

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 24

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER



Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission

Volume 24 • Number 2 • April 2000

indispensable. This is the case because the essence of religious freedom is deeply anchored in New Testament thought.

The early church, as a small diaspora church in a world critical of Christianity and increasingly hostile to it, carried out evangelism and fought for its future. In this way, its message proved itself to be a dynamic power, even with respect to the social history of antiquity, as seen, for example, in the triumph over slavery. The motivation of many of our spiritual forefathers, who emigrated to the United States for reasons of conscience and certainly not just because of economic motives, was characterized by the desire for freedom. They simply wanted to be allowed to practise their faith freely in the New World. They thought about their courageous step of emigrating in the context of the New Testament ideal of freedom, which was not without political consequences.

Just how important the question of religious freedom becomes is obvious in Wolhart Pannenberg's analysis of modern secularism. Pannenberg proves that secularism in Europe received its first major impetus as a result of the religious wars, that is, especially the Thirty-Years' War. Through the experience of political-military intolerance, the first great estrangement of broad segments of the European population from the Christian faith came about. Freedom of religion is a valuable possession that Evangelicals should defend, even politically. They should stand on the side of those who demand civil tolerance and in doing so, at the same time support the biblical message in carrying out its missionary proclamation. The Great Commission does not deny religious freedom but confirms it, for according to the New Testament, it is indispensable to the preaching of the gospel.

Dr Rolf Hille is Executive Chair of the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission and Principal of Albrecht Bengel Haus, Tübingen, Germany. As well taking an active part in his own church, he is also a leading figure in the Evangelical Alliance movement and theological associations in his own country and elsewhere in Europe. This article is excerpted from a chapter by Dr Hille in a collection of essays to be published by the faculty of Bengel Haus. Translation is by James Louis Kautt of Tübingen.

General Revelation Makes Cross-Cultural Communication Possible

Gordon R. Lewis

Keywords: General revelation, natural theology, salvation, cross-cultural communication, language, relativism, justice, world view, truth, redemptive analogy;

Christian missions in the Orient had diminished effectiveness, observed Lit-sen Chang, when dependent upon either general or special revelation exclusively. On the one hand, liberals failed because they so identified with the natural theology of the people that they did not adequately present the distinctive gospel of Christ. On the other hand, pietistic fundamentalists failed because they so emphasized the gospel that they ignored the cross-

cultural points of contact provided by general revelation;¹ a more effective theology of missions than either encompasses both God's universal and particular revelations.

For present purposes, however, I emphasize general revelation and its relationship to cross-cultural communication whatever the culture or language in use. I seek also to integrate some contributions of philosophical, missiological, biblical, and theological materials.

Not all missiologists affirm a divine revelation to all everywhere. Hendrik Kraemer represents those who follow Christomonistic theologian Karl Barth in denying the contributions of general revelation and natural theology. Kraemer explained that Karl Barth admitted points of contact between God and man 'because the fact that faith in God's revelation occurs pre-supposes that it can be communicated to man and apprehended by him as revelation coming from God'. Nevertheless, with fierce emphasis Barth's assumption of an infinite qualitative distinction between God and man led him to assert that 'There is no point of contact'. Kramer explains,

... The sole *agent* of real faith in Christ is the Holy Spirit. ... Intent on maintaining integrally the unique character of the Christian revelation as God's sovereign condescending act, what it says is that there are no bridges from human religious consciousness to the reality in Christ, and that it is exclusively God's grace and no human contribution or disposition whatever that effects 'the falling of the scales from the eyes'.²

Kraemer's Barthian missiology validly underlines the uniqueness of salvation through Christ, but unjustifiably denies a general revelation and a natural theology by common grace. The Holy Spirit has chosen to work universally through means such as physical and moral laws. Although *salvation* is Christomonistic, *revelation* is given, not only in Christ, but also in nature ([Rom. 1:20](#)) and the human heart ([Rom. 2:14](#)). Barth does not succeed exegetically in overriding Romans chapters [1](#) and [2](#) on the consideration that they are not Paul's primary teaching on salvific experience. In his *Commentary on Romans* while trying to be free from philosophical presuppositions, Barth astonishingly interprets [Romans 1:20](#) in a self-contradictory manner. The passage says, 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made'.³ Barth comments, 'And what does this mean but that we can know nothing of God ... ?'⁴

Although Cornelius Van Til also denies common ground 'in principle', he admits it in fact, but does not want missionary apologists to use it.⁵ However, his prohibitions upon the use of common ground in apologetics or missions conflict with Paul's use of the teaching in [Romans 1](#) and [2](#) and when ministering as the apostle to Gentiles (pagans) at

¹ 1. Lit-sen Chang, *Strategy of Missions in the Orient: Christian Impact on the Pagan World* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), p. 105.

² 2. Henrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), pp. 131–132.

³ 3. Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

⁴ 4. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 47.

⁵ 5. G.R. Lewis, 'Van Til and Carnell', ed. Geehan, *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussion of the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), pp. 349–368.

