be shared by the various religious faiths, the end result may be to compound confusion rather than to increase clarity.

At least four risks should be recognized when emphasizing seeming similarities between religions.

First, there is the risk of reinforcing the mistaken idea that differences between religions are merely historical accretions and that, if one presses behind apparent differences, one will discover that all religions are essentially the same and involve the worship of the same God.

Following a recent lecture that I gave on the challenge of the New Age Movement, a man claiming to be a Christian believer rather indignantly assailed me for using such words as ‘challenge’, ‘confrontation’, p. 226 and ‘deception’. ‘After all,’ said he, ‘the walls of misunderstanding have been built up only gradually through the centuries. If you go back to the early scriptures and doctrines of the various faiths you will find that they are in basic agreement. The same God is behind them all.’

Tragically, from my point of view, this kind of thinking is common today and has been throughout history. The Vedas, for example, insist that ‘The Real is one, but sages name it variously’ (*Rig Veda* I: 169). But if this thinking is tragically common, it is also partly erroneous. It should be seriously challenged, not unwittingly encouraged! It is impossible to read the Old Testament on its own terms, and conclude that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was somehow, behind the Baals and the Ashteroth of the Canaanites. As for the New Testament, Paul even goes as far as to say that Satan himself is the ‘god of this age’ and that he blinds the eyes of unbelievers so that the light of the gospel is hidden from men and women! ([2 Corinthians 4:4](#) NIV).

Second, there is the risk of adding fuel to the pervasive idea that whatever the differences in their origins and teachings, the various religions lead to a common goal. This assessment is expressed in a variety of ways, depending on the historical and cultural

circumstances, but the idea is both persistent and pervasive. In our culture, for example, people often look at world religions and conclude that ‘all roads lead to Rome’. Upon hearing the Christian message, many of my Buddhistically inclined Japanese hearers responded with the familiar Japanese adage, ‘There are many paths on Mt. Fuji, but they all lead to the summit.’ This is stated despite vague but commonly held notions that Japanese eventually become some kind of god or *hotoke*, the more explicit Buddhist teaching that the goal for which people should strive is Nirvana, and the obvious conclusion that neither of these analogies is in any way compatible with biblical teaching.

Third, there is the risk of an implied agreement with those who hold that doctrinal statements and credal confessions are relatively unimportant while personal faith and religious experience are all-important.

Consider, for example, the position of the Muslim scholar Mahoud Ayoub. He speaks of the ‘sin’ of ‘... reducing *faith* as a dynamic interrelation of human beings to an abstract theological doctrine or dogma’ (1985: 53–54). While all of us can recognize that possibility, we must also recognize the danger of divorcing ‘concept, creed and doctrine’ from subjective faith and religious experience in such a way as to make the latter mean anything that we want it to mean. Ayoub (1985:53–54 falls into this trap of his own making and as a result p. 227 makes all the ‘prophets, sages and saints’ of the various religions—whether Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, or Christianity—exemplars and models of one faith, the content of which cannot be clearly defined to anyone but the nobility of which can be wholeheartedly enjoined upon all.

My point is not that all employments of the similarities and commonalities approach lead to this kind of confusion, but only that they entail the risk of emasculating propositional truth while coronating personal experience. This is done in disregard to the recurring biblical emphasis on their complementarity and John’s warning that ‘anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching (*didache*) of Christ, does not have God’ ([2 John 9](#), NASB).

Fourth, in the pursuit of employment of commonalities, there is the risk of overlooking the profound differences that almost invariably lurk behind the very similarities to which we resort. The result is miscommunication with its varied and unwelcome concomitants—confusion, rejection, and syncretism. The examples provided in the section of this paper below will serve to illustrate this danger, and also to show how communication can be enhanced by emphasizing differences.

