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The Structure of Communication as a Challenge for Theology

I. INTRODUCTION

In his historical investigation of Martin Luther, printing, and propaganda, Mark Edwards, Jr., concludes, “the story takes a different form if you structure it around communication” (1994, p. 171). Examining the records of printing output and sales in Strasbourg in the early years of the Reformation, Edwards notes that Luther’s devotional works held great popularity well before his polemical works and served to give the latter a wider acceptance. Edwards identifies two important implications here.

First, as many others have pointed out, the printed output did serve to spread Luther’s ideas and thus did play a role in the Reformation (Eisenstein, 1980, pp. 379ff.). In the crucial first ten years or so, Luther and the other reformers published dozens of editions of key works, vastly outnumbering the output of their Catholic opponents. Edwards explains this in several ways. The more obvious explanation lay with the for-profit nature of printing: the works of the reformers sold better than those of the Catholics, leading the printers to print more of them. Equally important, the Catholics tended to write in Latin, addressing an elite audience, whereas Luther and the other reformers wrote in German. Whatever the other elements of the explanation, the fact remains that the printing press did play a key role in the Reformation and in all subsequent theology. The initial spread of ideas happened through the public press. Theological debates, once restricted to disputations at universities or summarized in low circulation manuscripts, now became best sellers. This pattern of the printed word as the agent of publicity and exchange of ideas reflects an instrumental use of communication.

Second, and more important still for theology were the structures of communication. Edwards identifies four aspects here. First, the printing press with its mass circulation, made the Reformation disputes a “propaganda war”. The controversialists had not only to marshal arguments to convince their opponents, they also had to convince the people (from the all-important heads of the German states to the peasants). Here, Edwards argues that the earlier success of Luther’s devotional works gave him a strong lead in the propaganda effort. Both his initial

credibility and the content of his theology (the anti-hierarchical notion of the priesthood of all believers) won the people over. This propaganda subtext subtly helped to shape subsequent theology because it made the various participants aware of their larger audience. The awareness of those for whom they wrote influenced—at some level or other—the themes addressed. Luther himself seemed much more aware of the German people and their needs than did his opponents who often wrote in Latin. And Luther's theology focused on the status and holiness of the ordinary believer much more than did scholastic theology.

Next, the printing press laid bare conflicting mind-sets (what Edwards terms the horizons on expectation) of the two sides.

For the most part, Catholic controversialists that I have studied remained wedded to the mind-set or *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectation) of late medieval Christendom, which included belief in divinely established and necessary hierarchy, a distinction between clergy and laity, and the necessity of works in the process of justification. In other words, while Luther and his followers now operated with an *Erwartungshorizont* different from that of late medieval Christendom, the Catholic controversialists continued to work from within the old *Erwartungshorizont*. So their central beliefs and expectations led them to read and understand Luther's text differently than Luther and his partisans did (p. 157).

A focus on communication helps us to take more seriously the “communities of discourse” with whom the various disputants interacted. Those communities shaped the ways in which individuals understood texts and concepts. The printing press, with its wider distribution of materials, made it harder simultaneously to address just one like-minded community and to control the interpretation of the texts. This structural element of communication (resulting from the expansion of the readership of any text) changed theology by expanding its discourse community. This complicated the role of interpretation and led to the kind of reading at cross purposes that Edwards describes.

Another aspect of the structure of communication that played a role in the Reformation was not new to the sixteenth century. Already described as a part of the implications of literacy in the middle ages by Brian Stock (1983), a “two-step” flow of communication saw written or (with the Reformation) printed texts absorbed by opinion leaders and disseminated to the wider population orally, through preaching or conversation. The hearers of these words formed communities around the texts, which they would then incorporate into their lives. Where earlier theology focused on monastic or cathedral school communities, Reformation theology had a wider impact in the towns of Germany, precisely because the printing press allowed for a rapid diffusion of ideas, a diffusion assisted by the vernacular language of Luther's theology.

Finally, and most directly related to the structural role of the printing technology, the printing press as the medium of Luther's theology carried with it an implicit message. Printed texts, freely sold, addressed everyone—theologian, university scholar, town preacher, political leader, business leader, farmer. In this seemingly simple openness, the press favored Luther and the evangelical's anti-hierarchy message. To use a later idiom, the printing press and its output was a democratic communication. A key issue in the early Reformation debates was whether to air church disputes before the common people; but every Catholic

rebuttal of Luther in print tended to do exactly that. The very medium of print supported Luther, whether Luther himself or his Catholic opponents used the printing press (pp. 57-82). Edwards underlines the point that the method of communication played an unintended theological role.

This sixteenth-century snapshot suggests an important lesson, as Stephen O'Leary points out in relation to the religious use of the Internet (1996). The structure of communication matters. It mattered not only in the Reformation, but throughout the history of theology. However, since most people take communication and the media of communication for granted, they fail to consider its impact. Whether or not one accepts Marshall McLuhan's somewhat extravagant claim that "the medium is the message" (1964, p. 7), we should not deny that the method of communication does play a role along with the content of any communication. Among several others, one of Neil Postman's examples is telling. Everyone knows the difference between the forceful impact of a stammered expression of sympathy at a funeral and the less powerful effect of the still sincere same words in a card, no matter how elegantly inscribed (1985, chapter 2). The medium (face-to-face conversation, writing) profoundly affects the meaning.

This holds true for theology. Throughout its history, the structure of communication has influenced how the Church does its thinking. To see this more clearly, let us accept Edwards' suggestion to structure the story around communication. First, we will consider the gradual shift from oral forms to written ones, and then to the later development of audiovisual communication. In Walter Ong's terminology (1982), we will trace the development of communication from primary oral cultures to literate ones, then to those marked by secondary orality. Again, following Ong, we can ask how the forms of communication affect human consciousness and how that influence has shaped theology. Second, we will examine the role of place in theology and then consider how communication technology changes the human relationship to place. Then, finally, we will consider how the use of space connects changes in thought to changes in place, examining its consequences for theology.

