

Liberation, Feminism, and Development Communication

This essay notes the relative neglect of considerations of both liberation and gender in the scholarship and practice of development communication. Liberation perspectives on development, grounded in religion and spirituality, argue for individual and collective empowerment, and therefore appear to offer consistency with feminist thought. In practice, it is unclear to what extent women are included or empowered in applications of liberation theology to development communication. This paper argues that the theory and practice of development communication would be strengthened by drawing on insights from both feminism and liberation theology.

Most discourse on development communication has assumed an economic framework, concerned primarily with the creation and distribution of material resources in society and the role of communication in these processes. Although some who make critical, political economic arguments do recognize ideological influence (e.g., issues of cultural imperialism), these considerations usually are secondary to larger questions of power and control over capital resources. The globalization of the economy has reinforced the dominance of economic perspective.

Religion, spirituality, and other nonmaterial factors are seldom central in the scholarship or practice of Western development—except as obstacles to change under the dominant paradigm of modernization. Likewise, the purpose of communication usually is defined as persuasion and marketing (modernization perspectives) or political solidarity and resistance to modernization (critical perspectives), with little attention to the role of religion or spirituality. In the larger field of communication theory, the notion of religious or spiritual practice as a form of communication has been seriously considered by only a few communication scholars, with most scholars focusing on other practical communication functions (Craig, 1999).¹

The neglect of religion and spirituality in development communication has been accompanied by a neglect of gender. Yet the field of development studies reveals 3 decades of scholarship on gender inequities,

beginning with Ester Boserup's (1970) pioneering book, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, which helped catalyze the 1975-85 United Nations Decade for Women as well as the implementation of women-specific policies and programs in most aid agencies. Since then, feminist critiques of development have evolved substantially. More complex, socialist feminist critiques replaced liberal feminist arguments for integrating women in development, and, in the past decade, the influences of postmodernism, poststructuralism, minority, and Third World feminisms (including postcolonial feminism and ecofeminism) have combined to raise new questions and critiques (e.g., Mies & Shiva, 1993; Mohanty, 1991b; Rogers, 1980; Ruether, 1996; Sen & Grown, 1987; Spivak, 1988). The field of communication studies likewise reveals 3 decades of feminist scholarship, also showing the ongoing impact of changes in feminist thought (e.g., Steeves & Wasko, in press; van Zoonen, 1993).

This essay draws on insights from a combination of liberation theology and feminist theory to argue that both would strengthen the theory and practice of development communication. I begin by discussing the contributions of liberation theology and feminism to development communication. I close by summarizing the overlapping concerns of liberation, feminist, and Marxian perspectives, arguing for more effort to collaborate, and providing brief examples illustrating the need for such collaboration.

Liberation and Development Communication

The religious and spiritual basis of development communication is rarely explicit in the literature, with many authors using the words of "empowerment," "emancipation," "liberation," and "dialogue," but few delving deeper, and fewer yet considering what they mean for women. At the macrolevel, some of the most significant social changes, including the civil rights movement in North America, the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, the anticolonial resistance movement in India, and the base ecclesial community movement in Brazil, have been inspired by religious leaders. Yet religion may play a contradictory role in people's lives and is often more oppressive than empowering, as in many mission interventions and in fundamentalist movements that threaten human rights. Also notions of fatalism, which are central in many religions, may simultaneously comfort the poor and thwart social change.

In addition, both capitalist and Marxian approaches to development have been largely secular and reject religious expressions as contrary to the material concerns of modernity.² If considered at all, religion usually is viewed as a barrier to overcome by creative strategizing (e.g., Manoff, 1985). In Marxian thought, religion is an opiate, masking problems of material inequality. Another complication is that Western feminists have

tended to see religion as patriarchal (e.g., Daly, 1973) and to view women in developing countries as victims of religions (Mohanty, 1991b, pp. 62–63).

