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Communication & Faith

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INTRODUCTION

At the onset, I would like to disclaim the idea that this paper represents "an attempt to integrate my Christian faith with my academic discipline or pedagogy." The word "integrate" means to bring separate parts together to form a whole." My personal universe of constructs is part and parcel with my faith, or conversely, my faith develops and flows into the contours of my intellectual quest. Neither my faith nor my philosophy of communication are static; rather they are always in the process of development, but always developing together as a whole. There is neither more nor less unity or discontinuity between my faith and discipline than there exists within the discipline itself or within my faith itself.

Furthermore, I immediately reject the notion that my faith and knowledge as a whole is absolute in any sense. In terms of faith, Richard Wentz suggests:

If God is absolute, there can be no other absolutes, including my conception of God ("the map is not the territory"). If my conception becomes absolute, it becomes a false god, and does bad things that false gods do.1

If conceptions of faith are not absolute, neither are conceptions of "reality," a realm which Ernesto Grassi characterizes by such terms as "contradiction, paradox, silence, and hiddenness."2

Assuming such an epistemological stance, I have found that intellectual/spiritual growth entails the uncovering of more questions than answers. Furthermore, as answers always remain tentative, questions always remain persistent. Therefore, in this
paper I will seek to explore and offer tentative approaches to three areas of communication concerns: language, interpersonal relations, and rhetoric. Hopefully a future paper will extend this examination to include social institutions, media, and culture.

One final note before proceeding to the various issues; while borrowing ideas from various writers, I believe that I have managed in some way to attain a goal once articulated by Foucault, "to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known." Following a "nothing ventured, nothing gained" attitude, I have become quite eclectic in my approach as I attempt to assemble a collage of themes and ideas that seems to make sense to me. I am somewhat assured in this endeavor when I recall the methodological apologetic of Jurgen Habermas:

Even when I quote a good deal and take over other terminologies I am clearly aware that my use of them often has little to do with the authors' original meaning.... I take over other theories. Why not? One should accept others according to their strengths and then see how one can go from there."

"Going from there" is also accomplished through the deconstructive techniques of allusion and metaphor, for which I seem to have a natural affinity.

ISSUE OF LANGUAGE

Perhaps it would be interesting to begin with an ancient quotation which appears most apropos to the present endeavor: "If those who are excellent find no preference, the people will cease to contend for promotion." What does this quotation mean? Does meaning reside in the writer, Lao Tzu, long deceased and most likely fictional anyway? In the translator (most translations of the Tao Te Ching vary so greatly as to virtually constitute different books)? Does it reside primarily in the context of this paper as a vehicle for my own "promotion"? Does it reside in the reader, who may be more or less familiar with either the Tao Te Ching or the promotion process at Messiah college? Does it reside in the social interaction that compels one to read this paper and that generates the language in which the quotation was written or translated? Or does meaning reside in the structure of language itself as manifest by this text and adjacent texts? These questions concerning the site of meaning reflect variations of three main currents of contemporary language theory: cognitivist, interactionist, and structuralist."

For the Christian, these various orientations raise some interesting possibilities revolving around the question, "How do God and man communicate and where is meaning?" Consider for a moment the general semiotics position that "the meaning of words is not within the words, but within the individual." In terms of revelation of Scripture, then, meaning was in the mind of the writer and is in the mind of the reader but does not reside in the Bible itself. For a doctrine of Scriptural authority to operate under such a framework would require a strong doctrine of illumination as well as revelation, perhaps in the charismatic vein.

Or consider the major premise of symbolic interactionism that "meaning is created through and sustained by interaction in the social group." Under this framework every Christian group (any
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group) could be expected to develop their own meanings for the Christological event and its record. For a doctrine of authority to operate under this framework would require a strong doctrine of the Holy Spirit in mediating the interaction of the community of believers.