II. ORALITY, LITERACY, AND THINKING

Orality-literacy studies explore how the introduction of probably the most powerful communication technology ever—writing—changed human society. To get a sense of this, think for a moment about a culture that does not have writing, what scholars term an oral culture. Every culture was oral at some time and every culture still bears the marks of its orality; all of us grew up in the oral culture of childhood, but entered the literate world as we internalized writing. Anthropologists have also had more recent contact with oral cultures. The evidence from all of these sources paints a fairly consistent picture of how the members of oral cultures think about the world and express themselves (Ong, 1982, pp. 31-77).

In order to survive, every culture must preserve and pass on to the next generation the complete body of what matters to the culture: what defines it, its relationship to God, its history, its genealogy; what shapes its identity, the story of

the ancestors, its ties to the land or the sea, its relationships with other peoples, its battles and its peace treaties; and the practices (hunting, gathering, farming, food preparation, building, and so on) that allow it to survive. Oral cultures must and do preserve all this knowledge without writing or any other system of record keeping. They often use pictorial systems, but at best these serve as memory aids, to help in the oral recall of the material.

Because memory is the lifeblood of an oral culture, virtually all of the communicative practices of such cultures are geared to remembrance. Forms of expression help people to recall. For example, rhythm and rhyme play a role since they encode redundancy into the content and thus help memory—only certain sounds will fit the pattern and make the rhyme. The use of various bodily resources (singing, dancing, movement) help to remember. Collective recitation adds more resources still: should one person forget a phrase, a neighbor will recall it. (Even literate cultures experience this in the collective recitation of complex prayers like the Nicene Creed.) Repetition and restatement in various ways helps recall: if one forgets a part of the structure, the other part remains. This doublet pattern characterizes the Psalms and the biblical wisdom literature. The correlate of these patterns—redundancy—marks all expression of oral cultures. Finally, the use of formulae and epithets serve as memory devices by associating titles with people and traditional expressions with social situations.

The necessity of saying memorable things and thinking “memorable thoughts” (Ong, 1982, p. 34) means that communication patterns help to shape what people know, or at least how people express and think about what they know. Oral cultures organize their knowledge in particular and characteristic ways. They are highly concrete—abstract thought is not a real possibility since abstraction demands a certain distance from the topic that the oral culture cannot manage. The constant need to remember makes it difficult for a member of an oral culture to “put something aside” to think about later on. Oral cultures also organize what they know in narratives, characters, and wisdom sayings—a story or a slogan is easier to recall than a philosophical treatise. Typical oral narratives feature characters who embody cultural values and who gather to themselves cycles of adventures. Odysseus is one such character from the Greek past; the story of his return home recalls not only the geography of a seafaring people, but tells how to survive shipwreck, how to build a ship, how to cleverly talk one’s way out of trouble, how to deal with nobility, and even answers questions about the afterlife. The best way to remember such information was to tell and re-tell the story. Finally, members of oral cultures organize what they know by concrete application rather than by analytic categories: an oral culture would not create a biological system of genera and species but might organize plants and animals by location. Similarly, as A. R. Luria reports, the unlettered Russian peasants grouped saws, axes, hammers, and logs together but not saws, axes, hammers, and screwdrivers. The abstract category of “tools” was not a meaningful one whereas the one of “things used to work with wood” did make sense (Ong, 1982, p. 51).

The extent of knowledge that could be maintained in these ways is limited. Oral cultures compensate for that by their communal nature, with everyone telling the same stories, children learning by apprenticeship, people focusing on the

community. While fostering one kind of social good, the pattern also carries both social and personal costs. The communication forms and social cooperation limit other social roles and demand a huge amount of the cognitive capital of a given society. Members of an oral culture must carefully guard what they know. They do not take risks, especially with their store of knowledge, for if they lose it, there is no back-up copy. Oral cultures are, then, inherently conservative and highly communal. To be an individual risked the life of the entire culture. Oral cultures tend to give great respect to the elders, for these have the longest memories. Oral thinking is also connected to the life world: particular places have meaning and particular actions recall events and essential knowledge. The present tense matters more than anything else, and so the past must become present (Ong, 1982, pp. 41-42).

People in oral cultures did reflect on their religious experiences, on ultimate things, and on their relationship to God—everything that would make up a theology. They expressed those things in stories, acted them out in rituals, and incorporated them in the daily life of the community. These theologies, though, did not have a literate’s sense of consistency, as the first generations of literate Greeks pointed out (Havelock, 1963, p. 65). Stories of gods and goddesses, legends of holy places, powerful words and actions of seers and prophets all reflect the oral life world.

It is not surprising to find traces of the oral heritage in Scriptures, for the Old Testament and, to a lesser degree, the New Testament emerged from oral cultures whose narratives and sayings were written down as that new technology became available. While the earliest theologies we have arise from oral cultures, those theologies follow the patterns of knowledge and expression available to the cultures. And so, the Old Testament uses numerical patterns to aid recall: the seven days of creation, the ten commandments. It also uses people to trigger memory: the genealogies simultaneously give the history of the ancestors and the history of their relationship with God. The Old Testament frames virtually all of its theological reflection in stories, anchored by key characters: the covenant with Abraham, the exodus led by Moses, the kingship of David, the Elijah cycle of prophetic actions. If one can recall the story, one can recall the theological lessons: God’s faithfulness, the reality of sin, the possibility of forgiveness, the ways of God’s revelation. The wisdom sayings and the doubled structure of psalm verses in Hebrew poetry exist to help recall. Similarly the redundancies of the Old Testament stem not only from the recording of northern and southern traditions but also from an oral preference for *copia*, an abundance of words.

The record of the teachings of Jesus similarly bears the marks of an oral heritage. Matthew constructs the sermon on the mount in good oral fashion: from the numerical pattern of the seven beatitudes to the oppositional structure of the “you have heard it said... but I say to you” passages. The style of repeated conjunctions of the Gospel of Mark is an oral inheritance. The use of key characters—Jesus, Peter, James, and John, Mary Magdalene—reflects the pattern of oral storytelling. The parables of Jesus mark an oral way of thinking: rather than deal abstractly with a concept like “neighbor”, Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan. As narratives, the Gospels rest on the Old Testament and presume an oral culture’s intimate knowledge of those sayings and stories. The theology of the New Testament emerges from the differences and extensions of these two sets of

narratives. Even a more literate thinker like St. Paul relies on the oral heritage, often constructing his arguments as commentaries on Old Testament figures. The Gospel of John also builds on an oral tradition, with Jesus not only regarded as the Word, but with the gospel itself structured around sayings. According to Werner Kelber, “The preponderance and oral functioning of the *logoi*, the *egô eimi* diction, the egalitarian practice of discipleship, the prophetic shaping of principal characters in the gospel, and a preoccupation with accessibility to the heavenly world, are all features that will have been nourished by a profoundly oral, prophetic, charismatic community” (1987, p. 115).

