

## Orality

In the literate West, it has been taken for granted that everyone has both the right and the obligation to read, and, as far as the Christian world is concerned, to read the Bible. As a result the abilities of non-literate societies and their traditional forms of communicating have tended to be devalued. We talk about “illiteracy” and “illiterate” individuals, and not about people who use alternative forms of oral communication. In the church we suffer the same symptoms. The Protestant Reformation promoted a proper appreciation of the Word of God as the inspired source of revelation and its spread through the printed medium. This understanding has, in turn, produced a number of suppositions about the reading of this inspired Word. These factors have created within Western Christianity an overemphasis on reading and writing which can cause problems when communicating the gospel in an oral society, and it is to this subject that this article is addressed.

### “Homo Legens”

Scientists call us “Homo Sapiens”—the man who knows—although these days it would perhaps be more accurate to call us “Homo Legens”—the man who reads. Reading has come to be a *sine qua non*, an integral part of our societies and cultures. Education is no longer considered as a process by which ideas and abilities are transmitted from one person to another; rather, it is a sophisticated process which depends on reading. Compulsory schooling for all children is one of the most desired aims for all nations on the planet, even though this educative process is irrelevant for the vast majority of societies, where 80% of the population performs a job in which reading is not necessary.

In more “developed” societies we are feeling the effects of this process, where positions “unworthy” of an educated person are rejected. Many people are educated up to university level, but then are unable to find a job “on their level.” The solution? Pay income support to the “unemployed” and import cheap (and uneducated) labour from less developed countries to cover the “manual” work needed.

Humans can be differentiated from animals in, amongst other things, their capacity to transmit knowledge culturally from one generation to another. This knowledge is preserved either as oral tradition, handed down by word of mouth from one generation to another, or in books—written records of the oral tradition. If we know something, whatever that something is, it is either because someone else told us, or because we read it somewhere—that writing itself being a record of the thoughts of another human being.

In former times—as is still the case today in some parts of the world—the process of transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next was done by personal contact, “face to face.” There were few books, and even fewer people who knew how to read them. A person who had “learned” was one who had spent much time with others, and had received their knowledge directly from them. But today all that has changed, through two past revolutions, and a third which is currently in full swing.

It is not widely known that Socrates resisted the process of committing knowledge to writing, as he foresaw the inevitable drift of learning away from the dialogue that occurs in a teacher-pupil relationship to the impersonal transmission of unassimilated facts under the guise of “knowledge.” Though we often fail to realise its importance, the invention of vowels by the Greeks, as they adapted the Phoenician alphabet for their own language suddenly made writing so much more accessible.

Despite this, most teaching—in the Western world at least—was nevertheless still communicated in an oral context, that of the lecture (which remains today the mainstay of university education). Exams were oral examinations of a student’s knowledge, and even this practice lives on in *viva* examinations and the oral defence of doctoral dissertations.

The advent of moveable type printing in the 15<sup>th</sup> century made written knowledge, which had existed for centuries, cheaply and widely available, transforming the learning process. Reading came to be the domain not of a select few, and informal education at least was within the reach of many more people. The third revolution concerns that of information technology, and the reversal of reading to multimedia and interactive education, that so often serves to downplay the role of simple reading skills. So, the post-literate society is born, but that is quite another question, beyond the scope of this article.

Today, then, the transmission of knowledge occurs through books—“storehouses” of knowledge which separate the learner from the source of inspiration, the person. Education consists of the pupil (or “student”) having contact with as many books as possible. The student learns—or at least studies, although I am not

convinced that learning always takes place—in the libraries of universities, where silence reigns, and not in the streets, in homes, in workshops, where there is a constant hubbub of interaction.

In western cultures we have witnessed the total devaluing of the educational process without books. For “Homo legens,” real knowledge comes from books. We are “students” not “apprentices,” and apprenticeship is focused on sterile records, not on mere humans who are reckoned unreliable. Human contact with significant people loses its importance and does not form part of the education we value most.