And finally, consider the premises of post-structural deconstructionism. First, concerning "truth": "... where there are no sentences there is no truth, ... sentences are elements of human languages, and ... human languages are human creations." Jean-Francois Lyotard goes on to suggest that the same kind of relativity is the essence of the post-modern age by asserting that consensus is denied when we are presented with the unrepresentable. This lack of consensus is echoed by Littlejohn when he states that the hallmark of post-modernism is pluralism. Perhaps the element which most relativizes "reality" is not just the idea that all perception is relative to language (or symbolic representation), but also that metaphor is the ground of language. Grassi’s preoccupation with ingenuism is also reflected by Derrida’s proclamation, "Metaphor then is what is proper to man. And more properly each man’s according to the measure of genius--of nature--that dominates in him." All meaning, then, including religious meaning, according to post-modern language scholars is relative to human interaction as interpreted through individualized metaphor. Many Christians and traditionalists seem to find this outlook disturbing. Derrida, in particular, has been labelled "negative, indeterminate, counterpro-

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ductive, antihumanist, even nihilistic." However, for me it is a relief that the idolatry of absolute "reality" and language has been lifted. Deconstructionism does not rest in on faith but rather opens up new possibilities for the meaningful exercise of that faith (indeed the emphasis of praxis in the work of Habermas is a testament to the practical creativity of such an approach).

Contemporary philosopher Gregory Desilet observes:

In its balanced approach, deconstruction does not rest upon disinterestedness but instead derives from a broader order of interests. It shows that neither individual nor collective values need be sacrificed in the use of language or in the pursuit of human fulfillment. It seems to me that God has not uttered the final word, nor will he as long as man is in his present earthly state; for when the final word is uttered, the conversation stops. God in his communion with man has instituted what Gadamer refers to as "true conversation" and what Kenneth Burke characterizes as an "unending conversation."

God is an absolute God, but at the same time he has set limits on himself in his dealing with man. These self-imposed limits are epitomized by the incarnation and, I believe, extend through the use of human language, both in terms of Christ’s own words and in terms of Scripture generally. No apostle or prophet ever claimed complete knowledge of God or his ways; in fact, much Scripture indicates just the contrary (Isaiah 40:13, Rom. 11:33-34, I Cor. 13:12). Moreover, the God of Israel is portrayed as one who engages with man on equal terms, listens openly to man and can even be persuaded to change his mind (Genesis 18:23-33; 32:22-32, Psalms
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6:9; 22:24, Jonah 3:9-10). Human language, like all human endeavor, is inexact, incomplete, and fraught with ambiguity. It is meta-metaphor. But as Kenneth Burke points out, it is this very "division," "dissociation," and "alienation" which serves as a motive to bring us together. In terms of deconstruction, it is absence which contributes to linguistic presence.

And so, according to Kenneth Burke, Erving Goffman and Ernest Borssmann, we act out together in language the drama of human life and reality, each actor reading (at times adlibbing) different lines of the same play. But the play's the thing! And lo and behold, who should appear on stage as an actor but God himself, in the supporting role of Jesus of Nazareth. And he walks with us and he talks with us.

So once we grasp the nature of the conversation that God has initiated with us, we are ready to begin that conversation with others, in terms of our everyday relationships.

ISSUES OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

The study of relational communication in the last fifty years seems to have gone through at least three stages: social integration, individual integration, and situational integration. Each stage appears to have been in some way compensatory for the excesses of the previous stage, with social integration viewed as a reaction to the communication abuses and excesses of the Nazi regime of the 1930s and 40s.

Having done my graduate work during the "hippie era," it is quite natural that I most closely identify the individual integrat-
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But maybe the individual integrationists have gotten a "bum rap." Cisnera and Anderson have recently attempted to rescue the reputation of Rogers by pointing out that his theory and praxis was not in fact focused on the self but rather on the other and the relationship. At any rate, the current emphasis in the study of interpersonal relations is away from self-disclosure and instead focuses on "caring." The caring relation is characterized by an "appropriate management of the dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness" producing a "delicate balance of restraint and candor." This balancing, however, is not contrived or mechanical but rather holistic and reflexive, emerging naturally from a spirit of sensitivity and caring on the part of the interactors.