Parts of the oral pattern of thought and expression seem strange to us because we have fully internalized the technology of writing. As literates we process information differently and we express it differently. We also think differently. Writing affects human consciousness (Ong, 1955; 1975; 1982, pp. 78-116).

Literacy organizes knowledge differently, though the change occurs slowly. In the West literacy spread first to scribes, who more or less recorded oral discourse verbatim. Only with the rise of widespread literacy after the printing press made cheap books available do we see the effects of literacy throughout Western cultures. At one very obvious but very important level, literacy changes consciousness and thought patterns because it frees the human mind from having to remember everything. If writing allows people to preserve what they know in inscriptions, manuscripts, and books, then cultures need no longer direct so much energy to preserving important knowledge. People have time to think about other things; literate cultures then develop all kinds of new knowledge and new procedures. At the same time, knowledge becomes more concise—the written word need not be repeated in so many variations because it does not need that variation to assist recall. With literacy, the character of knowledge changes and therefore the way people think changes, in this instance, from redundant and rhythmical narratives to brief statements. Knowledge also becomes more theoretical, more abstract, since the mind does not need the assistance of narrative or character to concretize concepts. Philosophy, for example, examines “wisdom” or “justice” as abstract concepts, not the “wise woman” or “just man” who instantiates those virtues. The literate’s approach to the world and to knowledge is distanced, not immediate. Words on a page seem to have an existence independent of us and we can examine them as something separate from ourselves—something quite impossible for an oral culture. We can even distance ourselves from ourselves, as we do when writing a diary or setting aside a letter or paper for later review.

This has another consequence for consciousness, at least in the West. Our knowledge tends to be spatialized—through the influence of reading and of the printed page, we regard knowledge as something that we see on a page. We “look for” relationships among what we know; we “map out” areas; and so on—all of these visual metaphors hint at the extent of the spatial understanding of the mind’s grasp on the world. Ong shows how literacy moves thinking from what people hear to what people see (1970). A great deal of western knowledge has the characteristic of spatial categories: systems of thought construct space-like relations among components, building on schema. The periodic table of the elements, a key conceptual element of understanding the natural world, is a spatial construct. But

the same spatial impulse works in other disciplines as well, including theology, as Dante's *Divine Comedy* demonstrates.

Literacy disseminates knowledge much more widely—which also has a cognitive effect, not least from the altered materials that people could read (Eisenstein, 1980, pp. 74–75). The written text, being quite portable, allows a wide distribution and can spread its content not only geographically but also across time. It both allows and promotes collaborative knowledge, since people in many times and places can refer to the same text. And because it promotes a separation of the knower and the known (the distance just described), the text promotes a disinterested knowledge, one that is separated from the personal. The distribution of knowledge makes knowledge more incremental. People build up a body of knowledge, adding to what others have thought. Of course this could happen orally, but writing and literacy extends the process across time and place and opens up greater opportunity for knowing.

Literacy also affects how we approach the world in other ways, too. Because the alphabet consists of a limited number of symbols (26 in English) to describe every sound, texts repeat those symbols in varying patterns. But those symbols (particularly in their printed versions) remain identical to one another and can be freely exchanged: every “a” looks just like every other “a”. This endlessly repeating set of symbols prepares our minds for the idea of interchangeable parts, happening not only in writing, but in other areas of life too. As Elizabeth Eisenstein remarks, this standardization goes beyond just letters: “I am thinking... about calendars, dictionaries, ephemerides, and other reference guides; about maps, charts, diagrams, and other visual aids” (1983, p. 51). In a kind of paradox, literate culture has its own uniformity—not the communal identity of the oral culture, but a uniformity of machine-made, interchangeable parts. In other words, literacy prepares us for a mass culture, where we see the same messages, the same texts, the same styles, the same products repeated over and over again.

If literacy affects the ways that literates think, then we should be able to see the effects of literacy in theology. In fact, the story of Christian theology is the story of a gradual shift from oral forms to literate forms. After the writing down of the Gospel proclamation and the collection of the New Testament letters, Christians continued to think about their religious experience. The theology of the early centuries of Christianity mixed written and oral forms, much as we find in the West through the middle ages. For example, St. Augustine's approach to theology was through sermons and “books”, which largely resemble speeches. In this he did not differ greatly from any of the other Fathers of the Church. St. Thomas Aquinas, much more rooted in literacy, uses textual sources in an oral manner, setting up the *Summa Theologica*, for example, as a series of questions, objections, and responses—in other words, as a debate. Throughout the period of scholastic theology, and flourishing especially in the later medieval period and the Reformation, theology becomes more abstract and more analytic. It also reaches a wider audience as theological books make their way through the booksellers of Europe. Statements of Church doctrine begin to take the form, not of easily memorable oral formulae, but of reasoned (and lengthy) statements—exactly the kind of thing that requires a written text.

One consequence of the spread of literacy for theology is the growing abstractness of its formulations. Only people with an evolved sense of literacy would be able to produce a semiotic analysis of sign and symbol like we find in the development of Eucharistic theology of the late medieval period. Even so central a theological category as “the Word”, shifts meaning as people begin to see the “word” as a series of marks on parchment or paper rather than to hear it as the flow of speech (Soukup, 1996; Boyle, 1977). The widespread dissemination of the vernacular Bible affects theology, too. As people become accustomed to seeing the unchanging, printed pages of the Bible, their sense of biblical inerrancy changes. Practices of interpretation shift from the multiple senses of the biblical text to the specific interpretations of key passages. In this, as in so much else, Luther led the way by using the printed text to interpret itself, through marginal notations and textual display (Edwards, 1994, p. 111). Such questions of interpretive power still remain quite real in contemporary biblical translation, particularly where translators try to wrestle with the textual form as well as the textual content (Sisley, 1999).