Although critical and feminist scholars and practitioners often draw freely on Freire (1970) to promote individual and collective empowerment, they usually forget that Freire's argument rested fundamentally on Christian liberation theology, one of several forms of "socially engaged spirituality" (e.g., Rothberg, 1993a). Themes of socially engaged spirituality are evident in the activism and writings of Christian liberation theology (e.g., Gutiérrez, 1973); of Jewish liberation theology (e.g., Ellis, 1990), of Islamic liberation theology (e.g., Esack, 1997), of engaged Buddhism,³ of Gandhi's approaches to nonviolent social change (e.g., Gandhi, 1967), of feminist, Christian liberation theology (e.g., Brubaker, 1991; Grey, 1999), of feminist interpretations of Islam (e.g., Mernissi, 1987), and elsewhere.⁴

These approaches all respond actively to social suffering, injustice, and inequality. They are highly context based and consider the role of economic and political structures in contributing to oppression. They make use of hermeneutics, which involves the interpretation of sacred texts within historically specific contexts, to argue for liberation from injustice, discrimination, and prejudice wherever they occur, including within their own religious organizations. Hence, these approaches reject dogmatic forms of religion that legitimize or ignore injustice. Faith and spiritual practice are important, but the goal is not just individual enlightenment, but collective activism leading to social change as well.

Space does not allow an analysis of every major religion, much less the myriad religions globally. However, an analysis of liberation interpretations of texts and belief systems within the traditions of different religions reveals a number of common and overlapping conclusions: that humans are fundamentally relational and need both human and divine relationships; that oppressive social and psychological conditions constitute barriers to these relationships; that social and divine relationships are mutually necessary, such that spiritual practice inspires service to the oppressed, and that God (or ultimacy) is discovered through this work; that service to the oppressed includes recognizing the role of corrupt institutions in sustaining oppressive conditions; and that political actions to confront institutional evils may be necessary as a part of this work. In essence, liberation theology involves work with and activism on behalf of the poor, the study of sacred texts, and spiritual practice. The combination of direct involvement with people and spiritual practice is crucial, as these two endeavors are assumed to be linked dialectically, and both are essential for spiritual growth.⁵

These interpretations have yielded religious and political alliances and coalitions among like-minded groups, such as the Ecumenical Associa-

tion of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). In general, proponents of liberation theology are highly conscious of commonalities between religions and urge inclusivity and collaboration to combat social evils (e.g., see Ellis, 1990; Gandhi, 1967).

In applications of liberation theology to development communication and development education, Freire (1970) has been perhaps the most influential.⁶ In brief, Freire's assumptions of what development communication should do are radically different from the assumptions of modernization, emphasizing message transfer supportive of economic growth. Rather, development communication is emancipatory dialogue that leads to expanded individual and communal consciousness and power, with no hierarchical distinction among participants in dialogue. Freire assumed that once people identified their sources of oppression and their sources of power, they would then be able to find their own solutions. For development communication practice, the central focus should be face-to-face egalitarian dialogue to initiate and sustain a collective process of reflection and action (e.g., Freire, 1970, 1973).⁷

For Freire, the success of the awakening process via dialogue additionally requires spiritual practice, which is communication, though a form of communication seldom examined by Western communication specialists. The assumption is that spiritual practice by individuals and groups assists in tapping resources that provide the necessary consciousness and motivation for change. Other forms of traditional religious communication may additionally be helpful in the liberation or empowerment communication process. These forms are unique to each religious tradition and cultural context and may include song, dance, storytelling, and gatherings of demographic groups with shared concerns.

It is important to recognize that the basic tenets of liberation theology require an understanding of the secular world and of relevant theories. Liberation theology's call for social action on behalf of the poor necessitates political involvement and activism in collaboration with other groups that challenge oppressive social structures. These other groups often affiliate with Marxian thought, which foregrounds an analysis of social relations in their proper historic context, versus more mainstream economic models that prioritize individualistic values. However, the relationship between liberation theology and Marxism has been historically controversial, resulting in statements of condemnation and concern from the Vatican (Turner, 1999).

To summarize briefly areas of overlap, both liberation theology and Marxism evolved in response to observations and experiences of social inequality and injustice, especially by economic class, and both have sided with the poor. Both also concur that solutions require collective action, appropriate to the context of each situation. Areas of conflict have included religion's aversion to science, including social science;

Marxism's historic aversion to religion; traditional and orthodox Marxism's support for revolution to address injustice, whereas most liberation theologians and activists advocate nonviolent means of working for social change; and Marxism's assumptions about the class determination of the individual, therefore denying the unique value and power of the individual (Turner, 1999; Zweig, 1991; Melkote & Steeves, 2001).