Athens and elsewhere.⁶ After surveying numerous alternative theological perspectives, and exegeting relevant biblical evidence, Bruce Demarest and I developed a doctrine of general revelation in volume one of *Integrative Theology* with some of its missiological relevance.⁷ We conclude as did Robert Webber elsewhere that

God created the world with which He is in relationship. The world reflects the Creator (yet is not an extension of Him) and therefore communication is central. God's communication of Himself to the world is through nature as well as in time, space and history. This establishes the principle that creation is a worthy vehicle through which God can be communicated.⁸

What makes cross-cultural communication possible is the universal illumination of the human heart and mind to the truths of general revelation by the Logos ([John 1:1-3](#)). Regardless of the depth of the diversities of the languages in use and the cultural mores, the one Creator made us to know and love him and our neighbours, and to rule the world as accountable stewards. Our accountability for our stewardship of nature and our opportunities to serve others imply some conformity of the categories of our minds with those of the world and of our common Creator.

I respect the anthropological approaches of Mayers and Hiebert, the missiological emphases of Anderson and Lubzeta, the communicational emphases of Charles Kraft and David Hesselgrave, and the theological approach of Harvey Conn who seeks to moderate 'the angry dialogue between cultural anthropology and theology'.⁹ To these approaches I urge adding axiological and epistemological approaches in preparing for communication from one world-view (*weltanschauung*) to another. The epistemological-axiological hypothesis concerning a universal revelation and illumination is proposed in part I. How it conforms to experience morally and intellectually is presented in part II. The question of whether it involves redemptive analogies is considered in part III.

I. GLOBALLY NORMATIVE TRUTH

The culturally specific missiologists properly call attention to numerous differences among the languages and mores in the contexts of their experience and research. Writers in philosophy also magnify contrasts among historical systems and contemporary existentialist, analytic, process, and theistic ways of thinking and speaking. The upshot of much of the philosophical and missiological work focused on variables tends toward a conceptual relativism and could proliferate in countless ethnocentric theologies and local 'truths'. Both philosophers and missiologists need to emphasize also the similarities of all humans *qua* humans in the *imago Dei* with some common human frames of reference or categories and common human moral values.

However, some philosophers and missiologists appear to have given up hope of ever arriving at *the* truth about 'the facts'. They are like a medical specialist who told me, 'I

⁶ 6. G.R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims: Approaches to Christian Apologetics* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), pp. 125–150, and 'Gospel on Campus: An Expository Study of [Acts 17](#)', Parts 1–4, *His*, (October–December, 1966, January 1977).

⁷ 7. G.R. Lewis and B.A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), I:61–91. See also Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

⁸ 8. Robert E. Webber, *God Still Speaks* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), p. 81.

⁹ 9. Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Trialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1984), p. 10.

used to think that there were three sides in counselling a married couple: her side, his side, and the truth. If I could only discover the truth and tell them, that would solve their problems. Now I do not think there is a third side, 'the truth'. Each has to forgive the other, and that's it. They wouldn't accept the truth if they heard it'.

From both philosophical and missiological fields it seems conclusive that we are indeed related primarily to the one specific culture in which we were raised. I say culture-related rather than culture-bound because some rebel against their parents' cultural influences. Admittedly, however, some of our knowledge is not only time-related, but time-bound and merely culture-specific. Some distinctive requirements for a specific cultural setting may not be normative for all times and all peoples. Some culturally specific knowledge, however, has significance for culture after culture. And some known ethical principles like justice are normative for all cultures and subcultures. Even the claims for an apparently total cultural or philosophical relativism are proposed as supportable with objective validity to all others for belief. If it is universally true that all human knowing is influenced by the standpoint of the knower, then we can attain at least one transcultural truth!¹⁰

The fact that all interpreters' perspectives of nature are culturally influenced by changing historical situations, nevertheless, does not mean that we know nothing but our changing perspectives. Because reporters put a slant on the news does not mean that nothing happened which is distinct from their slants or that we can reduce all knowing merely to slanted opinions. Some reporters are better informed than others about what happened in another part of our world. Humans as divine image-bearers have conceptual criteria for testing truth claims and critical methods of knowing that enable discerning people to sift more reliable from less adequate interpretations.

Historian H. Richard Niebuhr's works are properly concerned about the dangers of absolutizing the relative in history and in religion. But Niebuhr argues that his confessional faith makes 'reasonable sense of human life and thought' in terms of values, rather than a rational demonstration. That claim, however, appeals to some objective, non-confessional meaning of what is *reasonable* and of *value*. To the extent that Niebuhr manages to avoid subjectivism and religious scepticism he inconsistently appeals to universal principles of logic, evidence, and value. Holding that all human understanding is language-dependent and socially determinate, he fails to explain how relative viewpoints are confirmed or changed and how different speech communities with different confessional faiths can communicate with one another.¹¹

Unless Niebuhr can recognize basic common categories of thought and being in the world and in persons created to know and love God, to know and love each other and to rule the world, he lacks a basis for cross-cultural communication and progress in thought among different communities of people. *If God created the earth and image-bearers to know it, to rule it, and to relate to one another under God*, changeable and sinful though we are, we are not left to solipsistic relativisms or totally time-bound contextualizations.

