

1986

Communication, cultural form and theology

Paul A. Soukup

Santa Clara University, psoukup@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/comm>

Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Soukup, Paul A. (1986). Communication, cultural form and theology. *The Way*, Supplement no. 57, 77-89.

Copyright © 1986 British Jesuits. Reprinted with permission.

www.theway.org.uk

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.

COMMUNICATION, CULTURAL FORM AND THEOLOGY

By PAUL A. SOUKUP

AT FIRST BLUSH the yoking of communication science with theology might seem merely utilitarian, the one serving the other in much the same way that public relations serves industry or government. The relationship goes far beyond that.

As an academic area, communication science is fairly new, emerging from departments of speech, sociology, or psychology in the universities of the United States over the last thirty-five years. Communication science takes as its subject matter human communication in its various forms (oral, written, or electronic), according to its various contexts (interpersonal, group, or mass), and through its various media (print, film, radio, television, and so on). By 'communication' in this essay I mean to include both rhetorical and technological methods of communication as well as the content or messages communicated. In this light, we can perceive a significant relationship between theology and communication science.

Consider, for example, the dominant cultural influence of contemporary communication. Not only what we think about but even the ways in which we think, speak, and write are subtly affected by the pervasive presence of communication. Our attempts to speak of God to a contemporary world begin by searching what Aristotle called the *topoi*, the culturally accepted 'places' for finding subject matter. Our entertainment, news, and contact with the world beyond neighbourhood and office come mediated by communication. Our religious sensibilities and responses to the world are continually shaped by this communication environment. Our allocation of time (for work, for recreation, for prayer) includes a fair proportion of 'media time'.

Or consider the way that communication has altered the relations among the various institutions of society. The roles of family,

Church, and school in educating children are radically different now that children spend more than twenty hours per week watching television. Newspapers, magazines, comic books, radio, television, and films all clamour for a share of our individual and collective attention. Where family, Church, school, and state had maintained a balanced control over society, the communication industry has not so much usurped their roles as made them somewhat irrelevant to many people.

At minimum, tying communication science to theology responds to these signs of the times. In such a study we recognize the powerful influence of communication and use this knowledge not only to speak to the world but also to inform theology. In addition, communication science also helps to explain some of the current movements in theology and spirituality by situating them within the broader context of a global 'communicative culture'. The relationship of communication science to theology is an important one, justified by far more than communication's popularizing or disseminating function in relation to the conclusions of the theological enterprise.

This essay explores some relationships between the areas of communication science and theology, beginning with a brief examination of what is called the 'cultural studies' model of communication and the institutional roles of communication in contemporary society. The second section presents a look at some models of communication interacting with theology in an earlier historical era, while the third reviews some contemporary models of communication within theology. The last section also examines the contemporary period but focusses on more specific projects.

1 *The cultural studies model*

'Cultural Studies' is a label used to describe the study of communication as a part of a larger, cultural, whole. It explicitly rejects the notion of communication as an isolated area of study, one that examines only the broadcast industry, for example. Instead, those who follow the cultural studies model insist that both the content of communication media (news, entertainment, commentary, and so forth) *and* their form of presentation interact with government policy, with the school system, with corporate ownership structures, with Churches, and so on down the line of all the forces which constitute the contemporary world. The impact of communication on society includes but also extends far beyond

the new kinds of content introduced by contemporary communication. Changes in communication media have altered patterns of entertainment and news reporting, forms of social relationships, our basic perceptions of reality, the scale of our societies, the role of the home, and the social interaction of large urban populations.¹

Another way to state the issue is to examine the communication industry as an institution of society with functions similar in scope to the other institutions of society. For George Gerbner and Kathleen Connolly, one communication product, television, has the social function of a religion. 'Television presents a total world of meaning whose relationship to the state is not unlike that of the Church in an earlier time'.² Television and the mass media introduce patterns of social interaction, work as agents of socialization, communicative values and a trusted interpretation of the world, provide a strong means of group identification or community, and enforce group membership criteria—all functions of religion.³