### **“Homo Legens” and the translation of the Bible**

The modern emphasis on translating the Bible into vernacular languages is fruit of the Reformation. Building upon a process begun in the centuries before Christ with a translation of the Hebrew Torah into Greek, known as the “Septuagint”, the Reformers gave us the word of God in our own languages. They took the Bible out of the obscurity of the Middle Ages, where it had become permanently veiled in the “holy language,” hidden from the sight of the people, and they offered it to us in the language of the people. (This “dark” period in the history of the relationship between the people of God and His Word is strange, when considered in the light of the continuous use during these centuries of the “Vulgate” *translation* by Jerome, who had put the Bible into the “vulgar” language of the people; we can only lament that this attitude was not preserved and imitated during the millennium up to the arrival of innovators like Wycliffe.)

The Bible can, and should be translated. But what exactly are we offering people when we give them a Bible in their own language? It cannot simply be a collection of words which coincide with their mother tongue. If it is going to fulfil its purpose as a point of communication between God and men, it must also be adapted to their ways of communicating, their patterns for transmitting crucial information, and not solely to their linguistic signals duly analysed and transcribed.

A people does not receive the Word of God simply because we have presented them with a Bible in their own language, even if we have taught them to read it. (Perhaps I should state here that I believe the task of making people literate is important, as is making the Word of God available in their own language, but that is not what we are dealing with here. Teaching people to read does not guarantee that they will automatically understand the message being transmitted.) It’s not that simple. Our message should be transmitted using their own forms of communication. The message cannot be separated from its means of communication, and if we want it to be accepted, we must present it their way, not ours.

In truth, we are to preach the Word of God, not the Bible. We worship God, through Jesus Christ, of whom the Bible gives testimony. But the Trinity is not Father, Son, and Holy Scripture, as could wrongly be assumed from the statements and behaviour of some Christians. The written Word of God is not the focus of our message. It ought to be possible to be a believer without owning a Bible—in fact Abraham, the “father” of all believers, had to get by without the scriptures, as did all the faithful men and women of God until the time of Moses. Oral tradition brought God’s Word to them, and preserved ancient stories of creation and our origins for us today. And even after the law had been given at Sinai, most people only found out what was in it from the lips of a third party. But in our modern faith, according to the dogmas of “Homo Legens,” we do not know how to live the Christian faith without a Bible. And as educated ministers within our modern day literary institutes, nor do we know how to communicate the Christian faith without books.

Seriously now—do we know how to communicate without books? Do we know how to bring others to meet with God without asking them to read one of the Gospels? And what would we have done in the days of the early church when the Christian community grew without most of them having personal access to a copy of the scriptures? (It is reckoned that a hand written copy of the Septuagint—the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures plus the Apocryphal books—would have been worth around £15-20,000, in today’s monetary value... How many of us would have “gone to church” without our “sword”?!) We would not know how to act in places like China today either, where the church has seen extraordinary growth without most people having easy access to the Bible.

Our incapacity to communicate without papers in hand becomes patently obvious when we are confronted with traditional cultures, where reading is not so highly valued, and whose ways of transmitting information are oral and not written. Our attitude when faced with people who live in these kind of societies will determine our possibilities of success when we try and communicate our message to them.

## Oral Cultures

Unfortunately, we only know how to talk about “literate” people, that is, those who know how to read and write, and the “illiterate” (poor things!). They are distinguishable from us by a skill which they do not have, and we do. We are starting with an evident and palpable superiority.

But this is not how things really are. “Orality” should be considered as an attribute of a particular society, something that should be defined on its own merits, and not a defect or a mere lack of another skill. “Orality” is not the same as illiteracy. It is not concerned with the lack of something—the ability to read and write. Perhaps the term “illiterate” can be used to describe those who live in literate societies but do not know how to read and write, but it should never be applied to entire oral societies, who possess methods of communicating no less complicated than those employed in written communication.

On the contrary, despite not using books to preserve and transmit information, an oral society enjoys an infinite number of ways in which to carry out those functions reserved for our books. Not knowing about these we label them “illiterate,” thereby revealing our own ignorance more than their incapacity. And that is not all. By overlooking their strategies of communication we run the risk of turning ourselves into the “disabled” ones, and finding ourselves totally unable to communicate our message to them, despite having presented them the Bible in their own language. We need to discover not only their words, but also their vehicles for taking those words from the head to the heart.

In an oral society, enormous value is placed upon “face to face” communication, on collective participation in communicative events, and the communication process becomes much more of a social phenomenon than the acquisition of a series of technical data. Great appreciation is developed for the “warmth” of oral communication, and the major focus is upon relationship as intrinsic part of communication itself, and not just upon the results of this process.