When judgmentally scrambling human languages at Babel, God did not destroy the basic common categories of thought or values necessary to meaningful human existence on earth. Since Babel cross-cultural communication is more difficult, but not impossible.

¹⁰ 10. Gordon Lewis, 'Relativism', *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), pp. 926–930.

¹¹ 11. See my 'The Niebuhr's Relativism, Relationalism, Contextualization, and Revelation', *Challenges to Inerrancy: A Theological Response*, ed. Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), pp. 155–156.

Even though fallen and judged, God's image-bearers from East and West discover similarities in human moral and intellectual capacities and categories.

Linguist Eugene Nida has explained that although absolute communication is not possible, effective communication is possible between persons of different cultures. He offers three reasons for this: '(1) the processes of human reasoning are essentially the same, irrespective of cultural diversity; (2) all people have a common range of experience, and (3) all peoples possess the capacity for at least some adjustment to the symbolic "grids" of others.'¹² Across whatever languages may be in use in any context, human reasoning from experience is essentially the same and our 'grids' are compatible because *of divinely revealed transcultural categories and standards of truth and morality*. These thought forms and norms make worthwhile the efforts at cross-cultural personal relationships and make meaningful cross-cultural communication and confirmation of truth claims.

If universally humans are accountable to the same Creator and Sustainer for ethical norms (like justice) in their relationships with each other, we must be able to know some 'oughts' in spite of our finiteness, fallenness, and our cultural and linguistic diversities. Inwardly known moral laws, like the outwardly written law of Moses, make human life and cross-cultural respect and communication possible. The requirements of God's moral demands are reflected in the behaviour of those who did not have Moses' formulation ([Rom. 2:14, 15](#)). All non-Jews of any and every culture (Gentiles) in concrete situations encounter the demands of the law within. As self-conscious persons, pagans were wise critically to evaluate their own conduct by standards (not essentially different from the commandments of Moses). Because of the internal analogue of moral laws making claims upon them, the biblically uninformed cannot escape divine judgment.¹³ If God universally and always reveals basic moral values as Scripture and experience indicate, then, contrary to Willard Van Orman Quine, all moral values do not differ with the language in use and cannot be reduced to discrete behavioural dispositions.¹⁴

If what Paul teaches is true, people everywhere independent of Moses' ten commandments know that they ought to value their Creator above all and worship the Logos as distinct from any creature. Furthermore they know they ought not to murder, steal, commit adultery, or bear false witness against one another, but to respect others' God-given inherent rights. Although this truth may be suppressed, it remains a basis of accountability for all persons in all cultures.

Before communicating claims concerning Christ as Saviour to people of other philosophies, religions, or cults, ordinarily we need to establish meaningful relationships and help people realize their moral need for the gospel of grace. The conditions necessary to meaningful experience within and across cultures do not compromise the distinctiveness of the gospel message. They reveal our sinfulness and demonstrate our need for mercy and grace provided by the Messiah's atonement.

But the question persists. How? How does general revelation make cross-cultural communication possible? Answers to 'how' questions are notoriously difficult, and mechanical, biological or physical explanations will not be forthcoming. Rather, I suggest a theological explanation. *The Logos who created everything illumines the darkness of our*

¹² 12. Eugene Nida, *Message and Mission* (New York: Harper, 1960), p. 90.

¹³ 13. See Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 63–65.

¹⁴ 14. See 'Quine, Willard Van Orman', *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion Eastern and Western Thought*, W.L. Reese (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities, 1980), pp. 474–75; C.F. Presley, 'Quine, Willard Van Orman', *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 53–55.

fallenness whenever humans learn truth about a matter of fact or a principle of morality (John 1:3–5). Having implanted in all humans capacities for knowing conditions that make any meaningful relationships possible, God also illumines all people to these standards, making understanding and communication possible within or across differences of age, race, sex, world-view, or cultural expression. In addition to a general revelation, depraved sinners need and receive a general illumination to attain any changeless truths about what happens once-for-all or uniformly under given conditions. Hence in Augustinian fashion, teachers in the final analysis are mere occasions for the teaching of the divine *Magistro*. And knowledge learned from the divine Teacher is God's truth wherever it may be found.¹⁵ So, if all humans are dependent on God and accountable to one God, some globally normative truth is possible

II. AN ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENCE CONFIRMS UNIVERSAL NORMS

If our Creator has implanted some mental categories and moral standards in our natures, Edward John Carnell reasoned, we should be able to discover them in our experience and make use of them in our cross-philosophical communication. Carnell sought to discover divinely given principles by an analysis. *Analysis* is not inductive or deductive inference from experience to something outside it. Neither is analysis simply a phenomenological description of culturally influenced experiences. Analysis is a reflective discrimination of the various elements already present in our relationships with other people which make distinctively human life meaningful. It is our own unique experience that we analyse. And we simply ask, 'What, if anything, makes human experience meaningful?'¹⁶