The cultural studies view of communication directs communication science to a perspective which encompasses the consequences of a particular communication medium, content, or strategy. These consequences may be social, intellectual, economic, technological, or political. For example, communication science could examine the effects of the telegraph on nineteenth-century travel, newspapers, business, and government. Similarly, communication science is attuned to the ways in which ideas are shaped and transmitted by different media. There are some things that can be sung about but lose their force when written down; likewise, some written messages cannot be translated to song or cinema. This perspective introduces a new dimension to the interaction between theology and communication science.

2 *Communication and theology: a look back*

Despite the written form of the scriptures, the bible and early theology share the characteristics of an oral culture. The first news of the risen Lord came by way of proclamation; indeed, the first written materials (the pauline letters) date from twenty to thirty years after the Resurrection. The format of the gospels, and most especially the Gospel of John, reflects the oral nature of their composition. Some aspects of this oral composition include formulaic expressions ('Son of David', 'Son of Man'), standardized themes and story patterns (parables, for example), the generation

of 'heavy' characters who represent types (Peter, the beloved disciple), a ceremonial approach to history that is concrete rather than abstract ('For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed . . . ' 1 Cor 11,23),⁴ and a binary, agonistic approach to the social world (light and darkness, sheep and goats, etc.). In addition, oral styles add elements in a series, repeating similar ideas rather than analyzing them (the Beatitudes) and use imagery that is drawn from daily human life ('A sower went out to sow . . .'; 'A father had two sons . . .').⁵

These stylistic features are not merely a curiosity: they indicate a particular pattern of thought. The available form for talking and remembering affects what can be thought. Thus, in a society in which the majority of people were illiterate, the Church couched theological truths in terms of narratives, rituals, and formulas. The theological core of Christianity is to this day proclaimed in liturgical ritual; more detailed statements take the form of easily recalled creeds. As christian theology underwent elaboration through the reflections of the Fathers of the Church, the oral basis became obscured, but not completely erased. Learned treatises came only later. Some theological battles were battles of competing slogans (recall, for example, how Arius composed longshoreman's shanties to teach the temporal beginning of the Word: 'There was when he was not'. The orthodox also provided easily recalled slogans for teaching the true faith). Other catechetical attempts followed the order of ritual, developing an understanding of faith from its prior practice. The oral formula limited the popular elaboration of belief to what the average person could remember.

Even as eloquent a theologian as Augustine shows clear signs of an orally-based thought pattern. He was, of course, a teacher of rhetoric (a *vendor verborum*) and he constructed his writings as dialogues. The *Confessions* form a long prayer and follow logic less than chronology. In the *De Trinitate* Augustine explicitly chooses his metaphor for the trinitarian relations from human speech. All of his writings display masterful word play (another oral characteristic) and the development of the thought moves from physical place to physical place. This, too, characterizes oral style and is a favourite technique for memorizing long speeches. For example, in Book X of the *Confessions*, Augustine describes God's pursuit in images which move from ears to eyes to nose to mouth.

Medieval theology still bears the mark of an oral culture. Even with written texts available, scholastic theology maintained the form of orality in its lectures and disputations. Orality is contentious and arrives at truth through dialectic, dialogue, and programmed polemics. For scholastic theology there had to be a right position and a wrong position; such is the nature of debate. And debate was the form of theology. Aquinas shows the form in its perfection in the *Summa Theologica*, demonstrating the correct position in the face of conflicting claims. (Aquinas also shows the inroads of a written culture in the logic of his arrangement: such an abstract pattern of thought and such a volume of material are more than the mind can remember. Written sources become imperative). An oral theology then has characteristic topics, metaphors, arrangements of materials, dogmatic pronouncements, and forms of proceeding (lectures, debates, and binary logic).⁶ Writing, on the other hand, makes possible greater detail and forces greater clarity of expression. Thus, by the Middle Ages, writing separates rhetoric and music from learning. Aquinas, brilliant in both logic and music, restricts his flights of language to hymnody.⁷

Until the fifteenth century at least, theology reflected the dominant influence of an oral culture, albeit one that knew and used writing. It is impossible to separate absolutely the effects of writing from those of orality because the only ancient oral materials we know come to us mediated by written sources. A comparison of these materials with the productions of present day oral cultures does confirm the patterns indicated above. However, more easily documented is the major shift which occurred in Western Europe with the advent of the printing press.