Effective communication depends on the knowledge shared between the members of a society. It is built upon the history and traditions of a people, all faithfully preserved and transmitted from generation to generation. Everything is related, and all new information is linked up to the “bank of mutual knowledge” open to each and every one.

They also have at their disposal their own methods of transmitting and storing information. By trusting exclusively in written records we have lost the capacity not only to remember large amounts of information but also the ability to present that information in memorable ways. Genealogies preserve lists of ancestors and their exploits are recorded in “grand tales”—history in the form of myths and legends. Recitations are composed as songs and poetry and other important information is preserved and transmitted in a variety of formulas, proverbs, sayings and riddles.

Is this oral transmission reliable? Well, it must be admitted that it is indeed reliable. In fact, it can even be more reliable than written records, since nobody bothers to learn the contents of these, and therefore, when they get lost, or damaged, or are interfered with in any way, the data is lost forever.

We need to recognise that oral tradition is not so “corrupt” that we cannot trust its contents. In fact large portions of the Bible could be labelled as “written oral tradition.” How did Moses know the names of all his ancestors, not to mention their ages, if not through oral tradition? And what about the story of creation, or the flood? Are these “divine dictation” from Yahweh to his servant, in the manner of the Koran, or do they correspond to stories which originated with their protagonists and were preserved through the marvellous process of oral tradition? In the Gospels we can also find traces of this phenomenon, without our confidence in their contents being undermined.

So, just as oral tradition was sufficient to preserve accurately information about humanity’s origins until Moses was able to record this in writing, so we must not despise the process of oral transmission of information in other societies today. Every oral society relies on refined oral capabilities which allow them to memorise, recall and transmit data and knowledge with reliability. We must not project our limitations onto people of other societies! Rather, we should seek to learn from them.

Having learned to communicate important information in certain systematic ways, simply injecting written materials and the ability to read into an oral society will not bring about proper communication of the truths that this literature contains. The communication patterns of an oral society remain, even when a few of its members become literate, and for communication to be effective oral communication patterns must be

discovered and used. Until that has happened, even if a Bible has been made available and literacy programmes are underway, we should not consider that a people has received the gospel in a way they can genuinely understand.

There are certain keys to oral communication. Audience participation is fundamental: stories which involve their listeners, songs which everyone can join in with, and the use of questions or songs with responses guarantee this participation.

By being used continually, the memory develops to a capacity that we who rely on our exercise books and notes can only dream of. We all know what used to happen during productions of works by Shakespeare, how “infiltrators” watched the productions, and then went home and wrote out the script from memory. This capacity is not normal even within oral societies, but neither is it unique, and such people are given special honour.

We should point out that this extended capacity of memory rarely works word for word, but rather preserves the essential content. It works something like our method of remembering jokes. We know more or less how the story goes, and the punch line, but not much else. Even though we may tell it in different ways on different occasions, it is still the same joke. Just ask my wife!

To increase the power of memory the natural tools of mnemonics can be used. (I say “natural” in the sense that these are not artificial tricks, rather elements inherent to communication itself.) Rhythm and repetition occupy the most important position. We also find antithesis and alliteration, the “balance” of different aspects of a story, the use of formulas and well-known stories, and anthologies of popular proverbs. Apart from these verbal techniques, there is abundant use of paralinguistic sounds and other stimuli. Drums, vocal or instrumental music, body movements, touch, smell, ritual—they all have their place in assuring the retention of the contents being transmitted, and this is helped even more by the strange (for us!) juxtaposition of acoustic, visual, tactile and other stimuli.

Of course, oral communication has its limitations, especially when it comes to memorising word for word. However, these limitations do not disqualify it as a potential vehicle for the communication of the gospel. We just need to adapt ourselves to its demands rather than demanding that a people adapt to ours. The over-valuation of literary abilities can lead to a people being separated from the gospel by rejecting or disregarding their usual ways of communicating in their own cultural environment.

### **Applying the Lessons of Oral Cultures to the Communication of the Gospel**

So what should we do? If we find ourselves serving in an oral society, how can we, and how should we, adapt our methodology of gospel presentation?

Firstly it is fundamentally important to get rid of the idea that the gospel cannot be transmitted by non-literary methods. We need to fight to develop the concept of effective communication—and not only at the point of initial evangelisation, but for all of church life—without reading and books. Let’s not allow our way of thinking to stop us being able to communicate in this way. We need to work to learn the ways of communicating of a society, discovering those that they already have, adapting styles and contents which can be used to present a Christian message and inventing “Christian versions” based on new patterns.

