IJT 42/2 (2000), pp. 163-170

Democratisation of Communication and Biblical Hermeneutics

John Joshva Raja *

1. Introduction :

The aim of this study is to identify one of the major issues in the social role of Communication and to develop a Biblical Hermeneutics in the light of this issue. One of such issues raised in MacBride's report (1980) was *'Democratisation of Communication'*[1]. In the dialogue between Theology and Communication, some of the previous studies concentrated mainly on the propagation of the Gospel to the Modern World by adopting the available technical methods and artistic formats and on the ethical issues raised by the media[2].

The very reality of discrimination and inequalities in life[3] raise questions about the traditional forms of the communication process and structures which have been endorsed by past theological presuppositions and interpretations of the Biblical text. Thus there emerges a need for a re-reading of the text from an understanding of communication.

2. Definitions :

Democratisation is an ongoing dynamic process in which people make an attempt to participate at all levels of responsibilities and of decision-making that affect them directly or indirectly. In the definition there is an ideal expectation of democracy whereas there is a different practice of democracy in societies[4]. For Lee (1995), democracy becomes a compromise between the ideal of total participation and the praxis of delegating responsibility[5].

The term 'communication' is defined by the transmission view as 'imparting', 'sending', 'transmitting' or 'giving' information to others, whereas from the point of view of ritual, it is defined in terms of 'sharing', 'participating', 'association' or 'fellowship'.[6] The phrase 'Democratisation of communication' infers people's freedom to communicate their opinion and to receive any information that they need. Such people's communication is seen as part of the democratic process[7] and also as a basic human right.[8] In order to move toward an ideal democracy, the first step is to see that people have freedom to inform and to be informed.

In the MacBride report, 'the democratisation of communication' is defined as the process whereby a) the individual becomes a partner and not a mere object of communication, b) the variety of messages exchanged increases and c) the extent and quality of social representation or participation in communication is augmented'[9]. In this process people are actively involved

* *Dr. John Joshva Raja* is Lecturer, United Theological College, Bangalore.

not only in receiving but also in sending the message. This means every member of the society should have access to all the means of communication[10] in order to allow each to participate effectively in political and in public policy-making.

3. Identifying the Issue :

At present the most used mode of communication in society seems to be unidirectional and vertical from the centre to the mass, from the rich to the poor, or from few to many[11]. The communication studies look at the mass media as if the mass can participate only as a select and active audience, though with some exceptions.[12] This uni-directional communication is intended by those who control levers to produce an efficient and smoothly-functioning society.[13]

Democratisation of communication essentially demands people's participation not only at the interaction level among individuals, and representation in administration and in the government of public communication (White[14]) but also in the public policy-making process (Hamelink[15]). This would result in sharing a greater diversity of meanings and plurality in cultural understandings of society[16]. This process should be carried out at local,[17] national, and global spheres.

There are certain barriers in this process of democratisation of communication[18]. MacBride's report (1980:166) identifies ten barriers such as : inegalitarian and undemocratic nature of the society, bureaucratic habits in communication, vertical communication, inadequacy of Communication Channels, diversity and choice, exclusion, lack of knowledge to decode etc. and Hamelink (1995:31) has identified five enemies to this process such as globalisation from above, GATT and G-7 and Global Market forces. But there are various proposals to break these barriers[19]. These barriers need to be analysed in the broad context of the powerful centralising tendencies of the last two centuries, and of the social theory which legitimises them[20]. These barriers are related to people's social[21], cultural[22] and religious[23] beliefs and views and which views either hinder this process or support the existing centralised form of communication. By quoting V. Havel, Forrester argues that the ideology that legitimises power by suggesting 'the centre of power identical with the centre of truth' serves to internalise a false reality, to turn a lie into a truth[24].

4. Participation as a Solution :

As Lee points out to allow people to participate is to make them realise their full potential and to educate them[25]. This is possible not only by providing the technological means,[26] but also by attempting to reinterpret belief so that they might change the public attitude and opinion on which the principles of uni-directional and top-to-down communication have been set up. Freire's entire philosophy of participation is based on the notion that the historical vocation of human beings is to be free from the shackles of material and psychological oppression and from any pattern of life that is imposed from above.[27]

Simply by proposing idealistic plans and by persuading governments to carry them out one cannot bring this process into reality. People should be made aware of their potential by motivating them to participate in the communication processes in their society. This attempt is a complex one, as Huesca (1996) has pointed out : that people hold multiple understandings of their culture and posit relationships between diverse aspects of every day life as well[28]. This social mobilisation would be possible only if the existing attitude, opinion and belief could be reinterpreted and changed[29]. At this juncture, reinterpretation of religious text and belief can

play a vital role in bringing awareness and motivating people to participate in the communication process[30].