By and large, most of these shifts in theology took place beneath the full consciousness of theologians. Their work habits changed slowly as texts grew in importance. First of all, they had more texts to work with: the Renaissance and early printing re-introduced thousands of Greek, Hebrew, and Latin texts to Europe. Second, readers gave these texts greater authority, precisely because they were written. Third, theology, like every other kind of knowledge enterprise in Western Europe gradually shifted from commenting on commentaries to interpreting “original” texts and writing “original” essays. Eisenstein remarks on this development within literature, as Montaigne created a new rhetorical convention to address “a large crowd of people who were not gathered together in one place but were scattered in separate dwellings and who, as solitary individuals with divergent interests, were more receptive to intimate interchanges than to broad-gauged rhetorical effects” (1983, p. 57). Theology too moved from proclamation in the large assembly to the quiet study of books.

We are in the midst of another shift in communication structures today. While we maintain literacy (just as earlier, literate cultures maintained their oral heritage and characteristics), we have developed what Ong terms a culture of secondary orality. We can describe this in several ways. (1) A secondary oral culture features oral discourse dependent on writing. In other words, the oral parts of secondary orality are oral performances of written scripts, something seen most clearly in film and television. (2) A secondary oral culture mixes oral and written materials; people live with both. The oralism of a secondary oral culture lacks the full characteristics of primary orality—it need not be dependent on memory; it need not foster redundancy nor the flow of words. (3) A secondary oral culture is an audiovisual culture, one that makes use of images along the lines of literate model.

As we have seen with the rise of literacy, cultures do not abandon earlier communication structures but build on them. Over several hundred years western culture moved away from many of the features of oralism (see Ong, 1982, for some of these) and began to develop other ways of thinking and expression. While it is still too early to see all of the consequences of our secondary orality (after all, we have less than 100 years of experience of it), we can begin to see some of them. The communication

products of our culture show more complex meanings than most products of literacy; they use multiple narratives, made up on visual images as well as sound and text. And they exist in a world awash with messages that compete for attention.

Secondary orality does seem to have cognitive consequences. Only within it have we come to some awareness of what Howard Gardner calls multiple intelligences—the different ways humans interact with and understand the world: analytic, emotional, social, aesthetic, musical, and so on (Gardner, 1983, 1993, 2000). Secondary orality highlights processing information in more complex ways because it combines traditional oral and written learning with spatial, musical, and other forms. None of this, of course, is new, but the awareness of it is. As literacy affected theology, so too will secondary orality, but not immediately. It took several hundred years of widespread literacy to see the invention of new and suitable communication forms (the essay, the novel) and the attention to things like symbols and words. We have begun to see new forms of entertainment in film and television (which both adapted earlier forms), but we have not yet seen where the expectations nurtured by these forms will lead reflection on God’s activity and on our relationship with God.

Some recent movements in theology indicate a growing awareness of communication. Narrative theology stresses the importance of storytelling and recognizes the central oral features of Christian history (Shea, 1980; Navone 1984). It also recognizes the persistence of orality within the literate culture of North America, manifest within the secondary orality of contemporary cinematic and television narratives. A focus on art and image as theologically meaningful also calls attention to the secondary oral use of images, in the ways in which visual understanding pervades Western Christianity (Miles, 1985). Ironically, the shift away from a purely print-based culture has allowed people to recognize the boundaries of print in earlier theology. Finally, theological themes like *communio* and inculturation manifest the more consciousness connection among individuals and cultures associated with contemporary communication.

The path from oral cultures to literate ones to those marked by secondary orality illustrates one of the structures of communication. The concerns and the methods of theology change with the change in these structures. While this does not deny the importance of any of the content of theology, it does tell us a little bit about how the Church has done its thinking.

III. PLACE AND THE LOSS OF A SENSE OF PLACE

A second communication structure calls attention to place. As physical beings, humans have deep connections to places. Not only do our physical surroundings locate us and help to define us, these physical surroundings also help us to relate to one another, to think about each other, to define our social systems, to relate ourselves to God, and to think about God. In developing a theory of ritual based on place, Jonathan Z. Smith traces a consistent but shifting importance and definition of place in worship. Joshua Meyrowitz also offers a meditation on place, but from the perspective of television’s impact on human place. Both studies have important implications for theology.

We inhabit not only places but a sense of place. We know where we are in relation to physical landmarks and can navigate from place to place. At the same time, we also know where we are in relation to other people, since we inhabit a social place as well as a physical place. That sense of social place has made its mark on the English language, as when we remark that a person “does not know his or her place” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. ix; Smith, 1987, p. 45). Social hierarchy and social relations were reinforced, if not defined, by the physical places available to people. In the medieval period, peasants could not enter the King’s forest, much less the castle. Even among nobility, the admission to certain rooms of the castle signaled status. More recently, the American South enforced racial status differentiation by defining places for African Americans. Workers and managers occupy different places in factories. Even the most benign shops and offices still have doors marked “staff only”, separating insiders from outsiders and enforcing a kind of status. In each situation, the available physical locations mark the social ones. Meyrowitz argues that the physical places give people a sense of place: a sense of rootedness not only in the world but in the social order. The physical sense of place contributes to the “sense” or logic of position, easing and allowing social interactions.

Drawing on the social psychology of Erving Goffman, Meyrowitz offers every day examples of our sense of place acting as a kind of shorthand to guide behavior. We enact one set of social roles in church, quite another at the neighborhood bar. The serving staff in a restaurant have set roles in the public or customers’ area and others in the kitchen, with the former more formal, polite, and deferential and the latter more casual and unguarded. The difference between the public (or “on stage”) behaviors and the backstage behaviors depends on the place—or, we could say, the place defines the behaviors. The same holds true for the politician speaking in Congress or before the public and the politician at home. Continuing with his borrowed analogy to the stage, Meyrowitz argues that human behavior changes with its audience. The public audience (that is, the audience of the public places) calls forth one set of behaviors; the more intimate audience of family and friends, another. Think here of the differing ways that one speaks in a classroom or lecture hall, in a business, in a church, in a public meeting, at home, or relaxing with one’s peers (Meyrowitz, 1985, pp. 23-33). In communication terms, physical location provides social information, the things we know about each other and that determine how we relate to one another (p. 37).

