

# COMMUNICATION AS COSTLY COMEDY<sup>1</sup>

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## TWO COMMON WARNINGS

Anyone who sets out to present to anyone else — child, adolescent or adult, of the same culture or of a different culture — an idea that's not already in that person's mind, should remember two warnings:

*"First, you have to earn the right to be heard."*

*"What you are speaks so loudly that I can't hear what you're saying."*

These two warnings hold true no matter whether the "new idea" is a spiritual truth or whether it's looking at the teacher in class, or whether it's the necessity to add special endings to nouns that are plural in their meaning.

Keeping these warnings in mind, let's take a trip to the movies.

## ONE UNCOMMON MOVIE

Sometime in the 1960s I saw a film titled HEAVENS ABOVE, which was set in England in the days when manned space flight was almost but not quite a reality. HEAVENS ABOVE was a comedy — or at least I think it was supposed to be a comedy — starring Peter Sellers.. It shows up seldom if at all on the reruns these days. The following is my recollection of the plot.

In the opening scene we get a distant view of a young man — Peter Sellers — wearing a round collar and a dark suit, the standard uniform of a minister of the Church of England, leaving his car and entering a penitentiary. We soon discover that he's a chaplain, and that he's been called to the penitentiary in order to give final religious rites to a man who is about to be put to death for murder. We watch as the interview begins. In the next scene we see someone in the same round collar

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and the same dark suit emerge from the penitentiary, get into the same car, and drive away. And then, as readers may have guessed, we're back in the interview room and sure enough, here we find Peter Sellers in his underwear, bound and gagged and tied to a chair.

Now apparently this is only the latest in a series of demonstrations of ineptitude by this particular young clergyman, so his superiors in the organization have to decide what to do with him next. Finally they decide to send him to fill a vacancy in a church in a small English industrial city. The name of this city, Orbiston Parva, is a hint that this comedy may be more than a comedy, for translated into English its name means "little town of the world," and in Greek it comes out as "microcosm."

It turns out that the city of Orbiston Parva depends economically on a single industry, a pharmaceutical factory whose principal product is an over-the-counter remedy called Tranquilax. Tranquilax, it seems, consists of just the ideal balance of three ingredients. One of the ingredients is a tranquilizer, one is a stimulant, and the third is a laxative. This remedy has proved to be a great commercial success, which I suppose is hardly surprising since it allows people to deal simply, expeditiously and simultaneously with three of the most common ills of life, and so it has brought to the citizens of Orbiston Parva a comfortable amount of economic stability and prosperity.

Now into Orbiston Parva and its church comes this young minister, very upbeat and full of optimism. He's riding on the only mode of transportation he could find, which was a garbage truck driven by a friendly West Indian named Matthew. As they enter the city, they are singing:

"Praise, my soul the King of Heaven; to His feet thy tribute bring!  
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven; Ever more His praises sing! Alleluia!  
Alleluia! Praise the everlasting King!"

Before long, however, the new pastor is pointing out the superficiality of the worship that the people are accustomed to, and their frequent hypocrisies, and the need to face the demands of the Gospel as well as to accept its promises. All this is new to the people of Orbiston Parva, and they find it both challenging and refreshing, and before long the church is filled to overflowing and a ferment of new activities begins to show itself in the congregation. So all seems to be going well. The assignment to this new post seems to have been just the right thing.

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But the earnest young clergyman has his clumsy side. As he crosses the churchyard one night on his way to a meeting, he falls into an open grave, climbs back out, and continues about his business. The same kind of naïve awkwardness shows up in his dealing with people as well.

As the weeks and the months pass, the novelty begins to wear off, and people begin to find the demands and the new activities more and more onerous. This is particularly true when the principles put forth by Peter Sellers' character begin to conflict with the lifestyle that Tranquilax both typifies and supports. Then not only do the people in the pews begin to chafe and grumble, but the powers that be begin to become quite concerned.

And so the same powers find themselves facing the same problem that they had faced once before: Where shall we put this guy? There's no respectable way to get rid of him, and yet we can't let him go on this way much longer. What to do?

Then somebody comes up with a bright idea. Since our young friend seems to be making so much trouble as a parish minister, and we have no acceptable reason for demoting him, why not promote him and make him a bishop? But of course, if we do make him a bishop, he might just cause all the more unrest among the people in his diocese. So the thing to do is to put him in charge of a place where there *are* no people. We'll make him BISHOP OF OUTER SPACE! This way we can get him out of our hair, avoid public criticism, and at the same time score a few points in public relations by showing that we're in touch with the exciting new developments in technology! And so it's done. The troublemaker is removed from the parish church in Orbiston Parva, and consecrated Bishop of Outer Space. What a relief!

But — and here's where the story ends — the new bishop's initial duty after his consecration is to visit Britain's first astronaut where the man is waiting in a quonset hut just moments before he is to climb into his space suit and be sent off on the country's first manned space flight. At the very beginning of their interview, the man says quite plainly that the mission has been inadequately planned, the equipment has been insufficiently tested, that the mission is going forward only to satisfy the demands of key politicians, and that he is sure that he himself will not return from it alive.

