KULTURA – MEDIA – TEOLOGIA
ISSN 2081-89-71
2019 nr 38, s. 25–46

Paul A. Soukup SJ

Communication Department, Santa Clara University

Some past meetings of communication, theology, and media theology

Wybrane dotychczasowe powiązania komunikacji, teologii i teologii mediów

ABSTRACT:
The purpose of this article is to present selected links between communication, theology and media theology. It starts with a reference to the history of Christianity construed as a history of communication. Next, the article outlines the key teachings of the Church on communication and media, with special focus on the documents issued by the Second Vatican Council and the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. Media theology, communication theology are discussed based on the teachings of the Church as well as the subject literature. The article is to review the current state of research in this area; it aims to order the terminology and present the possible directions of further research concerning this topic, part of the social communication studies, media studies and theology.

KEYWORDS:
media theology, communication theology, communicative theology, media ecology

STRESZCZENIE:
Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie niektórych powiązań komunikacji, teologii oraz teologii mediów. W pierwszej kolejności nawiązano do historii chrześcijaństwa rozumianej tu jako historii komunikacji. Następnie ukazano kluczowe kierunki nauczania Kościoła na temat komunikacji ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem dokumentów Soboru Watykańskiego II oraz Papieskiej Rady ds. Środków Społecznego Przekazu. Na podstawie nauczania Kościoła oraz literatury przedmiotu odniesiono się do takich pojęć jak: teologia mediów, teologia komunikacji, a także teologia komunikatywna. Artykuł ma charakter przeglądowy; stanowi próbę uporządkowania terminologii oraz przedstawienia kierunków dalszych badań na ten temat prowadzonych w ramach nauk o komunikacji społecznej i mediach oraz teologii.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:
teologia mediów, teologia komunikacji, teologia komunikatywna, ekologia mediów

In its proclamation of the Gospel, Christianity has made use of every communication media available to it: from narratives and preaching through writing, to today's digital technologies.

In fact, the history of Christianity could be written as a history of communication, with media playing a role both inside the Church and outside of it, that is, both in catechetics or faith development and in evangelization. Though the practice of communication differs from theology, what Anselm termed *fides quaerens intellectum* or faith seeking understanding, it fosters such understanding. And so, while the Church has employed media from its earliest days, any sense of "media theology" or, more inclusively, communication theology began later, most likely – as with so much else in theology – with St. Augustine and continues sporadically till today.

This article will offer some introduction to media theology (or, more broadly, to communication and theology), first with a brief look at Christian history and the entanglement of communication with theology, then at the beginnings of theological reflection on communication, and finally at a flourishing of theological interest in communication after the Second Vatican Council. This latter examination will describe several different approaches, offer their definitions, and introduce some of the practitioners. Finally, the article will suggest key points of contact with theology and highlight some places ripe for exploration.

1. THE ENTANGLEMENT OF COMMUNICATION WITH THEOLOGY

From the earliest days of Christianity, people reflected on their faith and their experiences of God. Richard McBrien explains the interdependence of faith and theology in this way: "Theology comes into play at that very moment when the person of faith becomes intellectually conscious of his or her faith". He goes on, "theology is that process by which we bring our knowledge and understanding of God to the level of expression. Theology is the articulation, in a systematic manner, of the experience of God within human experience"[1]. The sermons in the Acts of the Apostles show the apostles themselves attempting to understand the meaning of the death and rising of Jesus; the letters of Saint Paul demonstrate a similar effort to make sense of the encounter with the risen Lord. These scriptural

[1] R.P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, San Francisco, CA 1981, p. 26.

examples simply begin association between Christian faith and Christian theology. This reflection can occur in any kind of human expression. Again, McBrien explains, "Theology, in the broad sense of the word, may emerge in many forms: a painting, a piece of music, a dance, a cathedral, a bodily posture, or, in its more recognizable form, in spoken or written words"[2].

In this context, media ecology highlights how communication and theology interact. The media ecology approach to communication study calls attention to ways that communication forms a kind of "ecosystem," in which each element affects all the others[3]. Neil Postman, generally accepted as the founder of this approach, notes that "The word ecology implies the study of environments: their structure, content, and impact on people" and notes that the communication environment forms a complex message system[4]. Lance Strate adds that media ecology is "the study of media environments, the idea that technology and techniques, modes of information and codes of communication play a leading role in human affairs"[5]. In these views, communication media interact with each other and with the ideas expressed in them. Consider the analogy to biology: if a new species makes its home in a forest pond, all the other species there will change: some will flourish, others will die off, still others adapt. The entire ecosystem changes. The same thing can apply to the media world: adding a smart phone to an individual's media choices, for example, changes how that person does everything: speaks on the telephone, substitutes texting for talking, explores the web, gets the news, reads (or not reads) the newspaper, watches videos, plays games, and so on. But the interaction is even wider. Not only do communication media affect other media and their users, but they also affect how people think and what they think about, something Ong memorably expressed in his study of literacy: "writing restructures consciousness"[6]. The ecosystem of communication gives people the opportunity to act in new ways: writing lessened the dependence on

[2] Ibid.

[3] L. Strate, *A Media Ecology Review*, "Communication Research Trends" 2004, vol. 23/2, p. 3–43.

[4] N. Postman, *The Reformed English Curriculum*, in: A.C. Eurich (ed.), *High School 1980: The Shape of the Future in American Secondary Education*, New York 1970, p. 160–168.