‘UNCOMMON GROUND’—THE IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENCES

When we say that the Christian faith is unique, we do not simply mean that it adds something to the other faiths. It is not the fulfilment of other faiths—not in anything approaching the sense in which it is the fulfilment of Old Testament Judaism, in any case. No, the Christian faith is *qualitatively* different from other faiths. To fail to make that fact crystal clear is to open the door to misunderstanding at best and syncretism at worst. This is true both in our attempt to communicate the Christian message to those of the Third World, where false religions have reigned for centuries, *and* in our attempt to reach people of a Western world that has now been invaded by those same false faiths.

The basic principle that is involved here is the ‘principle of contrast’. James P. Spradley, whose works on culture and ethnography have enjoyed wide acceptance, explains the principle in the following way:

Category systems not only divide up the world, they also define it. In order to make sense out of human behaviour we must begin with the actor’s definition of the situation, and a crucial feature of such meaning systems is the principle of *contrast*.... The meaning of a

concept cannot be made clear without specifying what it contrasts with. The principle of contrast p. 228 suggests that what something *does mean* is intimately linked to what it *does not mean*. (Spradley and McCurdy 1972: 68).

I have often referred to this principle as the ‘principle of comparison and contrast’, but the idea is the same. And its importance to our present concern can be demonstrated with reference to both intercultural and intracultural communication.

First, think of how intercultural Christian communication suffers when we do not take seriously the ways in which religious categories are described from the emic or adherents’ point of view—the way they define their own religious faith. By way of illustration, consider basic Hindu and Buddhist beliefs concerning incarnation and ‘saviour beings’.

Hinduism present numerous *avatara* (literally, ‘descents’ or incarnations) of its various deities. Krishna, for example, is one of the most popular incarnations of the god Vishnu. Rama is another, less well known in the West, but well known in India. Mahayana Buddhism emanated from the same ideological soil (the Samkhya school of Hindu philosophy). As it moved from India to Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, and elsewhere, it introduced two types of saviour beings. One was the bodhisattva, who had earned the right to buddhahood, but delayed final emancipation in order to assist others ‘on the path’. The other was the buddha of this or that age—Buddha reemerging on earth in times of crisis in order to show people the ‘true path’ of salvation.

Now to attempt to communicate Christ to people who entertain such concepts without contrasting them with the *biblical* teaching on the incarnation of Christ is a monumental error. For starters, Hinduism began with numerous gods, many of whom have had a variety of incarnations in human and animal forms. Buddhism began with no god at all, and then (particularly in its Mahayana expressions) evolved numerous gods out of its enlightened founder and similarly enlightened masters. But, as a radio announcer might say, ‘Any similarity between Christ and these *avatara*, *bodhisattvas*, and buddhas—whether living or dead—is strictly coincidental.’ The incarnation of Jesus the Christ is of the one God, historical, unrepeatable, and absolutely unique. It is the fulfillment of only one revelational ‘line’—that of the Old Testament Scriptures. Though Hindus, and even Buddhists, may find a place for him in their rosters of gods or godlike beings, everything that Jesus Christ was and is, and said and did, defies such an inclusion. *That being the case, there is a very real sense in which Christ has not been communicated in Hindu and Buddhist contexts until differences such as these have been made clear. Or, to put it the other way* p. 229 *around, only when these differences have been made clear have Christ and his gospel been communicated with precision and clarity.*

Again, unlike the acculturated Christianity of the West and more like the religion of the Bible, much Third World religiosity abounds with spirits and spirit activities of all kinds. Still, there is a world of difference between the ancestral, totemic, and other spirit beings of the animistic worldview and those of the Bible. And there is a great gulf between the capricious nature of spirits and the ‘proper’ way to deal with them as described in false faiths on the one hand, and the teachings of the Holy Spirit regarding the spirit world and our relationship to it on the other. Much the same can be said with regard to the various conceptions of a high god that are to be found in various cultures, whether Njambi, Allah, Shang Ti, or Ame-no-minakanushino-kami. As we have indicated previously, in some cases it has been determined that the similarities between the God of the Bible and high gods such as these are so great as to warrant the use of those names to refer to the true God, or even to conclude that one or another of them *is* the true God known by another name. Questions as to when and where such conclusions might be justified cannot detain us here, but the fact remains that conceptions accruing to the names Njambi, Shang Ti, and even Allah are usually far enough removed from biblical depictions of the ‘God