Printing changed the patterns of doing theology as well as the contents of theological reflection. The era of the printing press slightly predates the Reformation and the sixteenth-century protestant reformers, as well as their catholic counterparts, were quick to use this new medium for theological ends. Tracts, sermons, and all manner of polemic quickly spread throughout christian Europe. Copies of key works were rapidly printed and just as rapidly disseminated. In addition, printing fostered the textual criticism of newly recovered biblical manuscripts, a development which led to a sophisticated theological hermeneutics and a text-oriented theology. With the printing press making identical copies of texts common, academic theology reached more readers and had a more profound impact. For example, printing is associated with the

catechism, with widespread bible publishing and the lay bible-reading movement, with the rise of vernaculars as scholarly languages, and with widespread readership for theologians. The religious impact on society of the sixteenth-century communication revolution resulted not only from the bible in every home but also from the popularity of Martin Luther's writings and the nationalistic adoption of theological plans: Luther's ideas on government, Calvin's *Institutes*, Hooker's *The laws of ecclesiastical polity*, and the tridentine catholic response. The alliance of both reform and counter-reform with printing also stamped an enduring mark on liturgy. Two examples will suffice: the tridentine missal created a standardized form of the latin mass that lasted over four hundred years; the same can be claimed for the *Book of Common Prayer*. Their fixed, printed form bestowed on both a sacredness better associated with the rituals they prescribed.⁸

One can easily perceive the negative impact of printing on theology, too. Consider how the printed word has taken on an aura of sacredness, one that leads to a certain fundamentalism with regard to the printed text. Consider how the bible in every home eliminated the need for communal interpretation. Consider how theology as an academic discipline became more and more specialized, with each division having its own texts, until one person can no longer master theology. Consider how the printing-established vernaculars isolated national movements in popular religious practice.

While no one can prove the direct influence of communication technology on theology, one can indicate various indirect influences; a shift in communication patterns and technology does have its cultural effects. Perhaps we would do well to seek out correlations between kinds of theology (an intellectual and cultural product) and the styles and media of communication.

3 *Current intersections: communication and theology*

How can we understand the relationship between contemporary communication science and the study of theology? One way would be to explore the twentieth-century communication revolution (from printed to electronically mediated contents). Although this proves difficult for lack of historical perspective, some initial attempts are possible. One comes through a deeper appreciation of communication codes—a hermeneutic path. Another provides points of intersection between the concerns of a formal theology

and those of communication science. The former way reflects the attention paid by communication science to a specific cultural influence; the latter, to more general influences.

The hermeneutic path provides a window on contemporary culture. All communication functions by way of codes, the sign systems through which meaning is conveyed. (Because language is one such code, one often hears the film or television code referred to as a 'language of film' or as an 'audio-visual language'). When the codes work well, they fade into the background and language users, newspaper readers, television viewers take them for granted. The codes themselves, though, embody a particular world view; subjected to examination they reveal the cultural values and societal structures of a given time.