5. Need for Reinterpretation :

For a biblical theologian, it is a challenge to reinterpret the text so that an understanding of the text could pose challenges to the existing beliefs and opinions. Reinterpreted faith may motivate people to participate in the democratisation of communication and advance the process of democratisation. The attempt is to motivate Christians for the realisation of 'a new community'.[31] They are invited to adopt a model of participatory communication among themselves, to become the platform of alternative voices in society and also to challenge societies, states and nations to be involved in this participatory communication process.

'To set the model' does not merely mean a lay participation in the ministry (Tiller)[32] or in the administration of the Church (Pope John Paul II)[33]. It means building fellowship on the basis of sharing with mutual respect for the right to differ in the common decision-making which affects all in the fellowship. For this, one needs Biblical support. For this, an interpretation of the text in the modern context would need to include these humanistic principles of participatory communication. The text needs to be interpreted in such a way that the existing theological principles that support a centralising tendency will be corrected. Also, it needs to promote this understanding of the text in which participation in the communication process within the Christian fellowship becomes part of the salvation process itself.

6. Previous Studies :

Some of the previous interpreters who have attempted to interpret Biblical text on the basis of humanistic principles of communication and equality will be noted here. The Uppsala Report[34] declared in 1962 that "the power to communicate is given with creation and therefore to be accepted as a gift and tool for men to use in relation to their neighbours. In a fallen world, the process of communication is distorted by our desire for domination or hope for the reward". The divine process of self-communication is a model of what all true communication between human beings should be like[35].

By analysing the sociological aspect of Israelites' religion between 1250 and 1050, Gottwald (1985) strongly argued that the novelty of early Israel was not the introduction of new ideas and practice, but the conjunction of previously separated and contradictory social groups in a united and mutually supportive network of egalitarian relations.[36] For him the continuity of the struggle toward social egalitarianism can be identified in the biblical traditions under the guise of a religious philosophy of history. According to him, the Yahweh of united Israel was present under other names and in the action of the prehistory of people who entered Yahwistic Israel[37].

While interpreting the Old Testament text, DeGruchy (1994) attempted to identify such issues by identifying two distinctive political trajectories in the Hebrew Bible : the Mosaic or Prophetic and the Davidic or Royal which were in critical tension to each other. This is a tension between a more universal and a more nationalist understanding of the vocation of Israel. For him, the prophetic trajectory which perceived Yahweh as the God, the liberator of slaves, was also biased in favour of the poor and the oppressed in Canaan and therefore concerned with social justice and the building of communitarian society[38]. Barr (1980) also noted that the prophets perceived that the populist demand in Israel for monarchy was "a

revolt against God"[39]. DeGruchy argues that in many respects the Deuteronomic reforms can be compared to those initiated by Cleisthenes in Athens a century later, which is regarded by Hestorius as the symbolic birth of democracy in the Western world.[40].

Heschel made an explicit attempt to interpret the administration of the Law with regard to a plethora of personal and interpersonal matters that had to be exercised in terms of the covenantal obligation to pursue God's righteousness (sedaqah). This word 'sedaqah' literally means Yahweh's burning compassion for the oppressed[41]. For Hamilton (1992), 'sedaqah' was the barometer of the health of the society. This means the wrongs and social inequities were to be regularly redressed as in Lev 17 in the year of Jubilee[42]. Walzer argued that the prophetic vision of an egalitarian society in which justice rolled down like a mighty stream (Amos. 5.24) contributed to the struggle for political equality[43].

7. Reinterpreting radah :

In the Old Testament, there are tensions between various traditions (eg : J, E, D, P) with an underlying difference of the centralising forces (eg : Monarchy, the Temple movements) and of the decentralising forces (Tent movements, Theocratic movements, Prophetic movements). The basic understanding of Gen. 1:26, particularly the word 'radah', i.e. "dominion", has been misinterpreted in line with the vocation of Israel in their role of salvation for all the nations. For this, prophets interpreted "responsibility" not as a centralised power but as shared model of communication[44]. Israelites as a 'Chosen Race of God' were found to have failed in their responsibilities and so God used prophets to remind them of their role.[45]

The story use of formulas and metaphorical expressions proves that the prophets were active participants as means of divine communication[46]. They were active communicators, representing the marginalised and neglected voices within society, and trying to reinterpret the special privilege of being Israelite, being agents of Yahweh to all nations. For Isaiah, even the Egyptians and Syrians were chosen races (Isaiah 19:22-25). The prophets spoke out when the Israelites failed to listen to Yahweh's Words or misinterpreted their role. Yahweh had chosen others (Syrians) to be voices to bring his people back to Him. According to the prophets, God's communication not only aims at bringing about an egalitarian form of society among the Israelite communities, but also invites them to become the means through which such a model could be made known to others.

