
THEOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA

THEOLOGY

Radek Mezuláník*

*University Jan Amos Komensky Prague, Department of Media Communication, Roháčova 63,
130 00 Praha 3, Czech Republic*

(Received 25 July 2017, revised 29 August 2017)

Abstract

Theology of Media and Communication is a newly established scientific discipline. It responds to the current situation of the media world and the Church. It poses new questions about the meaning of communication and seeks answers about the origin and meaning of communication. It discovers the media as God's gift. It is based on Trinitarian theology and develops the basic elements of communication - silence, word and light. It offers Jesus Christ as a model of ideal communication.

Keywords: media, silence, word, light, Church documents

1. Introduction

Mass media has become a great and mysterious world of people. They are a permanent component of culture and a sought-after 'article of basic need'. This unusually influential world experiences in the present its rapid development, which many rightly believe is a crisis [1]. If we come to know the 'shock' caused by the conquering 'imperialism' of the media, then we will discover the strength, scope and consequences of their multiple influences. They are so deeply part of public life that they are now credited with the position of the 'first power' - thus unveiling the recent beliefs that saw them as 'the fourth power' - and hence the most significant - after the three powers of the democratic state.

In their extensive work, the media are either the bearers of a variety of good, oriented to individuals and society, or lead to proliferation of evil. This duality of mass media is briefly underlined by the Vatican instruction of *Aetatis novae*: "Media can either reinforce or suppress traditional moments in the field of religion, culture and family" [http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_22021992_aetatis_en.html] They are therefore a moral problem in the personal and social life of man of our time, which also makes them a challenge to Theology at all levels.

It must be stressed that the media not only display reality but also are able to alter it freely. We can see this especially in the field of creating social myths [2].

*E-mail: radek.mezulanik@gmail.com

The Church has always encouraged various attempts to at least partially deal with the lack of media literacy and low media literacy levels. The Christian Churches, as the only world institutions, have been devoting themselves to communication and media from the beginning. From the sixties of the last century, various ‘auxiliary materials’, originally modest proposals have taken form of pastoral instructions, a useful tool in the hands of clergymen and catechists, and consequently in the educational work of teachers and parents.

Later on, to a larger extent, this issue was mainly addressed by to the Catholic press, focusing on the readers’ considerations, above all, of the dangers of the media that had not been discussed in public yet. It primarily promoted critical thinking among media recipients, showing the hidden propaganda mechanisms. The Catholic texts were then an indispensable guide for the readers to the unknown mass media empire.

After 1989, views on the media issue could be fully publicized, pointing to terrible facts in mass communication and publicly revealing dangerous manipulation mechanisms. The Catholic press should publish the most work on this subject, just as it is the case in the world where the authors of these publications bring their conclusions and suggestions into educational practice as well.

Today, we see the sparkling development of new technologies in media (multimedia), with the virtual computers, including the avalanche of availability of television programs (satellite links) across continents and across the globe. This gives rise to a sense of helplessness among parents and teachers and, at the same time, to the need to rapidly design the modern system of Pedagogy and Theology of the media. The times are gone when the following were exclusively associated with this industry: a movie projector, gramophone, a camera, and overhead projection (epidiascope). This epoch went very quickly to a large mass culture museum. And this presents new demands and challenges for Social sciences.

Various forms of manipulation that lead to the degradation of a person’s personality and contribute to real brainwashing today also call on the scientists’ urgent interest in media theology and communication. Assistance in this area is expected mainly by parents whose children are exposed daily to the strong influences of various media.

The urgent demand for work on the theology of the media is also perceived by some specialists, both regional and international. This text also includes this expectation stream. It provides the basics of media theology, considering that they are now particularly important in reflecting on this type of education and upbringing. No area of education today can refuse the help of the theology of the media. The journalists and publicists, on whom the education of the society depends to a large extent, can also be addressed. In the perspective of tasks resulting from theological and pedagogical education, a particularly urgent requirement is the systematic formation of teachers and lecturers at elementary, secondary and higher education institutions.