Again, this seems to be what Christ was about. God has established a mutual two-way relationship with man through Christ. Assuming that Christ was fully "self-actualized," he did not achieve this at the expense of others. Usually when we overstep or understep the balance between candor and restraint, it is because we are focusing on self rather than other. Thus our caring is corrupted by self-interest in a most profound way. Christ, of course, was tempted to act out of self-interest (Luke 4:1-13), but he resisted. Perhaps the tragedy of our relational lives is tied to our failure to resist the apparent rewards of self-interest. Yet, those rewards always turn out so empty when we find we have no one to share them with. Christ’s immediate reward was the cross, but his real reward was a genuine relationship with each of us; and of course, we can share in the reward as we share in true conversation. It is ironic, yet understandable, that those who envision an authoritarian God who gives orders, as opposed to a caring friend who engages in “I-thou” discourse are precisely those who turn around and attempt to manipulate God and other people in the name of God. Now it might be protested at this point that God is friends only with those who obey his commands (John 15:14), but God is a friend of all. It is we who can choose to be or not be friends of God. It is God who took the initiative in the relationship (John 15:16). In terms of the "command," we need to look at the nature of Christ’s commandments before we assign to Christ the role of an authoritarian god. When Jesus was directly asked this very question by the Pharisees, he replied:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matt. 22:37-40 NIV)

Commanded to love! What is Jesus saying here? Love or else? Love or else I’ll stop loving you? Love or else I will disown you? Love or else I’ll punish you forever? Can this be the foundation for a relationship of trust and care? Unfortunately, some parents have attempted to enact just such an interpersonal strategy with their children only to reap disastrous results. Often children stop loving their parents (or vice-versa), but what is truly redemptive is when the parents continue to love the children. Even the proponents of "tough love," still maintain that the basic motivation for their action is love and caring.
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To return briefly to a theme of the previous section of this paper, perhaps the root of the problem lies in language as a means of "creating objects" (Heide) which then are subject to egocentric manipulation ("I-it" relationships of Buber). Perhaps this is why the God of the Hebrews resisted being named (Exodus 3:13-14). Furthermore, as we attempt to manipulate God, we manipulate our fellow man as well--the reverse of the great commandments--as Erich From has succinctly stated:

From the standpoint of monotheism carried through to its logical consequences there can be no argument about the nature of God; no man can presume to have any knowledge of God which permits him to criticize or condemn his fellow men or to claim that his own idea of God is the only right one. The religious intolerance so characteristic of Western religions, which springs from such claims and, psychologically speaking, stems from lack of faith or lack of love, has had a devastating effect on religious development. It has led to a new form of idolatry. An image of God, not in wood and stone but in words, is erected so that people worship at this shrine.22

What is called for then in terms of genuine, ethical interpersonal communication with both God and our fellow man is what Deetz refers to as "an act of deconstruction" whereby "thouness suggests that any possible label or conception of both self and other is capable of being questioned."23 And since experience is mutually developed through symbolic dialogue, "every communicative act should have as its ethical condition the attempt to keep the conversation ... going."24 To fail to meet such a condition is to halt experience and enter the realm of death. Or to view the situation positively, to enter into unending experience-making with God is eternal life.

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ISSUES OF RHETORIC

The most basic perennial issue of rhetoric is one of definition. The classic definition of rhetoric is that of Aristotle: "the faculty of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion."25 However, "little agreement currently exists on what distinguishes rhetoric as an object of study and discourse."26 Some scholars such as Stephen Toulmin and Chaim Perelman would narrow Aristotle's definition to focus exclusively on verbal argumentative discourse.27 Others such as Ernesto Grassi, Kenneth Burke, and Michel Foucault would broaden Aristotle's definition.28 For the purposes of this section of the paper, I will consider rhetoric from the broader perspective of symbolic (verbal/nonverbal) influence (direct/indirect).

Of particular interest to me from the vantage point of my Christian faith are Perelman's concept of "universal audience," Foucault's concept of "discursive formation," Grassi's concept of "folly," and finally Chung-Ying Cheng's observations regarding Tocque conceptual pluralism and creativity.

As I have become more and more interested in Asian culture and philosophy, I have come to realize that there is somehow an essential mismatch between the values and perspectives of these traditional societies and the message(s) of Christianity. This was broadly understood by the Tokugawa rulers of Japan as they set about to eradicate Christianity in the beginning of the 17th century. The mismatch is still evident in Japan today in that Christians (of all varieties) make up just over one per cent of the
entire population. I see a major part of the problem as a lack of vision on the part of the church regarding its audience.

Belgian Philosopher Chaim Perelman, following in the steps of Aristotle, devotes a great deal of attention to audiences of a communication event. Of particular importance here, is his concept of "universal audience." A "universal audience" consists of "an infinite variety of particular audiences"; in fact, "it may be all of humanity, or at least all those who are competent and reasonable." Further elaborating, Perelman states:

Philosophers always claim to be addressing such an audience, not because they hope to obtain the effective consent of all men—they know very well that only a small minority will ever read their works—but because they think that all who understand the reasons they give will have to accept their conclusions. The agreement of a universal audience is thus a matter, not of fact, but of right.

