

# Communication ethics and peace

Clifford G. Christians

*'Communication is peace' is the dramatic proposal for WACC's mission today. The church used 'to proclaim the ascendancy of the Christian faith over all other religions';... 'in a pluralistic world of different cultures and beliefs' its mission now is 'non-violence, tolerance... peace' (Lee, 2007: 50-51). Impeccable rhetoric. For those of us who know communication ethics, what does it mean? Is it something permanent or a passing fancy?*

Michael Traber, editor of *Media Development* (1977-95), joins me in spirit to think ethically about these preoccupations. Mike lived and worked in Africa, India, Switzerland, and London, but traveled the globe. What he did geographically in his winsome lifetime, we'll do together mentally with peace. We both resonated on universals in ethics: unless a principle reverberates across cultures, north and south, indigenous world through industrial—it is not valid ethics. Unless moral claims are rooted in our common humanity, they are sectarian demands.

So we started always with the universally human rather than the individual decision-maker, and for the task at hand we also roamed the world before gathering around the peace table at home.

## **Research on four continents**

There are a number of important issues in communication ethics today, but certainly a central problem is universals. For any credibility at all, our ethics must be global in scope, transnational – multicultural rather than narrowly Western, male-biased, and parochial. In order to build a model based on universal human solidarity, Michael Traber and I studied ethical foundations in 13 countries on four continents. Work had already been done comparing codes of media ethics around the world.

Codes are distillations of the best thinking practitioners can do together on their standards and ideals. Comparing them country-by-country for common themes is one way to discover cross-cultural agreements. But our strategy was different. We sought out philosophers, religious thinkers, cultural leaders, and social theorists instead of media professionals. Our question for them was their starting point. What is the first principle that is non-negotiable among your people group, in your religion or culture? What is bedrock for you, the presupposition from which you begin?

Aristotle taught us that there must be an unmoved mover. There can't be infinite regression or knowledge is indeterminate. One cannot act or think without taking something as given. We initiate any inquiry with presuppositions because we must start somewhere, not because they have been demonstrated to be unequivocally true. This means we have to defend our starting point in the public arena. First principles are not pure truth in isolation but a belief about what's best for the world. We have a responsibility to make public the course we favour and demonstrate how it advances the common good.

Around the question of basic presuppositions we organized workshops, conferences, and consultations in 13 countries on 4 continents—Slovenia, Manila, São Paulo, Amman Jordan, Nairobi, Seoul, Moscow, Mexico City, Rome, Barcelona, Paris, Stockholm, Edinburgh, London, and the U.S.A. We heard 50 major papers on 'first principles' in six languages—German, Russian, Spanish, French, Arabic and English. Out of those papers and from others solicited, we chose 16 chapters for a book (*Communication Ethics and Universal Values*) ranging from general theories to communication ethics in Latin America, Africa, Japan, Taiwan, Poland, Brazil and South Africa. We included chapters on Arab-Islamic ethics, Judeo Christian ethics, Hinduism, and Native American mythology.

The book is a limited sample obviously, and ideally the question about basic presuppositions should be asked of all 6,000 languages in the world and 20,000 people groups. But our research is explicitly international and cross-cultural, and points us in the right direction.

### **Sacredness of life**

The basic commitment in all the groups we studied is the sacredness of life. The deepest rationale for human action is reverence for life on earth. Life has purpose. Within the natural world is a moral claim on us for its own sake and in its own right. The sacredness of life is a pre-theoretical given that makes the moral order possible.

Our duty to preserve life is similar in kind to parents' obligation to their offspring. When new life appears, parents do not debate their relationship to it as though they are calculating the options with neutral protoplasm. Parents' duty to their children is an imperative that is timeless and nonnegotiable. Nurturing life has a taken for granted character outside subjective preference. From the sacredness of life perspective, the biological world provides a rich arena for seeing the permanent and universal value of human life in all its brilliant diversity.

The veneration of human life is an underlying norm similar in kind to the proto- Germanic language, a linguistic predecessor underlying the Germanic languages as we know them in history. Reverence for life on earth establishes a level playing floor for cross-cultural collaboration

on ethical foundations. It represents a universalism from the ground up. Various societies articulate this first principle in different terms and illustrate it locally, but every culture can bring to the table this fundamental value for ordering our lives together. In this sense, universal solidarity is the basic principle of ethics and the normative core of all human communication.

For those who know Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), the veneration of life is the same idea as his overarching belief about the world. This multi-gifted man was a musician, physician, philosopher and theologian, but perhaps most famously he founded the Lambaréné Hospital in Gabone, Africa. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953 for his *Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben* which he described in his autobiography (*Out of My Life and Thought*) as his greatest single contribution to human civilization. For him, respect for every kind of life had to be restored or ethical principles would continue to decay.