who is there' as to necessitate frequent comparisons and to resort to such phrases as 'the true God', 'the God of the Bible', 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ', the 'Triune God', and the like when communicating the Christian gospel. *When comparisons are made and contrasts are drawn, the Triune God stands apart, exalted by the attention given to aspects of his essential nature!*

A contemporary and classic example of what we have in mind is provided by Hans Reudi Weber in the illuminating account of his evangelizing and catechizing experiences in Luwuk-Banggai, Indonesia. The story is much too long and involved to be rehearsed here. But the larger lesson of his book has to do with the importance of the entire Bible in communicating the gospel even to non-literates. The whole of his experience constitutes a reinforcement of the principles of comparison and contrast which is in view here. But the principle is perhaps most graphically illustrated in a section where Weber explains how he supplemented verbal communication with chalk drawings:

On our journeyings through the Banggai Archipelago we came to Taulan, a small island consisting of one village only. A number of the inhabitants had been baptized a few years ago. p. 230

The village assembled—animals and humans, Christians and non-Christians, babies in arms and old men (among the heathen priest)—all of them illiterate. A few planks served as a blackboard; my imagination and powers of expression are too impoverished to follow the example of the illiterate and make the Bible message come alive in words only. So we decided to make use of simple drawings.

Beginning with the story of the Creation, I illustrated what I said by somewhat clumsy drawings on the blackboard. Then the old heathen priest related the ancient creation legends of the district, and we compared the two reports. Next, the story of the Fall, related and illustrated by 'talk and chalk', was contrasted with legends about the origin of evil and the fall of man as they had been handed down in the tribe. It was long after noon before we stopped for lunch, and in the afternoon this unique celebration was continued. (1960:6)

We conclude, then, that whether the audience is composed of literates or non-literates, or adherents of developed religions or believers of tribal myths, gospel communication entails a concentrated and explicit examination of differences if it is to be meaningful and effective.

Second, consider *intracultural* Christian communication directed to people of our own (Western) culture. The common 'wisdom' seems to be that, when preaching and teaching in North America at least, all that is required is to 'teach and preach the truth'. Reference to the teachings of other religions is totally unnecessary. Consequently, our theological schools send out thousands of graduates annually—graduates who have been trained in Bible and theology, psychology and counselling, homiletics and education, and much more, but who have not had one course in the living religions of the world. For at least three reasons it should now be obvious that this is a monumental error.

In the first place, in the public schools our children now study Islam, Buddhism, Shintoism, Hinduism, and lesser religions as integral parts of other cultures. Then they come to our churches and Sunday schools only to meet with silence or ignorance or sweeping generalizations concerning those very religions. As a result they seldom, if ever, are brought face-to-face with the uniqueness of the Christian faith *vis-à-vis* other faith systems.

In the second place, whether young or old and in the church or out of the church, our citizens are now being bombarded with ideas inherent in the Eastern religions and even with ideas found in animism. Most are confused by these ideas and some are seduced by them. In the face of this challenge a cursory study of the New Age Movement, Yoga, or Zen,

as the case may be, is insufficient. Without some understanding of the religious soils that provide the rootage for ideas p. 231 put forth in these movements, no significant understanding is possible. And without significant understanding, our interpretations and explanations become vapid and vacuous. Claire Booth Luce once said that there was a time when she had nagging questions about *yin* and *yang* and kindred concepts. She went to various clergymen for help but found satisfactory answers only when consulting with Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen. She reasoned that if he was sufficiently concerned for the spiritual welfare of his hearers to have delved deeply into other faiths as well as Christianity, she could trust him to lead her in affairs of the soul. What a challenge to contemporary Christian communicators!