8. Jesus the true Communicator :

For Morris, "true communication" can take place only between equals, therefore divine-human dialogue requires the Incarnation[47]. For McLuhan, Jesus is declared to be both medium and message[48]. Troeltsch observed that Jesus addressed himself to the needs of the oppressed, considered wealth a danger to the soul, and opposed the Jewish priestly aristocracy which represented the dominant ecclesiastical forces of his day[49].

Jesus turned social relations upside down and sought to re-establish them along egalitarian lines (Luke. 4:18f). As demonstrated in His exorcisms, Jesus was concerned about the wholeness of individual people and their freedom from oppressing forces. He challenged social and economic injustices (Mt. 6:33)[50]. His exorcisms and healing miracles were powerful symbolic acts not because they challenged the laws of the nature, but because they challenged the very structures of social existence[51].

9. Jesus' interpretation of 'radah' as *'diakonēsai'* :

In Mark, Jesus reinterprets the Genesis notion of 'radah' (10:42) by saying : those who are supposed to rule (archein) over the nations, lord it over them and their great men exercise authority over them, 'de ouk en humin' (but not among you)[52]. Then Jesus gives a definition of the role of "Son of Man" who came 'ouk ēlthen diakonēthēnai alla diakonēsai' (he came not to be served but to serve; Mk. 10:45). The disciples are invited to participate in this transformation of the Christian community (Church) and of the society[53] in which the responsibility lies with the followers of Jesus to serve the world. It means to offer one's life for the sake of this transformation. To offer oneself means to become part of the social transformation in which the democratisation of communication is at work[54].

The Christian grid is called "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit"—within which the gap between the communicating parties is not bridged but abolished, thus communication solidifies the community where the members are united not only in meaning but in life[55]. For Luke, Jesus is concerned with everyone as found in the parables of the Lost Sheep, of the Lost Coin and also of the Prodigal Son (Chapter. 15). His teachings emphasised decentralised worship (John 4:22) and decentralised mission (Mark. 1:15). In so far as discipleship is concerned, it is not only the question of equality among the followers but also an offering of oneself for the cause of equality (Mark. 10:45).

10. From 'Being to Becoming' :

It is not only the message of Jesus, but also the story about the whole personality that confronts every follower (John. 20:31, 1:14). So, the role of 'the chosen ones' lie not in their being at the centre nor being superior to others, but lie in their responsibility to serve others, thereby setting the model for others to follow (here, it is model of Participatory Communication). They were to offer lives for the sake of bringing this transformation (here transformation of the society towards the Democratised Communication process). Jesus himself has become the communication in which he wanted his followers to bring their own transformation and that of their society (John. 6:56; 7:38).

It is by 'becoming' God's communication that Christians, as a New Community, set a model of Participatory Communication. This new community shares a decentralised and democratised form of communication. By becoming this New Community, not only a model is set but new life (for all) is brought into the society, giving of themselves for the democratisation of Communication. It is to become a platform in which alternative voices are raised and the voice of the voiceless is heard.

11. Hermeneutic Challenges :

The challenge here is to translate this ideal interpretation into reading today. This reinterpretation of the text is to offer an alternative way in which the Biblical hermeneutics can legitimatise and support greater participatory communication. The church can provide an interpretation that allows it to challenge the existing dominant communication process with theological interpretation that supports it. These two horizons merge, that is, communication and hermeneutics of Christian communities in order to practice and provide a theology for democratisation of communication, and thus witness to the gospel.

12. Concluding remarks :

This article has made an attempt to formulate certain principles of Biblical Hermeneutics from which further researches could move to reinterpret the Biblical text. We have seen that there

were attempts in the biblical text itself to develop theological principles based on humanitarian principles.

Communication students are concerned with Democratisation of Communication as a way to deal with freedom in modern society. It is a challenge for them to find ways to bring the democratisation of communication. There are many barriers to enabling people's participation in the communication process. One of the major barriers is the belief people hold about such participation. The belief in certain centralised values is one of the major barriers, which is again supported by certain theological concepts.

This study suggests a possibility of reinterpreting the (Biblical) text from certain hermeneutic principles which would eliminate the belief that hinders this communication process. These principles might motivate Christians to participate and to offer themselves to translate such principles into a contextual reality.