In this tradition, following the lead of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, William Kuhns suggests that Christianity can be renewed through an appreciation of contemporary, secular culture. Kuhns seeks a language that 'could itself force a clear rethinking of every level of christian experience'.⁹ He takes as his starting point a detailed examination of the entertainment milieu and its codes. The entertainment milieu has maintained significant links to the religious. It embodies a sense of 'sacred' time, marked by film, radio, or television ritual; further, it provides a mythic world that supplies an interpretation of life, an escape from temporal pressures, and a grounding for morality and belief. The entertainment milieu unifies the community through the appeal of a star—a personality who gives a common focal point to individual spectators. With this in mind Kuhns proposes that theology examine the elements of the entertainment code—movement, multiple perspectives, co-expression of word, sound, and image. These elements can form the 'vocabulary' for a contemporary theology. Such a theology could then offer a critique of the entertainment world, breaking it open to the Good News of Jesus Christ. This new theology could bring people into contact with its own enduring images: a loving God, the Incarnate Christ who is the image by which all others are measured and judged.¹⁰

Hans Urs von Balthasar also develops a theology from communication codes, but on a much larger and more complete scale. The codes which von Balthasar chooses are those of western civilization and its dramatic structures. These same structures, of course, form the basis for the entertainment milieu. The dramatic form

underlying contemporary entertainment and western narrative provides the framework for a theology which comes full circle: the forms demand an analysis of culture and at the same time they provide an analogue in which theological form and content are joined. Theatrical drama moves the categories of theology from static concepts to action, for God's encounter with human beings is an ongoing creative play. Neither spectators nor puppets, human beings are players in the drama of God's love for the world. In a related project, von Balthasar constructs a theological aesthetics, basing his work on the codes of art and applying its aesthetic terminology to the theological enterprise.¹¹ Here Christ is the centre—the form of revelation, a form which is mediated by scripture through the medium of the Church. Although von Balthasar does not consciously choose communication science as a tool of analysis, the similarities are evident since aesthetics is, in its nature, an examination of communication codes.

A second approach to theology from communication study begins with various images of communication: language, art, dialogue, broadcasting, and culture. Each image anchors an area of investigation and characterizes a type of theology.¹² Theologians whose model of communication is linguistic reflect in their work not only the concern for communication codes discussed above but also a general concern for religious language, including the conditions for the possibility for religious expression, analogical predication, and guidelines for interpretation. Areas of theology which favour this image of communication include dogmatics, biblical studies and textual criticism, hermeneutics, and systematics.

Where art forms the ideal of communication, the focus of theology becomes correspondingly more concrete. Iconography, painting, stained glass, sculpture, music, dance, and ritual all hold theological importance in the Church. Each of these artistic media offers a point of contact with theology and a window onto the religious culture of a people. Areas of theology which investigate art include liturgical study and pastoral theology. In addition, some theologians, like von Balthasar, examine aesthetic codes and directly explore the theological rationale for aesthetic expression.

More recently dialogue has emerged as an ideal of communication among theologians. Typically those who choose this model of inter-personal communication as the anchor for their work favour ecclesiologies based on small, face-to-face christian communities.

Where religious self-understanding is one result of the divine-human communication initiated by revelation, a properly religious response is one which fosters dialogue in freedom. This ideal of dialogue cuts across many areas of theology and is particularly strong in ecclesiology, fundamental theology (revelation) and moral theology.

Much work in theology that specifically responds to contemporary communication treats it as synonymous with broadcasting. Broadcasting in this sense, is merely a tool to facilitate the spread of the gospel to as many people as possible. Because it fits so well with the mandate to preach to all nations, many independent evangelistic preachers embrace this view, thus justifying the whole televised electronic Church. Others, more interested in exploring traditional theological formulations in terms of their communicative structures, apply a broadcast communication model (Sender-Message-Receiver) as a means of illuminating particular issues and problems (theological method, church structure, church-state relations, homiletics, and so on). This particular image of communication is found in many areas of theology, including missiology, ecclesiology, and systematic theology.

Finally, those who view communication as a cultural process, tend to examine the effects of communication media on society. The second part of this essay demonstrates one method of following this approach. Others use it in order to offer a theological critique of the media culture. Religious educators often choose this area as the starting point in an exploration of the ways in which the gospel can be better presented to children.