However, it is also necessary to think of seminarians who, in accordance with the Apostolic Referendum's recommendations, are required to acquire adequate media literacy skills during their Theology studies in order to use them later on practically on various levels of school and parish education.

This text briefly takes into account the different demands expressed by clergymen, educators in seminars, journalists and diocesan referents for mass media (press spokespersons), directed at the author at the time when he worked for Radio Proglas as the editor of religious broadcasting.

Injudicious and spontaneous contact with the media makes individuals dependent on them and leads to harmful adherence to unscrupulous propaganda and foolish advertising, also in contact with the effects that deform the image of the world, man and fundamental values. Reflection is an attempt to respond to the general requirement that Theology and Pedagogy should be the basis in the preparation of children, young people and adults for media reception and creative participation in mass culture.

We just give an outline of the issue. However, it is necessary to express the belief that the further development of media influence research on human beings and effective scientific research by the theologians and educators will make it possible in the future to deepen the debated issues and to make the necessary modifications and amendments.

The media theology, presented here, derives its contents from many scientific disciplines, of which Catholic pedagogy and psychology, Sociology and Science of mass communication are among the fundamental and most important. It follows that the theological view of the media assumes the interdisciplinary character of the process. So it seems to be the right moment to give rise to the development of media theology [3]. Which premises motivate this postulate?

2. Subject and role of media theology

The opportunity, but also the dangers that arise from the functioning of the media, prove the necessity that systematic theological reflection cannot be avoided in this area today. Effective education based on theological knowledge requires appropriate consolidation of practice in the relevant (actual) pedagogical and theological theory.

The newly emerging scientific discipline, responding to the current state of the world, society and the media, is the Theology of the Media. "*The Church would feel guilty before God if it does not use such effective means that human reason is still improving.*" [Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi apostolic exhortation of his holiness pope Paul VI*, Article 45, Vatican, 1975, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html]

2.1. Media as God's gift

The Catholic Church, as well as other denominations, has so far dealt with media and communications within Pastoral theology, which seeks to make the most of human use of human opportunities to improve man and his relationship with God.

John Paul II was the first to call the media a *modern areopagus*, which contained a challenge: like Saint Paul, to proclaim the Gospel in a comprehensible language with knowledge of the recipients' environment - to understand and listen to today's man.

The Church and media obviously need one another - the Church offers perfect knowledge of the human souls and their problems, the media offers the opportunity to effectively influence and lead the human community. The media are therefore a very effective tool of information and formation. These are all very important reasons for the emergence of a new discipline that will address all aspects of this collaboration and the functioning of the media world.

2.2. Programme of media theology

So if we want to talk about the theology of the media, then we can no longer remain only in the level of evangelism - that is, how to present the Gospel in contemporary culture, but to ask new questions and look for new answers:

- ***How to recognize the media as God's gift.*** (Here is a beautiful analogy with bread as a gift of God - in our lands; it is still a symbol of life: where there is no bread - there is no life. There are a lot of people involved in the creation of this food, from the sowing, through harvesting, grinding and baking. It is a blessing to bring this food from the very beginning to its consumption and we should deal similarly with media and media products.)
- ***How to understand the world of new media, real world and virtual reality in the horizon of transcendence.***
- ***How to theologially clarify this diverse and complicated area in which the truth about man is so easily lost and at the same time it brings a fascinating interpretation of man and our world.***
- ***How to prevent the dissonance of the Gospel and the media world.***
- ***How to use the media effectively for evangelization and catechesis.***
- ***How to perform an in-depth analysis of the sphere of network communication values.***
- ***How to use the media as a tool for building a human community and strengthening the unity of the Church.***

The theology of the media is about clarifying the present in the context of the Gospel [4]. New thinking goes from visual culture to visual theology. The clarification involves the bringing of God's light into the view of the media.

Like many of **God's gifts**, many people today do not know what to do with **God's light**. Theological reflections lead us to rethink the notions of unity, communion, cooperation - where the pattern of any communication is communication between divine persons [5]. It is the only communication that is ideal and in true unity. This communication and mutual love led to the emergence of light from deep darkness and ultimately to the creation of man and human community as the reflection of this perfect communication and unity.

