

## **Cross-cultural Communication in Southeast Asia: A Biblical and Psychological Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

We are living in a time when communication across different cultures has become an inevitable element for a successful global movement. If we have to be part of the fulfillment of the prophecy about the Gospel to be preached all over the world (Matt 24:14; 28:19), a thorough understanding of cross-cultural communication becomes indispensable. As culture is dynamic, so is cross-cultural communication. Thus, it is important to consider the Biblical, psychological and research-based facts in designing an outreach that targets a certain cultural group. This article focuses on elements that are important to consider in forming an effective cross-cultural communication in a number of Southeast Asian countries where Buddhism plays an important role in the culture. It reviews cross-cultural encounters recorded in the Bible and explores their significance in this age. In addition, it suggests practical approaches based on psychological spectrums such as collectivism versus individualism, cognitive versus affective persuasion and medium of persuasion. It is vital to revise one's strategy according to the light and understanding we come across as this world changes every moment.

**Key words:** communication, cross-cultural, Bible

### **Cross-Cultural Communication in the Bible**

The Bible records several examples of cross-cultural communication in both the Old and New Testaments. There are several instances where God communicated with his children in a cultural context of the surrounding. When Moses ran away from Pharaoh, he had to leave Egypt and adapt the Midianites lifestyle. This is evident in the instruction God gave him when He revealed Himself through the burning bush. He told Moses to take off his shoes in accordance with the culture of the Midianites (Exod 3:1-5). The purpose was that Moses's experience might be credible for the Midianites. This practice of taking off one's shoes on a holy ground was practiced in different eastern cultures including Egyptian, with which Moses was familiar.<sup>1</sup> A similar experience is recorded when Joshua met God's angel. He was instructed to take off his shoes, which is according to the surrounding culture (Josh 5:15).

However, it is interesting to note the huge contrast in the way Aaron and Miriam, a brother and a sister of Moses, dealt with Moses's wife from Midian. His wife was a Cushite (The King James version calls her Ethiopian). She had a darker complexion than the Israelites. They felt that it was inappropriate for Moses to get a wife from another race or culture (Num 12: 1, NIV). In contrast, there was an effective communication between Moses and his father-in-law. It was his father-in-law who suggested to Moses a hierarchy of governance in dealing with issues that were arising amongst the Israelites. The suggestion was for Moses to appoint officials with different rank to handle cases according to their seriousness. The advice brought great relief to Moses who was weary of settling issues from morning to evening (Exod 18: 13-16). This experience shows that effective cross-cultural communication can be a means of exchanging a wealth of experience.

Another interesting record of cross-cultural communication in the Bible is that of Philip and the Ethiopian Treasurer who went to Jerusalem to worship God (Acts 8: 26-39). It didn't take much time for the Ethiopian treasurer and Philip to understand each other. This is because they had a common ground to understand each other despite the cultural difference. Both knew the same God and the Holy Spirit was working with them. This shows the importance of working on a common ground first in dealing with others of a different culture.

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1 Clarke, A. (1831). *Clarke's Commentary on the Bible*. Retrieved June 10, 2011, from Internet Sacred Text Archive: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/cmt/clarke/exo003.htm>

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For instance, vegetarianism would be a vantage ground to start working with Buddhists since they are in favor of it.

The apostle Paul emphasizes the importance of understanding and adapting the culture of the people to whom we want to minister. “When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I was with those who follow the Jewish law, I too lived under that law. Even though I am not subject to the law, I did this so I could bring to Christ those who are under the law” (1 Cor 9: 20, NLT). If the end time is to be preceded by the Gospel being preached to all nations (Matt 24: 14), it is imperative to understand cross-cultural communication. Our effort to understand cross-cultural communication has a prophetic back-up as John the Revelator underpinned it. “And he said unto me, Thou must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings” (Rev 10:11, KJV).

### **Systematic Culture-Based Communication**

The popular way of studying culture is to organize them on a continuum as individualistic and collectivist. Individualistic culture gives emphasis on independent thinking. On the other hand, a collectivist culture is characterized by group thinking.<sup>2</sup> In individualistic culture, members prioritize personal goals over societal goals whereas in a collectivist culture the societal interest has the primacy. It is also important to note that in the same culture individuals vary in the extent they adapt the individualistic or collectivist way of thinking.<sup>3</sup> Western culture is individualistic while Asian cultures are predominantly collectivist. Until a westerner attains biculturalism and adopts both, his or her communication in the eastern culture will be characterized by confusion and uncertainties. There will be misunderstandings due to failure to see others’ point of view in the sphere of communication.