4 *Some current developments*

In addition to this brief survey, let me indicate some other connections between theology and communication science. Two powerful movements in contemporary theology clearly show the effects of different types of communication. First, narrative theology examines the ways in which God is and can be revealed through human stories. Spurred by a study of parables and reacting against a purely philosophical study of theology, narrative theologians choose the story as the ideal medium to evoke the preconceptual and to communicate the ineffable through the communion created in storyteller and listener.¹³ In essence, narrative theology reclaims the oral tradition of biblical theology and directly addresses the contemporary world which, through oral media like film, radio,

and television, has shifted from the linear, print-based, orientation of the last several centuries. The development of the story as a form for theology reflects the renewal of the narrative in popular entertainment. Narrative theology self-consciously uses communication constructs for its theological contents.

Liberation theology, on the other hand, looks to the social structures created by communication in its concern for community-based communication that empowers individuals. This concern overturns the deductive model of communication underlying traditional theology and substitutes in its place grass roots discussion and prayer, basic christian communities, and the elaboration of the scriptures within those communities. The clearest communication model for this is the process of dialogue. As such this places liberation theology in a kind of opposition to a broadcast model of communication in which a single source communicates an identical message to multiple receivers. By affirming the local community liberation theology both offers a corrective to the centralized social structure implied by broadcasting and suggests that electronic communication can serve the community (as it does, for example, in local radio, cassette recordings, and community video). Among other things, then, liberation theology calls for a conversion of the social and communicative structures which enslave people.

Though not as sweeping, there are other connections between communication science and theology. Communication researchers and theologians have demonstrated the potential of an alliance in several projects. One of the most apt areas for this co-operation is fundamental theology (the study of the possibility of revelation, the communication of the word in human language, the role of tradition in the Church, the place of Christianity in society, and so forth). On the theoretical level, Helmut Peukert seeks to bring together fundamental theology, the logical theory of science, and the communicative philosophy and social policy of Jürgen Habermas.¹⁴ Arguing that the logical theory of science is unacceptably incomplete and that the materialist basis for communicative competence is insufficient, Peukert suggests that the theologian is well placed to provide the next step through the development of the ideal of the full human community in Christ, namely, the communion of saints. Peukert thus joins a theological construct to a theory of communication (communion) by means of an analysis of the conditions for the possibility of communicating and knowing. In

so doing, he clarifies the roles of theological knowledge and of communicative competence in defining human being.

Fundamental theology also includes the explication of the links between contemporary culture and the divine. We have already considered Kuhns's elaboration of the parallels between the religious milieu and the entertainment milieu, allowing the characteristics of each to shed light upon the other. The concept of the 'visual story' provides the starting point for John R. May's exploration of transcendence in film. This, too, is an essay in fundamental theology for it explores the boundaries between popular entertainment and religious belief not only in terms of film content but more especially in terms of film structure:

An approach to the religious interpretation of film that respects its autonomy as an art form will, by definition, have to explore those dimensions of the formal structure of film that represent the visual analogue of religious or sectarian questions.¹⁵

Since it is the structure of many films that leads the audience beyond the immediate plot to enduring human questions, the task of the fundamental theologian is to explore and lay open the 'grammar' of the visual analogue. For example, May maintains that the films of Hitchcock and those of Kubrick have the structure of parables: they lead the viewer to question the validity of the world's values by highlighting the disjunctions between appearance and reality.