[5] L. Strate, *Understanding MEA*, http://www.media-ecology.org/media_ecology/index.html (accessed 11.09.2019).

[6] W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London-New York 1982, p. 78–116.

memory to record facts, for example, and allowed new ways of organizing human knowledge. Today's smart phone allows constant connectivity and can shift the things to which people pay attention.

Applied to theology, media ecology shows how different means of expression promote different kinds of theological reflection, with different degrees of precision or even accuracy. People do reflect on their faith in different ways, with different communication tools, and at different moments of history. The centuries of Christian history demonstrate a continuous attention to theology. Anselm's "faith seeking understanding" forms a constant of Christian living, though different people engage it in different ways. A look at theology through the lens of communication shows one perspective on media theology.

People do reflect on their faith in different ways, with different communication tools, and at different moments of history.

Without attempting any kind of complete listing and not at all implying that one medium replaces another (recall that all these media form an ecology, with each continually affecting the others), let us briefly recall our history. As already noted, Christian theology begins with oral expression. That expression often takes on narrative form in the events of the life of Jesus or in the repetition of his parables[7]. These narrative forms followed precise rhetorical guidelines, with the Christian community experiencing them through performances[8]. Only later did the Church commit these accounts to writing in the Gospels, which still bear the marks of their origins as narrative performances. The narrative form of theology continues even to our own day with stories of faith, stories of the saints, and stories of Christian living shared among the believers[9]. The theology of the oral narratives emerges from the narratives chosen to recount, as well as from

[7] J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus in Oral Memory: The Initial Stages of the Jesus Tradition*, in: D. Donnelly (ed.), *Jesus: A Colloquium in the Holy Land*, New York 2001, p. 84–145.

[8] R.F. Ward, D. J. Trobisch, *Bringing the Word to Life: Engaging the New Testament through Performing it*, Grand Rapids, MI 2013, p. 3–33.

[9] J. Shea, *Stories of Faith*, Chicago 1980.

the characters, their activities, and the arrangement of the materials. The Evangelists also highlighted their theological conclusions through references to the Old Testament, creating implicit comparisons to actions and people, and bringing yet more theological detail in from the Old Testament. This kind of oral culture provides one communication "ecosystem" for theology but a powerful one as it had deep roots in the communication practices of the first centuries of Christianity.

Probably by the end of the second century, the media ecology of theology changed with the addition of art. Decorations in the catacombs depict the good shepherd, figures of people praying, and scenes of God's deliverance drawn from the Old Testament – the crossing of the Red Sea, Daniel in the lions' den, and so on[10]. Other Christian sites such as the second or third century church at Dura-Europos add other examples[11]. Goethals describes some of them: "One of these is a sketchy representation of Christ's healing of the paralytic, showing only the figure of Christ and the healed man as he takes up his bed and walks. Other vignettes depict. Jesus reaching out to a sinking Peter as the disciples watch from a boat; Jesus with a woman at the well"[12]. In these instances, the subject matter portrayed in the art (whether drawing or mosaic or friezes on the sides of sarcophagi) proposes its own theology. They may recall the Gospel narratives or they may simply juxtapose an image with an experience, like death or illness or martyrdom. The history of Christian art continues to this day, with each artist engaged in a personal or a commissioned attempt to understand the faith. For example, Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* suggests a very different theological interpretation from the same scene portrayed by Tissot or Benton, even though both depict the same parable[13]. The media of art and image offer the Church a different range of theology from that of oral narratives, though in many instances a narrative may well accompany a work of art.

[10] R. Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture*, Berkeley 1988, p. 27ff.

[11] C. Silver, *Dura-Europos: Crossroad of Cultures*, "Archeology", 31.03.2010, http://www.archaeology.org/online/features/dura_europos/ (accessed 12.09.2019).

[12] G.T. Goethals, *The Imaged Word: Aesthetics, Fidelity, and New Media Translations*, in: P.A. Soukup, R. Hodgson (eds.), *Fidelity and Translation: Communicating the Bible in New Media*, Franklin, WI 1999, p. 137.

[13] Museum of Biblical Art, *The Art of Forgiveness: Images of the Prodigal Son*, http://mobia.org/exhibitions/the-art-of-forgiveness#slideshow1 (accessed 12.09.2019).

Music forms another theological expression. Whether the settings of psalms or chants or more elaborate motets and oratorios, each musical expression also proposes its reflection on faith. The choice of texts provides one point of entry into the theology and this medium, but so also do the instruments, the harmonies, the musical key. For example, Bach's carefully constructed "Passion according to Saint Matthew" and "Passion according to Saint John" express his theology of the death of Jesus through melody, leitmotiv, chorale, individual voice, key, and reference to popular hymnody[14]. Even how the community engages music carries theological value: performance or listening? Meditation or entertainment?[15].

Once we undertake this kind of media ecology, it is easier to recognize how even more complex media environments express theology. The design and decoration of church buildings combine the arrangement of space, art, light, adornment, and so on. The placing of people both reflects and creates an ecclesiology of the body of Christ, depending on where one finds his/her place; a Eucharistic theology in the placement of the altar – or table in the post-Reformation period; – and a theology of God in the use of high ceilings and a "theological geography"[16]. The art in a church building contributes to the theology set in stone, as Ferree points out in terms of the great cathedrals of Europe: a biblical theology in the choice of scenes and a story of salvation in the juxtapositions of the images[17]. Goethals offers a similar example with the ecclesiology pictured in mosaic in the processional scenes at San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna[18]. She quotes the art historian Otto von Simson, noting that the processional images represent "the liturgical dramas: 'the Savior's life, death, and resurrection did not happen once in the dim past but take place mystically within the faithful themselves as they are enacted in the liturgy' (1948, p. 79)"[19]. In a different context, Goethals also notes how theologies of the *via negativa* and *via positiva*, as paths to God, find place in the aniconic and iconic designs of church buildings. The former feature spare, barren designs, with

[14] J. Pelikan, *Bach among the Theologians*, Philadelphia 1986, p. 74–101.