That sense of place helps to accomplish the key social goal of the smooth working of interactions among people through the maintenance of social status and the enactment of various social roles. Information (or communication) plays a vital function here; social place predicts both the availability of information and the amount of shared information. Meyrowitz identifies three categories or dimensions of social life in which place and one’s sense of place heavily influence people: “roles of affiliation or ‘being’ (group identity), roles of transition or ‘becoming’ (socialization), and roles of authority (hierarchy)” (p. 52). Each one of these—group identity, socialization, and authority—also have implications for religious experience and for thinking about religious experience. And each of them, as we will see later, is affected by the structures of communication.

Smith shows how place also marks religious consciousness. He notes that the physical location did not establish the holiness, but that the activity in that place

(the sense of place, the social action) made it holy. Groups would return to the place to remember, to re-enact, to encounter the Holy (Smith, 1987, pp. 39-41). This role of place in worship affects not only the practices of the community, but also their understanding of the world. "In other words, it is a distinction in the social experience of quality of time that stands at the origin of the absolute spatial dichotomy of sacred and profane, which, in turn, generates the other cognitive dualities on which intellection rests" (p. 40). This connection between place and intellect also finds support in the practice of oral cultures to make use of places in memory systems, as a means of aiding recall of key events, ideas, or cultural knowledge (Smith, 1987, p. 26; Yates, 1966). Place matters to both religious practice and to religious thinking.

Most religions identify sacred places, locations where the community worships, where individuals encounter God. The Old Testament records the establishment of various holy places: Bethel, the place of Jacob's dream (Genesis 28:19); Mount Sinai, the place of the giving of the commandments (Exodus 19); the Promised Land; Jerusalem and its Temple. Even within the holy places, different actors had different places. The Book of Exodus relates that Moses could go up the holy mountain, but that the people could not even touch its base (Exodus 19:10-13). Later, within the temple, Jewish custom reserved precincts for different social groups: Gentiles, women, men, the king, the priests. The place of worship was also a place of social order.

Smith traces how the sacred place moved from physical locations to analogous ones. During the Babylonian exile, the Book of Ezekiel records the detailed descriptions of the new Temple (chapters 40-48). Since the physical location of the temple in Jerusalem was not available, the Jewish exiles mapped out the characteristics of the temple and its arrangements. Ezekiel specifies not only the physical dimensions and layout but also social arrangements: the relationship of political power (the king) to religious power (the priests), the behavior of the people, the relationship to other nations. Though Smith does not put it this way, the structure of communication practices begin to substitute for physical places: the book stands in for the temple. The somewhat restricted access to information in the book to the priest or scribe continued the social restriction of place found in the Temple precincts. The community's worship and prayer mirrors the community's social structures.

Christianity more consciously moved away from a physical place of worship; Jesus tells the woman at the well that the days are coming when people will worship "neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... but in spirit and in truth" (John 4: 21-24). But place still mattered. Like Ezekiel, the Book of Revelation describes the heavenly Jerusalem, though not in the physical detail found in Ezekiel and not with the restrictions on place. In the Christian view, there would be no Temple, no place holier than the rest. But humans, as physical beings, need a sense of place. And so, by the fourth century, the newly legalized Christians returned to Jerusalem to memorialize their holiest of places, in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Soon the Christian liturgies in Jerusalem traced out the places of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The rest of the Christian world participated in these holy places by transposing place to the liturgical year or by re-creating the way of the cross within churches (Smith, 1987, pp. 74-95). Ritual places become rituals.

As Meyrowitz points out, in communication terms, social place marks out the availability of information. Ritual places, as social places, make information available. In a religious sense, this is information about God, about how a worshipping community understands God, about how that community reflects on God. Smith has pointed out that the ritual actions make the places repositories of social information. But, as we see in Christianity, that information can also reside in the ritual. As the ritual places become rituals, we see a gradual pattern of substitution for place. At the Reformation an important change occurs when ritual place became more of a symbolic place.

Smith, following J. P. Singh Uberoi, claims that the decisive moment came with Zwingli's Eucharistic theology, which argued for a symbolic—and not real—presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Zwingli insisted that in the utterance “This is my body” (*Hoc est corpus meum*), the existential word “is” (*est*) was to be understood, not in a real, literal and corporeal sense, but only in a symbolical, historical or social sense (*significat, symbolum est* or *figura est*)... Dualism or double monism was fixed in the world-view and the life-world of the modern age, which was thereby ushered in... By stating the issue and forcing it in terms of dualism, or more properly double monism, Zwingli had discovered or invented the modern concept of time in which every event was either spiritual and mental or corporeal and material but no event was or could be both at once... Spirit, word, and sign had finally parted company for man at Marburg in 1529; and myth or ritual... was no longer literally and symbolically real and true (Uberoi, 1978, p. 31; quoted in Smith, 1987, p. 99).

With this shift in outlook, people have reduced ritual place as social place to social information—“symbolical, historical, or social” in Uberoi's phrase.

What Smith does not say is that communication practices begin to substitute for place: the book for the temple, the liturgical calendar for the way of the way of the cross. He does note how the symbolic becomes separated from the ritual: the symbolic statement substitutes for the Last Supper. To some extent, this parallels the growing move towards abstraction fostered by communication technology. Written words abstract from face-to-face immediacy; as we have already noted, a literate culture values abstraction. Following Danet, O'Leary (1996) argues that the separation of symbolic from ritual correlates with a transfer of performative communication from the spoken text to the written. The analysis and abstraction fostered by the separation of speaker from words—that is, the ability to see our words as separate from ourselves and our speaking, to see our words on a page before us—changes our relationship to language and to practice. It allows people to step outside of ritual and of ritual place; it allows people to focus on social information rather than on physical or social place. In so doing, abstraction reinforces the tendency to create a semiotic system of substitution.

Smith concludes his study with a reminder that the Reformers did not stand alone in their semiotic substitutions. Even the Catholic mainstream, which resisted Zwingli's Eucharistic theology, accepted some measure of substitution for place.