In the final sequence, we see a spacesuit-clad figure emerge from the quonset hut. He raises his hand in apparent greeting to the spectators, but just as he enters the capsule, he almost imperceptibly traces with his finger the shape of the Cross. Then

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he enters the spacecraft, and as it blasts off through the clouds and disappears from view we hear a man's voice singing

"Angels in the height adore Him. Ye behold Him face to face. Sun and Moon bow down before Him, Dwellers all in time and space. Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise with me the God of Grace!"

And of course we discover the astronaut back in the quonset hut in his underwear, bound and gagged and tied to a chair.

This brings us — or at least it again and again has brought me — to the question, Is this comedy only about a strangely named place called Orbiston Parva with its double dependency on Tranquilax? Or is it only a movie about the Church? Or is it that uncommon phenomenon, a genuinely religious movie that happens to have an ecclesiastical setting? To put the question more bluntly, are we to see in the Peter Sellers character some kind of Christ figure?

I myself think we definitely should not see this young clergyman as Christ. True, he was supposed to be an official representative of Christ, but he was sorely limited in his intelligence, his judgment, and his ability to get things done. True, some of the judgments he pronounced against what was going on in Orbiston Parva were probably consistent with what the Lord Himself might have said, but he spoke them indistinctly and probably without fully understanding what he was saying. True, he got into trouble for speaking the truth, but that has happened to countless people, godless as well as godly, throughout the ages. It's even true that he gave up his own life — that he voluntarily became a block of ice in outer space — so that another man might live, but his sacrifice only bought the other man a few more years of earthly metabolism; it did not purchase for him either pardon for his sins or eternal life.

No, the Peter Sellers character in HEAVENS ABOVE cannot be for us a model of Christ. As I interpret the movie, however, that he is an example for us as Christians. For me the key to this interpretation is to be found in that almost imperceptible farewell gesture in which he traced the shape of the Cross with his finger as he waved to the crowd. In this act I see three things:

- It shows to me as an outside observer where his mind was: that he was drawing his example and his courage from what had been done for him 2000 years earlier.

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- His gesture would enable other characters in the same story, such as viewers of the next day's newsreels all over England, to know where his example and his courage had come from.
- The overt gesture itself was only a tiny variant on something (in this instance, a farewell wave) that would have been done under the same circumstances by anyone else.

#### REFLECTING ON THIS UNCOMMON MOVIE

In closing, let me share a few of the questions that this story has brought to my mind over the years. I do so in the hope that my questions will start similar discussion among readers of *CETC Newsletter*.

1. First of all I remember that *HEAVENS ABOVE* is a comedy. In his rising-from-the-grave episode, as well as in his overall bumbling ineptitude, the young clergyman reminds me not to take myself, or my own efforts — even my rare partial successes — at imitating Christ, too seriously.

2. Although I don't see the Sellers character as a Christ-figure, I do see represented in his action one side of an analogy. This particular analogy fulfills four special conditions:

- One side of the analogy consisted of physical, human acts.
- The other side of the analogy is the idea of redemption through Christ as the Word of God made flesh.
- A person's acts are both motivated by, and made possible by, that person's deep belief in the idea. They thus become, not just figurative *symbols for* the idea, and not just an *analogy* of it, but outward *signs that* the idea is active within him or her.
- The human purpose of the human acts is to help other humans to *get something which they deeply desire and which is within the range of what humans actually can help one another to get*: health, food, longer life, fluency in English, a feeling of self-respect, political freedom, and so on. It does not even pretend to include such things as spiritual salvation or eternal life.

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To the extent that an analogy meets all four of these conditions, it begins to take on some qualities of a *sacrament*, whether the human actions involved be a style of teaching, or of cooking, or of sharing a flat.

With this in mind, I ask myself:

“What needs am I in a position to fulfill in the lives of which people?”

(What would *your* answer be?)

2. I remember that for me the key to the interpretation of the movie was a barely perceptible variant on the gesture of a farewell wave. As the suggestologists have pointed out to us, often the most powerful communication comes through stimuli that we don't fully notice. In a language class, these might include orderliness, openness to spontaneity, generally accepting or critical tone, and countless other factors. So I also ask myself,

“What ‘tiny variants’ do I have control over in how I deal with the people in various parts of my life, and what might they convey to those around me?”

(What would *your* answer be?)

3. What was really so bad about the Tranquilax culture, that our young friend felt he had to stand up against it? Is it also up to me to fight for needs that people aren't aware of, or that they might even deny having? Here I'm reminded of Francis Schaeffer's characterization of modern society as concerned mainly with “personal peace” (caricatured by the triune benefits of Tranquilax the drug), and “relative affluence” (brought to Orbiston Parva by Tranquilax the industry). I'm reminded also that much is being written these days about authoritarian and non-authoritarian models in language education. And I ask myself about that.

(What would *your* answer be?)

4. In general, I suppose, the higher the cost of an act, the more convincing it is likely to have been. “He wouldn't have acted that way if he hadn't really believed...!” That, of course, is what, in my view at least, turned a silly comedy into a moving — and challenging — parable. So I ask myself,

“What's really real to *me*?”

(What would *your* answer be?)

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5. Finally, here's how a company that rents videotapes on the Internet summarizes HEAVENS ABOVE:

“Sellers is outstanding in this satirical comedy about a well-meaning clergyman who manages to make things difficult for his snooty parishioners.”

This forces me to ask myself,

“Did the writer of this squib completely miss the point of HEAVENS ABOVE, or was I just reading into it some ideas that I was wanting to find?”

(What would *your* answer be?)

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