[15] D. Brent Laytham, *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play: Theological Engagements with Entertainment*, Eugene, OR 2012, p. 42–45.

[16] T.M. Martin, *Images and the Imageless: A Study of Religious Consciousness and Film*, Lewisburg 1991, p. 63.

[17] B. Ferree, *Bibles in Stone*, "New England Magazine" 1998, 24/3, p. 162–177.

[18] G.T. Goethals, *The Imaged Word: Aesthetics*…, op. cit., p. 133–172.

[19] Ibid, p. 138.

an emphasis on light and shadow, while the latter make abundant use of images, stained glass, and statuary[20]. In the post-Reformation period, the architecture supports the different interpretations of Christian worship: contrast the focus on the preached word in a Presbyterian church, built in an aniconic style, with a central pulpit, with the focus on the Eucharistic sacrifice in Baroque Catholic church, built with iconic images and a dominant altar.

Writing, long used to record the Bible as well as sermons or letters of the Fathers (which still bear the stamp of the rhetorical arrangement of oral cultures) gradually develops its own forms of organization and thinking[21]. By the early medieval period writing separated theology from narrative and preaching as people learned to analyze texts, treat detailed arguments, and cross-reference supporting evidence. In other words, those who mastered literacy had mastered a new rhetoric. And this rhetoric came to define theology even to the present day, with its reasoned arguments, carefully researched sources, and references to similar theological debates[22].

As people develop new media, they find new tools to express theology. The printing press, with its ability to provide multiple inexpensive copies led to the wider dissemination of written theology[23]. This new medium had a twofold effect on the media ecology in which theology took place. First, it opened theological argument to a much wider public, taking it from the schools and the approved experts to anyone who could read; similarly, it offered easy access to textual evidence – the Scriptures in the original languages, commentaries that had lain hidden in monastery libraries, and so on. Second, the printing press continued the ecological change begun by writing, allowing people to develop new forms of analysis, including the ways a printer arranged words on a page and the critical analysis of texts. And the printing press developed the ecosystem in a different way, by bringing theology into contact with other disciplines like botany, the

[20] G.T. Goethals, *The Electronic Golden Calf: Images, Religion, and the Making of Meaning*, Cambridge, MA 1990.

[21] W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*..., op. cit., p. 123–135.

[22] P.A. Soukup, *Orality, Literacy, Education, and Theology*. *Paper presented to the 13th Annual Convention of the Media Ecology Association*, June 2012, New York.

[23] E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*, Cambridge 1979.

sciences, engineering, and even finance[24]. The practices of the academic theologian, but also of the artist, the musician, the architect, the storyteller, changed. These participated in complex "ecosystems" in which theological reflection and expression rubbed up against the printing trade, patronage systems, changing academic norms, and customer demands[25].

> As people develop new media, they find new tools to express theology.

Similar things occur as the media ecology develops: the addition of the motion picture promoted a different kind of storytelling, with a kind of return to oral cultures, something that Ong has termed "secondary orality", a practice continued with television[26]. Secondary orality refers to the resurgence of narrative forms based on oral cultures, but impossible without the literacy that makes radio, film or television production possible. Those who use these media develop their own kinds of narrative, and many of them address theological topics[27]. The use of all kinds of new media open up different ways of doing theology. For example, the rise of the Internet in some ways recapitulates that of the printing press, allowing access to more voices in the theological ecosystem[28]. We will return to this more contemporary situation later.

2. THE OTHER SIDE

This brief overview shows that the role of communication media in theology appears at least as something that allows people to engage in Anselm's pursuit of faith seeking understanding in a variety of ways. Seen from the perspective of

[24] Ibid, Ch. 4.

[25] P.A. Soukup, *A Media Ecology of the King James Version*, "Translation" 2013, vol. 3, p. 151–173.

[26] W.J. Ong, *The Literate Orality of Popular Culture Today*, in: W.J. Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*, Ithaca-London 1971, p. 296.

[27] G. Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, Malden, MA 2005, p. 36–40.

[28] P.A. Soukup, *Computer Networking, Theology, and Media Ecology*, "Asian Horizons: Dharmaram Journal of Theology" 2011, vol. 5/3, p. 484–497.

the media ecology, a much greater richness of theology emerges in the history of Christianity. Not surprisingly, people also applied that "seeking understanding" to the media of theology themselves. This practice probably begins with Augustine in the fifth century and John Damascene in the eighth century. As a one-time teacher of rhetoric (as were many of the Church Fathers, since the study of rhetoric formed the core of classical education), Augustine limited his media ecology concern to rhetoric, answering the question of whether Christian preachers could or should employ the methods of classical rhetoric, a theme he explores in the "De Doctrina Christiana". For Augustine, classical rhetoric constituted a way of knowing, something that the rhetor could apply to any subject matter. While he recognizes the independence of the Scriptures, he does accept the use of some hermeneutical tools for difficult passages. He also defends the Christian teacher who will utilize the norms of contemporary culture to more beautifully and forcefully express theological ideas: Why should they not have access to the same tools as their opponents, he asks. We see as much in Augustine's own sermons and books, each elegantly crafted. But such seeking understanding about the media of theology never formed a central concern for Augustine.