Contemporary theorists and activists continue to grapple with the weaknesses of Marxism, as indicated by failed social experiments and also Marxism's inadequate attention to the power of nonmaterial phenomena. However, the tradition still provides a basis for social action in collaboration with others who share Marxism's fundamental concerns. These collaborators include followers of liberation theology. They also may include feminists, especially feminists influenced by Marxian thought and its emphasis on class and historic context.

Feminism and Development Communication

In the literature of women and development, context has been an increasingly important theme. This is partly because much of the research and practice has been carried out with contextually inaccurate assumptions and conclusions. Chandra Mohanty (1991b) argues that Western feminists "discursively colonize" the lives of women in developing countries and assume a "composite, singular 'third world woman'" (p. 53). This monolithic woman is victimized by a "monolithic notion of patriarchy" as well (pp. 53–54). Mohanty observes that feminist scholars have commonly assumed Third World women are victimized in six ways, that is, by male violence, universal dependency, colonial process, religion, familial systems, and development. Minority and Third World feminists have critiqued these and other assumptions as ethnocentric, imperialistic, and inaccurate (e.g., hooks, 1984; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Minha, 1986–1987; Mohanty, 1991a, 1991b; Spivak, 1988).

The feminist perspective assumed here draws in part on socialist feminism, which assumes (from Marx) that individuals cannot develop their potential in class-based societies where wealth and power are controlled by a few. Therefore socialist feminism rejects the individualistic premise of liberal feminism. It also rejects feminisms that assume an essential biological human nature, including some forms of radical feminism. From Marx, socialist feminism assumes that human nature is a dialectical product of many factors and constraints, biological, social, economic, and political. Socialist feminism further assumes that the capitalist mode of production and capitalist classes contribute to women's oppression by encouraging men's control over women's labor in most societies and increasingly globally. Socialist feminism does not focus exclusively on capitalism and capitalist structures of globalization as the only sources

of women's oppression, however, recognizing that women were oppressed before capitalism and have been oppressed in socialist states. Hence, socialist feminists have struggled to develop theories of capitalist patriarchy (e.g., Eisenstein, 1979). Yet theories of capitalist patriarchy remain problematic in many respects. Most significant are problems of theorizing patriarchy in terms other than capitalism, especially in non-material terms, such as ideology, representation, culture, spirituality, and individual identity and subjectivity. This is essentially the same problem previously discussed of linking liberation theology and Marxism. Clearly nonmaterial facets of society, including media representations, popular culture, and spirituality, may catalyze or contribute to social change, even accounting for material parameters and constraints (Zweig, 1991, pp. 40–41). This and other problems are confronted via extensive criticisms and revisions of Marxism by theorists such as Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci, as well as by liberation theologians and feminist scholars. Finding a material basis for nonmaterial aspects of society (or vice versa) remains an obstacle to linking capitalism and patriarchy (Barrett, 1992, 1999; Steeves & Wasko, in press), as well as Marxism and liberation theology.

Additionally, in the past 2 decades feminism in general has turned away from an emphasis on material experiences (e.g., of illiteracy, low pay, and sexual harassment) to an emphasis on symbols and representations (Barrett, 1992). Poststructuralist theorists such as Foucault have argued that material objects alone are meaningless, but are given meaning by signs and discourses. Poststructuralists also have challenged the validity of causal explanations, arguing that it is more useful to analyze meaning in representations. Poststructuralism has been supported by postmodernism, which also rejects causal theories and their underlying grand narratives of legitimation in favor of plural, local, and historically specific meanings (e.g., Fraser & Nicholson, 1990). In addition to these influences, minority, Third World, and postcolonial feminists, noted previously, have critiqued Western feminisms as irrelevant and harmful to their lives. These feminists tend to agree with poststructuralists' and postmodernists' rejection of unified theory, yet their material political agenda departs from the poststructuralist focus on discourse (Barrett, 1999, p. 149).