In the third place, in the context of religious pluralism, one of the most telling ways to teach *biblical* truth is to contrast it with *unbiblical* error. Take, for example, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the Hindu idea of the *Trimurti* mentioned above. Absolutely central to the Christian faith, the doctrine of the Trinity is beyond our ability fully to comprehend, to say nothing of our inability to explain it adequately. Granting that, it nevertheless is uncumbent upon us to know what the Scriptures teach about the Trinity and also to know what they *do not* teach. One important aid to clarifying the biblical teaching on the subject would be to compare it with the *seemingly* similar Hindu teaching on the *Trimurti*—the teaching that at the apex of the pantheon of deities are to be found Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (Preserver), and Shiva (Destroyer), all three of whom are separate and distinct personalities, but all of whom lack the ‘real reality’ that is the attribute of Brahman alone. A comparison of the difference between the Trinity and the *Trimurti* (or Muslim or Jehovah’s Witnesses aberrant views of the Trinity, etc.) can have salutary results. Not only does this approach enhance understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, *it also helps to guard against the inroads of false ideas and faiths.*

CONCLUSION

Similarities? Probably. And though they may not be essential similarities, they can be profitably used in gospel communication if used cautiously. Differences? Assuredly so if we hold to any significant uniqueness in the Christian faith. And the time has come to learn what those differences are, what their importance is, and how best to capitalize on them. They hold largely untapped potential for meaningful and effective communication of the biblical gospel!

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Social Action and Communicating Christ

Dhyanchand Carr

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I hesitated to reprint this article, knowing that many of our evangelical constituency will reject it as being 'liberal', despite the evangelical heritage of its author. Its ethos and methodology is in stark contrast to the preceding article by David Hesselgrave. I think it is a very significant article on the issue of the relationship of evangelism to social justice and deserves careful reading and theological analysis. It is important because it gives an authentic and penetrating insight into the sufferings and oppressions of ordinary village people who, for generations, have lived in bondage and suffered injustice. It reflects the dark side of the powerless villagers, not only in India but across Asia. These insights are the costly fruits of living an incarnate life for an extended period of time, in a community in the grip of bondage to satanic power. The itinerant evangelist, who comes into the village to hold an evangelistic meeting, complete with jeep, flannelgraph and film projector, may never experience the pain of such human degradation and sin. In story after story, the author shows that sin and evil are not just a personal and private matter but are communal, involving social customs and structures. To preach a purely individualistic gospel, on the assumption that once people are converted, the social evils of the community will slowly go away, is just not true. But it can happen when the church is formed as a redeemed fellowship and through word and deed confesses Christ as Saviour and Lord. Unfortunately the article does not state whether or not the long term goal of the so called 'secular' approach to justice, is the establishing of a church as salt and light in the world. Human solidarity for justice is not enough and I think our author would agree. Further, this article is important because it shows that a non-confrontational and living dialogical approach to people does, in fact, lead people to accept Christ as Saviour and Lord. Confrontational evangelistic preaching may be effective in an urbanized secularized society or where the church is well established, but in rural Asia where the name of Christ is not known, a more typically Asian approach to communication may be more effective. As we reflect on the lifestyle and message of our p. 234 Lord and Paul's approach to a purely pagan people, it is clearly not 'either/or' but 'both/and'. To preach sin and guilt to people who inherit a culture of shame calls for a special understanding of both the gospel and the context. The article is also significant because the author and his students were willing to accept a status of powerlessness and nonviolence, refusing money or using their superior education as instruments of power. They were able to point inquirers to the power of Christ lifted up on the cross and risen from the dead. My disappointment with the article lies in the fact that the author does not give us enough clues on how to bridge the gap between proclamation and justice, between justification by faith and justice in society and the boundaries between an incarnate Christ-centred life style and syncretistic practices which deny the uniqueness of the gospel. Perhaps the answer will be