Our consideration of the Christian myth/ritual must end, not with the brief recovery of the place by the Crusaders... Rather, we may make a conclusion a project begun in a small village thirty miles from Barcelona... and possibly

influenced by a one-month pilgrimage to Jerusalem, as Ignatius of Loyola completed his classic manual of devotion, *The Spiritual Exercises*. There, as the first set of exercises for the third week of retreat, he commends, for the contemplation at midnight, meditation the events of the Passion of Christ spread out over seven days. In each of these, the individual is asked, first, to “call to mind the narrative of the event” and, second, to make a “mental representation of the place”. Here, all has been transferred to inner space. All that remains of Jerusalem is an image, the narrative, and a temporal sequence (Smith, 1987, p. 117).

Here, too, the ritual place becomes, in communication terms, information. The changing sense of place, influenced to some extent by changing patterns of communication with the increasing growth of literacy, begins to appear in religious practices and in religious understandings. How people think about religious experience shows the mark of the communication tools with which they think.

Today we experience a much more dramatic change in place. Meyrowitz argues that electronic media have changed Americans’ sense of place in fundamental ways. In his view, this goes beyond a trivial change: we have lost our sense of place. Television, he claims, removes both physical location and social arrangement. Television amplifies the sense of disconnectedness first introduced by electronic communication. One no longer needs to be in the same place with another to communicate. The anthropologist Edmund S. Carpenter describes the situation in explicitly religious terms: Electricity has made angels of us all—not angels in the Sunday school sense of being good or having wings, but spirit freed from flesh, capable of instant transportation anywhere.

The moment we pick up a phone, we’re nowhere in space, everywhere in spirit. Nixon on TV is everywhere at once. That is Saint Augustine’s definition of God: a Being whose center is everywhere, whose borders are nowhere (1972, p. 3).

Electronic communication dissolves place. We can be at home and watching simultaneous events across the world. By the same token, electronic communication shatters social norms. We can view popes, presidents, queens, movie stars in our pajamas, with our morning coffee, with no need for protocol. We have indiscriminate access to social information that formerly defined groups, leading to an uncertainty of who and where we are.

Perhaps it is not so much a loss of place as the substitution of one kind of place for another. Contemporary places are virtual ones and composite ones. We combine our physical place with the virtual place of television location, of computer simulation, of cell phone conversation. We are seldom in one place at a time anymore, but link ourselves somewhere else. Part of us remains physically tethered but another part seeks out the virtual. From our behaviors (and dependence on electronic media), it’s clear that people prefer to co-inhabit places: here and that virtual somewhere.

Meyrowitz asks what the change in this sense of place has done to us. To help us understand it, he has, as noted earlier, identified three dimensions of change: group identity, socialization, and authority. Because each depends on place, the changing of social place by television has affected each.

Generally, sociologists define groups as individuals bound together by place, people who share social information that place restricts to their members. While it is

possible for people to form communities of discourse based on written materials (Stock, 1983), electronic media have sped up and expanded the process and provided social information formerly available only face-to-face (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 135). The wider place introduced by electronic media has led to “the decreasing importance of traditional group ties and the increasing importance of other types of association” (p. 131). Electronic media provide more options for identity formation, exposing people to different social meanings and shared social information across a much larger group.

To use George Herbert Mead’s term, electronic media alter one’s “generalized other”—the general sense how other people think and evaluate one’s actions. The “mediated generalized other” includes standards, values, and beliefs from outside traditional group spheres, and it thereby presents people with a new perspective from which to view their actions and identities (pp. 131-132).

The change in place brought about by television changes groups by increasing both the scope and the rate of information.

Socialization—the ways in which people enter into groups—changes with the shift in our sense of place, too. Typically socialization involves the gradual introduction of an individual into a group, through the measured provision of information about the group, its goals, its behaviors, its practices. “Part of the mystique of any training or socialization process is the belief by the person going through it that when the process is complete, he or she will be ‘another person,’ a person with special qualities” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 155). The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults provides a good example here. However, television and electronic media do not distinguish among groups nor do they aim to keep things secret. This changes both the pace and the practice of entering social groups.

The merging of formerly public and private spheres blurs the distinctions among full group membership, stages of socialization into a group, and outsider status. Generally, individuals being socialized into a group learn about the group’s ideals first (i.e., front region behavior) and then gain more access to back regions as they become more fully socialized. Through electronic media, however, the sequence and amount of information have changed. Individuals learn much about a group’s back region behavior before they become full members of the group. As a result stages of controlled access are bypassed (p. 153).

Individuals may well receive information about groups or society in general before they are ready for it; they may lose the sense of becoming a new person through initiation; and they may find themselves partial members of many groups and fully incorporated in none of them. Television’s impact on socialization causes an information overload.

Finally, Meyrowitz describes a loss of authority stemming from the loss of a sense of place. Authority, he claims, “rests on information control” (1985, p. 160), with people or organizations in authority, by virtue of their places, having more information than others. But television has altered that access, providing information to everyone, sometimes even before political authorities like the President or Congress have it. But television has chipped away at authority in other ways as well:

Roles of hierarchy are upset not only by the loss of exclusive control over knowledge directly relevant to role functions (medical data for a doctor, for

example), but also by the merging of public and private situations. More than any other type of roles, hierarchal roles depend on performers restricting access to their personal lives. Much human activity is common to all individuals. If high status persons cannot segregate such behavior from their on-stage high status performances, then they appear to be more like everyone else. By providing greater access to, and awareness of, backstage behavior, electronic media tend to undermine traditional abstractions of status (p. 167).

Once any authority figure has lost hierarchical place, all authority comes into question. People who have access to once privileged information in one sector feel that they could also have similar access in others. People who see the backstage behaviors of some authorities infer it of others. Television changes the workings of authority in ways that many people in authority have not yet understood.

Though Meyrowitz does not discuss it, television and electronic media also affect people's sense of ritual place. Ritual place, according to Smith, directs our attention: Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process for marking interest... It is this characteristic, as well, that explains the role of place as a fundamental component of ritual: place directs attention (Smith, 1987, p. 103).