Are moral values too emotively explosive for productive cognitive evaluation across radically different philosophical preunderstandings or long-standing cultural traditions? Is it possible to consider with a high degree of philosophical fairness and objectivity issues with such deep, polarizing loyalties? Can we find a basis for meaningful relationships, dialogue, and evaluation? Difficult as it may be, an analysis of meaningful relationships between persons of different religious cultures and world views disclose several non-negotiable values best accounted for as given by the Logos who illumines the darkness of all.

A. Universally people's *intrinsic human rights* ought to be respected. Whenever we walk in a park and meet other human beings, we find ourselves under obligations greater than those of either things or animals. In relationships with persons, however different from us, we are obligated to respect their rights to life and liberty. If injured we ought not to take advantage of them, but to help them. If starving we ought to feed them, if hurting we ought to assist them. If Jews and Arabs, for example, are to communicate with each other harmoniously, they must respect each other's rights to exist. Similarly, if Christians are to communicate with non-Christians effectively, Christians must respect their human rights.

The confirmation of this analysis of human relations can be observed in relationships between humans of radically different political loyalties at the United Nations. Participation in the United Nations requires assent to its International Bill of Human

¹⁵ 15. On general illumination see my 'Faith and Reason in the Thought of St. Augustine', (Syracuse University: Unpublished Dissertation, 1959) pp. 25–54.

¹⁶ 16. Edward John Carnell, *Christian Commitment* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), pp. 44–46. For a condensation and discussion see also G.R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), pp. 176–284.

Rights.¹⁷ An analysis of the basic recognition of the inherent value of human life regardless of political or religious differences is necessary for communication between people of the East and West, North and South. With tolerance for the inherent value and rights of those with whom we differ culturally and philosophically, meaningful communication becomes possible. Total relativism, relationalism, and contextualization cannot account for the universality and the necessity of the obligation under which all human beings find themselves to respect the rights of all other persons. And on the basis of that oughtness we do find cross-cultural communication taking place at the Olympics and, however painfully, at the United Nations.

As empirical evidence of the correctness of this analysis, on December 10, 1948, the United Nations adopted its Universal Bill of Human Rights. An analysis finds that a *sine qua non* of meaningful human experience and communication cross-culturally is respect for the inalienable rights of persons, however differently interpreted in Marxist lands. The impact of this universal truth was perhaps a key factor in Russian *glasnost* and *perestroika*. And Chinese young people gave their lives for it in Tiananmen Square. The most adequate explanation of the universal recognition that we *ought* to respect others is a universal divine revelation of moral law. God gave the negatives of the moral law to protect human rights. Because all humans of diverse cultures are my image-bearers you shall not murder, violate, or steal from them. All in God's likeness have a right to life, spouse, possessions, and religion. All also have a right to hear the way to eternal life and the gift of Christ's perfect righteousness.

How does general revelation make cross-cultural communication possible? It grounds the rights of the Christian and the pre-Christian, not in individual or collective achievements, but in the very constitution of our being as made in God's image and sustained by God. No earthly culture or authority can legitimately deny or suspend the intrinsic rights of a person to freedom in life, thought and religion. Universal and necessary moral principles come from above, they are not derived by inductive polls of human opinion. A moral law implanted in every human heart demands respect for the rights of all other human beings. That law may be violated, suppressed, and held down in unrighteousness, but those who disregard it remain inexcusable ([Rom. 1:20](#)).

B. Universally people can communicate because all appeal to *the demand for justice*. All know that they ought not treat others unjustly or unfairly. The universality and necessity of the obligation to just thought and conduct can best be explained as a product of universal revelation from above. Satanists and others may deliberately suppress this inner sense of obligation to the right versus the wrong and reverse it. But in doing so they disclose the depths of their sinful distortion. Nevertheless, *no one desires to be treated unjustly* whether by another person, a gang, a tribe, a government or a religion. The right of all men and women to equality of concern and respect, Dworkin argues, is not derived from social status, merit, or national citizenship. The right is intrinsic to humanness.¹⁸ All desire to be treated fairly even beyond the realm of their country and its social contract. Prophets speak up against the mores of their cultures. Comparative judgments about better or worse societies reflect universal norms. Social justice is judged ultimately, not by varying national cultural traditions, but by universal, normative criteria. These would include not only that we ought always to respect others' rights and dignity as persons, but also to say in word and deed what we intend in meaning.

¹⁷ 17. Reproduced by Allen O. Miller, *A Christian Declaration on Human Rights*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), Appendix pp. 159–182.

¹⁸ 18. See Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 182.