Other theological responses to communication media also appear in Church practice. Though not developed consciously as a theological response to clashing interpretations, the Church Councils did opt for a practical solution to the existence of heretical materials. After a Council had decided an issue (and anathematized opposing views), manuscripts were destroyed. Much of the evidence we have of the arguments of the heresies of the early church comes only from the summaries contained in the works of those setting out to refute them. This theological approach, then, lay in what today we would term information control. However, such a system could not be perfect, as occasionally political powers in the emperor's circle would cling to the heretical positions.

In such far riskier times for the theologian, John Damascene took up the question of the legitimacy of images against the backdrop of the rise of iconoclasm, most likely spurred in the eastern Empire by contact with Islam[29]. In a church long accustomed to images and icons (even the Jewish synagogue at Dura Europos features extensive images in its decorations, Silver, 2010), little explicit theological

[29] J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine. Vol. 2. The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)*, Chicago 1974, p. 91ff.

reflection had occurred to justify the practice in the light of the Decalogue's forbidding the making of images. When the emperor's court took up the banning of images, the Church faced a crisis. The practices of icon making had emerged in the cultural contact of the Christian missionaries with the Greek and Roman worlds and seemed more or less unproblematic until the iconoclastic movement. Ultimately John builds his argument in defense of images on the Incarnation, in which the Word becomes flesh and, in the words of the Letter to the Colossians, "is the image of the invisible God" (1:15). This detailed defense of images also receives support from Pope Gregory the Great, who argues from a pragmatic base: the images are the "Bibles of the poor," of the non-literate. Pelikan summarizes the argument:

"The original Christian defense of the visual arts", it has been noted, "was based on their usefulness as educational tools. Imagery was a means of instruction or edification, especially for the illiterate"[30]. Images were preferable to the plain cross as symbols of the passion, because they communicated its meaning more effectively to the simple rustics. The images were "books for the illiterate", instructing them about the Christian message. The crude and uninstructed masses often failed to pay attention to the readings from Scripture in the public services of the church, but even they could have their attention drawn by images and could thus learn from them what was in the lessons[31]. As such instructional aids, the images allow those members of the body of Christ to come to know the Scriptures. The media theology of images combines both Scriptural warrant and pragmatic utility.

For the most part, communication media remained somewhat unproblematic for the Church in the next centuries. Abelard, unconscious that he participated in a kind of media theology or at least a theology dependent on the media ecology of his day, raised questions, not so much about the media, but in its effects. In his "Sic et Non", where he applied the textual analytic tools afforded by writing to the theological corpus of materials, he highlighted points of disagreement or outright contradiction among the revered church fathers and even in the Scriptures. Having the materials written down allowed for this much greater scrutiny. This kind of work, as well as the later Reformation theology, prompted a theologically-based

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid, p. 94.

media solution, with a return to that practiced in the early church: the banning of books. If theological information were widely available to anyone, and especially those judged unable to evaluate it, then those prepared in theology would make up lists of acceptable and non-acceptable books. The rise of the printing press and its greater dissemination of ideas only made the task more urgent.

The next two theological moments in which church leaders or theologians examined media theology also occur in the context of the spread of new media. In the 19th century, newspapers and the nascent mass media introduced a cause for concern, and one which elicited a number of papal statements[32]. And in the early part of the 20th century, a much more threatening medium appeared in the motion picture. Like the situation of images, one did not need any literacy, education, or even sophistication to consume films and the narratives they recounted. By 1936, Church leaders proposed a two-fold response: the boycott of objectionable films and a kind of film education program, to allow people to participate in film culture in a more nuanced way. Papal statements such as "Vigilanti Cura" (1936) and "Miranda Prorsus" (1957) show a certain sophistication in addressing film and, later, television. Though much of these documents take a suspicious tone, they do take the then new media seriously; they also acknowledge that the Church should learn to make use of these media[33].

Finally, in the 1950s, some theologians addressed a new question: whether the Mass or other Church rituals should be televised and whether those participating from a distance might benefit from the graces bestowed by the sacraments[34]. The approach applied the categories of sacramental theology and participation to the televisual presence, in an interesting anticipation of today's debates about virtual reality.

[32] E. Baragli, *Comunicazione Comunione e Chiesa*, Roma 1973, p. 245–282.

[33] For a very thorough listing of Catholic Church statements on communication – 842 in all – from the "Acts of the Apostles" to the Papacy of Paul VI. See: E. Baragli, *Comunicazione Comunione*…, op. cit.

[34] K. Rahner, *Die Messe und das Fernsehen*, in: R. Guardine, H. Kahlefeld (eds.), *Apparatur und Glaube*, Wurzburg 1955 (Available as: *The Mass and Television*, in: *Mission and Grace: Essays in Pastoral Theology*, Vol. 1, London 1963, p. 255–275.

