

## IN COMMEMORATION: WALTER ONG AND THE STATE OF THEOLOGY

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*The centenary of Walter Ong's birth offers an occasion to reflect on how his research into culture, language, orality and literacy, and communication practices can contribute to the work of those engaged in theological research and reflection. This article argues that his work helps us understand how shifting information handling (from classical rhetoric to writing to computer systems) influences what counts for knowledge and how each kind of information requires a particular hermeneutical approach.*

THE YEAR 2012 MARKS THE CENTENARY of the birth of Walter J. Ong, S.J., a long-time professor of literature at Saint Louis University, and a scholar whose wide-ranging studies and essays have profoundly influenced contemporary intellectual life. In a writing career that spanned over 50 years, he published relatively few works on theology—and these more along the lines of devotional or analytic essays on American Catholicism—but his body of work carries huge implications for theology as it moves into the future.

Born in Kansas City, Ong graduated from Rockhurst College with a degree in classics, worked for a year, and then entered the Society of Jesus. During philosophy studies at Saint Louis University, he also completed a MA in English, with a thesis examining the sprung rhythm in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. His thesis director, a young Marshall McLuhan, introduced him to the New Criticism, to the history and role of the trivium in medieval education (the topic of the dissertation that McLuhan worked on during those years), and to “Perry Miller’s work on Ramism in

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*The New England Mind: The 17th Century.*<sup>1</sup> After ordination, Ong went to Harvard for advanced studies in English with Miller.<sup>2</sup>

### “INFORMATION HANDLING”

During his own dissertation research on Ramus, Ong came to several key insights that he developed over the course of his career. First, in examining how Ramus redefined rhetoric, Ong noticed changes in what today we would call “information handling.”<sup>3</sup> Ramus began his educational reform shortly after printed books flooded European universities and book-sellers. Adjusting classical rhetoric’s ways for finding arguments, retrieving information, storing ideas, and presenting those ideas, Ramus proposed simplified systems based on printed visual diagrams. In other words, Ramus began to see that printed books gave us the technology to store information independently of the age-old systems of oral recall or handwritten manuscripts; and he put this technology to work. Here, Ong noticed how the methods of information handling changed more broadly along with their means of expression—the media used by orators, scribes, scholars, and students. Moreover, he concluded that methods of information handling changed more in the manner of evolution—gradually, incrementally. What Ramus proposed made sense only in the light of a centuries-long rebalancing of rhetoric and grammar that emerged with manuscript culture.<sup>4</sup>

Second, drawing on his theological and biblical studies as well as his philosophy studies, Ong noticed a difference (highlighted in his dissertation) between the Hebrew and the Greek understandings of knowledge, a difference he at first attributed to aural or visual mindsets.<sup>5</sup> For Ong, this insight complemented and illustrated his first insight. The communication patterns changed what Ong came to term “psychodynamics” or noetic patterns. How people (and cultures) communicate and store knowledge changes how people (and cultures) think. Each culture develops a kind of bias for a particular type of knowledge. Greek and Latin culture privileged visual patterns—even in their oral discourses and rhetoric, a bias Ong traces into

<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. Farrell, *Walter Ong’s Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 2000) 42.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 33–52.

<sup>3</sup> Walter J. Ong, “Information and/or Communication: Interactions,” *Communication Research Trends* 16 (1996) 3–29.

<sup>4</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Ramus: Method, and the Decay of Dialogue; From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1958).

<sup>5</sup> Paul A. Soukup, “Walter Ong, S.J.: A Retrospective,” *Communication Research Trends* 23 (2004) 3–23.

contemporary Western culture in an essay fittingly titled “I See What You Say: Sense Analogues for Intellect.”<sup>6</sup>

Third, Ong followed these insights through 17th- and 18th-century literature, noting evidence of patterns of expression and thinking in the written texts, which he termed “oral residues.” In effect, these patterns marked epistemological approaches that resulted from the educational preparation of generations of teachers and students who followed a classical rhetorical training, one designed for oral expression, but one more and more directed to creating written works. From these perspectives he adopted a kind of developmental view of human expression that moved in phases from oral expression, to writing, to what Ong termed “secondary orality” (the oral expression that depends on writing, in the form of scripts performed by actors, for example), to electronic expression.

These methods of expression established ways people learned to discover, express, remember, and recall all knowledge—and how they thought with these tools. Such methods also characterized theology at each stage of its historical development. Ong’s work can serve to highlight how the general changes in education, information handling, and expression influence the more specific practices of theology.

