INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CJW-4
Multi-National Missions:
The Medium and the Message

112/1 Soi 14
Phaholyothin Rd.
Bangkok 4, Thailand

Mr. Peter B. Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 W. Wheelock St.
Hanover, N. H. 03755

Dear Peter:

Irian Jaya is primeval. It has more impenetrable jungle than Africa or the Amazon, some writers say, and mountaintops where the snow never melts. It is a tangle of wild rivers and Stone Age tribes whose culinary tastes include a fondness for human flesh. The people of Irian Jaya (or West Irian, the western half of New Guinea; the eastern half is Papua New Guinea, which is independent) don't take the intrusions of civilization lightly and in 1977 they rebelled against Indonesian authorities, hurling their spears into police stations and driving stakes into runways to thwart the landing of reinforcements. It was here that David Rockefeller's son disappeared (in 1961) and here that tribesmen made a meal of four Dutch families on Christmas of 1974. Thus, when out of a clear sky the great light "birds" came, they created quite a stir. And when the birds began to speak--in the dialects of the villages where they landed--the effect was spell-binding, if not miraculous.

The voices the tribespeople heard came from simple devices carrying recorded messages, according to environmentalists who frequent remote areas of Indonesia. The "birds" carrying the recordings were parachutes, dropped over the villages reportedly by Christian missionaries.

"They'll get someone who knows the local dialect, have them read from religious tracts and tell (people) where to come for future instruction," one environmentalist said. "They simply drop parachutes over the villages (each carrying a recording). These are very inexpensive...recorders with one message: the message from the sky."

The missionaries were deploying one of the weapons in a sophisticated arsenal available to Christians in the mission field today. More and more, religious organizations are adopting the tactics and gimmicks of big business--and big government--in their centuries-old battle for souls.

Cammy Wilson, formerly a staff writer with the Minneapolis Tribune, is an Overseas Journalism Fellow with the Institute of Current World Affairs.

Through media campaigns, a staple of American business (and politics), missionaries can reach their audiences without necessarily tying up the resources necessitated by the old method: staking claim to a bit of jungle turf and waiting years, perhaps a lifetime, for the Lord to work His miracles. In many respects, the "television ministries," as they're sometimes called, resemble the old-time revival meetings, with one major exception: audiences depend not on their churches or denominations for religious succor, but on their television sets. There is little doubt the media approach works.

In the U. S., hundreds of thousands of Christians prefer to stay home from church and shop for Sunday morning services through their television listings. At least some of the viewers had become disenchanted with the main-line denominations, which, during the 1960s, began to preach a social gospel and to apply it by supporting civil rights groups, building high-rise apartment buildings for the elderly, and stumping the world for the ecumenical movement. With the emphasis on the similarity of people and religions, the need to convert the world to Christianity waned. The Pentecostals, the Southern Baptists and the para-churches, as the non-church affiliated, media-oriented groups such as the Billy Graham Crusade, are known, stepped into the vacuum. They hadn't concerned themselves with the social soul-searching that was common in the major denominations. Their faith in the American Dream secure, they turned to the methods that had proven so effective for business enterprise, adding one after another of the "attachments" to the basic system--television--to which they were already committed.

Therefore, if a religious executive makes a decision to purchase television time for a few Sundays, rather than to build a church (which might cost the same), he or she is likely to determine which time-slot and market to enter by means of the same tools that a tooth-paste executive might use.

Religious organizations now purchase marketing analyses and commission public opinion surveys; they seek to penetrate cities and to saturate markets. Movie stars, television personalities, football players, singers, even comedians, may be enlisted for the effort. In short, the trend is for Christianity to be sold to the world's audiences by the same methods that proved so successful for cold-water detergents and under-arm deodorants.

Mission groups today require neither the support of denominations nor churches. They have the capacity to enter a country, mount a massive mission effort through the media and move on. They field world-wide "sales" forces, command budgets that would make many a dictator jealous, and enjoy a lack of accountability the CIA could envy. Within the religious community, they are sometimes called "the multi-national missions."

The major success stories in the missions field tend to emanate from the multi-nationals; their appeal--with their impressive claims of conversions (20,000 Cambodian refugees, for instance)--is hard for traditional missionaries to resist. This was evident at the Consultation on World Evangelization (COWE), an international gathering of evangelicals (the churches and organizations that preach a fundamentalist doctrine and join together outside the World Council of Churches). The two-week convention was held in Pattaya, Thailand, a sex-suds-and-sand mecca built on its appeal to American GIs on R & R (rest and recuperation) from another kind of battle in Vietnam. The by-invitation-only assemblage was attended by approximately 800 delegates from mission agencies. The objective was to develop strategies for converting the non-Christians of the world, particularly those who have chosen other religions instead, such as Islam or Hinduism.

The first priority, the missionaries say, is to develop a taste for Christianity among the local people.