When teaching and living in central India my wife and I and our tall fourteen-year-old son—all obviously from the USA—were distinct curiosities in a city not frequented by tourists. Although at the time the government of India was displeased with the U.S. government and suspicious of even American missionaries as ‘spies’, our freedom depended on a universal sense of justice from a population overwhelmingly Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist. When any country unjustly deprives foreigners or citizens of their inherent rights, they incur greater guilt before the divine Judge of all the earth who does right.

Contrary to Charles Manson’s reasoning, as influenced by monism, a vast difference remains between helping a person and murdering her (Sharon Tate). Violations of the rights to life and liberty ought never to take place. The outcries of the victims of mass murders in any culture assume a universal and necessary norm of justice. The former dominance of the Nazi power did not make discrimination against the Jewish people in the Holocaust excusable. In the name of ‘law and order’ it is always wrong everywhere for ‘the haves’ to oppress and exploit ‘the have-nots’. It is also unjust everywhere and always for the have-nots to become accuser, judge, jury, and executioner in personal vengeance against those who wrong them, even in the name of ‘liberation’. Violations of the norms of universal revelation resulted in guilt before their Source for the Canaanite nations whose land became that of the Jews and for the Jewish people when they committed the same types of offences and were taken captive.

Talk about justice is cheap if no universal Administrator of justice exists. Personally we cannot take vengeance and are not free to administer proper penalties. Societies and court systems do not always achieve a just resolution. And societies and courts themselves need at times to have justice administered to them. But in every culture, for meaningful human life and communication, justice is non-negotiable. The most adequate explanation of this remarkable agreement in the midst of a host of relative differences is that God has imprinted this sense of obligation on the hearts of all persons in high places and low. The human heart longs for the restoration of the just peace lost in the Fall.¹⁹

In any culture or *weltanschauung* parents are responsible to educate their children morally. Why can children eventually be asked to do right, not simply for rewards, pragmatic advantage, conventional approval, law and order considerations, or a social contract made for them by others? How can Kohlberg expect us to teach our children to act morally in terms of universal ethical principles? In an age of relativism we can teach children to make judgments on universal moral norms because God has implanted this capacity in their hearts. Beyond legalism, we can invite our children to obey these principles as motivated by love for their divine Source. However suppressed or rejected, universal principles distinguishing the just from the unjust can be discovered. God’s negative commandments in their affirmative import protect each human’s right to life, spouse and possessions in any contextual situation.

C. Universally, furthermore, all people fail to live up to the standards of justice and need *mercy*, the withholding of deserved penalties and *grace*, the loving bestowal of undeserved benefits. General revelation, like Moses’ law, is a school master to help fallen people realize their need for mercy and grace. It prepares fallen people to seek mercy and grace from their Creator. And when the missionaries arrive, sensitive persons have often been found, like Cornelius, prepared for the gospel of a merciful pardon from all guilt and the gracious imputation of Christ’s perfect righteousness.

¹⁹ 19. For a development of the relationship of missions to justice see Waldron Scott, *Bring Forth Justice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

When visiting mission fields in ten different nations travelling to and from India, I found that people in cultures as different as those in Athens, Jerusalem, Calcutta, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Taipei, Manila, and Tokyo wanted love. Wherever love is wanting all else is inconsequential. It is no accident that love is the highest of human values. It makes all else worthwhile. Love is the fulfilling of the law, not only the law written on stone, but the law written on our hearts.

Again, it is difficult to explain the universality of the value humans put on faithful love apart from our Sustainer's universal communication that above all else God wants our love, and he wants his image-bearers to love one another. He made us also to need people, merciful people, loving people, faithful people. Believers in a Creator who has made known his existence, power and moral values universally have a basis for faith in meaningful relationships cross-culturally because of these universal values revealed in our hearts by common grace.

D. For meaningful human relationships and cross-cultural communication people from the varied cultures need *humility* before relevant givens in reality and the *integrity* to report the data with *intellectual honesty*. That is, if a missionary's or a pre-Christian's view of an event or matter of fact should be inadequate, we may need openness to assess new evidence and/or willingness to accept a more adequate interpretation. The value of intellectual openness and honesty is important in so simple a communication as seeking directions to a place in a strange land, reporting the causes of an airline disaster to the world press, or describing the situation in an area of the world involved in revolution. We know from the requirements of the law written on our hearts not only that we should not bear false witness, but that the theories we propose for acceptance should fit the relevant, given data.