In brief, then, Ong’s body of research and thought argues that people’s communication tools (oral methods, writing, electronic) influence how people deal with information. This in turn affects what counts as knowledge and what counts as valid argument in support of knowledge. In addition, information handling influences the topics people investigate. The history of theology, as part of the larger culture, manifests these changes.

During the period of his dissertation research in the early 1950s, Ong visited the libraries of Europe, seeking out Ramist editions. Based in Paris, he lived in the same community as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. “Ong’s room was just across the hall from Teilhard’s. It was then that Ong read Teilhard’s work, much of it in manuscript form.”<sup>7</sup> Some of Ong’s religious writings in the 1950s number among the earliest to introduce Teilhard’s thought to an American audience.<sup>8</sup> He later said that Teilhard’s thought had not influenced his own ideas on the development of rhetoric or expression by, for example, suggesting new lines of inquiry; rather, Teilhard’s writings confirmed him along the lines he had explored in the sense of the evolutionary development of ideas and expression.

<sup>6</sup> Walter J. Ong, “‘I See What You Say’: Sense Analogues for Intellect,” *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* 10 (1970) 22–42; reprinted in Walter J. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1977) 121–44.

<sup>7</sup> Farrell, *Walter Ong’s Contributions* 45.

<sup>8</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Frontiers in American Catholicism: Essays on Ideology and Culture* (New York: Macmillan, 1957); Ong, *American Catholic Crossroads: Religious-Secular Encounters in the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1959).

Those 1950s writings outlined a broad theological perspective, consistent with his other work. He wrote about an intellectual evolution, about a world shaped by instant communication, and about a deep historicity in which the church exists;<sup>9</sup> he wrote of technology, cosmology, and the failure of humanist culture to understand it—and the challenge this poses to a theology unwilling to take cosmic evolution seriously;<sup>10</sup> he wrote of the dangers of intellectual isolationism to theology and Catholicism.<sup>11</sup> But even in this, he took a generally optimistic view: “There is no revelation outside history, and no Church either,”<sup>12</sup> a view consistent with “the old logion ‘Grace builds on nature’”;<sup>13</sup> he saw no contradiction between Catholic theology and evolutionary thought. He urged an awareness of cosmic history (the billions-of-years-old universe) on religious thinkers, and he advocated dialogue with a pluralist society if the church were to understand itself in the contemporary world.<sup>14</sup> He ends that 1959 essay with comments that presage the Second Vatican Council as well as the 1971 Pontifical Council on Social Communication’s document *Communio et progressio*:

All communication, all dialogue, has this effect: it unites, and this despite the greatest difference there is, that between your person and mine, between you and me. But, finally, dialogue must be between persons who are fully persons by being committed, by having taken a stand in the world of persons. Otherwise it will degenerate into the mere talk of a television commercial.<sup>15</sup>

His repeated theme in these early essays is that the church and its theology must take place in a secular world that evolves, as does all life, across millennia. A theology isolated from history, secular knowledge, and the patterns of communication, and from a self-awareness of its rootedness in these three realities will end in irrelevance.

Mixing God’s revealed word with misunderstanding is horribly disastrous, and we are pretty sure to so mix it if we do not keep this knowledge in constant contact with theology. Otherwise new questions arise which cannot be understood in old frames of reference. . . . The theological frames of reference have to keep pace with other thinking.<sup>16</sup>

Not working as a theologian, Ong saw his role as propaedeutic, to help theology understand a world of rhetoric, science, and its epistemology.

### ORALITY, LITERACY, AND THEOLOGY

Throughout the 1960s, encouraged by explorations of what Eric Havelock called the “orality problem,” Ong began to think systematically about

<sup>9</sup> Ong, *Frontiers* 1–23, 35–51.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 104–25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 45.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 86–103.

<sup>12</sup> Ong, *American Catholic* 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 16–45

<sup>16</sup> Ong, *American Catholic* 107.

orality and literacy. The time proved a fruitful one for such work. Shortly after he published his dissertation research on Ramus, several other scholars, working independently, probed the same problem: Claude Lévi-Strauss in *La pensée sauvage* (1962); Jack Goody and Ian Watt in “The Consequences of Literacy” (1962); McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962); Ernst Mayr in *Animal Species and Evolution* (1963); and Havelock in *Preface to Plato* (1963).<sup>17</sup> Informed by these different approaches to his general area of interest, Ong turned his attention more specifically to “the word,” publishing a trilogy of studies over 15 years: *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (1967); *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (1977); and *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982). Each of the books explores expression, thought, and the ways humans store and recall information—and the ways those processes in turn affect how people understand and frame knowledge.

