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The call to articulate a theology of communication is an urgent one. It demands disciplined research commitments, involvement in mission and a spirituality grounded in Christ and his Church. [p. 197](#)

Christian Literature and Society in the '90s

Melba Maggay

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There is an African proverb which says, 'When the elephants fight, the grass gets trampled.' Today I shall try to speak from the perspective of people who always get trampled upon in the big events of our history.

The topic assigned to me is 'Christian Literature and Society in the 1990s'. Let me start by quoting a *haiku* from the Japanese poet, Bashra:

Nearing autumn's close,
my neighbour, how does he live,
I wonder.

In brief, Bashra the poet evokes an association of images: autumn's close drawing near ... the leaves fall ... slowly, the colours lose their flaming red ... the gripping chill is in the air ... you can almost picture a desolate twig lacerating the grey sky. And the poet shudders at the bleak prospect of a dark deep winter, and he calls to mind his neighbour, and wonders how he must live in the face of it. A feeling for a common human thread and a sense of the other. A passion for connectedness. For gossip about other people, other worlds. A certain curiosity that wants to know whether they do laugh and suffer there. These have always marked much great literature, till fairly recently.

The modern cult of the artist in isolation, the anti-hero, at odds with society alienated from his community, is precisely that. Modern. It has its roots in the breakdown of the old order of meaning occasioning a disruption of sensibility between artist and audience. And the retreat of literature, like religion, into a highly privatized world of its own invention. Mumbling in corners about the meaning of its own symbols.

In this time together, we shall explore a way of reconnecting somehow the vital currents of our lives. And of life in the mass, what Henry James calls 'swan life', and try to recover again a sense of context, of relatedness, of solidarity, with the life of the world as we bring to it the Word. [p. 198](#)

OUR TASK AS WORD KEEPERS

We shall start by examining afresh the nature of our task as Wordkeepers. And then moving on to the implications of this task in the life of our societies today. First the task of Word-keeping.

The Power of Naming

The first aspect of this is what I would call the power of naming. Of finding a word for the world as it really is. We are told that a part of the image of God is the power of naming. That perspicuity in putting a finger in what ails us, what burns our hearts, what lacerates our souls and makes all our dreams destitute.

Literature and its gift for words is especially equipped with the power to articulate a world that most of us only half-understand, because we only half-grasp with the power of a tongue. Modern linguistic theory tells us that we are not likely to know that which we do not have words for. We do not see what has not been labelled for us beforehand. Language shapes our view of the world just as much as the world shapes our language. For example, I am told that Eskimos have at least thirty different words for snow. And the Arabs have many names for horses. And those of us, like Filipinos, who always lived in the reality of community and take this for granted, do not know the meaning of privacy. We have no word in Filipino for privacy. The words give us grip. We feel we have colonized a corner of reality once we are able to put a word to it.

Now ancient imagination long ago was already aware that words and symbolic language are somehow crucial to our survival. Myths and fairy tales tell us that so much hangs on a guess ... a password, a ritual answer to a riddle, the frog can turn into a prince, doors shall open. The curse and wasted earth shall be healed and land formulate certain ritual questions that will wrest answers out of the riddle of our existence. I suspect these are intimations, remnants of a distant past. Memory of the early dawn of history when there was yet a unity between word and deed. When what was said was just as good as done. God said, and it was so.

It is said that part of the power of the Beatles, as cult heroes of the 60s, was their ability to verbalize the half-perceived alienation and restlessness of an entire generation. Likewise, I think, the power of Christian literature in society, or of all literature for that matter, is directly proportionate to its power to name the fears and articulate the hopes of an increasingly complex and hopelessly destitute world. All around us today is the feeling that the world is out of joint, yet most of [p. 199](#) us have no way of knowing why this is so. For the most part, people suffer as a brute suffers with the dumb animal stare and an incoherent yelp of pain.