Our knowledge is not limited to experiential reactions entirely divorced from the givens themselves (phenomenalism). Ben Kimpel argues, 'A distinction must be made between knowledge which consists of interpretations and knowledge which is exclusively of interpretations.'²⁰ Some interpretations, furthermore, are better informed than others. The determination of which are the more reliable interpretations can be decided only by referring again and again to the given data. As Kimpel reasoned, 'Neither Immanuel Kant, nor anyone else has made it fully clear that our knowledge is only of interpretations and not of reality itself.'²¹

Washington columnist James Reston reported that when Stalin's purges were in full swing a resident news correspondent in Moscow was asked by a wide-eyed visiting leftist how far the court proceedings could be believed: 'Everything was true', he replied, 'except the facts'.²²

In spite of all the subjective differences influenced by childhood experiences (Freud), economic status (Marx), educational communities (Dewey), historical standpoints (H.R. Niebuhr), non-rational impulses (Reinhold Niebuhr), and cultural contexts (Kraft), people do critically examine data and determine some truth about events, crimes and nature's laws. On this basis our diagnoses of actual problems in the *status quo* in societies, schools, and churches need not be imaginary predicaments. The *ought* of our social concern cannot be understood without a grasp of the *is* of actual human existence. Lasting justice will not be built on false witnesses or half-truths. Responsible policy for liberation of the poor does not grow out of irresponsible analysis. With the help of criteria of truth as checks

²⁰ 20. Ben F. Kimpel, *Language and Religion* (NY: Philosophical Library, 1957), p. 39.

²¹ 21. Ibid.

²² 22. *New York Times* (January 30, 1980).

and balances, and a critical method for confirming or disconfirming hypotheses people can overcome sinful biases and achieve a high degree of probability for critically determined conclusions. The attainment of truth in matters of fact is not easy, but its value is worth the painstaking effort. Unless one's knowledge in some respect conforms to reality, it misleads in relationships to others and to God who knows what is the case.

How to choose among the changing paradigms in rapidly developing sciences? Kuhn wrote, 'As in political revolutions, so in paradigm choice—there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community.'²³ Apparently Kuhn and his followers do not see the contradiction in speaking of the 'structure' of scientific revolutions since a structure transcends the events. As Stanley I. Jaki pointed out, Kuhn failed to ask, 'What must nature, including man, be like in order that science be possible at all?' or 'What must the world be like in order that man may know it?'²⁴

E. In meaningful human relationships persons from varied cultures must communicate in ways that others can follow. For meaningful communication to take place within or across cultures people need to express themselves *without self-contradiction*. If what is affirmed is also denied at the same time and in the same respect, nothing remains for the receptor to receive. For lasting meaningful relationships settlers of the Americas ought not to contradict their promises to the Indians already living in the land. Neither men nor women ought to contradict the spirit or the wording of their marriage or other vows.

The givenness of the law of non-contradiction in general revelation is indicated by the fact that one cannot argue against it without assuming its validity. The recognition of the error of self-contradiction by children at very young ages and people of differing cultures everywhere can most coherently be accounted for as a product of general revelation. *God is faithful; his judgments and words are faithful*. Similarly, we know that the judgments and words of God's image-bearers ought to be *without hypocrisy and without self-contradiction*. The Creator who cannot deny himself creates us to communicate with himself and with others created in his image.

Integrity in thought and communication is as important as integrity in action. Non-contradiction is the norm of integrity in thought and word. Although some Eastern writers advocate abandoning the law, what is communicable in their writings adheres to it. Hinduism may be presented as embracing all contradictory positions, but when one suggests the contradictory of the basic tenets of Hinduism, a Hindu monist suddenly uses the law of logic. Hindu monists do not admit the contradictory of 'all is Brahman' or of 'all that we observe is maya'. On the unquestioned authority of the guru's affirmation of monism we are expected to deny the contradictories: a dualism of Creator and creature and the reality of the observable world.

Intellectual truth and personal faithfulness, although often divorced in our experience, are closely related in Scripture. Intellectually, truth is a quality of propositions that conform to reality. Existentially, faithfulness is a quality of persons who conform to universally revealed norms of what is and what ought to be. The hypocrisy so castigated by the existentialists is inconsistency of life with what is professed. Jesus faithfully taught the truth conceptually; he authentically lived the truth existentially. Hence he is the way, both in thought and life.

If the central claims of Christianity are true, then it follows that the incompatible claims made by other religious and philosophical writers are false. Harold Netland, a

²³ 23. Thomas Samuel Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 93.

²⁴ 24. Stanley I. Jaki, *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* (Chicago: Chicago University, 1978), p. 239.

missionary to Japan, has effectively shown that the exclusivism of Christianity's claims is not different in kind from other logical claims to truth.²⁵ All of the teachings of other religions are not false, only those that contradict teachings validly derived from soundly interpreted Scripture. Humility and respect should characterize our interaction with those of other faiths. But it is a serious misunderstanding to presume that humility and respect demand glossing over the question of truth.

The universal presence of such personal, moral, relational, and intellectual standards enables people in a pluralistic world to overcome total relativism and have more than mere opinions, fleeting images, or passing models of thought. Granted that God has implanted within us moral, factual and logical values, people everywhere can live, learn, and relate with increasingly well-informed, correctable opinions for which they are accountable to one another and God. On the basis of such non-negotiable absolutes as these we can account for the success of communication, time-consuming and difficult though it may be, across different presuppositions of diverse cultures, philosophies, and religions.