"One of the problems of people in the big cities is they feel no need of (Christianity)," one of the convention's urbanologists told a group meeting to discuss ways of reaching city-dwellers. "...You have to get somebody 'lost' before you can get him 'saved.'"

Asia is Christianity's most difficult market, missionaries say. The term repeatedly used to describe the attitude of Asians toward Christianity is "resistant." Indeed, after six hundred years of proselytizing, often in conjunction with military subjugation and colonization, the percentage of Asian Christians is small. The Philippines is the primary success story (92 per cent Christian); Papua New Guinea is probably next, with 51 per cent; then possibly Korea with 16 per cent.

Though there are millions of Christians in India, they comprise but 2.6 per cent of the population.* The following percentages of the countries named are Christian: 2.5 per cent of Taiwan; 5 per cent of Indonesia; 1.4 per cent of Pakistan; and about half of one per cent of Thailand.*

While the missionaries sometimes see the lack of converts as evidence of the willful rejection of Christianity, some theologians point out that Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism all integrate the religious aspects of life more wholly into daily life than does Christianity, whose followers tend to practice as an adjunct to their business and social lives.

Developing a taste for Christianity in the cities of Asia can involve elaborate preparation and follow-through. One of the most discussed approaches at Pattaya was the Southern Baptists' "All Media Penetration Project" (AMP).

AMP is "a three-year effort to use all appropriate media to penetrate Bangkok with the message of Jesus Christ, confronting every person in the city with Him as a culturally acceptable option," the marketing survey said (it was on sale at the convention).

After choosing a "representative sample of 400...from 21 sub-groups in Bangkok," the Baptists prepared a public opinion survey which attempted to measure everything from which radio stations and newspapers people prefer to what their worries are. All such information is then carefully weighed, along with the measurements on religious questions, to determine the approaches apt to have the most effect on the individual. The three-year project is expected to proceed from "climatizing" neighborhoods--the first stage--to building churches in each area--the final stage. Thus, the missionaries are using the same strategy that politicians are prone to: discovering what bothers people and then proposing a solution.

"AMP will utilize all available media for a comprehensive program of evangelism and church building," the AMP report said. "In doing so, AMP will follow modern principles of Christian communications strategy and as such become a pioneering and experimental project for urban media-evangelism."

After a market has been measured and tested, the next phase is saturation. Missionaries speak of South Korea as being in this phase.

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*Figures on Christians in Asia from The World Almanac. 1979 edition.

"No matter where it is, some attempt to saturate that group with the good news of Jesus Christ can be noticed," said a brochure available at the conference.

Public figures are being heavily utilized for the mission effort.

"A national football champion, Lee Young Moo, is always seen kneeling down on the ground publicly with his hands folded in prayer during the game, whenever his ball shoots for the goal," said another booklet. "Even though this gesture looks funny to some spectators, his sincere, wordless testimony has touched millions of hearts through the three million t.v. sets. Now he is heading up a church composed of top National Christian athletes who have joined him to witness for Christ throughout the nation."

Missionaries speak of Korean churches with 10- 30,000 members, of more than a million people gathering in one place to hear the gospel (at a 1973 Billy Graham Crusade and at Explo '74, sponsored by the Campus Crusade for Christ). And now the Koreans are sending missionaries to places like Thailand.

In addition to strategies aimed at converting large groups, such as Hindus or Muslims, the convention aimed at developing a few unconventional tactics, such as infiltrating the press.

"A group of Christians working for a news network help place competent Christians into assignments with the network when openings arise, giving a greater Christian voice in the marketplace," said one convention strategy report.

"Christians should engage in...journalism, media work, education, etc.," said another suggestion. "A Christian publisher in UK (United Kingdom) produces books for children on the world we live in (animals, flowers) to sell in the secular market with very little specific Christian content except a final sentence like, "What a wonderful world God has made."

No businesslike convention would be complete without a look at the growth markets of the future and the evangelical one was no exception. Much effort is already going into converting refugees (who are sometimes called "rice Christians" because of the possibility of their associating the need to convert with the receipt of food), but the consensus is that refugees will continue to pour from one country to another. As the refugees' gods tend to take a beating in the process, missionaries consider refugees to be prime targets for conversion.

The second area of potential growth is that of Muslims. Like the rest of America, the missionaries seem to have just discovered Islam. Fliers on where to study customs and how to find Muslims in your own community were common. Schools for missionaries interested in trying their hand at conversion were advertising for students (Muslims make Buddhists and Hindus and West Irian tribes look like simple conversions).

And, finally, the relaxing of religious restrictions in China is seen as a great opportunity. The evangelicals aim to go slow in that instance, however, as they are fearful a major effort might spook the Chinese into slamming the door again. So, in the meantime, they're cranking up their Chinese Bible publishing operations and biding their time.

