

Message and Mission (The Communication of the Christian Faith), by Eugene A. Nida. Harper and Brothers, New York, 1960; pp. xvii, 253. \$5.00.¹

Dr. Nida's latest book covers a much wider field than techniques of Bible translating only. The author intends to give a discussion of principles and procedures of communication, in which he is "concerned primarily with the ways in which the message of the Bible has been communicated" all over the world (p. xiii). That Bible translating plays an important role in such an undertaking goes without saying.

A bird's-eye view of the contents

Let me first try to give at least some idea of the subject matter which the author is discussing in his usual lucid style. In doing so I shall often borrow his own expressions and phrases, even where this is not expressly indicated.

The introductory chapter opens with a remark which gives the author's reason for writing this book, and at the same time epitomizes the motivation of his whole work as adviser of Bible translators: "The major difficulties in communication result largely from the fact that we take communication for granted. Whenever we hear someone speak, we tend to assume that what is meant is precisely what we understand by these words. But words do not always mean what we think they mean, even in our native tongue, and our seemingly most transparent idioms are rarely translatable into other languages" (p. 1). The symbols used in communication, especially word symbols, have a tremendous power over people, and an indispensable function in the handling of concepts, in thinking. The variety of means of communication is very great since we may communicate with others by means of all our senses, but communication by word symbols is certainly the most important. That is especially the case in "Judeo-Christianity", which is more "word oriented" than any other religion (from which statement Mohammedanism should have been expected, I think), even rejecting visual images and likenesses (p. 5).

To obtain an answer to the problems of communication which challenge the Christian church, chapter 2 tries to analyze the role of communication in religion. Communication to and from the supernatural seems to be the basic characteristic of the great variety of religious activities; communication may therefore be called the very essence of religious practice.

Chapter 3 looks further into the nature of communication by examining its essential structure. Starting from remarks about the fundamental triad, source, message, and receptor (S-M-R), and stressing the (so often overlooked) importance of R, the author discusses the implications of the fact that communication always occurs in the setting of a particular time and place, and as such is essentially part of a larger framework (pp. 35-47).² This leads to paragraphs on "the formal non-identity of messages", i.e. the differences in "form" between messages in different languages (matters of vocabulary, word classes etc.), and "the formal nonidentity of cultures"—the latter term always to be taken in the sense of an all embracing world view and system of values and not to be restricted to an assortment of isolated

¹ Available as free grant for Bible translators, see last page of this, and page 13 of the January issue.

² The discussion is an elaboration of the author's remarks in TBT vol. 10, October 1959, pp. 150-54.

traits (p. 50). A message can never be understood apart from such cultural settings, for it is the culture that assigns meaning to every symbol needed to express it. Congruous forms thus mostly have different functions, according to the cultural setting. Therefore, a communicator, e.g. a Bible translator, has to aim primarily at functional, as against formal, equivalence in order that R (the receptor) in a present day culture may be able to respond to M (the message) within that cultural context in substantially the same manner and extent as the original R responded to the original M in the context of the biblical culture. This involves selection of culturally relevant features from the revelation, and the finding of significant cultural parallels (p. 59).

Chapter 4 discusses "Symbols and their Meanings," as part of language, the most complex and significant communication code used by man. Symbols, defined as instruments by which we label and manipulate conceptions, are distinguished from signs, said to indicate the existence of a particular thing, event, or condition within a context (p. 65), and the characteristics are given of linguistic symbols (which are arbitrary—as to the relation of form to referent and as to the ways in which languages dissect various areas of experience—, conventional, and adaptable to individual differences of usage in form and meaning, p. 67f.) and codes (which, again, are arbitrary, namely in their order of arrangement and their way of marking the relations between symbols, p. 68). The second half of this chapter undertakes "to uncover the more elusive nature of language symbols", under headings such as: *Meaning and Perception*, *The Meanings of Words as a Conceptual Map of Experience*, *The Range of Meanings of Words and Groups of Words*, *Perspective of Meaning depending upon the Participants in Communication*, *The Restructuring of Meaning*. The result of this discussion is summarized in "three statements about semantic correspondence: (1) No two people ever mean exactly the same by the same word. (2) No two words in any one language ever have exactly the same meaning. (3) No two words in any two languages have exactly the same meaning" (p. 89). These facts exclude absolute communication; nevertheless effective communication between members of diverse cultures is possible, as all peoples reason according to essentially the same processes, have a common range of human experience, and possess a certain capacity for mutual adjustment enabling them to recognize differences and identify correspondences in symbolization (pp. 90-92).