In a collectivist society, a member always prioritizes group thinking rather than individual thinking. What counts more is what the group members in general think. Before accepting a new idea or adapting a new way of thinking, one would consider how others in his circle would react to it. Common interest is to be maintained at a cost of individual interest. It is a common thing to hear an Asian student say “My parents want me to... or “I like it but my friends....” Even when it comes to class projects most Asian students prefer a group work project to an individual one. Using group projects is in fact one of the most common method of teaching in this part of the world. Respect for parents, elders and authority is a measure of good citizenship. It is common to meet people who see religion as a family or community affair instead of a personal decision. This imposes a great difficulty in presenting ideas such as “Christ a personal savior...”, “Religion as a personal decision...” or “Individual accountability in the final judgment.” On the other hand, the group-oriented mentality can be a source of evangelistic motivation once a person is converted. Many converted Christians feel the burden of winning their family members and their community.

It is important to synchronize the evangelistic approach and the culture. For instance, presenting Christ as a “Savior of the World” may be easy to digest compared to presenting him as a “Personal Savior.” The spirit of prophecy supports the idea of starting on common ground. It is better to work on common grounds than trying to reconcile difference.<sup>4</sup> Most Asian religions do not have a problem with the existence of God (a supernatural power). The challenge is in acknowledging Christ as a God or conceptualizing the idea of God becoming human. Thus, it may be more effective to start with the concept of ‘God.’ Prayer and meditation are highly valued in Asian religions. Inviting Buddhist students for a prayer by itself is welcome; if not, acceptable or at least tolerable. The issue rather is on how to end the prayer. It may be wiser not to follow the commonly practiced way of a Christian prayer, which ends with “In Jesus’ name.” It may symbolize conversion into Christianity even though joining a prayer by itself may not be considered bending backwards. Remember that conversion for most is not supposed to be an individual decision. The person to whom one seeks to minister to needs time and space to consider the issues.

One interesting contrast between the eastern and western culture is the pattern of thinking. While the western culture favors the Socratic approach in which a student is encouraged to question and challenge elders and parents, the eastern culture favors Confucius’s philosophy that promotes respect for elders, practicality and walking the safe trodden path in the past.<sup>5</sup> This by itself presents its own challenge for evangelism. While it may be interesting and appealing to use a thought provocative approach for a student who was raised in

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2 Myers, D. G. (2010). *Social Psychology* (10th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

3 West, R., & Turner, L. (2007). *Communication Theory: Analysis and Application* (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

4 White, E. G. (1982). *Gospel Workers*. Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Publishing Co.

5 Shiraev, E. B., & Levy, D. A. (2010). *Cross-Cultural Psychology* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

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an educational system that favors the Socratic approach, it may be considered as being a non-conformist in a system that follows Confucius's philosophy.

Another factor to consider is the mode or means of persuasion. There are two approaches in cognitive psychology: cognitive and affective. Cognitive means of persuasion leads to a belief that is based on facts and concrete information while affective means of persuasion leads to beliefs that are formed based on the appeal to our emotions and senses. For instance, a person may be convinced to choose Colgate toothpaste because he saw an advertisement that tells of the toothpaste's effectiveness in fighting tooth decay. In this case, the belief has cognitive bases. Another person may choose the same brand of toothpaste because of its pleasant smell. In this case, it is a belief based on affective means of persuasion. There have been experiments conducted in this area to determine and evaluate the strength of cognitive and affective ways of persuasion. The findings showed that a belief formed by affective means is likely to be changed through affective means of persuasion and belief formed through a cognitive means is easier to challenge through cognitive means of persuasion. Beliefs formed through affective means are resistant to change through a cognitive means and the vice versa.<sup>6</sup>

Based on the above light, we can examine the belief formation of students from Asian religions. Most of them do not have deep understanding of the tenets of their religion. They follow that religion simply because their parents have been following it. There is more of an emotional attachment to the religion than cognitive reasoning. Their religion is based on a belief that is formed through affective means rather than cognitive. Presenting highly intellectual cognitive evidences to someone who follows a certain religion because of affective (emotional) reasons may not be effective. Even though the person may admit the strength of your rational argument, he/she may still be reluctant to change to avoid the emotional gap the change will create. What intensifies the situation is the close family tie in Asia. In such cases the best approach would be using affective means. Some examples of affective approaches would be friendship evangelism, warm church fellowship, small-group activities and community outreach programs. However, this should not shun the importance of a cognitive (rational) approach. In fact the other finding of the above mention research was that beliefs formed through cognitive means are more resistant to change than those formed through affective means. That is why the Bible instructs parents to train children while they are young. "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Prov 22:6, NIV).