In a 1969 essay, “Communications Media and the State of Theology,” Ong attempted to apply this general understanding of communication to theology. His aim was to consider

the interlocking of communications media and theology. We know now that in a given culture many seemingly unrelated phenomena are somehow correlatives of one another. The intellectual activity of a culture and its technological activity are correlatives; styles in art and styles in politics are correlatives, and so on, although we must not imagine correlation here as one-to-one correspondence. We can suspect that the state of theological thinking and the modes of communication in a given culture at a given time are perhaps somehow correlatives, too.<sup>18</sup>

To demonstrate his point, he explains his understanding of communication media as more than a means to convey messages. Even for a person to frame a thought, communication involves dialogue, beginning with self-understanding and requiring a nonneutral medium—how people express ideas shapes their ideas. Here theology interacts with the conceptualization of communication:

This communication from the Father, who is both mediator and message, must be conceived of specifically by analogy with the human word, as the Scriptures make clear. “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14). Conceptualizations involving other sensory analogies, as when the Nicene Creed calls the Son “light of light,” are secondary to this one involving sound. “*Eo Verbum quo Filius,*” goes the

<sup>17</sup> Eric A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1986) 25.

<sup>18</sup> Walter J. Ong, “Communications Media and the State of Theology,” *Cross Currents* 19 (1969) 462–80; reprinted in Walter J. Ong, *Faith and Contexts*, 4 vols., ed. and intro. Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992) 1:154–74, at 154.

theological logion. "He is Word by the fact that he is Son." Here the primacy of the sound medium in human communication is underlined, and thus all sorts of theological questions concerning media come urgently to the fore.<sup>19</sup>

What relationship exists, Ong asks, between the oral, auditory word and the written Gospels? With this background, he turns to several specific correlations between theology and communication media.

The first correlation—and what would prove to be the most extensive one—appears in the study of the Scriptures. Here Ong directly applied his initial understanding of oral cultures, a point to which he returned in the mid-1970s (a point to be discussed later in this article). In this relatively early essay, he indicated the initial understanding of oral expression—how oral cultures store and recall knowledge and how these patterns appear in the Gospels (formulaic expressions, rhythm, rhyme, etc.); how the interpretation of events takes on those patterns, and how the sometimes puzzling nature of biblical materials makes more sense when we stop viewing them as written materials. "These sayings [of Jesus] are not only clothed in oral forms; they are also often quite strikingly oral-type thought."<sup>20</sup> This point takes on greater significance with Ong's later work on oral thought.

A second correlation appears with reflection on the Tridentine affirmation "that divine revelation is contained both 'in written books and in unwritten traditions.'"<sup>21</sup> The importance of this formula for Catholic theology emerges more clearly with an understanding of oral and written communication media.

Before [humans] moved into the electronic era and thereby awoke to the limitations of writing and print, [they] tended to regard the inscribed word as a paradigm of all verbalization. In our newer perspectives we can find more meaning in Trent's formulation because we understand better what the non-written may be.<sup>22</sup>

We in the academic world, in biblical studies, and in theology are too literate; consequently we fail to see writing and literacy for what it does to us and to our modes of thinking. A new perspective on oral and written cultural expression leads to a new set of tools for interpretation and understanding.

A third correlation between communication expression and theology applies to theological expression itself. Ong's research on Ramus and medieval rhetoric showed him that all academic work, including theology, prior to the printing revolution and into the 18th century, retained oral patterning. This changes again with new media in the 20th century. "This is a shift away from a basic orality in theology, an orality with profound historical roots hitherto never bared, to a multimedia theology in which the almost total communication ambitioned in electronic technologized culture

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 157.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 161.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 160.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

interacts vigorously with the theological heritage."<sup>23</sup> A current perspective lays bare the characteristics of the older one—what people had taken for granted as part of theology becomes evident as part of its modes of expression more than of its substance. The oral heritage of theology in the West includes its centuries of Latin expression and the formulaic perfections of those expressions. Even when written in manuscripts, Latin theology retained its rhetorically informed tools of expression, recall, and information storage. That rhetorical heritage included a polemic quality: oral expression came to perfection in debate and argumentation, something formalized in the disputation. That format also privileged a “highly formalized logic,” developed with the growth of written expression in the medieval period. Since people pay little attention to what appears transparent to them—in this instance, the forms of thinking—such an approach seemed normative in theology, at least up to the Second Vatican Council.<sup>24</sup> Ong goes on to comment:

From antiquity to the age of Romanticism in the late 1700’s or even later, teaching had not aimed at objectively framed knowledge—although individual scholars could achieve admirable objectivity—but had proceeded by defending a stand or attacking that defended by another. The division of Christians gave this polemic intellectualism a new lease on life and seemingly preserved it longer in theology than elsewhere. . . . The polemic economy of oral intellectualism demands that knowledge be on the tip of the tongue and that it be sharp-edged. This is a fundamental reason for what we may call the style of earlier theology—maximized memorization and the use of formulas.<sup>25</sup>

For Ong, the dogmatic formulations of Christian belief depend as much upon the information-handling capacity of a culture as upon its theological insight.