Everyone constitutes the universal audience from what he knows of his fellow men, in such a way as to transcend the few oppositions he is aware of. Each individual, each culture, has thus its own conception of the universal audience. The study of these variations would be very instructive, as we would learn from it what men, at different times in history, have regarded as real, true, and objectively valid.

If argumentation addressed to the universal audience and calculated to convince does not convince everybody, one can always resort to disqualifying the recalcitrant by classifying him as stupid or abnormal. This approach, common among thinkers in the Middle Ages, is also used by some modern writers. There can only be adherence to this idea of excluding individuals from the human community if the number and intellectual value of those banned are not so high as to make such a procedure ridiculous.

I believe that the Gospel is addressed to a universal audience; that is, God’s revelation of his love through the teachings and acts of his Son is addressed to all men, and is furthermore comprehensible to all men using any language and any world view (whether seen as biologically generated, socio-linguistically generated, or environmentally generated). I am afraid that the Western church, for the most part, has failed to grasp this truth. It has lashed Christianity to both Indo-European language (most notably Latin) and Judeo-Greek philosophy and defined its "universal audience" as those who can operate intellectually in such modes. For almost two thousand years, Asians, native Americans, Africans and other "abnormal" people were simply "disqualified." Only those who could and would reorient themselves to Western thought modes were included. Of course many did reorient themselves, often in the context of political and economic exigencies. Suddenly, with the rise of Islam (currently the world’s fastest growing religion), the economic muscle flexing of Japan, and the specter of substantial influence of China and India, to say nothing of Malaysia, the church is faced with the specter of its "disqualifying procedure" as appearing "ridiculous. "What is needed is a complete reconsideration of who constitutes the universal audience of the Gospel and what in the current Christian message is truly God’s universal message and what is merely cultural/linguistic myopia or excess baggage. Concurrently, a far greater appreciation and tolerance for views and baggage outside of the Western tradition needs to be developed. (Notice I am not saying that we have to destroy our "cultural baggage" any more than we have to destroy the "baggage" of others, I am simply saying that we have to identify it for what it is and not impose it on others.)
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Unfortunately, the process is considerably difficult because our culture is tied to our faith in idolotrous ways, as suggested in the beginning of this paper. Yet, smashing the idols is a task the church has put off for generations; of course new idols will emerge, but those can be destroyed later. Right now we have to concentrate on desanctifying some of the great monoliths of Western culture, and perhaps the dynamite of socio-linguistic relativism and deconstructionism will do the job.

One way to get at the great monoliths of Western culture, for we must identify them before we disassemble them, is by using Foucault's critical construct of "discursive formation." This term is closely related to the structuralist concept of "episteme," which is the "ground of thought that governs the language, perception, values, and practices of an age" or culture. The discursive formation creates, defines, and circumscribes knowledge. In other words, "only a particular kind of knowledge is allowed by particular discursive formations, and nothing else receives support in the discourse." Implicit rules govern such discourse, but these rules are "statement" governing epistemological rules, rather than "sentence" governing grammatical rules or "proposition" governing logical rules. So the discursive formation may be viewed as a sort of linguistic/epistemological cage or trap, whose bars are both natural habit and social censure or approbation. But how then do we get out of the trap? The easiest way is simply to let the trap deteriorate, which Foucault maintains is exactly what is happening in the current transition period between the modern formation built around the autonomous human being and the post-modern formation built around metaphoric language within the context of intelligent systems. If Foucault is right, the church really doesn't need to do anything; it will simply wake up one day and find itself in a new discursive formation. Unfortunately, if the church's past record is any indication, this is precisely what will occur. But I believe that the church and Christian scholars can be proactive instead of reactive. We can jump the cage as we see the bars rusting away, identify and denounce our idolatry, and open the channels of communication with other discursive formations. This is difficult for human beings to do, but I believe that it is possible to enter new worlds both linguistically and culturally if we are willing to lose our old comfortable identities (self-idols). This, in fact, may be closely tied to the idea of being willing to lose ourselves for the sake of Christ which leads to rebirth and everlasting life, either in terms of ever-evolving discursive formations mediated by the presence of Christ or some kind of ultimate discursive formation eschatologically established by God.