But the focus of electronic media and television constantly changes and directs our attention from (virtual) place to (virtual) place, making it harder for us to attend to the place we are. At the same time, television trivializes place. Because we can be anywhere, we lose our sense of place. The sacred place is just another place. It is not uncommon now for people to make no distinctions in their social behaviors when they enter into churches or other "holy places". The sense of place has changed. And because we have access to virtually anywhere in the world, we hesitate to go to a holy place. What's there that we do not have on television? Many people no longer experience ritual itself as a means to enter into the holy. Television has changed social practice to the extent that people experience place differently and therefore experience ritual differently.

Just as ritual place changed from public shared spaces to information—the book, the symbol, the image, the imagination—so now the disembodied information of the electronic media privatize ritual space, a phenomenon exemplified in the "electronic church". In the United States, religious practice depends less on the community in its physical locations and seems more a matter of individualism. "I'm a very spiritual person, but I don't go to church" is a more and more common refrain. The virtual community of virtual places allows people more freedom in choosing their communities of worship.

All three of Meyrowitz's examples touch on religious experience as well as the more general social experience he describes. Group identity, socialization, and authority function within religion, too. Just as television changed group definitions by providing access to groups beyond people's physical boundaries, so too has it affected religious groups. Religious groups themselves overlap one another—to the benefit of ecumenism and interfaith dialogue. Religious intercultural dialogue also comes from the breakdown of group definition. On the other hand, religious groups become more porous, with people more likely to switch from church to church. Other groups have lost their mystique, their strangeness, and their cohesion. The shifting group boundaries also affects socialization since groups can no longer

control the flow of information to new members. It is more likely now that people come to join churches on their own terms and come with a great deal of knowledge of both the ideals and the flaws of religious groups.

However, religious authority shows the greatest effect. As with other authority, the loss of a privileged place and the appearance of no longer controlling the flow of information have resulted in a more open questioning of authority, particularly the hierarchical authority that depends on place. The trappings of office –physical separation, special clothing and vestments, behavioral protocols– are not enough to establish authority. The clergy no longer hold a place of honor and their actions are more likely to be questioned. Church members seek to hold their leaders accountable, despite theological claims that the Church is not a democracy. It is not so much political theory that gives people democratic expectations of the Church, but television’s breaking down of the sense of place and opening the flow of information. As Meyrowitz puts it, “Electronic media not only weaken authority by allowing those low on the ladder of hierarchy to gain access to much information, but also by allowing increased opportunities for the sharing of information horizontally” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 322). As people share more information, the interpretive rules change, lessening authority even more.

As both Smith and Meyrowitz note, the change in place affects the way people think about religious experience. Like all communication structures, we tend to take place for granted, even though it affects how we experience religion and how we think religiously. As place changes, we become more aware of groups, of cultures, of our own situatedness. That will challenge the ways that we have traditionally thought about the Church. It will also change the ways that we experience God’s presence (a place metaphor). On the other hand, if we can change place so easily, then is Carpenter right? Have we become angelic? What does that change do to our sense of body and embodiedness? To our sense of contingency?

The shifting of our sense of place not only changes what we think about. The changes in social practice resulting from it will also affect who does the thinking for the Church. The hierarchical sense of teaching authority and authorized teachers breaks down, since people feel that their perspective is as good as anyone else’s. We have already seen hints of this in the adulation that meets the Pope on his travels coupled with a willingness to discount what he says as chief teacher. The Pope has succeeded in establishing a visual authority but not an interpretive one. The changing of social place means that the Church will need to develop a new model of authority, one less dependent on position.

IV. THE USE OF SPACE

Contemporary communication practice calls attention to one other structural element that also indirectly influences theology through an influence on human thought. Motion pictures and television—indeed all visual media—rely on the arrangement of objects in space; through such arrangements, they promote a certain interpretation of the world. The cognitive consequences of spatial arrangement do not begin with these media, but much earlier. Ong has already pointed out how the

spatial arrangement of printed texts affected thought in the early centuries of printed books (1982, pp. 117-135). Eisenstein (1983) also documents the role of the visual elements in printing. However, today, the impact of the visual has spread throughout society with the pervasiveness of film and television.

For Ong, as we have earlier considered, visual arrangement of words on a page allowed a heightened separation of words from the speaker, something that manuscripts did not promote, but that only occurred slowly, well after the invention of the printing press (1982, pp. 119-120). This in turn fostered, on the one hand, a sense of words as separate, as objective symbols that had thinkers could scrutinize and analyze. On the other hand, the spatial arrangement of words on a page gave rise to different ways of thinking, marked by different arrangements in charts and diagrams. Typography used space itself as meaningful, highlighting similarities and differences, “exploiting visual space for the management of knowledge” (p. 130). This also subtly affects consciousness itself. The use of visual space “encouraged human beings to think of their own interior conscious and unconscious resources as more and more thing-like, impersonal, and religiously neutral. Print encouraged the mind to sense that its possessions were held in some sort of inert mental space” (p. 131).

Eisenstein remarks on the seemingly simple, but quite profound, effect of visual aids on learning and knowledge in the early era of the printing press. The ability to provide high quality illustrations “dramatized” engineering by showing how pulleys or gears worked (1980, p. 261); it also promoted a kind of analogical thinking based on the images: the heart as a pump, for example (p. 262). The visual “froze” nature, providing detailed illustrations of plants (p. 485) and also of human anatomy (p. 268). The emphasis on visual depiction over verbal description also led to new ways of thinking about geometry and astronomy (pp. 588-89). Eisenstein would not claim that no visual images existed before the printing press, but she does stress that the printing press increased the reliability and dissemination of images and, in so doing, changed the way that people understood and—dare we put it this way?—visualized the world. The greater the incidence of images, the more people become sensitive to spatial and visual arrangement.

In his study of religious consciousness and film, Thomas Martin argues that spatial factors and images affect all human thinking, including religious thinking.

First, an image suggests some type of picture—a spatial arrangement. Secondly, as in any arrangement, an image is interpretive. Finally, this interpretation is basic to human understanding and, given the unity of human reflection, will have an impact on all verbal articulation including religious reflection (Martin, 1991, p. 4).