Chapter 5 explores the influence of social structure on communication, especially in cases where S (the source) and R are parts of different social structures. Effective communication has to be reciprocal. Such two-direction communication is most likely to happen between persons of the same social group; communication between members of different groups tends to be in one direction, from high to low. Types of structure in homogenous societies—both urban and "face-to-face"—, and their interrelation in heterogenous societies are described, as well as the appropriate patterns of effective communication (pp. 96-123). The next section studies the "orientations of societies towards life" and the implications of the fact that a message, to be relevant for a social group, has to reckon with that group's orientation (pp. 123-36).

As examples of "The Dynamics of Communication", chapter 6 mentions the so-called nativistic movements among primitive peoples, and studies the development of indigenous Christian movements, using the example of the Tzeltals in Southern Mexico to whom the Christian message has been communicated in their own language, through use of indigenous media and of explanations in meaningful cultural contexts (p. 143). There follows a discussion of circumstances favorable to the development of such movements, their initial impulses, their internal and external problems, and their tendency to "cool off" (pp. 144-55). To reduce such cooling off, or "entropy", to a minimum, it is necessary to supply the movement constantly with new "information" (this term is here used in a technical sense) and new applications thereof (p. 156).

Chapter 7 stresses the importance of the right "Psychological Relationships in Communication", and states that the communicator, e.g. the missionary or the Bible translator, has to accomplish inner identification with the receptors, the people he wants to reach with his message. Such "identification means also participation in the lives of people, not as benefactors but as collaborators... (it) should be neither forced nor rigged, but a genuine interpersonal experience" (p. 169)—to quote one of the many good pieces of advice the author brings forth out of the good treasure of his own interpersonal experience.

In chapter 8 many telling examples are given of the ways communication can be best effected in a total cultural framework. The discussion includes: the choice of the proper place (e.g. the chief's home, in Laos), time (Paul in Ephesus chose the siesta hours for his preaching), and occasion (e.g., at consecration of a house, amongst the Chols of S. Mexico); the most effective techniques (e.g. dramatic dance); the adaptations of message, i.e. "not the altering of the essential content of the Biblical message, but the encasing of this message in a culturally relevant verbal form" (p. 179f). In doing so one should be aware of the essential difference between indigenization (full employment of local indigenous means of communication) and syncretism (accommodation of content, pp. 184-88).

In chapter 9, "Scripture Translation and Revision as Techniques of Communication," the insights gained in the earlier chapters are applied to these special tasks. It gives examples of three types of translations, that stress respectively (a) stylistic equivalence (e.g. a Scottish riming rendering of Ps. 1), (b) equivalence in the referential meanings of symbols, as do Weymouth and Rieu, and (c) equivalence in the conceptual meanings, as does Phillips (pp. 191-94). Next, "translation as the closest natural equivalent" and "problems of equivalence" are discussed (pp. 194-99),³ and the reasons for revisions of the Scriptures.