The God-given inner demands for personal integrity and intellectual honesty provide the bases on which Marvin K. Mayers can expect cross-cultural communicators to begin by developing a trust bond in mutual respect. At the end of each of the fine chapters in *Christianity Confronts Culture*, Mayers provides helpful biblical illustrations of mutual respect and personal trust.²⁶ But the possibility of success is there for the missionaries in these biblical examples because of the moral and epistemological laws essential to meaningful human relationships with God and one another.

How is it that people from cultures all over the world at the United Nations have the potential to develop in respecting one another's rights? Demanding justice? Caring about others? Conforming to reality? Representing states of affairs faithfully (without self-contradiction)? Capacities for the eternal are in their hearts! God has created the inner person with these moral and noetic values in his image.

Summing up, general revelation provides the most adequate explanation of values essential to meaningful human relationships and communication. Like the source of this revelation to all, all effective communicators should be pro-life in the broadest sense. All need justice, mercy, grace and love, knowledge of given data, and logical consistency in reference to their lives.²⁷

General revelation explains the dependence, obligation, and guilt of all people and cultures. By making clear our sinful disrespect of others, injustices to others, lack of love for others, misrepresentation of our neighbours and inconsistencies, general revelation points up our need. Like Moses' outward expression of God's law, this inner expression prepares us for the missionary who comes with the salvation of Christ. The *telos* of the law in either case is Christ.

III. DOES GENERAL REVELATION SUPPLY 'REDEMPTIVE ANALOGIES?'

With all the values of general revelation for theism and moral norms, we have found no evidence in it of God's plan of redemption through the incarnate Logos or his sacrificial death and resurrection. General revelation prepares people for the good news of special

²⁵ 25. Harold Netland, 'Exclusivism, Tolerance and Truth', *Missiology* 15:2 (April 1987), pp. 77-95.

²⁶ 26. Marvin K. Mayers, *Christianity Confronts Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, Revised, 1987), pp. 5-73.

²⁷ 27. Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 1:82-90.

revelation. Can we find in nature and history analogies of the Messiah's redemption? Don Richardson has popularized the view that general revelation provides 'redemptive analogies'. As he says, instances from ordinary history may serve as 'eye-openers' for some aspects of redemptive revelation when people first hear the gospel of Christ illumined by the special calling of the Holy Spirit. Analogies from history do not communicate the gospel before it comes via special revelation. Neither biblical nor experiential evidence indicates that general revelation redeems, regenerates, or reconciles to God. The people missionaries have found already prepared to receive Christ, do in fact receive him and mark their salvation from the time of their commitment to Christ. Cornelius was redeemed when he received the gospel.

Paul's approach to the Athenians utilizes points of contact from Stoic thought for theism but not for the gospel of Christ. Paul quotes a Stoic poet when he affirms our common Creator of all humans, but not when he reports the resurrection of the crucified Christ. The Lord of all is, of course, the Lord of the plague and the unknown God the Athenians should have sought. An element of truth is found in the Stoic pantheistic writer, that God is immanent and actively sustaining life on earth. But the Stoic poet is not therefore a sinner who, as Don Richardson said, 'reached out and found' God redemptively.²⁸ Rather, Paul commanded all everywhere to repent for not worshipping and serving God more than the creation.

General revelation logically and *temporally precedes special* revelation, as Don Richardson agrees. But Richardson's designation of general revelation as 'the *Melchizedek* factor' prior to Abraham confuses general and special revelation. Melchizedek, Richardson says, stands as 'a figurehead or type of God's general revelation to mankind'.²⁹ To follow Richardson and most critics in taking Melchizedek as a Canaanite priest, Bruce Waltke argues, 'presupposes that Scripture is deceptive and that man's historical reconstructions are more trustworthy than the inspired Word of God'.³⁰

Melchizedek, 'like the Son of God', had no pedigree recorded in Scripture ([Heb. 7:3](#)). Most likely he is a human specially called prior to the Abrahamic covenant and so is a type of Jesus Christ. Since the Messiah is the supreme instance of special revelation, it seems out of character to take him as a type of general revelation. The author of Hebrews demonstrates that he is a type of Christ, for both are a king of righteousness, and of peace, and both are without descent and abide as priests continually ([Heb. 7:1-3](#)). The fact that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham as indicated by his receiving Abraham's tithes, also indicates that he had more than general revelation (vv. [4-10](#)). Apart from Melchizedek, Richardson could speak of the general revelation factor preceding special revelation.

Richardson has well pointed out that in any culture we need to distinguish the intermingled factors of good and evil. We need to respond to elements of revealed truth about God and about morality already there and reject the evil factors resulting from rebellion against it, such as Richardson's occult or Sodom factor.³¹

Also in agreement with Richardson against some of his critics, we need not jump to the conclusion that general revelation in any way threatens the uniqueness of the Bible as

²⁸ 28. Don Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1981), pp. 22-23.

²⁹ 29. Ibid., p. 31.