As development communication scholarship and practice have centralized the economic concerns of people (including women) in developing countries, it is likewise necessary to critique the political-economic structures and processes that contribute to their concerns. At the same time, the role of nonmaterial factors in oppression—including ideology, religion, and spirituality—cannot be discounted. Additionally, none of these considerations are fixed, but vary greatly by cultural and historical context. I have argued elsewhere that the solution is not to confine femi-

nist scholars, practitioners, and activists to their own contextual boundaries, but rather to work harder to understand our differences and commonalities, to collaborate and to build political coalitions (Steeves, 1993b). Gender is a crucial, yet complex, contextual consideration at all levels and in all areas of development communication scholarship and practice.

Alongside a recognition of all these points, including the importance of ongoing conceptual and political work, critical political-economic studies of gender in relation to communication in developing countries clearly are needed. Yet relatively few critical international communication scholars or dependency theorists have considered gender in their analyses (e.g., Scott, 1996; Steeves, 1993a). Of the critically oriented feminist communication scholarship, the majority of studies have examined representations of women in media, including the media of developing countries. These studies assume that exposure challenges hegemony; therefore it is worthwhile to reveal patriarchal processes in media texts. These studies usually go beyond critique, to identify openings for possible hegemonic change as well. In contrast to studies of representation, some (though far fewer) studies examine women's reception of media in developing countries, gender considerations in media and information policies, and women's participation in communication and information organizations and projects.⁸

Beyond studies of mainstream media, telecommunications, and information technologies, feminist scholars and activists must recognize that the democratization of communication and information is irrelevant to the majority of the world's women, who do not have access to these technologies. Hence, projects focusing on issues that affect basic access are crucial. These include efforts to increase women's and girls' literacy and to make greater use of: indigenous forms of communication (Morrison, 1993); traditional women's groups and networks (March & Taqqu, 1986); and democratic media such as community radio (Lucas, 1999).⁹ None of these projects are easy to implement and sustain, as the trend toward globalization and privatization increasingly drains resources from marginalized groups, especially in rural areas (e.g., Heath, 1988; "Women," 1994). However, the continued initiation and success of some such projects do indicate openings for progressive social change within mainstream global and national structures.

Additionally, issues of education and economic empowerment often are mutually dependent, and both may be necessary before women have access to communication and information. It is in relation to these goals that critical and feminist communication scholarship often overlaps with Freirian arguments. To increase grassroots involvement in development projects, feminist scholars have written much about alternative, highly participatory, empowerment-oriented approaches to development. These approaches are varied, and they are not mutually exclusive.¹⁰

Rowlands (1997) and Rozario (1997) discuss the history of the empowerment concept, which both observe is overused. Rozario divides empowerment into two primary models: One model “is based on empowering the individual, not on encouraging collective social action by the oppressed” (p. 46). The other model, consistent with critical arguments, has emerged from Freire’s (1970, 1973) approach, emphasizing “conscientization and radical social action” (Rozario, 1997, p. 47).

As women historically have been neglected in economic development projects, noted earlier, a number of projects have tried to implement Freirian approaches. Microcredit organizations to enable women or women’s collectives to start income generation projects are among the most lauded of these approaches. For instance, since 1979 the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh has given unsecured loans to thousands of poor women for income-generating activities (Mizan, 1994). Although this and similar organizations have certainly helped many, evidence indicates that these organizations do not seek to alter existing gender and class hierarchies as grounded in a combination of indigenous tradition and the global economy. This appears true even for more radical microcredit nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that claim goals of consciousness raising and collective mobilization alongside improvement in economic status (Rozario, 1997). Even here, it appears that women add new tasks to their domestic responsibilities, with no changes in gender roles. Hence, while microcredit organizations allow for the self-improvement of some, the fundamental system of inequality is left intact.

Alongside efforts to create new kinds of economic development projects for women’s empowerment, feminists are creating alternative media and networking structures. These forms of communication support other nonmainstream approaches by providing outlets for unfettered discussion and for building organizational strength, by providing mechanisms for information dissemination, and by opening new spaces for resistance.

In general, feminists with critical leanings have struggled in varied ways and at all levels to understand and address the complexities associated with the role of communication and information in supporting or challenging modernization in a context of increased globalization. However, one problem with most of these approaches is their secular orientation and lack of attention to nonmaterial motivations and considerations.