Many literary critics attribute this crisis of meaning to a loss of a sense of original sin. The death of God, and the erosion of standards by which behaviour may be clearly assessed and sharply judged, has ultimately deprived people of a clear conception of the human dilemma. The substitution of private vision for centuries of a common faith tradition has resulted not merely in the fading of right and wrong into contingent obstructions, but also in the failure of literature to arrive at what an American novelist calls 'an adequate definition of terror'. The literary critic, Walter Aaron, has said that there are really only two kinds of righteous: those who believe in original sin and those who do not. Now those of us who do must tell society what is wrong—and why it is wrong. Others have no such insight. We need to articulate a tragic vision that is deeper and more terrible than a failed social system or a breakdown in our machines. And thus we restore a measure of dignity and coherence to our recurrent agonies and the daily failures of our dreams. 'To be a man,' says Robert Penn Warren, 'is both a crime and a penance.' We wound others because of what we are and suffer because of what we want to be.

As Christians we must name this monster which thwarts our best efforts and in general makes for what Auden calls 'human unsuccess'. Now this is a very bleak truth. But as someone has said, in the same way that man took of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and fell, it is possible that if he takes another bite he may come close to a measure of redemption. Too often, we rush in with answers before we have even

begun to name the problem. We are generous with answers to questions nobody else is asking! Gertrude Stein, in the throes of her dying, asked of the glittering *literati* who were gathered around her deathbed ‘What is the answer?’ Failing to elicit a response from her usually talkative audience, she then asked, ‘What is the question?’ In today’s struggle for insight, it is just as important to be able to pose the right questions—to track down the dragon to its lair. Name the places ‘where evil comes off softly like a flower’. That is a phrase from Budler.

Prophecy

This brings us to the second major aspect of Word-keeping. That is prophesying, or bringing the Word of God to the world as he would like it to be. T. S. Eliot once made the famous remark that ‘a poet has not a personality to express, but a medium’. A sensibility through [p. 200](#) which a way of looking at the world presents itself. Now this is especially true, I think, of Christian literature. Our words have power only in so far as they function as a medium of the Word. Just as prophecy has authenticity only in so far as it can lay claim to the formula, ‘Thus saith the Lord’. Our subjection to the Word must be such that it makes us into a medium of the recreative power of God. Just like Jeremiah who speaks of the Word as fire in his bones. A burning fire so sovereign, so irresistible that he cannot hold it in. He says, ‘I am weary of holding it in.’

The prophetic word is essentially a critiquing word. Prophecy involves primarily the bringing of bad news. It is the announcement that all those idols upon which we base our confidence, and the enthusiasms of our time, are not going to work. The prophets spoke to Israel on two basic themes, which I think we need to recover: idolatry and oppression. They named the powers that had become lures in their culture, and the ways in which Israel had turned away from its calling to do justice and righteousness—violating the laws of love both for God and for neighbour. Likewise we need to name the idols of our time and tear them down; and bring God’s word of judgement against injustice, and the ready surrender of the church to powerful forces that make us hesitate to dissent.

Among modern writers, I think Dostoyevski is a good example of this prophetic naming. As early as the last century, even before Nietzsche, he had already prophesied in many of his novels that with the downfall of the altar of God, one is left merely with either the anthill or the superman. You are left either with the anonymous collective, or with him to whom pretensions to grandeur are such that he makes himself a law unto himself. In the language of Roskolnikov, one of his characters, ‘one to whom everything is permitted’.

In verse 10 of Jeremiah chapter 1, Jeremiah’s prophetic task is described in terms of four negatives and two positives. ‘See,’ God says, ‘I appoint you today over nations and kingdoms, to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.’ The prophetic office is predominantly a critical element in our societies. It is predominantly a literature of doom and gloom even if we don’t like it. It disturbs our peace and is often seen as subversive and unpatriotic. You remember Jeremiah undermining the royal court’s confident expectations that they could throw off the yoke of Babylon. Instead he was suggesting capitulation.