"Folly" is what is called for. "Folly," according to Grassi, involves the ability to perceive "the ironic dimension of a situation, where things can just as well be true in a sense opposite to what they are." Folly involves gross "misperception," not just mistake. We misperceive the very nature of things, and realizing this, "we are unable to take ourselves seriously, and thus we know we are human." This realization is important,
because as language-using, object-manipulating creatures we often confuse ourselves with gods (Genesis 3:5). The gulf between discursive formations is so broad (with perhaps some modification during times of transition) that it can only be breached by folly.

Of course, folly can be encouraged by environmental factors, such as living in another culture. But sometimes such environmental pressures force an individual deeper into her native formation. What is being called for, consequently, is a conscious attempt to bridge the gulf separating various discursive formations—a conscious attempt to embrace opposites and incongruities—a conscious enactment of folly as a vehicle of creative discovery. Perhaps some recent examples of those consciously practicing folly have been beatniks (hippies followed their discursive frontiers), Dadaists, and the early deconstructionists. At first viewed as anti-rationalists, nihilists, or intellectual anarchists, these pioneers in "fantasy" (etymologically derived from "light") spawned further movements and powerful metaphors which are now allowing us to view the world quite differently. If Foucault is correct, the presently emerging post-modern formation will constitute "a phenomenology to end all phenomenologies"; that is, through the epistemological analysis of "statements" embedded in discursive formations, all speech acts will be revealed as "conditions of existence." Within the context of such thought, the folly of following Christ, of denying self (existence), starts to take on new significance (1 Cor. 4:10).

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What is to be gained? Besides eternal life, which was earlier suggested, the present life is reinvigorated. Ever since I entered the evangelical community as a freshman at Wheaton College more than thirty years ago, I have heard those involved in the arts bemoan the dearth of creativity among Christians, "Why is there so little good Christian art? Why is so much of Christian writing poor to mediocre? Where are the prominent Christian painters, sculptors, composers, playwrights, filmmakers?" Furthermore, many Christians in the arts have sensed a generally hostile attitude toward art in the Christian community. Why? Some of the answers to this problem may be found in the observations of Chung-Ying Cheng as he discusses the presuppositions of Chinese philosophy and how they contrast with those of traditional Western philosophy.

One of the roots of Chinese philosophy is the tao, which is the true nature of things, but which cannot be communicated in any way; it can only be pointed to indirectly—through language, discipline, art, etc. Yet once the tao is grasped or experienced, the pointers are abandoned—their function has been fulfilled. This world view parallels deconstruction in that the pointers, language and other cultural symbolic systems, are seen as relative, utilitarian, and interchangeable with alternate systems. Moreover, an understanding of the relative nature of the pointers (discursive formations) is the key to the successful use of them:

... communication has to become creative in interpreting as well as in constituting. It should be able to create meaning where there is none and where things originate. Unless communication has constructed meaning and many points of view and can be approached in many ways, it will not become creative. To know and see many points
of view and approaches is to transcend them and to find
and create new ones."

If we Christians have been involved in the idolatry of a particular
discursive formation, it is natural, according to Cheng’s theory,
that we should suffer from creative constipation, for we have no
sources to create from and no space to create in.

So why not take the leap of faith? What may appear to some
as a leap away from faith is in reality only a leap away from a
discursive formation, and God is certainly much more than this.

ENDNOTES

1. Richard E. Wentz, Why Do People Do Bad Things in the Name or

2. Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, and Robert Trapp, Contemporary
Perspectives on Rhetoric (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland
Press, 1991), 146.

3. Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 213.

4. Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 245.

Group, 1983), 53.

6. Stephen W. Littlejohn, lecture at Hope College, Holland,

Communication Probes (Chicago: SRA, 1974), 40.

(Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1989), 95.

9. Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge
Univ. Press, 1989), 5.

10. Lyotard quoted by Bill Readings, Introducing Lyotard (London:

11. Littlejohn, Hope College lecture.


31. Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 216.

32. Foss, Foss and Trapp, 217.


37. This statement is made humorously because only a present imbued with the eternal is vital and meaningful.

38. Of course the major difference lies in the concept of the tao itself, which though not communicable can be grasp in some more profound way, often expressed in Buddhism as Nirvana or Satori.