Spirituality and Feminism in Development Communication

I argue that the theory and practice of development communication would be strengthened by more attention to both liberation and critically oriented feminist perspectives concerned with liberation and empowerment.

Empirical observation suggests the importance of both and the value of developing the conceptual arguments as well. Certainly many liberal feminist projects, including communication projects, have focused on women's needs, but have failed because they have not altered the basic social arrangements that oppress women (e.g., Rogers, 1980; Wilkins, 1999), or because they have neglected to work closely with women's groups, which include religious and spiritual organizations and resources (e.g., March & Taqqu, 1986). There is ample evidence that most of these projects fail to provide sustainable improvements in the lives of women or other oppressed groups.

Hence, the remainder of this section addresses a more useful question: To what extent do liberation projects aim to liberate women? At the macrolevel, it is well known that women have played active roles in major resistance movements, yet women usually have been marginalized from the leadership of these movements. At the microlevel, much more research remains to be done, but limited evidence thus far indicates that spiritually motivated empowerment movements and projects do not always encourage feminist empowerment.

Base Ecclesial Community Movement in Brazil

One example is the role of women in the resistance movement in Brazil in the 1970s, which was grounded in liberation theology. As in much of Latin America, Christian liberation theology in Brazil was largely manifest in base ecclesial communities, or *comunidades de base* (CEBs). These communities began emerging in 1950s to address priest shortages and help sustain Catholic tradition (Dawson, 1999). The idea was formally sanctioned at the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops held at Medellín, Colombia, in August, 1968. Hence, in much of Latin America, including Brazil, plans were drawn up to transform large parishes into confederations of base communities, confederations already established in many places because of the earlier experiments. The numbers grew quickly, and in Brazil, by the mid-1970s, there were an estimated 40,000 base communities in about 40 dioceses and over 100,000 by the mid-1980s. Although the idea began with Catholicism, many Protestant CEBs emerged as well (Cook, 1985; Dawson, 1999; Melkote & Steves, 2001).

The CEB process is nonhierarchical. Typical meetings use a three-part methodology, following an opening prayer. In addition, meetings involve a process of dialogue influenced by Freire's teachings. The three-part methodology has been called "See—Judge—Act" (Cook, 1985; Dawson, 1999). In the seeing phase, each individual is invited to share his or her concerns from the previous week, concerns that are often communal in nature. Next, in the judging phase of the meeting, a passage from scripture is read aloud and discussed in light of experiences shared in phase one, especially experiences of suffering and oppression. If the seeing and judging phases succeed in providing individuals with communal and

spiritual acceptance and a sense of inner strength, these phases are replaced by an action phase in the days following the meeting. Groups become motivated and empowered to apply their new insights in concrete work and activism in their neighborhoods.

The activist role of the base communities and of the Catholic church (and other Christian churches) in Brazil began emerging in the late 1960s through the mid-1970s following the coup of 1964, which replaced a democratic government with a repressive military dictatorship. Thousands were arrested and tortured or killed, unions were banned, and censorship was enforced. Hence, traditional modes for protest were closed. Pastoral workers at the base began to recognize the value of spiritual communities for political consciousness raising via biblical interpretation. The goals were no longer just to pray and carry out the rituals of the church, but to connect religious beliefs and rituals to political activism for social change (Boff, 1986; Dawson, 1999; Mesters, 1989).

In 1975, the first national meeting of base community leaders in Brazil was held.¹¹ This and later national meetings helped reveal common issues and transform the base communities into a national movement that lobbied for progressive social change. Ultimately, the CEB movement played a major role in overthrowing the military government of Brazil and restoring democratic elections by 1986. However, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, many activist educators and pastoral leaders were imprisoned and martyred for their opposition to the government. Paulo Freire was among those arrested for subversive activities following the military coup of 1964.¹²

Alvarez (1990) analyzes the urban feminine and feminist movements¹³ in Brazil from the 1960s through the mid-1980s, including complex relations between these movements, the church, and the religious left resistance movement. She notes that women were typically involved in church-affiliated mother's clubs, that is, feminine groups with practical gender interests, such as day care and improved health services. In the late 1960s and 1970s both laymen and laywomen were encouraged to join CEBs and participate in their political work (Alvarez, 1990, pp. 62–63). In many instances, these women made up the majority membership of CEBs.