Our research did not begin with Schweitzer's conclusion and his name was not mentioned during our studies in the 13 countries or in the 50 papers that all led to the same root idea regarding reverence for life. It strengthens our conclusion, however. When the same idea appears in different circumstances unconnected to each other, they often indicate that something true about the nature of the universe has been discovered.

And that's how we view this confirmation. It helps to demonstrate at least one primordial generality underlying ethics. Human responsibility regarding natural existence contributes the possibility of intrinsic imperatives to moral philosophy. And its universal scope enables us to avoid the divisiveness of appeals to individual interests, cultural practices, and national prerogatives.

The primal sacredness of life is a norm that binds humans into a common oneness. And in our systematic reflection on this primordial generality, we recognize that it entails such basic ethical principles as human dignity, truth, and nonviolence. Reverence for life is deep in our human existence. We know it to be true in our conscience and spirit. It is there in our being as something we know instinctively, before we develop theories and explanations based on it. As we use our minds to describe it and discuss it and write about it, we speak of ethical principles based on it. And in our study, on the level of specific principles, the terms human dignity, truth, and nonviolence were most prominent. And as nonviolence enters the picture in our global travels, we begin heading home to Philip Lee's arena, where the 'true mission of faith-based organizations and, therefore, communication, is peace' (Lee, 2007: 51).

## **Human dignity**

Rooted in the sacredness of life, respect for another person's dignity is one ethical principle on which various cultures rest. Different traditions and societies affirm human dignity in a variety of

ways, but together they insist that all human beings have sacred status without exception. Native American discourse is steeped in reverence for life, an interconnectedness among all living forms so that we live in solidarity with others as equal constituents in the web of life.

In communalistic African societies, *likute* is loyalty to the community's reputation, that is, to tribal honour. In Latin America, insistence on cultural identity is an affirmation of the unique worth of human beings. In Islam, every person has the right to honour and a good reputation. In Confucius, respect for authority is necessary because our authorities are human beings of dignity. In Judeo-Christian monotheism, people are sacred, made in the image of God. Humans are a unique species, requiring within itself respect for its members as a whole.

From this perspective, one understands the ongoing vitality of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued by the United Nations General Assembly in 1949. As the Preamble puts it, 'Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world' (Universal Declaration, 1988). Every child, woman, and man has sacred status, with no exceptions for religion, class, gender, age, or ethnicity. This common sacredness of all human beings regardless of merit or achievement is the shared commitment out of which we begin to generate notions of a just society.

## Truth

Truth is another basic principle rooted in the sacredness of life. There is cross-cultural agreement that for human existence to flourish, a fundamental level of truthfulness is essential. The most fundamental norm of Arab Islamic communication is truthfulness. Truth is one of the three highest values in the context of the Latin American experience of communication. In Hinduism, truth is the highest *dharma* and the source of all other virtues. Among the Shuswap of Canada, truth as genuineness and authenticity is central to its indigenous culture.

Living with others is inconceivable if we cannot tacitly assume that people are speaking truthfully. Lying, in fact, is so unnatural that machines can measure bodily reactions against it. When we deceive and have to justify it, we are recognizing the truth imperative in advance. Even those who refuse to accept it as an ethical principle, in their argument against it, they are indirectly accepting it as the standard against which they defend their deviations from it. Since language is the means we use for social formation, human existence is impossible without an over-riding commitment to truthful communication.

In an intellectual trajectory to Aristotle, the positive worth of truth-telling has been generally accepted at face value, with deception an enemy of the human order: 'Falsehood is itself mean

and culpable, and truth noble and full of praise' (*Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 4, ch. 7). In Sissela Bok's book, *Lying*, deception is as destructive and morally outrageous as physical assault. Though often only a rhetorical flourish, media codes of ethics typically appeal to truth as the cornerstone of social communication; in their own way they reflect its intrinsic value.

As the primary agent of information in the complicated world where we live, the public media have no choice but to honour this norm as obligatory to their mission and rationale. As the media become increasingly digital in their technology, the question about truth remains central as always—can online journalism, blogging, Myspace, websites, and iPods deliver facts or fiction? Truthfulness, in other words, is not simply a problem of cognition per se; it is integral to human consciousness and social formation.

## Nonviolence

Nonviolence is the third ethical principle rooted in the sacredness of life, or in negative terms, no harm to the innocent. Gandhi and Martin Luther King developed this principle beyond a political strategy into a philosophy of life. The same with the main speakers at the International Peace Research Association (IPRA) conference described in a recent issue of *Media Development* (see 4/2006, p. 48)—peace is a worldview not simply a plan of action.

In one of today's most important ethicists, Emmanuel Levinas, interaction between the self and the Other makes peace normative (1985). The first word of the Other is 'Thou shalt not kill'. In the face-to-face encounter the majesty of human life is revealed and it demands my commitment. In communalistic and indigenous cultures, care for the weak and vulnerable (children, sick and elderly), and sharing material resources are a matter of course. Along with *dharma*, *ahimsa* (non-violence) forms the basis of the Hindu worldview. The death and violence in schools in different parts of the world cuts to our deepest being. Along with the public's general revulsion against physical abuse at home, and our consternation over brutal crimes and savage wars, we see a glimmer of hope reflecting this validity of this principle.