3. VATICAN II AND THE GROWTH OF MEDIA THEOLOGY

At the end of the first session of the Second Vatican Council, in December 1963, the Council Fathers adopted the Decree "Inter Mirifica", addressing the means of social communication. Recognizing their lack of knowledge to thoroughly deal with topic, they limited the decree to just a few points: the moral demands of social communication, the need for information, the role of public opinion, the Church's use of these new means for its apostolic goals, and the formation of Catholics in social communication. The decree also called for a longer, more detailed statement from the Pontifical Council on Social Communication. In 1971 that group issued "Communio et Progressio", a careful statement on the means of social communication. Here, as in other Vatican documents of the time, social communication refers to the printed word, cinema, radio, television, and the theater. The first section of this lengthy statement outlined a theology prepared by the Vatican theologians with which Catholics might approach the various means of social communication. This included the goal of social communication (the unity and progress of human society[35]), the model (Christ, the perfect communicator[36]), the method (the giving of oneself in love[37]), and "essential requirements" (sincerity, honesty, and truthfulness[38]). And they also called for theologians around the world to reflect on the new communication media[39].

"Communio et Progressio" spurred the beginnings of the recent period of theological reflection on communication. In the 1980s and 1990s a series of biannual meetings of theologians and communication scholars took place under the auspices of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and the Jesuit-sponsored Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture. Each meeting focused on a theme: fundamental theology, ecclesiology, moral theology, revelation, film, and so on, with many resulting in the publication of the papers[40]. Seminar organizers

[35] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Communio et Progressio* (1971), no. 6–9.
[36] Ibid, no. 11.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid, no. 17.
[39] Ibid, no. 108.
[40] P. Granfield (ed.), *The Church and Communication*, Kansas City, MO 1994, P. Rossi, P.A. Soukup, (eds.), *Mass Media and the Moral Imagination*, Kansas City, MO 1994, P.A. Soukup (ed.), *Media, Culture, and Catholicism*. Kansas City, MO 1996.

wanted to promote theological reflection on communication by setting up interdisciplinary venues where those trained in theological analysis and those with a background in communication might learn from each other. In the following years, others, led by Plude and Bonnot attempted similar discussions in the United States, at the annual meetings of the Catholic Theological Society[41].

At the same time other Christian churches also began to develop a theological approach to communication. Most did so either to provide a grounding for their denominational forays into mass media or to reflect on the theology of the then-popular televangelists (television preachers). Since these preachers typically followed an ecclesiology and a theology of evangelization different from the more liturgical churches, this exploration of comparative theology proved fruitful. Soukup provides a guide to the growing literature in communication and theology of that time, dividing the material into six categories, based on communication areas: linguistic communication, aesthetic communication, cultural communication, interpersonal communication, mass media communication, and theological communication[42]. In each category, he identifies four themes: religious self-understanding Christian attitudes toward communication, pastoral uses of communication, and ethics, advocacy.

3.1. Communication and Theology

In the last 20 years, several distinct strands of theological reflection on communication have emerged. The broadest, "communication and theology" follows the description that Soukup appropriates and expands from McDonnell and includes "any item which 'in some manner contribute[s] to a systematic reflection upon or elucidation of theological problems in the light of communication theory or practice, or of communication experiences and issues in the light of Christian faith'"[43]. Theology here refers to the "systematic investigation and study of God, either as

[41] F.F. Plude, *Communication Theology in Theory and Practice*, "Catholic International" 2001, vol. 12/4, p. 25–27; B. Bonnot, *Communication Theology: Some Basics*, "Catholic International" 2001, vol. 12/4, p. 25–27.

[42] P.A. Soukup, *Communication and Theology: Introduction and Review of the Literature*, London 1983 (reprint: London: Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture 1991).

[43] P.A. Soukup, *Communication and Theology*…, op. cit., p. 19; J. McDonnell, *Theology and Communication: A Bibliography Complied by the Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture*, London 1982.

God or in relation to human beings and human living"[44], while communication can refer to the process of sharing information or establishing relationships, the relationships themselves and the media through which communication works, or the content of the interactions. This broad definition allows a great deal. It includes any attempts to bring theology and communication together, either in practice or in an academic exchange. This would include, for example, the entanglement of communication and theology as expressed in the media ecology described at the beginning of this article.

The general definition encompasses the work of theologians who use communication concepts to inform their work on traditional theological topics. Joseph Appleyard explores the signification of sacraments – centrally important to theology in Augustine, Aquinas, and the Reformation – by an appeal to contemporary theories of symbol and to the speech act theory that grounds a great deal of study of interpersonal communication[45]. Franz Jozef van Beeck also uses interpersonal communication and some of its theories of relationship to resolve a conundrum of the theology of revelation[46].

The approach also includes the more sociological work of religious thinkers like Robert White or Gordon Lynch who explore how the churches utilize communication and how theologians draw on popular culture[47]. White analyzes the historical record of the Catholic Church's attitudes toward mass media, but begins with an acknowledgment of the role of communication in the life of the Church: "Christianity is pre-eminently a religion of communication, placing central emphasis on: a divine revelation; the Incarnation and a Church that is continually becoming incarnate in different cultures; the mandate of proclaiming the Word of God; the formal ecclesial community as the context of faith development; the key role of written scriptures; and the teaching of a tradition to succeeding generations. The vitality of the Church has depended very much on adapting its gospel witness to the forms of communication of a particular era"[48].

[44] Ibid.

[45] J. Appleyard, *How does a Sacrament "Cause by Signifying"?*, "Science et Esprit" 1971, vol. 23, p. 167–200.

[46] F-J. Van Beeck, *Divine Revelation: Intervention or Self-Communication?,* "Theological Studies" 1991, vol. 52, p. 199–226.