On the practical side, the Gregorian University in Rome, in association with the London-based jesuit Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture, sponsors an ongoing project to encourage the co-operation of theologians and communication scholars. This series of seminars is designed to develop units for the seminary curriculum in which communication has an integral part. To date these seminars have explored the general seminary curriculum, fundamental theology, and philosophy.¹⁶

Finally, a number of writers examine the consequences of communication in the area of applied theology and spirituality. Their concern is to provide a robust spirituality for people confronted by the media world. John Kavanaugh contrasts the commodity form fostered by marketing, advertising, and consumerism with the personal form based in a christian philosophical anthropology. Virginia Stem Owens provides a biting critique of consumer-based

images and appeals to Christianity to provide counter-images while Kevin Perrotta offers concrete suggestions to families who wish to develop a christian family attitude rather than a television-based attitude.¹⁷

Conclusion

In an attempt to illustrate some of the connections between communication science and theology, this essay has proposed a view of communication drawn from cultural studies. Accordingly, it has explored some of the intellectual and social implications of changing communication styles and technology, particularly as they have affected the development of theology. Finally, it has attempted an initial examination of some areas of contemporary theology which more clearly indicate the influence of communication or a relationship to communication science.

NOTES

¹ Williams, Raymond: *Television: technology and cultural form* (New York, 1975), pp 11-12.

² Gerbner, George, and Connolly, Kathleen: 'Television as new religion', *New Catholic World*, 221 (March-April 1978), p 53.

³ Comstock, George: 'The impact of television on american institutions', *Journal of communication*, 28 (Spring 1978), pp 12-28; Stewart M. Hoover, 'Toward new directions in the consideration of religion and mass communication: liminality, pilgrimage, and other issues', paper presented to the 36th annual conference of the International Communication Association, Chicago (1986).

⁴ In other words, history exists only in the ritualized re-living/re-telling of events. In an oral culture there is no such thing as 'private' historical reality; the past lives in the present through ceremony and through concrete individuals whose lives become the focus for events.

⁵ On the characteristics of an oral culture, see Walter Ong, *Orality and literacy: the technologizing of the word* (London & New York, 1982).

⁶ Ong, Walter: 'Communications media and the state of theology', *Cross Currents*, 19 (1969), pp 462-480.

⁷ Ong, Walter: 'Wit and mystery: a revaluation in mediaeval latin hymnody', *Speculum*, 22 (1947), p 318.

⁸ Eisenstein, Elisabeth L.: *The printing press as an agent of change: communication and cultural change in early modern Europe*, vols 1 and 2, (Cambridge, 1979), pp 303-450.

⁹ Kuhns, William: *The electronic gospel: religion and media*. (New York, 1969), p 143.

¹⁰ Kuhns, *op. cit.*, p 159.

¹¹ Urs von Balthasar, Hans: *Theodramatik*, vols 1-11 (1973-1978), Urs von Balthasar, Hans: *The glory of the Lord: a theological aesthetics*, vol 1, *Seeing the form*. E. Leiva-Merikakis (trans), J. Fessio and J. Riches (eds). (San Francisco, New York, 1982).

¹² Soukup, Paul A.: *Communication and theology: an introduction and review of the literature*, (London, 1983).

¹³ Navone, John and Cooper, Thomas: *Tellers of the word*, (New York, 1981); Shea, John: *Stories of God: an unauthorized biography*, (Chicago, 1978), *Stories of faith*, (Chicago, 1980).

¹⁴ Peukert, Helmut: *Science, action, and fundamental theology: toward a theology of communicative action*, trans, James Bohman, (Cambridge, MA, 1984). Original edition: *Wissenschaftstheorie—Handlungstheorie—fundamentale Theologie: Analysen zu Ansatz und Status theologischer Theoriebildung*, (Dusseldorf, 1976).

¹⁵ May, John R.: 'Visual story and the religious interpretation of film', in John R. May and Michael Bird (eds), *Religion in film* (Knoxville, 1982), p 31.

¹⁶ Henrici, Peter and White, Robert A., (eds): *Communicating the faith: new light on fundamental theology*, in press.

¹⁷ Kavanaugh, John: *Following Christ in a consumer society: the spirituality of cultural resistance*, (Maryknoll, New York, 1981); Virginia Stern Owens, *The total image: or selling Jesus in the modern age* (Grand Rapids, MN, 1980); Kevin Perrotta, *Taming the TV habit* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1982).