Martin’s claim that the spatial arrangement of images is interpretive bears reflection. Human beings act upon the world to make it understandable. Picturing the world brings the diverse elements of day-to-day perception under more conscious control of the artist, the image maker, or the printer. Every image selects and arranges the experience of the world in particular ways. Or, as Martin, notes, “Images are, then, a basic way that the human has for interpreting the world” (p. 10).

More than photography or art, film and television put us in the habit of a doubly active interpretation of experience. First, as in static art, these arts compose each scene, offering a particular interpretation of how the world is. But, second, they then add a second interpretation in the moving image: one image flows into

another, one scene edited into the next. The film maker's interpretation of the world encompasses time as well as space and weds itself to narratives. In moving pictures, Jean Paul Sartre's comment about images seems doubly true: Rather an image is a certain type of consciousness. An image is an act, not some thing. An image is a consciousness of some thing (Sartre, quoted in Martin, 1991, p. 12).

Even if we are unaware of the constructedness of images, we still react to the kind of consciousness they place before us. It is this consciousness, claims Martin, that affects our religious reflection.

For Martin, humans need to situate themselves in time as well as in space—a perfect role for the moving picture. In his analysis film (and, by extension, television) does this by adding a direction, a goal to the narrative stream of images (p. 59). This, too, carries theological import, for what we envision as a goal will affect how we interpret those things that lead to it. Martin actually makes a much larger claim for any thinking, but particularly for religious thinking. He holds that the images by which people interpret the world affect, even on an unconscious level, all abstract thinking. “As Thomas Gornall notes in an essay on the role of imagination in theology, many are insensitive to the phantasms out of which their abstract thinking develops, but they are nevertheless basic (Gornall, 1964, p. 122, quoted in Martin, 1991, p. 4).

The preponderance of moving images in contemporary culture provides a huge reservoir of understandings of the world that, on one level or another, influence people's thinking about religious experience. Martin traces how film repeats and reinforces a quite old image. “One spatial organization that has been traditionally associated with the religious view in the West and which even today is most readily called religious by the average person is what can be termed the supernatural model[:]... God above and the world below...” (p. 63). The image may be suspect theologically, but it retains its power over us through its incorporation in art, film, and television as a background depiction of the state of creation. Martin finds traces of the image not only in “religious” films but across the board in the make-up of mainstream cinematic images.

Martin holds that space serves as more than a metaphor. It provides a means of interpreting the world, of organizing our experience, of reinforcing direction in our lives, and of structuring patterns of thought. With the increasing presence of images in the last century, it should not surprise us to find different sensitivities in religious experience. Perhaps the contemporary preferences for virtual worlds and the distrust of static explanations connect to the increased role of pictures, both static and moving. As a structural element of contemporary communication, this emphasis on spatial organization connects thought to place. But because it is a structural element, we tend to overlook it, just as we take literacy and our sense of place for granted.

V. CONCLUSION

In commenting on the role of printed works during the Reformation, Edwards proposed four consequences to the public communications of Luther

and his Catholic opponents. After reviewing three mechanisms for the structural impact of communication on religious reflection today, let us return to Edwards' four elements.

Through the action of the printing press, the religious disputes took on the nature of a propaganda war, with theological principles sometimes taking a secondary place to the popularity or skill of the communicators. More and more today, theology has become a part of the public discourse of society, not something left to the religious professionals. With the implicit roles of television and film (affecting place and space), today's religious reflection takes place in the backgrounds of entertainment and news programming. Often these have more credibility to people than overly abstract theological statements of belief and dry homiletic reflections on the Scriptures. As much as people might question the soundness of its theology, the popular television program, "Touched by an Angel", has a greater following today than any member of the hierarchy.

Second, Edwards notes how Luther and the Catholic writers interpreted the Scriptures as well as each other's writing differently, each side locked into a particular horizon of expectation. The separation of those texts from a discourse community, something fostered by the then new communication medium of print, allowed people to communicate without the usual shared understandings. Today this occurs all the more, particularly as people become unmoored, with no sense of place. The instant and indiscriminate communication media work against any kind of socialization into a community and make theological reflection all the harder. In homogeneous communities, reflection on religious experience can presume a similarity of experience. In communities made up of different literacies, different "places", and even different interpretations of space, it is harder to speak to one another's religious experience.

Third, Edwards reminds us that the printing press in the period of the Reformation had both a direct and an indirect impact on people. Much of the communication of Luther's ideas came to people through what later researchers termed "the two-step flow of communication" –from the media to an opinion leader to the people. Today's electronic media have repeatedly demonstrated this two-step flow. Talk shows, for example, allow the host or commentator to guide people's opinions. A book recommendation on Oprah Winfrey's daily talk show, for example, creates an instant best seller. These talk shows also address themselves to religious themes and the interpretation of religious experience. It's another forum for theology, though one seldom accepted by the theologian. (This is not to imply that some religious figures have not embraced the principle. That principle, for example, justifies various television ministries).

Finally, the various communication practices carry with them an implicit message. Just as the use of the printing press undermined the Catholic position on hierarchy by democratizing communication, so too today's communication technologies carry their own implicit messages, which do not always correlate with the intended theological uses of communication media. This review of three structural elements of communication aimed to call attention to how the media reshape the theological message.

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ABSTRACT

Even more than any content of communication, its structures influence theology by forming the framework for thinking about and sharing reflections on religious experience. This essay examines three characteristic, but often overlooked, communication structures: oral vs. written and printed communication and the contemporary move to "secondary oral" styles; communication technology's sense of place; and the uses of visual space as guides to the interpretation of experience. Since each of these structures shapes theology, a more conscious awareness of them challenges theology to take the role of communication more seriously.

RESUMEN

Aun más que cualquier contenido de la comunicación, sus estructuras influyen en la teología puesto que proporcionan el marco para el pensamiento y la reflexión de la experiencia religiosa.

Este ensayo examina tres estructuras características de la comunicación, que son a menudo pasadas por alto: la comunicación oral v/s la escrita e impresa y la tendencia contemporánea hacia los estilos "orales secundarios"; el sentido del lugar en la comunicación tecnológica; y los usos de espacio visual como guías de la interpretación de la experiencia. Puesto que cada una de estas estructuras moldean la teología, esta debiera asumir el desafío de tomar mayor conciencia de ellas y asumir el rol de la comunicación más seriamente.