[47] R. White, *The New Communication Emerging in the Church*, "Catholic International" 2001, vol. 12/4, p. 18; G. Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular*…, op. cit., p. 20–42.

[48] R. White, *The New Communication Emerging*…, op. cit., p. 18–24.

After a detailed description of contemporary society, he proposes that, in order to effectively communicate, Catholic teaching must undertake a theology of symbolism and that religious teachers and leaders must create symbols of faith, things only possible in a more egalitarian church and a church attuned to popular culture. Lynch begins with popular culture, asking why theologians should pay attention to popular culture. He proposes four answers: first, religion interacts with popular culture daily, especially in the lives of people. He notes, "popular culture shapes religious belief and activities or is appropriated by religious groups, religion is represented in popular culture, and religious groups interact with popular culture"[49]. Second, "popular culture may serve religious functions in contempo-

> Christianity is pre-eminently a religion of communication, placing central emphasis on: a divine revelation; the Incarnation and a Church that is continually becoming incarnate in different cultures; the mandate of proclaiming the Word of God.

rary society" on a sociological level that overflows into theology. Third, some in the Christian churches have already adopted "a missiological response to popular culture." Fourth, there exists a widespread "use of popular cultural texts and practices as a medium for theological reflection"[50]. His last category includes the abundance of material on the use of cinema as a source of theological reflection, one of the largest sources of material in the categories of theology and communication[51]. Implicit within this overall approach lies the work of those who use different media to explore theological topics: contemporary film directors like Krzysztof Kieślowski and Clint Eastwood or musicians represented in various Christian bands.

[49] G. Lynch, *Understanding theology*..., op. cit., p. 21.

[50] Ibid.

[51] For a sense of its extent, see: T. Lindvall, *Religion and Film, Part II: Theology and Pedagogy*, "Communication Research Trends" 2005, vol. 24/1, p. 3–40, though many more texts have appeared since Lindvall's work.

Jose M. Galvan represents a theological variation on these approaches in his reflections on aesthetics as a theology category. He begins with this premise: "Many current cultural factors and the internal dynamics of post-modernity, both very much related to information and communication technologies, seem to indicate that the *pulchrum* [beauty] will continue to have a relative predominance over the *verum* [truth] and the *bonum* [good]"[52]. Beginning with beauty, then, he constructs a media theology, arguing that the categories of aesthetics work better today than those of the other philosophical universals.

3.2. Communication Theology

Plude and her colleagues tend to refer to their work as "communication theology." The area focuses largely on the mass media. And though she recognizes the limitations of the title (that it "seems to make communication derivative of Theology'[53]; that it lacks nuance), she compares the approach to "liberation and feminist-themed theologies. In this context, communication theology, within the Catholic perspective as conditioned by Vatican II, is doing theology: [a.] from a position within today's culture which is defined by communication emphases, [b.] with a perspective that seeks to understand the Divine presence and action in the varied dimensions of this communication culture"[54].

This approach often includes works that have their origin in formal theology, such as that of Avery Dulles whose work focused on the nature of the Church[55]. Rather than use the term, "communication theology," he uses the more straightforward, "theology of communication". He proposes this definition: The theology of communications is the study of how God brings about the convictions and commitments connected with religious faith. Faith normally requires for its proper development a community of believers who support one another's investigations and commitments. The theology of communications is, therefore, closely connected with ecclesiology[56].

[52] J. Galvan, *The Importance of the Cinema in the Dialogue Between Theology and Postmodernity: 10 Stages of a Journey*, "Communication Research Trends" 2013, vol. 32/3, p. 28.

[53] F.F. Plude, *Communication Theology in Theory*..., op. cit., p. 25–27.

[54] Ibid.

[55] A. Dulles, *A Half Century of Ecclesiology*, "Theological Studies" 1989, vol. 50, p. 430–431.

[56] Ibid.

On this foundation he attempted to map various kinds of communication onto his earlier work on the nature or models of the Church, judging, for example, broadcasting and mass media (or centralized communication) as better suited to an institutional or hierarchical model of the Church while symbolic communication describes a sacramental model of the Church[57].

3.3. Communicative Theology

Communicative theology emerged out of a collaboration between several groups in Germany; it refers primarily to a method of doing theology rather than to a specific subject matter in theology. Bernard Hilberath, one of its principal researchers, provides this description:

"Communicative Theology is not a theological reflection about any single sector of reality, comparable to a 'theology of marriage' or a 'theology of work'. On the contrary, it addresses itself to the whole of reality – a trait it shares with the Theology of Liberation, which likewise deals with reality, namely in the perspective of God, who liberates his People. Analogously, Communicative Theology has its foundation in God's self-communication, in short, in the revelation of a 'communicative God'. This too holds for all times and places, but the contemporary situation in the Catholic Church and in the ecumenical movement calls for special attention in this regard, and this is the context in which Communicative Theology was born. It arose precisely out of the practice of theological communication within groups"[58].

Bradford Hinze provides a more detailed introduction to the work of those developing communicative theology and connects it to contemporary theological concerns with personalism and dialogue, and with hermeneutics. Where the other approaches to media theology tend to focus on media and the cultural realities of television, radio, and film, communicative theology begins at the interpersonal level and develops communities of theological practitioners[59].

[57] A. Dulles, *The Church Is Communications*, "The Catholic Mind", October 1971 p. 6–16.