³⁰ 30. Bruce Waltke, 'Melchizedek', *ZPEB* 4:177.

³¹ 31. Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, p. 33.

God's only inspired, written revelation.³² Beliefs in folk religions paralleling those in Scripture need not be discredited as distortions or Satanic counterfeits in so far as they portray the content of theism and morality. Any non-Christian parallels to the redemptive plans of God, however may be traced to some influence of the Bible or people who have accepted its special revelation.

In agreement with Richardson, furthermore, the misinterpretations of some missionaries (calling Jesus the tenth incarnation of Vishnu!) need not keep us from finding some similarities that help in communicating the message of Christ once-for-all.

Richardson says that his references to redemptive analogies do not mean redeeming, i.e., that people could find relationship with God through their own lore apart from the gospel. By 'redemptive' he means, 'contributing to the redemption of a people, but not culminating it'.³³ So there may be 'God-fearers' in the midst of otherwise pagan people.³⁴ But Richardson's use of 'the Melchizedek factor' goes further than this and tends to confuse general revelation and illumination with the specially revealed redemptive message.

CONCLUSIONS

In cross-cultural communication of the faith Christians can capitalize upon the points of contact provided by general revelation, but should not consider the gaining of agreements on theism and morality sufficient for salvation. Having attained some metaphysical, moral, and epistemological common ground, Christians ought by all means and analogies to communicate the good news of the Logos who came to save those who in fact do not live up to the truth they know.

Both transcultural absolutes and their culture-specific applications have crucial contributions to make in both the East and the West. Some philosophers emphasize the objective validity of Christianity's transcultural truth claims. And some missiologists seem to be more concerned with the culture-specific adaptations or applications of Christian truth. The objective validity of Christianity's truth-claims is neither Western nor Eastern, but human. General revelation utilizes the capacities that all humans as divine image-bearers have for recognizing objectively valid truths about God's existence, power, and moral values and supplies the criteria for testing claims to special revelation.

Culturally specific missiology may tend to focus on communicative functions more than communicated content. Philosophers and theologians are generally more concerned with issues of communicated content than the process. Both contributions are needed for the sake of cross-cultural communication. We need not limit ourselves to dynamic equivalents, but on the above analysis of general revelation our cross-cultural communication can also achieve conceptual equivalents. More cross-disciplinary communication would help to develop a more adequate view of the objective validity of truth and value claims and a more effective communication of them to specific peoples. Yet, if this article has some validity, then one cannot follow postmodernism's denial of epistemological '*foundationalism*' without explicitly contradicting the Creator's universally revealed basis for cross-cultural communication and moral accountability.

The issues of missiological contextualization are not radically different from those of philosophical relativism. Philosophers have been struggling for years with the issues of

³² 32. Ibid., p. 52.

³³ 33. Ibid., p. 59.

³⁴ 34. Ibid., p. 107.

persuading others with radically different presuppositions, categories, and methods of reasoning. The history of philosophy is the history of attempts at communication across radically different world views and radically different values. As philosophers attempt to communicate across different *weltanschauungs* they can learn something from the history of missions that exhibits the attempts to communicate with people of different contextualized interpretations of experience in different cultural expressions of these world views. Philosophers and theologians do well to listen to missiologists and missiologists may profit from listening afresh to philosophically perceptive theologians.

Gordon R. Lewis, who has served as a member of the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission, is a Senior Professor of Theology and Philosophy at Denver Seminary, Colorado, USA. Author of several well known theological books, he has also been a Visiting Professor at Union Biblical Seminary, India and president of the Evangelical Theological Society, USA.

The Church, Culture and Ethnicity: A Theological View

Eshetu Abate

Keywords: Church, marks of the church, culture, ethnicity, transformation, reconciliation, negotiation, contextualisation, transparency.

The church is the body of Christ. Like her Lord she has two natures, the supernatural and the natural. She shares in the supernatural (the spiritual) because of her unique access and relationship to her heavenly Lord and the natural because she exists and operates in the natural world.

It is not new for the church of Jesus Christ to operate within cultures and ethnic groups. It has done this from the very inception of the church. In fact the founder of the church, our Lord Jesus Christ, did his mission within a certain culture and ethnic group. His great commission was 'to disciple all nations (all ethnic groups), baptizing them in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. . . .' The apostles obeying the Commission of our Lord went with the gospel to all parts of the known world of that time, thus reaching all ethnic and cultural groups.

This means that the church today is not starting from scratch. We, as the church, have models to follow, our Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles, in our dealings with culture and ethnicity. Besides, his promise in the great commission to be with his church to 'the very end of the age' assures his continued guidance throughout her ministry on this earth. Thus the church, guided by his Word and Spirit, can get directions on how to deal with different cultures and ethnic groups. Nevertheless, in the history of missions it has not been as easy to put this into practice as it should be.

Before we look at some theological models for the church's interaction with culture and ethnicity, let us see briefly what characteristics the church, culture and an ethnic group have.