Now all of that sounded unpatriotic and defeatist and negative. But you see, God’s Word is first of all a word of radical rupture—of eruption and upheaval before it can even become a word of [p. 201](#) reconciliation. This is why I find televangelists, and the health and wealth gospel, most disturbing from where I sit in the world. You never get the sense that coming to God would mean a tearing down, a shattering of our cherished orthodoxies and bad commercial habits. A bursting of the old wine skins of tradition and idolatrous culture. Yet our power to critique as a society directly depends on our ability to be

incarnate. The ability to make the Word flesh. To give it a body that people can see, and hear, and touch.

THE WORD IN CONTEXT

Now this brings us to the second part of this morning's reflection, which is the Word in the world and what it means to put it in context. The Word in context means that we need to be able to come down from our ladder of obstruction. Communication theorist Hayakawa has this notion of a ladder of obstruction, and we need to be able to come down and make the word culturally specific. To ask questions, like 'Who, or what, are the powers of our culture?' Is it mammon, materialism, family, tradition? What does it mean to say 'Jesus is Lord' in a society bound by iron tradition or in the West by heartless economic forces? What is God's Word of power to the weak and powerless? To those of us who live in animistic cultures, in constant fear of the spirits? To the poor who live a precarious existence in the face of systemic viscosity and powerful forms of injustice? I think it was Martin Luther who said, 'We are not really preaching the Word if it fails to speak at that precise moment of crisis in our time.' We may be preaching the Scripture verses, but, he says, we are not preaching the Word.

Likewise, I think it is not really preaching the Word to go from culture to culture with a one, two, three point formulation of the Gospel that fails to speak at that joint where a society or a culture most hurts. The fact that a majority of the world is poor means that much of what we produce as Christians ought to be a literature from the underside of history. A literature that takes the reality of the poor and sits where they sit in imaginative empathy. Now unfortunately much of our literature, especially Christian literature, is dominated by the themes arising from the problems of the affluent West.

Decolonizing our Imagination

Those of us in the Third World have a special obligation to put a stop to the massive exportation of irrelevant books and the pamphleteering [p. 202](#) that does not take into account Lazarus sitting at the gate. Those of us who have been educated in a Western way need to de-colonize our imagination. I say this to myself as well. I learned to speak and write from a consciousness of powerlessness and weakness. We must learn, as Third World people who have had the privilege of much education and much Western contact, to write again from the perspective of people who all the time live in extremes.

I think Russian literature, perhaps of all national literatures excluding the Third World, is a good example of what it means to reflect this bias of giving voice to the voiceless. As one of Solzhenitsyn's characters once remarked, 'Have you ever noticed what makes the characters of Russian literature different from those of Western literature? In the West they have no time for anything except their careers, money, and fame. But in Russia, they don't even need food and drink. All they want is justice.'

Sensitivity to Cultural Distinctives

Now, besides the feeling for social need, if the Word is to be in context there must be a sensitivity to people's ways of thinking and feeling. Many in the world today (and I think this is true as much for women as for men) think relationally and in concrete images. This is true for those of us who live in oral societies, as well as for those in the West who are raised in the culture of electronic media. The French sociologist, Jacques Fllul, has written a book recently called *The Humiliation of the Word*, lamenting the eclipse of the word by the dominant influence of the image in modern culture. Now McLuhan long ago has given us the insight that the medium is the message. That the medium itself, regardless of content, does something to us. And one of the things that print does as a medium, he says, is to change our minds so that they think in linear sequence. To think in a detached, analytical way. In contrast, electronic media, especially radio, bring us back to the

wordless, mythic world of tribal drums. To the simultaneous association of words with images.

Now this means, I think, that our young people today are cognitively of the same orientation as a tribal man whose traditional culture is altogether by-passing the 400-year age of literacy which has characterized the West, and is leaping straight into the visceral and oral culture of electronic media. In the Philippines, for instance, 90 per cent of our population is reached by radio and 60 per cent have TV. Even before we have a literate reading population, although we are functionally literate, the Philippines is about the third highest in [p. 203](#) literacy in Asia ... 87 to 89 per cent. So in a way we have come full circle.