REFERENCES

1. In the book '*Many Voices, One World*', MacBride Committee (sponsored by UNESCO) has reported on many issues related to Society and Communication. The New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) was proposed by the developing Countries (Non-aligned Movements and others). S. J. MacBride *Many Voices One World. Communication and Society, Today and Tomorrow.* (London : Kogan, 1980).
2. Paul Sockup, *Communication and Theology : Introduction and Review of the Literature,* (London : World Association of Christian Communication, 1983). p. 7-11.
3. Realities of life means the realities in which individuals, societies and nations participate in their everyday life.
4. The term 'democracy' comes from the combination of two Greek words "demos" (people) and "kratos" (rule) which means 'Rule by the people'. Georg Sorenson, *Democracy and Democratisation,* (Boulder : West View, 1993). p. 3. There are various definitions of Democracy in the society, such as : direct, representative, liberal and social democratic practices which are different interpretations of the term and its applications.
5. Philip Lee, *Democratisation of Communication.* (Cardiff : University of Wales Press, 1995). p. 2.
6. James. W. Carey, *Communication and Culture.* (New York : Routledge, 1984). p. 15 & p. 18.
7. MacBride. Op. cit. p. 166. & M. Traber, Communication is seen as a Human Need and Human Right, *Religion and Society* XXXIX (1992) 1, p. 9. Traber argues that Democracy requires people who make their wishes known in public and participate in public debates.
8. MacBride report quotes the Universal declaration of Human Rights as 'Everyone has right to freedom of opinion and expression : this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and to import information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers'. *Ibid.* p. 167.
9. *Ibid.* p. 166.
10. All means of Communication include "Small Media" as suggested by Annabelle S. Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution,* (Minneapolis : UMP, 1994) or "Alternative Media" as proposed by P. Lewis, *Alternative Media : Linking Global and Local, Reports and Papers on Mass Communication.* (Paris : UNESCO, 1993), p. 107 or even "Mass Media". Small Media [Photo Copying machine in Iran revolution and Type writers in Poland] and Alternative media [Video Cameras used by the Self Employed Women's Association in India for developmental purpose] differ sometimes only in purpose. But, they include cordless phone to Internet etc.
11. MacBride's report argues that the whole structure of Communication is geared to the assumption of vertical flow., Op. cit. p. 149.
12. John Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies,* (London : Routledge, 1982) pp. 24-35.
13. *Ibid.* p. 137.
14. R. White, Democratisation of Communication is seen as a Social Movement Process, in Lee(ed.), *The Democratisation of Communication,* (Cardiff : University of Wales Press, 1995) p. 93.
15. Cees J. Hamelink, 1995, *The Democratic Ideals and its Enemies;* in Lee, P. Op. cit. p. 22. Hamelink adds 'even in other domains'.

16. John Gearry and Keith Sisson, *Conceptualising Direct Participation in Organisational Change—The EPOC Project* (Dublin : European Foundation, 1994).

17. P. Lee argues that communication is a two-way participatory process in which social relationships and social interactions are created and maintained. *Communication for All; The Church and the New World Information and Communication Order.* (Indore : Sat Prakashan, 1987).

18. Op. cit. p. 31.

19. C. J. Hamelink points to the possibility of transfer of technology and technical knowledge from the elite countries to others in *The Politics of World Communication* (London : Sage, 1994), R. A. White (1995) identified the need for a new public philosophy for communication, Op. cit. p. 99.

20. Joseph Komonchak, (ed.) 'Subsidiary in the Church : The State of the Question' in *The Nature and Future of Episcopal Conferences :* Ed by Herve Legrand, et al., (Washinton : WDC. 1988) 343.

21. A. S. Mohammadi, *Media and Democracy*, (Leicester : CMC, 1983) p. 6. By quoting Hamelink, Mohammadi argued against the assumption that if all people participate in the media (Small or Mass), it may undermine the political stability and public harmony. Actually it is the other way around.

22. A. S. Mohammadi, (1995) Op. cit. p11. identified a tension between admiration and hostility toward Western technology in the East and South. Many held (still hold) the belief that adopting Western technology meant embodying Western values and interests.

23. J. W. Carey, (1989) Op. cit., 15 & E. V. Ramsamy Periyar argued that the people must be made aware that they are equal and on a par with others in all levels of life which is not possible merely by economical and political liberation alone.*Thathuva Villakkam.* (Madras : SRPI, Translated in 1987) p. 35.

24. Duncan Forrestor, The Media and Theology; in *Religion and the Media : An Introductory Reader*, Ed by Chris Arthur (Cardiff : University of Wales, 1993) p. 75.