Looking ahead from 1969, Ong envisaged theology as increasingly non-Latin, nonformulaic, more interpretive, more textually nuanced, more critical of literary forms (“demythologizing”), and more connected, with theologians around the world in immediate contact with one another through advances in travel, postal systems, telephony, and electronic communication. Theology in the contemporary period becomes richer because theologians have more resources at hand and more connectedness around the world.

### CONSIDERING THE SCRIPTURES

In the various volumes of his trilogy, Ong wrestled with the impact of expression, the forms of expression, and the word. In reviewing Ong’s

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 162.

<sup>24</sup> See Soukup, “Walter J. Ong, S.J.: A Retrospective 3–23, at 4–11.

<sup>25</sup> Ong, “Communications Media” 168.

work, Werner Kelber goes so far as to argue that its most profound impact for theology appears in biblical studies:

[Ong] never applied his circumspectly developed expertise in orality/scribility/textuality to a methodical treatment of the Bible or modern biblical scholarship, nor did he pay sustained attention to such issues as tradition or memory that are vital for biblical hermeneutics and theological reflection. Yet his work is dotted with intriguing and often profound insights into the Bible both from the perspective of orality-literacy studies (aural assimilation, tribal memory, oral substratum, changing sensoria, rhetoric, interiority, corpuscular epistemology, Bible reading and divisiveness, textual criticism and philology, etc.) and of theology (incarnation, presence, Holy Spirit, *fides ex auditu*, inspiration, Eucharist, Trinity, economy of revelation, etc.). Moreover, his intense concentration on the “word” as speech event and his rethinking of textuality from the vantage point of orality has given us a theoretical framework that is highly suitable for a revitalization and revision of assumptions, methods, and practices that govern current biblical scholarship. Indeed, I venture to claim that, given more time to let Ong’s work be absorbed by the guild of Scripture scholars, few academic fields will be as profoundly affected by his ideas on the verbal arts as biblical scholarship.<sup>26</sup>

In his review, Kelber directs attention to “Maranatha: Death and Life in the Text of the Book,” the 1977 essay in which Ong most directly applies his research to biblical studies. Here Ong examines the unusual relationship between the Bible as text, its relationship to time, and its orality.

Unlike other instances of textual preservation of oral materials, Ong points out that the Bible exists only as a text.

This whole is a text. Individual parts of the Bible have oral antecedents, more or less evident and more or less ascertainable. But there is no oral tradition in which the Bible as a whole ever existed or in which its parts simultaneously coexisted (as would be the case, for example, with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*). The Bible is what the word *biblos* says it is, a book, the Book.<sup>27</sup>

And that text functions in particular ways for the believing community, not least as a “monument,” a testimony. As with every text, it preserves the past by recording it; at the same time, a text puts an end to the living quality of oral repetition. The letter is dead, at least in contrast to the living sounds of the spoken word.<sup>28</sup> This quality of the written text—always dead, always tied to the past, always looking to the past—anchors text, narrative, and plot in a kind of retrospectivity. The literacy of texts predisposes us to a particular attitude toward, and understanding of, the world. But though

<sup>26</sup> Werner H. Kelber, “The Work of Walter Ong and Biblical Scholarship,” in *Language, Culture, and Identity: The Legacy of Walter J. Ong, S.J.*, ed. Sara van den Berg and Thomas M. Walsh (New York: Hampton, 2011) 49–67, at 50.

<sup>27</sup> Walter J. Ong, “Maranatha: Death and Life in the Text of the Book,” in *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1977) 230–71, at 232.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 232–33.



people in oral cultures might refer to the past, they can experience oral narratives only in the present tense of performance, something that establishes a very different sense of the world. Written texts bring life, however: they free the mind and the culture to think new thoughts, to experience the world in different ways, something that Ong documents in many of his works. He never seeks to glorify the oral or the written culture, but to call attention to their differences. This he applies to the Bible.

The Bible differs from literature and from oral expression.