The last chapter, "The Theological Basis of Communication", opens with some remarks on the "history of the tension between church and culture", and on "two contrasting approaches to communication": the "common-ground" approach (exemplified in the 6th century instructions of Gregory the Great to the missionaries working in England) and the "point of contact" orientation. It discusses Christ's orientation towards culture, which can be said to have been one of contact and continuity in its fulfilling of Jewish aspirations, but at the same time one of discontinuity because of its break with and abrogation of the law, which it transcended in the proclamation of a new supercultural way of life, cp. Mt. 22:37-40 (p. 215f). Therewith Jesus himself has laid down two "principles of interpersonal communication", being those of love in the sense of a profound appreciation of the worth and value of people as God sees them, and of equity, not only within one's own group but towards everyone that is in need. These two principles have to be normative in the choices every communicator has to make in problems of cultural change, i.e. whether an institution in the receptor culture has to remain, to be altered in form and content, or to be replaced by a functional substitute—all three under the condition, of course, that the essence of the message is jealously guarded (pp. 216-21). This essence the Bible does not bring in abstract terms and formulas, but in historic, personal forms. This is in accordance with the "Biblical view of communication", the basic presuppositions of which are enumerated: (1) Verbal symbols are only "labels", and are of human origin (cf. Gen. 2:20). (2) As labels for concepts they have priority over visual symbols in the communication of truth. (3) They reflect a meaningful relationship between symbol and behavior: "Language is thus a set of symbols to describe behavior, not a mystical code to the eternal essence." (4) Communication is power. (5) Divine revelation takes place in the form of a "dialogue", it is always two-way communication (p. 224f). This implies that the Biblical revelation is not absolute.

³ In the same vein as in TBT, vol. 10, October 1959, pp. 154f., 157-59.

"There are still many mysteries which we as finite persons can never know about the infinite" (p. 225), or, as Paul said, "We see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12). It implies also that the Biblical revelation is essentially incarnational. The author ends with the warning that all this speaking about *our* communicating the Biblical message "is in a sense only figurative speaking. We ourselves do not communicate this message; we only bear witness to its truth, for it is the Spirit of God that directly communicates and mediates this divine word" (p. 228f).

Seven pages with explanatory notes and references, a long bibliography, and a short index (that, in my opinion, might have been more detailed) complete the volume.

This summary has made clear, I hope, that the book under review gives a Bible translator many illuminating insights, many facts to ponder over, many remarks and suggestions the implication and application of which he will want to work out for himself. I make a more or less random choice from the many points that struck me.

Information theory

I may be wrong, but I think that the section on this subject (pp. 72-75) will be of special interest to many of our non-American readers, as they are probably less familiar with it than most American Bible translators are.

Information theory is not primarily concerned with formal content and meaning of verbal symbols but with their dynamic. It holds that the impact, or the amount of information, carried by any word or expression is directly proportionate to its unpredictability. Words in frequent use are very predictable, or redundant; they have a very wide, general meaning and, accordingly, carry but little information. Such "information" is not the same as "meaning": a nonsense word has no meaning, but it may carry a high amount of information and have a heavy impact on the unexpecting hearer, because of its utter unpredictability. Long use of a version heightens its predictability, and so lessens its impact. J. B. Phillips' translation of the Epistles, because of its unusualness, its unpredictability, finds many attentive listeners and readers amongst people who are dozing off when reading the A.V., which has become so very predictable by redundant use.

This, however, is only one side of the picture. Too high a measure of unpredictability in use of words, sentence structure etc. may also result in a translation which baffles its listeners, because it heaps up so many unpredictable terms that they cannot understand it. The fact is that every communication has to fight impairing factors, such as distractions in the situation, unusual pronunciation by the source, inattention on the side of the receptors (which factors are lumped together under the term "noise"). It can do so only by a certain rate of "redundancy", which causes a listener to be forewarned to some degree what to expect in the next term. Successive sequences in speech seem to be usually about 50 % redundant. Such redundancy, which makes possible the predictability of what follows, should not be

confused with repetition, or tautology, which merely repeats what precedes (p. 74). As an example of a translator successfully keeping to the golden mean the author mentions Adoniram Judson who, in translating the Bible into Burmese, "was willing to build into it a certain amount of "redundancy" in order that it might be an effective vehicle of communication" (p. 199).