Like other executives, those who run the multi-national missions come in for their share of criticism, some of the strongest of which comes from churches.

"They represent no national church bodies and are accountable to none. They are evangelical pirates," say Chris Sugden and Vinay Samuel in a paper they brought with them to the conference. "They control the seaways and commandeer resources but are above the law" (the two evangelicals pastor an Anglican church in India).

At times the multi-national missions, as Sugden and Samuel call some of the mission groups, appear to deliberately exclude churches. For instance, the World Consultation on Frontier Missions will meet in Edinburgh in the fall; like that of the participants at Pattaya, the delegate list is exclusive.

"The conference is sponsored by an ad hoc group of evangelical mission agencies, and participation will be limited to representatives of evangelical mission agencies, NOT CHURCHES, who apply for attendance," (italics theirs), said the Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research, given out at Pattaya.

While the evangelicals employ a wide range of communications devices to "penetrate" the markets they target, they are highly suspicious of not only who attends their meetings, but what information leaks out, as well. Many sessions were closed to anyone but invited participants and security measures were stringent; Badges were checked and a member of the press was known to all by the fine red line marking his or her badge.

Reports and all scraps of paper were picked up immediately after sessions and obtaining documents could be an exercise in sleuthing. Some staff members kept a lookout for the "church press," which they seemed more concerned about than the presence of conventional journalists (the World Council of Churches, the denominations that belong and the publications associated with it are especially suspect).

"Some of them told us they were coming and they were going to publish anything they could find out," one staff member said. "And they call themselves Christians."

Like finances in families, money matters are hardly discussed. Many of the large evangelization organizations are like closely held private companies: no one outside the evangelists, their accountants, and possibly relatives of the former, can be sure how much money is taken in or how it's spent. Relatives may succeed the founding head of a group; Leighton Ford, the convention chairman, is Vice-President of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (and Graham's brother-in-law). The only certainty is that the stakes are high.

The Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, which began setting fund-raising guide-lines for its 100 members after scandals occurred in some groups, says its members alone solicit over $500 million per year* (in comparison, the United Ways of America, with over 2,200 groups, raised approximately $1.4 billion last year).* Some donations are difficult to assess. Describing some of the items found in one offering collected during an address by the Rev. Kim Ik Do, the "Billy Graham of Korea," a booklet describing evangelization in South Korea says, "There were 200 finger rings, 22 silver and gold watches, 200 silver ladies' hairpins, and $17,000 in cash." Questioning monetary matters in some circles is tantamount to questioning God, however: it just isn't done.

The resources that the multi-nationals can command are sometimes a mixed blessing. When missions were perceived as poverty-stricken outposts in the jungle, good-will among local authorities might be acquired with a meal or medical treatment or the enrollment of the headman's children in the mission school. With the advent of the multi-nationals, the image of at least some groups is changing, brought about by the vast amounts of money spent in some campaigns--particularly when the per capita income of a country like Thailand is only $351 (1976 figures)--and where the intake may be high as well. The more evangelization resembles a business, the greater the likelihood of demands for bribes from local officials; with bribes go the possibilities of black-mail or being set up.

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*Figures from U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT, July, 1980.

"Don't ever pay a bribe in Malaysia(a Muslim country)," one missionary remarked to another in the hotel coffee shop at Pattaya. "If they catch you, they'll close down your mission."

Such business-like pragmatism is especially notable because it is coming from the fundamentalists--the Protestants who stood fast in their literal interpretation of the Bible despite the rise of Science and the sweeping changes of the Industrial Revolution. Late in the 20th Century, they still believe in the Virgin Birth, in the physical resurrection of Christ and His return to earth in the flesh, in the Bible as the Divine Word of God.

At the same time, these are the people who are probing the psyches of their audiences to determine their worries and, based on polls and studies, intend to mold a message that will "sell." The question of whether the medium--the intricate gadgetry of technology--will become the message, as Marshall McLuhan has observed, is hardly considered. Like the West Irians with their amazing new toys, the missionaries are too excited by the prospects to consider the perils.

The question of whether substance is giving way to form perhaps is symbolized in the "Sackcloth and Ashes" pin, distributed by the Campus Crusade for Christ and worn by some delegates.

A small piece of burlap, tied with blue string (ostensibly to hold the ashes in), the pin was attached to an attractive brochure on linen-like paper. "This unusual two-inch burlap pin reminds the wearer to pray for personal and national repentance..," it said.

Sackcloth and ashes, when worn by the early Christians, was an agonizing experience. The scratchy sackcloth became distressingly uncomfortable with the addition of the ashes. Wearers in Pattaya did not have that problem. Not even a smudge could be delivered by the pin, which contained, not ashes, but a small piece of crumpled waxed paper. The brochure did say, "Sackcloth and Ashes symbolic pin."

Sincerely,

Cammy Wilson

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