The Bible as a text has certain unique characteristics which can be examined here under two related heads: first, the futurity of the Bible, its nonpreterite cast, and second, the special status of textuality, despite its kinship with death, established by the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation of the Word of God.<sup>29</sup>

The Bible as text opens to the future; and for most of Christian history, believers experience it in proclamation or performance (individual Bible reading on a large scale appears only recently in Christian history). The textuality of the Bible raises questions of interpretation, which Ong describes for the oral and written worlds. And these differ in several ways:

Composition in writing, or even setting down in writing something actually said orally, is not the same as oral speech, nor is it simply a parallel operation, for it involves utterance in a different way with time, with past, present, and future, and relates writer and reader differently from the way oral speech relates speaker and listener. Secondly, a reader is not the same as a listener, nor a writer the same as a speaker.<sup>30</sup>

But in the Christian experience, the Bible is more than a text and more than a document.

The relationship of the word of God in the text of the Bible, which as text is dead, and the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ, who lives now and forever—“*Maranatha*; come, Lord Jesus”—is here in play, and this relationship has never been adequately defined or explored in the perspectives available to us now and suggested here.<sup>31</sup>

Ong’s observations, as briefly set forth here, provide the basis for Kelber’s reexamination of the historical-critical paradigm in biblical studies. Kelber argues that this paradigm grew out of

a set of cultural constellations and intellectual developments that took root in the Middle Ages and received their formative identity under the combined cultural forces of Humanism, Ramism, Protestantism, and print technology. One way of looking at this cultural constellation is to claim that what Humanism did for philology and philosophy, Ramism for pedagogy, and Protestantism for religion was to come to terms with the intellectual implications of the print revolution without being fully conscious of it.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 261.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 269.

<sup>32</sup> Kelber, “Work” 51–52.

The key paradigm of biblical studies embraces print and print culture and even when it calls attention to the orality of the Bible, it does so with the unconscious presupposition that oral material is a text. Kelber tries to take this seriously and offers a careful critique of ten features of form criticism, the most self-aware area of biblical studies, in terms of orality and oral tradition. For example, form criticism postulates “isolated oral objects.”<sup>33</sup> Ong’s studies show that oral expression does not exist as an object nor can it behave as an object. Speech is evanescent, as Ong continually reminds us; cultures dependent on speech had to find various ways to preserve information: The millennia of development of information storage in oral cultures created particular types of understanding and engagement with that spoken word. Writing or print changes all this, but we are too literate to notice or comprehend it. We read our understanding of written information and written information storage back into the preserved orality of the past, including the Bible. Given our own literacy, we will necessarily interact differently with other kinds of information management—the oral as well as secondary orality and electronic data manipulation.

Kelber concludes: “Text and intertextuality, author and tradition, reading and writing, memory and imagination, speech and text—these and other central metaphors in the Western tradition are all affected by the study of oral dynamics and oral-scribal interfaces.”<sup>34</sup> This applies to theological studies as well as to biblical studies. A lack of awareness of how oral cultures stored, retrieved, and interpreted knowledge—and how our own literate cultures do the same—leads to hermeneutic challenges and to a kind of false assurance of understanding in dealing with the past.

### LITERACY AND INTERPRETATION

Among interdisciplinary audiences, *Orality and Literacy* remains Ong’s best-known book. In it he summarizes and synthesizes decades of research about oral cultures, oral expression, and the impact of literacy. Never intended as a final word on the topic, it gave a wonderful introduction to orality and literacy studies (as of 1982), and it triggered a great deal of subsequent work; further research in many fields has surpassed it and rendered some of Ong’s conclusions obsolete. The book’s importance lies in its making orality and literacy studies accessible and relevant to every academic field across the humanities. The chapter headings indicate the scope and potential impact of the work: “The Orality of Language”; “The Modern Discovery of Primary Oral Cultures”; “Some Psychodynamics of Orality”; “Writing Restructures Consciousness”; “Print, Space, and Closure”; “Oral Memory, the Story Line, and Characterization”; and “Some Theorems.”

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 65.

Throughout the book, Ong makes the case that how humans express themselves and how they retain information matter to how they think, understand, and pass knowledge to following generations—as stated most clearly in his chapter title, “Writing Restructures Consciousness.” Communication patterns affect understanding. These consequences of literacy impinge on theology as well.

The theological tradition, ranging across time and space—the centuries of Christianity and the myriad cultures and places in which the reflection on Christian belief occurs—also embraces the variety of information processing, storage, and understanding techniques described in studies of oral, chirographic, print, visual, and electronic cultures. The danger of not noticing the changes introduced by various technologies (writing, print, television, etc.) remains the same for all of us brought up as literates and, more likely than not, highly trained in interpreting and understanding texts. Everything becomes a text; information, being information, seems to behave in the ways we force upon it.