Today's children of electronic media are perceptually the same as the illiterate medieval devotee who needed icons to remind him of the great themes of his faith. It is interesting that within the churches, the dominant cognitive culture belongs still to the age of literacy. Analytical, sequential, propositional, verbal. It is a cultural link that I think can be traced to the historically symbiotic relationship between the rise of Reformation faith and the invention of the printing press. I think it is not an accident that the two came together. In the 16th century, medieval Christendom shifted from the altar to the pulpit. From an emphasis on the image to an emphasis on the Word. And since then the Protestant tradition has had a strong propositional quality.

There is no need, however, to criticize this, to drive a wedge between the word and the image. For in the incarnate Christ, the Word has become an image. The invisible God has been made visible. There is both a verbal and non-verbal dimension to the gospel. In other words, people need not only words to hear, but images to see. Sounds ... blowing the trumpet, as well as sights, if people are to believe. Having said this, we must not lose sight of the fact that the gospel is first of all a story rather than a proposition. It is news, rather than views. It is an event. Something that has happened. In the language of Paul, this thing was not done in a corner. It is an event rather than an idea. It is primarily something that speaks to that part of us which longs for poetry. Inside the humblest machine of modern life and culture. It speaks primarily to that part of us which longs for filling and imagination, in the face of so much that is abstract and cold and windowless in our life and in our faith.

Print, I think, need not be a dying medium. All it needs is to recover the language of feeling. And to put across the fact that pain is a language that God understands. In whatever medium we do it, we must go back to story telling. To fiction, rather than exposition. To poetry, rather than analysis. One of the things I lament about much Christian communication is that there is an undue emphasis on the linear and the technical. The bloodless language of the communications specialist ... which unfortunately most of us are, including myself.

In the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel, we read of the book of the law being found in the dusty corners of the temple in Josiah's reign. For a long time Israel had been in apostasy. The finding of the book of the law was shattering. It was first read in the presence of the king, and [p. 204](#) then of all the people. And the effect was electric. There was a rending of garmets and a putting on of sackcloth and ashes. The reading of it brought back the people to the ways of God and the faith of their fathers. Where tradition dies and people forget, a book can provide continuity, can preserve a people's historical memory. Now this is something that electronic media, with its more ephemeral images, cannot do.

Sensitivity to Kingdom Concerns

Finally, to incarnate the Word in the world demands sensitivity to the forms in which the kingdom takes shape historically. If we say that the kingdom has come, where is it in the

mass movements of our time? What is the new thing that God is doing in the world? Often the people of God miss their cues historically. This is true of the Filipino evangelical church. Four years ago in the 1986 revolution, people kept talking about [Romans 13](#), when I thought the relevant passage was [Revelation 13](#). It was time to dissent because the state had become demonic. Now, like the Jews who demand signs, we miss the kingdom when it does come.

One of the saddest verses I find in Scripture is that of [John 1:11](#). 'He came to that which was his own, but his own people received him not.'

For many centuries, the Jews kept looking and looking for the consolation of Israel. When he did come, they had no eyes for him. I think that part of our obtuseness, as people of God, has to do with our inability to see that the kingdom can happen in the most unlikely places—and using the most unlikely people. Who would have thought, for instance, that Gorbachev would become a kind of modern Cyrus, lifting the case that would free masses of people and eventually led to the crumbling of the Berlin Wall?

The kingdom always brings us face to face with that margin of mystery where all our calculations collapse, and we become aware of a power that is other than the kingdoms of men in our history. Also, the coming of the kingdom is uncomfortable, because it often threatens ... it is disruptive and destabilizing ... it splits wineskins ... it turns the world upside down ... breaks window panes to let in all the air—especially for those of us who are trapped by socio-economic forces and windowless ideologists. Everywhere in the world today, we see the axe being laid at the root of the tree. Authoritarian regimes in Asia and Latin America have fallen, or like China are under the threat of [p. 205](#) falling. Eastern Europe is determinedly pushing its iron governments for more democratic space.