25. Lee, Op. cit. p. 6.

26. That is, either by providing people opportunity to participate through Small or big media or by increasing the number of Channels. Ascroft and Agunge (1994) 295 [as quoted by E Fox (1988)] pointed out that technological transfer from first to the third world as a possible solution. E. Fox has identified this as an unsuccessful attempt towards Democratisation of communication in his book, *Media Politics in Latin America*, (London : Sage, 1988).

27. Quoted in Pradeep Thomas. People Participatory Development Communication-Philosophical Pemises, in S.A. White and K.S. Nair, *Participatory Communication : Working For Change and Development.* (New Delhi : Sage, 1994) p. 51. For Freire, it is not merely awareness or the act of knowing, but its relationship to a project of social transformation whereby consciousness and action on consciousness are dialectically related. *ibid.* p. 53.

28. P. Huesca, New Directions for Participatory communication for Development, *Media Development,* XLIII (1996) 2, p. 26. In this book, he argues that cultivating a sensibility to multiple meanings within a culture is a useful first step in advancing participatory Communication for Development.

29. "Man acts upon his ideas and his actions are guided by what he believes ...and anticipates". In David Krech, *Individual in the Society.* (New York : McGraw Hill, 1962) p. 68. It can be argued that the relationship between attitude, belief and behaviour do not necessarily have direct relationships.

30. For M. Weber, the nature of the desired sacred values has strongly influenced the nature of external interest and the corresponding way of life both of an individual and of social stratification itself. This is quoted in R. Robertson. *Sociology of Religion.* (Hamondsworth : Penguin Education, 1978) p. 354.

31. P. Lee, (1987) has already identified some of the roles to be played by the Church in the society and in the Media in line with NWICO Movement. Op. cit.

32. C. Morris, *God in a Box : Christian Strategy in TV Age.* (London : Hodder & Stoughton, 1984) p. 65. With reference to Heb. 13:15, I Peter 2:9 and Romans 12:1, he quotes Tiller (A strategy for the Church Ministry) saying, 'Lay participation in the ministry is an inevitable process in the Church'.

33. Pope John Paul II in 1983 emphasised co-responsibility rather than democracy by pointing out participation in making choices which affect the life of the community, a role of selection of leaders, provision for the accountability of the leaders and structures for effective participation and shared responsibility. Quoted in K. Walf and J. Provost, The Tabu of Democracy within the Church, *Concilium.* (London : SCM, 1992) p. 133.

34. *The Uppsala Report : Official Report of the IV Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, edited by Normal Goodall, (Geneva : WCC, 1962) p. 395. The report adds that in Christ we are united to unmask all pseudo-communication which divides rather than unites, points to ourselves than others, sows enmity rather than reconciles, imprisons rather than liberates.
35. C. Morris, (1984) Op. cit. p. 212.
36. Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh : A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 BCE.* (New York : Orbis, 1985) p. 645. In this book his presuppositions are the humanistic and sociological methods for reconstructing the ancient Israel mutation. p. xxiii.
37. *Ibid.*
38. J. W. DeGruchy. Christianity and Democratisation, *Reformed World,* 44 (1994) p. 141.
39. J. Barr, The Bible as a Political Document, *The Bulletin of the John Rylands University.* (Manchester : Library of Manchester, 1980), p. 273. Quoted in DeGruchy, (1994) Op. cit. p. 143.
40. DeGruchy, (1994) *ibid.* p. 144.
41. A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York : Harper & Row, 1969) p. 201.
42. J. M. Hamilton, *Social Justice and Deuteronomy. 15,* (Atlanta : Scholars Press. 1992) p. 201.
43. M. Walzer. (1986) *Exodus and Revolution,* New York : Basic Books.
44. Isaiah 58:7 & 14, Micah 3:9-10 & 4:2.
45. Isaiah 6:8-10
46. R. Keitzer, Communication of the Word of God in the Prophetic Traditions of the Bible; edited by Gnana Robinson, *Communicating Gospel Today,* (Madurai : TTS 1986) p. 9.
47. C. Morris, (1984) Op. cit. p. 212.
48. Quoted by Morris (1984) *ibid.* p. 210.
49. Quoted by Morris (1984) *ibid.* p. 214.
50. J. W. DeGruchy (1994) Op. cit. p. 146.
51. R. A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence,* (San Francisco : Harper & Row, 1987) p. 244.
52. Here (radah) and (archein) have the same meaning.
53. Interpreters Bible Commentary calls this transformation as revolution. G. A. Buttrick *New Testament articles, Matthew, Mark,* (New York : Abingdon. 1951) p. 817.
54. Mark 8:35, Luke 21:15-16.
55. Morris, (1984) Op. cit. p. 212.