In many ways theology exists as a textual discipline: It recovers texts, restores texts, criticizes texts, comments on texts, argues from texts, creates texts. Beginning with scriptural texts, theology wrestles with all the issues Kelber notes and, because of this, as Kelber further argues, theology can learn from Ong’s work. The same points apply in their various ways to all the other texts that touch theology. All of these, in one way or another, deal with information storage and retrieval, with texts serving as the medium. However, texts, while not the only media possible for such a purpose, have become through their ubiquity a kind of default and, as such, seem more or less transparent. That is, because printed texts are ubiquitous, we do not notice them; we see right through them, thinking that we can directly perceive the meaning of the author and fail to see that the medium itself affects even our understanding of the message.

Late in his career, Ong specifically addressed the communication implications of texts and the ways in which texts necessitate hermeneutics.<sup>35</sup> Like a number of communication scholars, he calls attention to the opacity of texts. He begins with the distinction between information and communication. The former consists of a “message transmitted by a code,” while the latter refers to “the exchange of meanings between individuals through a common system of symbols.”<sup>36</sup> Communication consists of interaction between human beings and goes far beyond the information that any

<sup>35</sup> See Walter J. Ong, “Hermeneutic Forever: Voice, Text, Digitization, and the ‘I,’” *Oral Tradition* 10 (1995) 3–26; reprinted in *Additional Studies and Essays, 1947–1996*, vol. 4 of *Faith and Contexts*, ed. Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (Atlanta: Scholars, 1999) 183–203; and Ong, “Information.”

<sup>36</sup> Ong, “Information” 3.

such communication may include. For Ong, presence—of one person to another, of a social group, of God—lies at the heart of any communication. Records of such communication, whether in writing or computerized information systems, only approximate that “exchange of meanings.” Beginning with ancient rhetoric, human beings have sought ways to organize, store, and retrieve information, creating a range of techniques and tools to retain the initial exchange of meanings and presence. All information storage depends, ultimately, on social relationships. Quoting Philip Leith,<sup>37</sup> Ong notes that

the foundation or the ground of a computerized information system is not fully formalized, not mathematical or “scientific” (as all “information” is inside a computer system), but is necessarily sociological, which means generated by communication beyond the realm of simple information. . . . Thus an information system devised by human beings cannot result simply from other information but needs also previous communication, motivation tied in with discourse between conscious human beings.<sup>38</sup>

Because of this social grounding, each technique, Ong points out, requires a corresponding interpretation. The more complex the systems humans created for managing information, the greater the need for hermeneutics:

When a communications system, which works between persons through symbols, is overloaded with great masses of information, you create an urgent need for interpretation or hermeneutics. Symbols, unlike sheer information, are of themselves multivalent and have long fascinated and hyperactivated human consciousness. Total verbal explicitness is impossible: any statement can call for further interpretation that makes its meaning (apprehended not only explicitly but also implicitly by its unuttered but really apprehended context in a given utterance).<sup>39</sup>

However, it took time in the development of information systems in the West for an awareness of the need for systematized hermeneutics to emerge. The closer the discovery, storage, and retrieval of knowledge stayed to day-to-day human experience, the less people felt a need to interpret it. In oral cultures, where even recalled communication appears in the present moment, people attend less to interpreting, except in situations that appear “strange”—the interactions among speakers of different languages, for example. Ong connects the more conscious need for interpretation with the information overload first associated with printing:

The age of dictionaries and encyclopedias and other materials processing words coded in writing for convenient visual retrieval immediately preceded the time when hermeneutics, labeled as such, became a major preoccupation of European scholars, largely in the 19th century (Gadamer 1985 [1960] 146–47).<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Philip Leith, *Formalism in AI and Computer Science* (New York: Ellis Horwood, 1990) 208–11.

<sup>38</sup> Ong, “Information” 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

While widespread in the 19th century, the call for hermeneutics had existed earlier, particularly in theology where it exists at least from the time of Augustine. And that is no accident, as Augustine's background makes him finely attuned to the different ways people and cultures stored and recalled information.

As a discipline with a very long history, theology—or, more properly, the people doing theology—made use of whatever kinds of information storage appear proper to contemporary cultures and educational systems. Augustine, for example, trained as a rhetorician, used late Roman rhetorical systems, even in his (dictated) written texts. He appreciated the difference between oral and written. As Michael McCarthy observes: “[Augustine] himself is aware of key differences in the dynamics of the written and spoken word. The former is stable and requires a learned expert to teach others its steadfast meaning across time; the latter is fluid, demands an active community to make it a living voice of present, personal appeal.”<sup>41</sup> Aquinas, some 800 years later, used written organizational systems even as he recreated a kind of oral debate pattern. His approach, influenced by the medieval grammarians, adduced textual evidence precisely as textual in the service of a written performance presented as an oral debate.