Specificity versus generalisation

On p. 81 the author comes to speak on semantic structure (i.e. levels of meaning in words), which he describes as "many-storied": on a low level we find very specific words, e.g. the names of animals; on a somewhat higher level many of these names can be brought under common denominators, e.g. generic terms as "rodents", "mammals", and these again, on a still higher level, under a very general denominator with a wide area of meaning, such as "animal". The amount of information decreases as the level of generalisation increases, or put the other way round, "the greater the specificity of detail the greater is the information" (p. 75). These facts the author even brings to bear on the theory of "demythologisation", which according to him actually means "re-mythologizing" or "re-encoding" the message on quite a different level of abstraction (p. 223). But they are certainly of importance also in the ordinary practice of translation, e.g. the problem of rendering exocentric⁴ (figurative, metaphorical) expressions in a receptor language which does not possess expressions that are congruous with the source language in form and in meaning, both referential and conceptual. Sometimes the translational choice to be made is self-evident. In Bali, for example, there is a cultural equivalent of "gird up your loins" (Lk. 12:35) that has the same metaphorical meaning, namely, 'have it tucked in' (i.e. the long skirt-like cloth, which is drawn up between the legs and tucked away in the girdle at the back when a man is getting ready for heavy work). No one, I think, will hesitate to use this rendering, as it is quite near to the original in referential meaning. But that is not always the case. Then, the usual solution is to seek an endocentric,⁴ non-figurative, rendering that has the same conceptual meaning, e.g. the rendering of "gird up the loins of your mind" (1 Pet. 1:13) with "prepare your minds for action" (Goodspeed), "macht euch geistig fertig" (Menge, i.e. 'make ready spiritually'), 'may your consciousness be sharp' (Indonesian). Such renderings convey the conceptual meaning of the original, but they still lack its impact, because of the ordinary, general wording. A translator, therefore, should not too quickly be satisfied to accept such a rendering, but should try to reproduce something of the original specificity. He may try to do so by using a kindred metaphor, or by seeking

⁴ For a short discussion of semantically endocentric and exocentric structures cp. TBT vol. 10 (October 1959), p. 162.

compensation in another way. The former was done in the Balinese rendering of Lk. 12:35 just mentioned, or in Moffatt's and Phillips' rendering of 1 Pet. 1:13, "brace up your minds." An example of the latter may be found in the (proposed) rendering of Job 38:3 in the Indonesian revision, where an expression for 'make ready' is chosen which suggests the Indonesian equivalent of the military command "Attention!"

To make well considered choices in these and similar cases, the author's remarks will certainly be used to advantage by many Bible translators.

Adjustment and "the form of a servant"

Not only in chapter 7 but all through the book the author stresses the importance of the communicator's personal attitude towards his hearers. He might have quoted Hendrik Kraemer who once ended a discussion of the "point of contact" by stating: "There is only one point of contact, and if that one point really exists, then there are many points of contact. This one point of contact is the disposition and the attitude of the missionary . . . Such is the golden rule, or, if one prefers, the iron law, in this whole matter."⁵

The section "Encoding and Decoding" (pp. 69-72) gives, so to speak, the linguistic, or "communication-theoretical" background for this view. To be put into words, i.e. to be "encoded", our thoughts or conceptions always have to pass through two grids or "screens", that of our own accumulated perceptions (including the ways in which our minds have organized them) and that of our language (p. 71). This is true of the source but also of the receptor who has to decipher, or decode, the message. Both have to "tune in", to adjust themselves to each other, no communication being possible without such mutual adjustment. The greatest responsibility, however, naturally falls on the person who has taken the initiative in the communicative act. His is a difficult task even in relatively easy cases, and human stubbornness, selfcentredness, and sin make it a much neglected task. But it is often made a nearly superhuman task by the deep going and far reaching differences that exist between cultural settings (cf. chapter 3) or social structures (cf. chapter 5). These often make necessary a total adjustment that seems to compel the communicator to shed his personal and cultural habits as a snake sheds his skin, and to express his message in cultural and linguistic forms seeming so to restrict communication as to render it nearly ineffective. Such a kind and measure of adjustment is only really possible, perhaps, for the follower of Him who "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7; cf. the author's remarks on pp. 23, 222). And so our path leads us from processes and principles of communication to theological depths—which, however, I shall refrain from exploring further, in

⁵ *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, London 1938, p. 140.

order to avoid becoming embroiled with the theologians amongst this journal's readers.