However, while the church encouraged and greatly needed women's participation with men in social justice activism, it held firm to conservative doctrines on other issues of concern to women, especially in regard to sexuality and family roles. Also, few women held leadership positions in the movement for social justice (Alvarez, 1990, p. 64). Feminine groups that were initially focused on practical gender interests became frustrated by the limited respect and appreciation shown by men and clergy active in the CEBs (Alvarez, 1990, p. 107). Despite class barriers, they found more support for their concerns from middle-class feminist groups than from their male colleagues in the CEBs. Hence many

formerly feminine groups became influenced by feminism, resulting in conflicts between these groups and the church, conflicts that were difficult to overcome because of women's strong bonds with the church.

Alvarez (1990) gives an example of the evolution of one such feminine group at Jardim Mariam, a neighborhood community on the outskirts of Sao Paulo (Alvarez, 1990, pp. 126–133). As women's group participants gained more consciousness of gender inequality, they began acting on these interests. In the late 1970s donations for industrial sewing machines enabled a church-sponsored domestic sewing course to transform into an occupational sewing course. Discussions evolved from why women needed employment skills to issues of differential education for girls and boys, women's health, sexuality, family planning, and more. The group grew, with hundreds of women flooding into the church to participate. Although the parish priest had supported occupational training, he did not support the new discussion content that challenged church doctrine on sexual norms and family issues. The women felt betrayed, as they had provided essential services for the church and church-linked community groups working for social justice issues, and therefore felt they deserved support for their issues in return.

And whereas the local priest, a fervent advocate of liberation theology, seemed comfortable pushing “the limits of the parishioners” on class issues and the need for “general social transformation,” gender specific issues that directly challenged church moral doctrines appear to have been a different matter altogether. As the course increasingly centered on women's oppression in the private sphere, the tenuous alliance between the women and the local male practitioners of liberation theology became ever more strained. (Alvarez, 1990, p. 129)

In addition to the conflicts with the priest and others over church doctrine, male activists in the church disparaged feminism as a “bourgeois movement,” further reducing support for the women's issues. Eventually the group rented its own space and became an independent women's organization, even though most of the women involved remained active in the church as well. The new organization did much to train women for employment and empower them as individuals. However, the break with the church was costly because of the centrality of religion and spirituality in the lives of the women. Participation in the sewing course declined and the organizers decided to convert the course into a women's center to provide services to victims of gender violence. The church continued to object to the women's center, accusing it of being “antifamily” and “bourgeois feminist.” Eventually some of the key organizers left the group and returned to the church. By the mid-80s the women's center no longer existed and women were again taking domestic sewing classes at the church (Alvarez, 1990, pp. 131–132).

In sum, this example shows how liberation concerns with social justice and empowerment do not necessarily extend to feminist agendas. Yet the contradiction between this reality and the Freirian processes embraced by the CEBs is obvious. In this instance only select forms of oppression (class oppression) were suitable material for open discussion, conscientization, and political action. However, separation from the church was not a viable alternative because of the centrality of religion in the women's lives.

Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka

Another example is the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka, which has been established for decades at the village level throughout the country. The movement began in 1958, when a *shramadana* (labor assistance) camp was first organized in a poor village by A. T. Ariyaratne. Today the movement is the largest NGO in Sri Lanka and is active in close to 9,000 villages, about a third of the villages in the country.¹⁴ The primary goals are individual and collective awakening, accomplished by the voluntary sharing of time, resources, and labor. Individual personality development, called *paurushodaya*, is crucial. This entails two forms of liberation. The first is liberation from internal character flaws ("defilements") and from feelings of low self-worth. Second, *paurushodaya* means a growing consciousness of unjust socioeconomic forms of oppression that keep the poor majority from improving their lives and experiencing freedom. The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement cannot succeed without the leadership and participation of individuals fully dedicated to their own personal liberation, as well as the liberation of others.

Consistent with liberation theology, the Movement assumes that individual and collective liberation requires a combined process of spiritual practice and direct service to those in need (Liyanage, 1988). The process of combining spiritual practice and voluntary shared labor is operationalized primarily at the village level, where the goal is community self-sufficiency and empowerment. Spiritual practice involving meditation in the Buddhist tradition is an important feature of the movement. However, the Movement also aims to include and affirm all religious traditions (Liyanage, 1988).