The communication challenge here, the very one that Ong seeks to identify, applies as much to theology as to any other area: How do we recognize the information discovery, storage, and retrieval techniques that both influence what remains of the communication and preserve it for us? In other words, even though something may come to us as a text, it may not be proper to treat it as a text. The textual record of Augustine's sermons or books functions in a very different way from the textual record of Aquinas's *Summae* or from Luther's writings or from conciliar statements, and even more so from contemporary writing. Hearers or readers in the 5th, 14th, or 16th centuries might have implicitly known the “rules” of retrieval, and probably entered into the communication embedded in the information, but the communication record differs dramatically in each century. To understand the expression/content of each kind of information storage system (rhetoric, print, etc.), we need hermeneutics.

The problem may actually be bigger than we think. Quite naturally, we assume that our approaches to texts work univocally, that all texts are simply texts. Ong refers to this phenomenon as “textual bias.” In stating the case for hermeneutics, he calls attention to a theological implication:

Textual bias, proneness to identify words with text and only the text, encourages religious fundamentalists, cultural fundamentalists, and other fundamentalists, but

<sup>41</sup> Michael C. McCarthy, “‘We Are Your Books’: Augustine, the Bible, and the Practice of Authority,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75 (2007) 324–52, at 327.

also perhaps most persons, declared fundamentalists or not, in a culture so addicted to literacy as that of the United States, to believe that truth, of various sorts or even of all sorts, can be neatly enclosed in a proposition or a limited set of propositions that are totally explicit and self-contained, not needing or indeed even tolerating any interpretation.<sup>42</sup>

For Ong, reasoning by means of propositions indicates a restriction of theology to only one kind of thinking and to a narrowing of the Christian understanding.

In Christian teaching, full truth reaches beyond, transcends any propositional statement. This statement by Jesus ["I am the way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6)] reaches beyond itself, via the personal "I," to indicate that full truth, self-contained truth is not a statement at all, but is nothing less than a *person*.<sup>43</sup>

The challenge to theology, as a textual discipline, lies in keeping the personal and the interpersonal—our relationship with God—at the forefront of theology's efforts. These personal and interpersonal qualities appear embedded and partially hidden in textual information; all too often they disappear.

Communication study must aim to recover the personal and the interpersonal that separate communication from information. Ong points out that only a hermeneutics sensitive to information discovery, storage, media, and retrieval can do that. Those processes of discovery, storage, media, and retrieval have shaped theology, its questions, its conclusions, and its methods. A textual discipline today, theology includes older oral, homiletic, liturgical, musical, architectural, chirographic, print, and visual traditions that require different rules of interpretation.

### CONTEXT AND THEOLOGY

Ong shared an intense self-consciousness of a culture in the midst of change with Eric Havelock, Marshall McLuhan, Edmund Carpenter, Harold Innis, and others writing in the 1960s and 1970s. His own approach, influenced most likely by his historical studies of Ramism and of the "oral residue" in the first several centuries of print culture (and perhaps by the kind of thinking confirmed by Teilhard's evolutionary religious anthropology), included a developmental or evolutionary component as he argued that different kinds of information handling moved in conjunction with a growing human (self-)consciousness—oral, literate (chirographic and print), secondary oral (electronic), and computer-based. Some evidence, which Ong adduces in the first two volumes of his trilogy on the word, certainly supports the developmental model, but as with any evolution, one cannot argue for any necessity, that one form necessarily *had* to take the shape that

<sup>42</sup> Ong, "Hermeneutic Forever" 200.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

it did. A model of “affordances”<sup>44</sup> works better here: the changes in communication, information storage, retrieval, and dissemination afforded or provided the opportunities for cultures and individuals to do things differently from how they did them in the past. The new materials—print, for example—provided opportunities for information handling that manuscripts or oral debates did not. People could, and did, use them in different ways, but once established, they changed the practices for subsequent users.

In other words, Ong argued that culture and context matter. Part of any culture includes communication and information handling. And everyone in a culture cannot help but interact with the tools that the culture provides. A good part of Ong’s writing, then, considered cultures but often as a means to better understand the cultural change in which he lived in the mid- to late-20th century. Those changes affect theology as well.