Moses actually described it in a specific manner when he presented the instructions of the Lord to the Israelites. "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (Deut 6: 6-8, NIV). Even though we will be able to convince someone using the affective means, he may go back to his old way of thinking because of another affective reason. This can be prevented by a follow up studies of the Bible that will strengthen his foundation on a cognitive pillar.

Another factor to consider is the means of presenting highly intellectual messages. A good example of a highly intellectual message would be the study of Daniel and Revelation. Understanding these prophecies requires historical background knowledge, analytical ability, inferencing ability and a certain level of mathematical aptness in computing the prophetic days and years. In contrast, understanding the gospel books is easier since they do not create much of a cognitive load. Cognitive load refers to the amount of resource a person uses in order to process a certain cognitive task. A cognitive task may be a low-load task or a high-load task depending upon the amount of cognitive resource it is required to process.<sup>7</sup> In the above case, the study of Daniel and Revelation would be a high-load task and the stories of the Gospel would be low-load task.

We process a certain amount of information at a given time using our short-term memory. A short-term memory is where information is processed and long-term memory is where information is organized and stored. Human short-term memory has a limited capacity though our long-term memory can store a limitless amount of information. Short-term memory can only process a range of  $7 \pm 2$  pieces of information at a time.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Brunning, R. H., Schraw, G., Norby, M., & Ronning, R. R. (2004). *Cognitive Psychology and Instruction* (4th ed.). New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.; Aronson, E., Wilson, T. D., & Akert, R. M. (2004). *Social Psychology* (5th ed.). New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.

7 Goldstein, E. B. (2011). *Cognitive Psychology* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth; Reed, S. K. (2000). *Cognition* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

8 Chance, P. (2009). *Learning and Behavior: Active Learning Edition* (6th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth; Santrock, J. W. (2003). *Psychology* (7th ed.). Singapore: McGraw-Hill.

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One way to maximize the efficiency of our working memory (short-term memory) is by controlling how the information is presented.<sup>9</sup>

Psychology tells us that the type of media we use affects the persuasive power of the message. The different types of media are: live (face-to-face), videotaped, audiotaped and written. Easy-to-understand messages are more persuasive when they are videotaped. On the other hand, difficult messages are better understood and remembered when they are presented in a written form. This is because the reader will try to understand the message at his/her own speed. When a medium such as TV is used, the subject may not be able to keep up with the pace of the presentation aside from being distracted by peripheral cues such as the attractiveness of the presenter.<sup>10</sup> What makes this fact significant is that whether individuals are into reading (especially difficult-to-understand messages) varies from culture to culture. Southeast Asians students in general do not take personal reading as a hobby. This is reflected in the reduced desire to engage in a personal reading such as Sabbath school lesson study amongst church members particularly in this part of the world. This poses a threat to literature evangelism. It is however noticeable that regardless of the socio-economic status, most homes have TVs. There is a more promising ground for effective televangelism provided that the messages are easy-to-understand.

In conclusion, effective communication is more than having an authentic and powerful message. It is important to understand the role of culture in the Bible. Being able to understand the cultural setting is vital for effective communication. In a collectivist society such as Southeast Asia, cultural understanding is a key for successful communication. One should examine through what means the person whom he wants to communicate with has formed his belief. Depending upon whether it was through cognitive or affective means, one needs to adjust his or her approach. It is also important to use medium of communication in presenting messages according to their level of difficulty to understand. Since culture is dynamic, the strategies to be used should be revised. As culture is flexible in its nature, so should the strategies of effective communication be. A person who works in a culture that is different from his own needs to remember the basic rule of helping others. "If something you try doesn't work, do not try more of the same. Try something different!"<sup>11</sup>

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9 Brunning *et al.*, *Idem*.

10 Myers, *Idem*.

11 Ivey, A. E., Ivey, M. B., & Zalaquett, C. P. (2010). *Intentional Interviewing and Counseling* (7th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, p. 21.