The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement includes a legally independent Women's Movement, which claims that "Sarvodaya has always fully involved women in its development process" (Project 2000). Yet women in Sri Lanka have traditionally been considered inferior to men and encouraged to focus on roles as wives and mothers (Risseuw, 1988, p. 273). Data show that while women do constitute the majority of the unpaid volunteers (as in the Brazil example), they remain the minority (about 7%) of the Sarvodaya leadership. Also, Women's Movement goals

as described on the Sarvodaya website highlight women's traditional roles as mothers: "to ensure the mental and physical well being of children . . . to bring about the total development of women as mothers, social workers, income generators and spiritual leaders" (Project 2000).

Pace (1993) did field research to find out to what extent the awakening concept encouraged women to think critically about traditional and oppressive gender roles. She found that, whereas the movement does emphasize the necessity of personal transformation for societal transformation, it also idealizes village life, including traditional family life and gender roles therein. These values are evident in Sarvodaya's official literature, including the website for the Women's Group, noted earlier, and Ariyaratne's speeches.¹⁵ Women's predominant historic involvement with the movement is via the overlapping concerns of the mother's group, preschools, and the youth group. These gendered family values were evident in Pace's interviews, where she asked female participants what they think the movement means by awakening, whether anything should be changed about women's status in Sri Lanka, and whether the women perceived links between the two areas of questions. Most women did not question women's or men's traditional roles or any inequalities associated with these roles. A minority of women had begun to ask these questions, but not because the questions were encouraged within the movement.

From her research, Pace (1993), like Alvarez, concluded that the movement

remains radical in terms of its ideology around issues of spiritual and community development, yet it is conservative with regards to its perspectives on prescribed roles for men and women. As an organization Sarvodaya has not begun to investigate seriously changing gender constructs in Sri Lankan society. (p. 73)

Hence, whereas the movement encourages individual and community awakening through dialogue, spiritual practice and shared work, the awakening concept does not appear to include feminist awakening.

Additionally, although village-level income-generating projects have benefited individual women, these new responsibilities were merely added to women's domestic and subsistence responsibilities with no change in gender roles. This is consistent with the findings of Rozario (1997), noted earlier, in her study of secular empowerment projects for women in Bangladesh. At the same time, the fact that Sarvodaya emphasizes village self-reliance, human development and ecological balance constitutes a challenge to some of the macrolevel causes of women's exploitation, even if women are not aware of this. Furthermore, women's involvement and experiences in new roles may be personally empowering, even if these experiences do not result in feminist activism.

Conclusion

The structures and processes of development communication may be conceptualized as serving at least three overlapping practical goals: marketing, collective resistance, or spiritual awakening. The globalization of the economy has reinforced the dominance of the marketing framework. Critical and liberation frameworks remain viable avenues for scholarship and practice, yet these projects take place within the larger context of globalization, modernity, and patriarchy. Clearly all perspectives on communication and development have blind spots—in relation to each other, in relation to feminism, and to other issues not explored here that cross perspectives (such as environment, basic needs, and human rights). Gender-sensitive scholarship and revisions are needed in each instance. Alongside the consideration of gender in development, religion, and spirituality should not be ignored.

This essay has focused on communication for spiritual awakening and liberation for a variety of reasons: The perspective has been neglected by most development communication scholars and practitioners; history reveals its power in challenging oppressive social structures; and it offers much consistency with Marxian and feminist theory and practice. Just as liberation theologies challenge religious traditions that emphasize spirituality without social awareness, many who identify with Marxism and feminism deviate from their antireligious peers by acknowledging the importance of spirituality as a resource for challenging class, gender, and other forms of oppression.

The examples in Brazil and in Sri Lanka are just two of many movements and projects that reveal the central role of religion and spirituality in much development communication.¹⁶ All of these projects need feminist analysis and intervention. However, feminist studies of the role of religion and spirituality in development remain vulnerable to two critiques: They may contribute to the Western tendency to overidentify women in developing countries with religion, and they may contribute to Western tendency to negatively and inaccurately miscast women as victims of religion (Mohanty, 1991b). I argue that the reality is neither. Most women in developing countries are involved with religion, but they obviously have many other affiliations, too. Further, women globally are reinterpreting sacred texts in feminist directions and challenging patriarchal practices in religious organizations.