New wine in old wineskins

Everyone who is struggling to express Biblical terms and phrases in the language of a culture to which such concepts are new, has sometimes asked himself whether he was not "spoiling the original", "watering down the contents of the Biblical message." And even if he has never asked himself this, others will reprovingly have pointed out to him that he would end in misrepresenting the message; that in trying to use the "pagan" language, his range of ideas and meanings was bound to be limited to what had been thought and said in that language before. They will have assured him that such methods would never enable him to express new things, much less the good news that "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived."

Against this background some of the remarks the author makes on linguistic symbols and codes gain a special significance. One of the characteristics of codes is that they go together in a systematic way, and of symbols that one and the same symbol may be used in many different positions. This means that the code has "the potentiality of endless generation of new expressions," and that new combinations of symbols can be produced (cf. pp. 63 and 68). Therefore, the translator who expresses the message of the source with the means the receptor language puts at his disposal, is *not* necessarily bound to the ideas hitherto expressed in it. He can be the creator of something new in that language. He has to do so, however, with linguistic material that existed already: "creatio ex nihilo" is not given to man!

A fifth trend in revision

In his paragraph on revisions of the Scriptures (pp. 199-205) the author mentions four reasons why so many revisions are required, namely, better original texts, more accurate knowledge of the Biblical languages and culture, changes in the receptor language, and "a revised concept of communication, and hence of translation" (p. 200, cf. 204f.). It should be remembered, however, that the fourth reason is often less clearly envisaged than the other three: many of the learned revisors would be as astonished to read that they had a concept of communication, as was Molière's M. Jourdain when hearing that he had always been speaking in prose! Nevertheless, a general trend can be discerned in many Western revisions, away from the "word-for-word" idea of translation and towards a more communication-minded concept.

In the Younger Churches an opposite trend may sometimes be detected. The first translator, working among newly converted

Christians and non-Christians, and more concerned about the impression the message was going to make than about verbal fidelity, may have gone far in seeking conceptual and cultural equivalents. Amongst a later generation of Christians, however, such a method of translation is often questioned; they prefer a revision which is "more accurate", i.e. more faithful to the wording of the original. In Central Toradja, for example, the expression "died to sin" (Rom. 6:2), first translated 'became like dead ones as to the temptation to rebel against God', was changed in the revision to 'died freed from sin'. Within certain limits such a desire is quite legitimate: the first version was intended for people with no, or very limited, knowledge of the Bible, whereas the revision will have many readers with wider Christian experience, and a more thorough knowledge of the Bible; between them and the message there is less need for mutual adjustment. But the dangers in such an approach are not to be underestimated. Greater fidelity to the original wording may easily lead to a version in which the receptor language does not come into its own, and the communication value of the translation will be lessened. Such, for example, has been the case with the Javanese rendering of "Legion" in Lk. 8:30. The translator of 1854 had used: "Ten thousand", that of 1894: "Troop", but the revisers preferred to transliterate the Greek word, thus attaining "accuracy" at the cost of communicative value.

In cases where such dangers are real, or to be expected, the perusal of the book under review is highly recommended to translators, revisers, and advisory committees.

So I could go on without exhausting the resources of this book—as the book has certainly not exhausted the resources of the author and the contributions he can give to matters of communication and translation. A review in the last issue of the U.B.S. Bulletin causes us to hope that a new book, on the Science of Translation, is already under way. We are looking forward to it.

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