America, with its increasing internal poverty and loss of prestige, is suffering symptoms of what a political scientist has diagnosed as 'imperial overstretch'. A tired and an older Western Europe speaks of the end of history. Now that we have seen what someone calls the 'final triumph ... the final triumph of literal democracy and the end of ideology', a foreign policy expert here in Washington, named Francis Fukuyama, even predicts that we are about to enter a *boring* phase in human history. The courage, the idealism which once characterized the old ideological battles between the East and the West will fade and pass away. 'All that we shall be left with,' he said, 'are merely technical questions—of how to produce more growth and make the system work.'

It is obvious from all this that we are seeing in our time the breakdown of a global order which is organized along our artificially imposed ideological lines. In the West there is a crisis of meaning, in the Third World there is a crisis of paradigm. Ideology is to us as an idol that has failed. Neither capitalism nor communism remain credible philosophical systems for organizing an increasingly interconnected and pluralized world. So ours is a crisis moment. It is an exciting historical moment, which I think is cause for a renewed imagination, for a new vision of a just social order.

Christians must articulate afresh a vision which shall engage the tired idealism of a disillusioned world. The Church as the news-bearer of the coming kingdom has a golden opportunity to articulate a vision of what we would like to happen historically. And we need to find a way, as well, of loving the world even as it weeps for its lost gods.

To conclude, first today's crisis of paradigm requires of us the capacity to incarnate historically that part of the kingdom which is now. To articulate a vision in terms that are recognizable to our contemporaries. The best literature that contemporary Christendom has produced so far, has been either historical or mythical, I am sorry to say, like the fantasies of C. S. Lewis, the mythic worlds of Tolkien. I like both of them, but I think they are essentially historical. Or we have works that are historically frozen, like the poems of T. S. Eliot, built on fragments of a dying and derelict culture, and, I suspect, based on a

nostalgic longing for the old order and the stout-hearted sentences of medieval Christendom. What we need is a literature that articulates the great themes of our faith: suffering and salvation, within the sociological boundaries of our time.

Secondly, the intense crisis of meaning in modern societies [p. 206](#) demands that we once again, in the language of Tolkien, 'put the monsters at the centre'. In other words, 'to help people look in the eye that which they fear the most instead of turning away literally from the disaster'. That is a phrase from Auden. The German poet Rilke in alluding to the story of the frog that turns into a prince assures us of something.

I would like to quote this, and end with it: 'That which we find most fearful, we shall find in the end also to be the most fateful, like this monster of a frog. At the centre of its terror and of its being is something that needs and wants our help.' And he concludes by saying, 'Perhaps all the dragons of our lives are really only princesses just waiting for us to be at once beautiful and brave.'

This article was a plenary address delivered at the *Media Association International Litt-World '90 Conference*, U.S.A. Melba P. Maggay is General Director of the Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture (ISACC) in Manila, Philippines and is an editor and writer. [p. 207](#)

Contextual Theologies: The Problem of Agendas

Harvie M. Conn

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Evangelism, as the communication of the gospel, never takes place in a vacuum and it never has done so. Historical events and situations have always shaped our confessions of faith. In this article the author, a former missionary in Korea, argues that the application of the biblical message to our contemporary world is necessary but not enough. We must go deeper into the historical and cultural context of the people with whom the gospel is being shared. The gospel must be inculturated, not just applied. This takes clarity and courage, for the danger of syncretism is never far away, but the call to live dangerously is always with us. Doing theology is more than a mental exercise; it comes from on-the-road involvement in the lives of people. It is the right relationship between text and context.

The author discusses the agenda of the Early Church, of AngloSaxon evangelicals today and of the emerging churches in the Two-Thirds World. He discusses how the Early Church Fathers, Justin Martyr, Clement and Origen, in their evangelistic concerns responded to the aspirations of pagan Greek philosophy and to the demeaning accusations of Celsus, yet were themselves captive to the rationalism of the educated few. The consequence of the