How? Consider a bigger picture of communication—developments beyond what Ong studied. Over the last 125 years or so, human life has seen the development of telephony, motion pictures, automobiles, radio, airplanes, television, high speed trains, computing, satellite communication, space travel, the Internet, digital media, wireless access, and portable multi-function communication devices—to consider only a partial list of information, communication, and transportation technologies. Many of them, as most readers can remember, moved into common use in the last 50 years. All of them have changed the way people think of themselves, relate to others, consider the world, and just plain think. Living in the present, we instinctively know that something has changed but do not always recognize the impact of that change. Ong tried to identify some of these changes and clearly did better in historical hindsight—his discussions of 16th-century literacy or 18th-century literature provide wonderfully clear models. But he, and many others, at least called attention to the correlatives between the “intellectual activity of a culture and its technological activity.”<sup>45</sup> Theology is part of that intellectual activity.

To go beyond Ong but in the spirit of his work, here are just a few examples of contemporary communication and information-handling processes that should raise theological questions. First, how has the hyper-visualism promoted by film, television, and screen technologies affected the way people understand God? This need not occur directly: The visual technologies may influence human interpersonal relationships by providing

<sup>44</sup> See Ian Hutchby, “Technologies, Texts and Affordances,” *Sociology* 35 (2001) 441–56; and Richard Ling, *The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone’s Impact on Society* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2004).

<sup>45</sup> Ong, “Communications Media” 154.

a wide range of relational models, by encouraging parasocial interaction, by idealizing one type of relationship, by offering compelling narratives about the nature of the world, and so on. These relationalities, in turn, influence ideas of community and personality, independence and dependence, love and family; and these, finally, may suggest a different image of God, supplement traditional images, or qualify the various biblical images.

Second, the same kind of indirect chain of influence applies to sound: McLuhan argued that the introduction of the microphone into church spaces profoundly affected the worship experience, changing the relationship between presider and congregation, changing the kinds of discourse proper to the homily, changing the environment of the church building itself, changing the balance between silence and talk, and changing how people prayed individually.<sup>46</sup> And each of these changes in turn affects how people conceptualize or understand worship, prayer, God, and community.

Third, a hierarchical broadcasting model and the ease of travel may affect ecclesiology. The papacy of John Paul II saw a profound shift in the power and awareness of the papacy, with papal visits and media presence overshadowing the local church. Events like World Youth Day, while encouraging youth participation in the church, promoted one model of ecclesiology with the papacy at its center, while at the same time encouraging an event-driven experience of the church for its younger members. In time, such experiences will affect how people judge various ecclesiological questions and even influence theological topics.

On the other hand—and fourth—such mass media or mass-event presence can reduce the experience of the church to the status of one among many equal or more or less important things, from rock concerts to political rallies. In the information handling of the media systems, the appearance of papal visits in the news alongside other newsworthy events puts the church into a nonreligious context and makes it that much more difficult to apply older understandings of the church to a reality dominated by seemingly more important news. Similarly, public spectacles like World Youth Day can easily become assimilated in people's experiences to other spectacles like the World Cup, rock concerts, or other youth gatherings.

Finally, social media, online publishing, and similar communication tools bypass traditional religious reflection and church authority, leveling the hierarchy. Many recent issues of authority in the church touch, in one way or another, on the communication context. With every voice equal online, on what grounds does a bishop, theologian, or Vatican office claim that its teaching offers something more authentic than any other teaching? The

<sup>46</sup> Marshall McLuhan, "Liturgy and the Microphone," *Critic* 33 (1974) 12–17; reprinted in Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szklarek (Toronto: Stoddart, 1999) 107–16.



open skepticism about the church in the secular media in reaction to almost any issue reflects this lack of authority based on social standing or place.<sup>47</sup> A church response of a reassertion of authority fails to take into account the larger communication context. For many, even the experience of prayer and worship has moved online, with online religious groups often raising their own theological topics. More recent ones include an intense interest in the end times, “the rapture,” and various hidden things. Many online religious sites focus on popular interpretations of the Bible and the use of the Bible to foretell the future.<sup>48</sup> Because traditional theology does not fit into the information-handling approaches of the new media, these new media make theology into something else that does fit their contexts.

Except for the few essays mentioned, Ong did not focus on theology; he did, however, focus a great deal on the context of theology. And here his work holds the greatest significance for theology. He calls attention to the background, to realities we typically and unreflectively take for granted. By becoming mindful of these realities, particularly in the information discovery, storage, and retrieval processes, we can discover communication—the person-to-person connection—that lies at the heart of any faith seeking understanding.

<sup>47</sup> Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University, 1985).

<sup>48</sup> Robert Glenn Howard, *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet* (New York: New York University, 2011).