Darrell Fasching's comparative study of religions (2001) identifies hospitality to strangers as a common commitment among them. And this commitment reiterates the cross-cultural ethics of nonviolence. A responsibility for protecting the dignity of strangers is the opposite of considering them as aliens or intruders to be destroyed or a subhuman class. Out of nonviolence, we articulate ethical theories about not harming the innocent as an obligation that is cosmic and irrespective of our roles or ethnic origin. With peace as an ethical imperative, it is not reduced to a political strategy or considered a luxury, but one of three fundamental ways to understand the sacredness of life intrinsic to our humanness.

## Back home with WACC

A commitment to universals does not eliminate all differences in what we think and believe. The only question is whether the first presupposition with which we begin affirms the human good or not. The issue is whether our values help to build a civic philosophy and thereby demonstrate a transformative intent. This is worldview pluralism, which allows us to hold our beliefs in good faith and debate them openly rather than be constrained by a superficial consensus. The standard of judgment is not economic or political success, but whether our worldviews and community formations contribute in the long run to truth-telling, human dignity, and nonviolence.

Philip Lee and the 50 contributors to the universal ethics project think in harmony. He turns to WACC's *Christian Principles of Communication* and writes of human dignity, truth and non-violence flowing in and through one another (pp.50-51). Positive peace is impossible without the pillars of harmonious coexistence, such as truth and human dignity. And surely, they say in concert, principles grounded in the sacredness of life do not obstruct cultures and inhibit their development. On the contrary, they liberate us for strategic action and provide a direction for social change. They enlarge our understanding of what it means to be human and in the process invigorate our moral imagination.

These principles bring us to judgment before the ultimate test: Do we sustain life, enhance it long-term, contribute to human well-being as a whole? They speak not only to our minds but revivify the spirit. Rather than allowing a debilitating relativism in which no guidelines are possible across cultures, this theoretical model grafts us onto our human oneness. In so doing, it offers a vigorous response to the classic paradox that to insist on philosophical relativism one must rise above it and thereby it is given up.

When we build our ethical models in universal terms, as Michael Traber and I tried to do, we have a framework by which to judge our professions and practices locally. Test Philip Lee's vision for WACC against it and it fits perfectly. Of the three ethical principles that have arisen from various sections of the world, in communications we have worked the hardest with the first and second—human dignity and truth.

Truth is central to communication practice and appears everywhere in our codes of ethics, mission statements, classes and textbooks on media ethics. We disagree on the details, not always sure what truth means and how it applies. There is still in news a heavy emphasis on facts and unbiased information that no longer is defensible epistemologically. But the general concept of truth is an unwavering imperative. In entertainment media, we insist on realism, on artistic integrity and aesthetic authenticity, as synonyms for truth.

And increasingly, human dignity has taken a central position in media ethics. For two decades now, we have worked on ethnic diversity, racist language in news, sexism in advertising. We see gender equality in hiring, and eliminating racism in organizational culture, not as political correctness but as moral imperatives. WACC's investment in the massive Gender Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) is one imaginative way to implement the human dignity standard.

But the third ethical principle—nonviolence—is still underdeveloped. Flickers of peace are emerging on our media ethics agenda, but only glimmers compared to truth, and of late, human dignity. *Media Development* has grown into one of our very best international magazines for articulating, crafting, promoting, and illustrating the ethics of human dignity. And now to see its Fourth International Congress highlight peace is awesome to an ethical theorist. The concept is taking written form in essays and books, but WACC's multiplex Congress is the richer venue we need at present—addresses, group discussions, multimedia presentations, film, theatre and music. And bringing the idea into its own across cultures and from the bottom up is a treasure for ethics that is difficult to match in other settings.

Told by her First Nations grandmother to throw a rock into a river, her granddaughter 'watched the ripples it created move downstream with the flow of water. Her grandmother pointed to the ripples and asked her, "What imprint will you leave on the planet for seven generations to come?"' (*Media Development* 4/2006, p. 49). Achieving peace will take seven generations and more. But our research suggests that with peace upfront, WACC is on the right track.

## References

Bok, Sissela (1978). *Lying. Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. New York: Random House.

Christians, Clifford and Traber, Michael (eds.) (1997). *Communication Ethics and Universal Values*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Fasching, Darell, and Dechant, D. (2001). *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach*. Ames, Iowa: Blackwells.

Lee, Philip (2007). 'Communication is peace: WACC's mission today', in *Media Development* 1/2007, pp. 49-53).

Clifford G. Christians is Charles H. Sandage Distinguished Professor, Research Professor of Communications, Professor of Media Studies, and Professor of Journalism in the College of Communications, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.