[58] B.J. Hilberath, *Communicative Theology: A Short Introduction. Paper presented to the first conference on Communication and Theology*, Santa Clara University, June 2012, p. 1.

[59] B.E. Hinze, *Introduction*, in: M. Scharer, B.J. Hilberath, *The Practice of Communicative Theology: An Introduction to New Theological Culture*, New York 2008, p. 1–9.

4. OTHER AREAS OF REFLECTION

This overview of some of the past approaches to – and works seeking to develop – theological reflection on communication suggests some of the breadth of concern, though it cannot possibly cover everything. Soukup summarizes work in the 1990s, while "Communication Research Trends" published essays on theological and religious perspectives on the Internet, with material from the Jewish, Catholic, Islamic, and Hindu traditions[60]. "Communication Research Trends" (2013) returned to the general topic with essays addressing theological reflection on social media.

Social media offer new opportunities for reflection on communication and theology since these new media combine aspects of both the interpersonal communities of communicative theology and the indiscriminate audiences of mass communication, as well as new understandings of human interaction, human personality, and human presence.

Social media offer new opportunities for reflection on communication and theology since these new media combine aspects of both the interpersonal communities of communicative theology and the indiscriminate audiences of mass communication, as well as new understandings of human interaction, human personality, and human presence. Two areas hold importance. First, these new media challenge theology to reevaluate presence: how does the virtual community and its virtual participation affect the traditional theological thinking that depends on the face-to-face presence in Christian worship or on the various definitions of the

[60] P.A. Soukup, *c*

divine presence? Virtuality also affects people's experience of and thinking about place. Is place in the virtual world different from place as represented in the Stations of the Cross, for example? In many ways these questions arise from media ecology, since they call attention to the changing media environment and how those changes affect the entire communication ecosystem in which the Church exists[61].

Second, social media and the Internet more generally have recreated the situation of the printing press by making multiple, cheap information available without any vetting process[62]. For organizations like the Christian churches, this raises the question of religious authority: who speaks for the church? On the one hand, social media can lead to a flowering of theological opinion by opening up the discourses of theology; on the other hand, these media can lead to uncertainty about belief and doctrine. On another level, these new media invite a new reflection on ecclesiology and the nature of the Church. While the Church may have faced similar issues with other "new" technologies – the printing press or the television, for example – the theories and methods used to resolve those issues seem not suited to today's concerns.

Another area that could bear much fruit takes up a theme first explicitly addressed by Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) and repeated by John Paul II in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990): the use of various communication media for evangelization. This theme occurs again and again, though the Catholic Church, its dioceses, and communication enterprises run by both religious communities and lay organizations seem unable to make an impact on contemporary culture. Perhaps the combination of a theology of evangelization and the study of media audiences might help to shed light on the challenges.

Finally, contemporary communication media and practices have, in the media ecology sense, changed all other practices of human interaction. And that has had a profound affect on community and culture, two areas central to the life of the Church. Much of the theology of *communio* stems from an earlier age in

[61] P.A., Soukup, *Computer Networking*…, op. cit., p. 484–497; P.A. Soukup, *Looking at, with, and through YouTube*, https://darcynablog.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/youtube_schol.pdf (accessed 12.08.2019).

[62] P.A. Soukup, *Computer Networking*…, op. cit., p. 484–497.

the Church, a time of smaller cities, a time of a slower pace of life. Similarly, the Church's understanding of culture dates to times before mass culture. But today people live in a world not defined by the Gospel and constantly bombarded by ever changing messages. Here, too, we see the need to understand the world of communication in a theologically sophisticated way.

This brief essay has introduced several approaches to applying theological reflection to communication, beginning with the historical expressions of theology through communication. In the past, Church fathers and teachers tended to consider communication media only when they raised problems for the Christian community. Consistent with the Second Vatican Council's theological directions, scholars and theologians have worked to develop a positive media theology in the last 50 years. From the other side – that of communication studies – approaches like media ecology have allowed a new appreciation of the role that communication itself plays in theology.

REFERENCES

Appleyard J., *How does a Sacrament "Cause by Signifying"?*, "Science et Esprit" 1971, vol. 23, p. 167–200.

Baragli E., *Comunicazione Comunione e Chiesa*, Roma 1973.

Bonnot B., *Communication Theology: Some Basics*, "Catholic International" 2001, vol. 12/4, p. 25–27.

Dulles A., *A Half Century of Ecclesiology*, "Theological Studies" 1989, vol. 50, p. 430–31.

Dulles A., *The Church Is Communications*, "The Catholic Mind", October 1971, p. 6–16.

Dunn J.D.G., *Jesus in Oral Memory: The Initial Stages of the Jesus Tradition*, in: D. Donnelly (ed.), *Jesus: A Colloquium in the Holy Land*, New York 2001, p. 84–145.

Eisenstein E., *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*, Cambridge 1979.

Ferree B., *Bibles in Stone*, "New England Magazine" 1898, 24/3, p. 162–177.

Galvan J., *The Importance of the Cinema in the Dialogue Between Theology and Post-modernity: 10 Stages of a Journey*, "Communication Research Trends" 2013, vol. 32/3, p. 28–33.

Goethals G.T., *The Electronic Golden Calf: Images, Religion, and the Making of Meaning*, Cambridge, MA 1990.

Goethals G.T., *The Imaged Word: Aesthetics, Fidelity, and New Media Translations*, in: P.A. Soukup, R. Hodgson (eds.), *Fidelity and Translation: Communicating the Bible in New Media*, Franklin, WI 1999, p. 133–172.