Relatively few development communication scholars, including those influenced by Freire, have considered the positive role and power of religious communication in transforming individuals and communities. Those few who have done so have usually neglected women's struggle to participate in these empowerment-oriented settings characterized by socially engaged spirituality. Therefore, there is a need to tell some of these stories and see what lessons there may be for development communication theory and practice.

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¹ Craig (1999) divides the field of communication theory into seven traditions according to underlying conceptions of communication practice: rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, and critical. Craig suggests a spiritual tradition as a neglected area that might be further developed.

² See Steeves (in press) for a discussion and feminist critique of modernization and critical approaches to development communication.

³ Well-known examples include the social activist and exiled Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh (e.g., 1987) and Sulak Sivaraska of Thailand (e.g., Rothberg, 1993b).

⁴ See "Gender" (1999) for 10 articles and a resource list on gender and feminism in relation to different religious and spiritual traditions globally. The literature of Christian feminist theology is especially extensive, including Rosemary Radford Ruether's many books (e.g., 1983). Some of this literature focuses primarily on poverty and women's rightful place in liberation movements. Grey (1999) and Brubaker (1991) provide overviews of feminist liberation movements. Isasi-Diaz and Tarango (1988) discuss feminism and liberation in Latin America. As Grey (1999) points out, the term *feminist theology* is seldom used outside of North America and Europe. Elsewhere, the labels that women choose and their priorities vary considerably. Even in North America, the term *womanist theology* refers to the theology of African American women and *mujerista theology*, the theology of Hispanic women.

⁵ See Melkote and Steeves (2001), chapter 7, for an analysis of liberation interpretation within several religious traditions.

⁶ Although his ideas emerged initially from the Christian liberation theology movement of 1960s Brazil, he drew upon the writings and actions of liberation leaders from other traditions as well, especially Gandhi (1967).

⁷ Development communication texts that promote Freirian and related approaches include Mody (1991), Nair and White (1993), and White, Nair, and Ascoft (1994). Freirian arguments have been extended to critiques of power differentials in uses of traditional data-gathering methods in non-Western contexts, with alternative proposals favoring dialogic, egalitarian ethnographic approaches (e.g., Mody, 1991).

⁸ For examples, see Steeves (1993a) and Steeves (in press).

⁹ Riano (1994), Allen, Rush, and Kaufman (1996), and Gallagher and Quindoza-Santiago (1994) provide additional examples globally.

¹⁰ Overlapping lines of argument include communitarian theory (e.g., Christians, Ferré, & Fackler, 1993; Tehrani, 1994), and environmentally oriented perspectives, including ecofeminism (Mies & Shiva, 1993).

¹¹ This conference was held at Vitória (Espírito Santo), January 6–8, 1975.

¹² Friere spent 70 days in jail and was subsequently expelled from Brazil. He began his first book, *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (published later as *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 1973) while in prison.

¹³ Drawing on Molyneux (1986), Alvarez (1990) defines feminist movements at those that seek to advance strategic gender interests that derive from an analysis of gender oppression. Feminine movements advance practical gender interests, such as day care, and do not involve strategic goals.

¹⁴ See Liyanage (1988); also *Sarvodaya: The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement of Sri Lanka*. Internet: <http://www.sarvodaya.org/index.html>. Earlier essays on the Movement in the context of development communication include Ariyaratne (1987) and Dissanayake (1991). See Melkote and Steeves (2001), chapter 8, for a more extensive discussion of the issues raised here.

¹⁵ An analysis of his speeches, however, shows that they have changed over the years, to show a greater recognition of gender inequality and how traditional roles sustain inequality (Pace, 1993, pp. 14, 64–65).

¹⁶ Other movements that could be studied include the Sarvodaya Movement in India, and the radical NGO movement in Thailand. See also Melkote and Steeves (2001) for an example of a gender-sensitive Muslim Family Life Education Project in Ghana and for further discussion of the

Notes

base ecclesial community movement and the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement. For additional examples, see “Gender” (1999).

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