It is necessary to try to be “memorable”, making use of the tools used in each particular culture. (To tell the truth, this is also helpful in literary cultures! I am sure most of us find it much easier to remember the things which are presented in our churches for the children, usually as stories or with lots of audio-visual aids, than the majority of the sermons.) We cannot be content to simply offer a summary of Christian doctrine reduced onto a collection of printed sheets. Rather we need to seek to write these eternal truths on the hearts of our listeners, their lives being the only *materia prima* we use. We can see that the apostle Paul at least understood this process. (See 2 Corinthians 3.3)

We should follow a few simple guidelines to make our communication more memorable, the same ones which characterise natural communication within an oral society. Story-telling is fundamental, and deserves to be given special attention. Repetition is a supreme didactic tool, and can be used with any style of presentation, whether poetry, prose, song or anything else. The communicator can repeat his material in different ways, basing his ethical teaching in a variety of stories, using synonyms or antithesis, or asking for responses from the audience, thereby guaranteeing their participation.

Our communication should also be oriented towards the context, and not just the content to be transmitted. It is said that all the North Americans who were alive at the time remember perfectly where they were and what they were doing at the moment when they heard President Kennedy had been assassinated. In some mysterious way those pieces of information have been stored together in the memory, and remembering one implies also remembering the other. That is how our brains work. For that reason we must attempt to create a communication “event,” so that the essence of our message is inseparably linked with the surrounding environment in which it is transmitted. In this way it is rooted in a time and a place and is intensified by what is seen, felt, heard and smelt there and afterwards. The memory of the event will bring back memories not only of what was done that day but what was said, and with what aim.

Ritual is one of the best ways of achieving this linking of content and context. At the same time, it is one of the most undervalued and forgotten aspects of western evangelical Christianity. The value of ritual is based on its function as a repetitive event which expresses spiritual or moral lessons in physical realities. The Lord’s Supper and baptism are two examples of institutionalised rituals, but we do not need to limit ourselves to those. Most oral societies have more in common with the socio-cultural structures of the Old Testament than the Greco-Roman culture of the New Testament, which tends to present theology in terms of Greek philosophy. In contrast the Old Testament transmits theology to us as oral tradition expressed in ritual, and can be applied directly within a large number of modern day oral societies.

In addition, our communication should be directed towards the listener. We need to lose our evangelical legalism, which looks for conformity of vocabulary and doctrine rather than of life. We are too pedantic, having silly quarrels over the position of a comma or the use of one word instead of another. In an oral society our communication must be focused more on the inherent meaning than the specific words used. And anyway, if we are assuming that we will be using repetition in our teaching, we are going to be presenting the same message in different words.

Incidentally, perhaps this is the origin of some of the differences between parallel accounts of biblical passages. Or do we imagine that Jesus told his stories and parables only once, on one single occasion, and that someone was there with a notebook and pencil taking them down word for word? Differences between the various “versions” found in the gospels do not threaten their reliability; rather they teach us valuable lessons about what is really important in communicating in an oral society. Jesus was a master of oral communication, and the gospels are records of that living process. We would do well to learn from them.

Finally, we need to achieve audience participation. This participation is in itself a form of repetition, and maintains a good balance between communicator and audience. Songs are the most effective and most common method of involving the audience in the communicative process, and they go beyond audience participation to include many other kinds of mnemonic methods, such as rhythm, musical elements, and body movements. (Do understand that in an oral society, since they don’t have to hold a hymnbook, it’s impossible to sing without dancing, or at least moving your feet and hips around a bit!) The listeners do more than “listen”—they need to feel part of the event.

In this way we adapt our communication to the realities of oral societies, and our message reaches the heart of the people. We are still taking them the same good news, the central message of the Bible, but will complete our task in a way that reaches them. No doubt we will also teach them to read, and in time we will present them with a Bible in their own language too. But these actions will only reinforce a process already in motion, because we will have been able to adapt ourselves to the demands of “orality.”

*“He who was the Word (the “Logos”, the divine utterance, the message from God) was in the world...he became a man and lived among us, full of grace and truth. And we have seen his glory...yes, we have seen it and our hands have touched it. This is the word of life.”*

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