Granfield (ed.), *The Church and Communication*, Kansas City, MO 1994

Hilberath B.J., *Communicative Theology: A Short Introduction. Paper presented to the first conference on Communication and Theology*, Santa Clara University, June 2012.

Hinze B.E., *Introduction*, in: M. Scharer, B.J. Hilberath, *The Practice of Communicative Theology: An Introduction to New Theological Culture*, New York 2008, P. 1–9.

John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html (accessed 12.07.2019).

Laytham D.B., *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play: Theological engagements with entertainment.* Eugene, OR 2012.

Lindvall T., *Religion and Film, Part II: Theology and Pedagogy*, "Communication Research Trends" 2005, vol. 24/1, p. 3–40.

Lynch G., *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, Malden, MA 2005.

Martin T.M., *Images and the Imageless: A Study of Religious Consciousness and Film*, Lewisburg 1991.

McDonnell J. *Theology and Communication: A Bibliography Complied by the Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture*. London 1982.

Milburn R., *Early Christian Art and Architecture*, Berkeley 1988.

Museum of Biblical Art, *The art of forgiveness: Images of the prodigal son*, http://mobia.org/exhibitions/the-art-of-forgiveness#slideshow1 (accessed 12.07.2019).

Ong W. J., *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London-New York 1982.

Ong W. J., *The Literate Orality of Popular Culture Today*, in: W.J. Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*, Ithaca-London 1971.

Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandii* (1975), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html (accessed 12.06.2019).

Pelikan J., *Bach among the Theologians*, Philadelphia 1986.

Pelikan, J., *The Christian tradition: A history of the development of doctrine. Vol. 2. The spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)*, Chicago 1974.

Plude F.F., *Communication Theology in Theory and Practice*, "Catholic International" 2001, vol. 12/4, p. 25–27.

Postman N., *The Reformed English Curriculum*, in: A.C. Eurich (ed.), *High School 1980: The Shape of the Future in American Secondary Education*, New York 1970, p. 160–168.

Rahner K., *Die Messe und das Fernsehen*, in: R. Guardine, H. Kahlefeld (eds.), *Apparatur und Glaube*, Wurzburg 1955 (Available as: *The Mass and Television*, in: *Mission and Grace: Essays in Pastoral Theology*, Vol. 1, London 1963, p. 255–275).

Rossi P., Soukup P.A. (eds.), *Mass Media and the Moral Imagination*, Kansas City, MO 1994.

Shea J., *Stories of Faith*, Chicago 1980.

Silver C., *Dura-Europos: Crossroad of Cultures*, "Archeology", 31.03.2010, http://www.archaeology.org/online/features/dura_europos/ (accessed 12.07.2019).

Soukup P. A., *Communication and Theology: Introduction and Review of the Literature*, London 1983. (Reprint: London: Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture 1991).

Soukup P.A., *A Media Ecology of the King James Version*, "Translation" 2013, vol. 3, p. 151–173.
Soukup P.A., *Computer Networking, Theology, and Media Ecology*, "Asian Horizons: Dharmaram Journal of Theology" 2011, vol. 5/3, p. 484–497.
Soukup P.A., *Looking at, with, and through YouTube*, https://darcynablog.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/youtube_schol.pdf (accessed 12.09.2019).
Soukup P.A., *Media and Religion*. *Communication*, "Communication Research Trends" 2002, vol. 21/2, p. 3–37.
Soukup P.A., *Media, Culture, and Catholicism*. Kansas City, MO 1996.
Soukup P.A., *Orality, Literacy, Education, and Theology*. *Paper presented to the 13th Annual Convention of the Media Ecology Association*, June 2012, New York.
Strate L., *A Media Ecology Review*, "Communication Research Trends" 2004, vol. 23/2, p. 3–43.
Strate L., *Understanding MEA*, http://www.media-ecology.org/media_ecology/index.html (accessed 11.09.2019).
Van Beeck F-J., *Divine Revelation: Intervention or Self-Communication?,* "Theological Studies" 1991, vol. 52, p. 199–226.
Ward R.F., Trobisch D. J., *Bringing the Word to Life: Engaging the New Testament through Performing it*, Grand Rapids, MI 2013, p. 3–33.
White R.A., *The New Communication Emerging in the Church*, "Catholic International" 2001, vol. 12/4, p. 18–24.

Biography

Paul A. Soukup, S.J., Department of Communication Santa Clara University; has explored the connections between communication and theology since 1982. His publications include "Communication and Theology" (1983); "Christian Communication: A Bibliographical Survey" (1989), "Media, Culture, and Catholicism" (1996), "Mass Media and the Moral Imagination" with Philip J. Rossi (1994), and "Fidelity and Translation: Communicating the Bible in New Media with Robert Hodgson" (1999). In addition, he and Thomas J. Farrell have edited four volumes of the collected works of Walter J. Ong, S.J., "Faith and Contexts" (1992–1999). These volumes have led him to examine more closely how orality-literacy studies can contribute to an understanding of theological expression. Most recently, he has published a book of Biblical meditations on communication, "Out of Eden: 7 Ways God Restores Blocked Communication" (2006) and edited a collection of essays applying "Ong's thought, Of Ong & Media Ecology: Essays in Communication, Composition, and Literary Studies" (2012). Fr. Soukup serves on the Boards of Trustees of the American Bible Society and of Loyola University of New Orleans. Contact: psoukup@scu.edu