Likewise, the Gospel offers Christ as a model of communication - the human incarnation of God's word corresponds to the abilities and possibilities of the audience. Christ takes on their way of speaking, thinking and acting, becoming one of them to communicate effectively. The most complete act of communication then becomes Himself - God gives himself in His Son and the Son gives himself in the Eucharist. He gives not only the word, but Himself.

Theology of the media can therefore, through the threefold principle of communication, bring a new perspective of contemporary man on communication as a fundamental principle of the relationship between God and man and rediscover the truth about man.

3. Between the silence and the word - the light of communication

The following brief considerations aim to stimulate the opening of a new interdisciplinary dialogue on Communication sciences and a new cultural paradigm.

Dialogue should become the true method of scientific knowledge in the world of communications, as well as in other disciplines. Dialogue between people working in the field of culture and the media is and should be what occasionally comes to shape, to create.

Reciprocity is important for a dialogue that is already completed and is at the same time under way. You cannot deny the basic element (the journalist would say), the stimulus (the academics would say), or the break (the filmmakers would say). In the title of this chapter is the third element - light, it complements the classic binomial silence - the word.

This is the current element because it forces us to confront the great havoc in our communication and its possibilities. On the one hand, the principles of audio-visual communication may interfere with our thinking in terms associated with light - shining, illuminating, flickering, flaming. We think, however, that new media can give light - to illuminate the everyday life of a person who uses them, but at the same time they break communication with one another - getting the message over when people are overwhelmed with different elements - noise, sound, words without meaning and feeling - a symptom of loss of meaning, a symptom of the fall and the loss of human depth.

4. Conclusions

Result? There is the new light of the 21st century, but also the continuing absence of light in the thinking and life of man as man and woman. The screens of various devices are increasingly shining, they can be watched even in the direct sun, but the real sun - the sun's rays are forgotten. The new future of communications will be creative. Not just an academic exercise.

The ontological root of communication causes the word and vision not to be empty words and concepts, but they have the power of being communicated, and therefore the prophetic communication we want to reach again, is the communication that goes somewhere, which is the precursor of the tendencies that are in society, but at the same time it does not forget the richness of the past.

There are also those who talk about the end of the communication because of the problem that news, studies, articles, publications, all the information about everyone and everything is uncontrollably spread on a number of circuits. It is easy to get lost with the extraordinary amount of different messages. Babel is no longer around the corner, but it's already here. Above all, because there is no hierarchy of sources, everything is served on information plates as an endless 'hotchpotch', from which we have to choose a certain amount of information that we like more and which is useful to us. We go straight if we do not lose the ability to foresee (above all deontological foresight) against the wall of a very strong ethical relativism that unifies and uniforms everything and at the same time directs to the idea that defining weakness is mere euphemism.

But it's not as bad as it seems. We are really experiencing the vigil of a new beginning of communication. Or, better, new epochs of communication, post-Babylonian.

Communication that wants to be mutual cannot be based on an affirmation that we will make things from both the recipient and the mediator, but in the love that becomes mutual. It is not by chance that Christianity always connects the adjective mutual with love to reproduce a paradise on Earth based on love. The reflection of heavenly love on Earth, but also in all great religions, where the golden rule exists, both positive and negative, indicates reciprocity as the rule of human coexistence, the element of unity, through different convictions and confessions, remote from each other. Communication sciences have long considered reciprocity as a basic communicative act - a fact. The best-known models are already contemplating this reciprocity, but they are too often limited by the coolness of mechanical relations and always: more of one or less of the other.

Communication of true reciprocity cannot be binary but Trinitarian. Because there is more to the silence and the word, the third element, the third creation - the light that leads to the fulfilment of that binomial silence - the word which we 'read' before we communicate.

And this is a new topic that we want to open up, giving it the basics in clear reflection and incentives for further development. There are no theoretical models that could explain this, but we are already coming to that, we are sure.

References

- [1] J. Matúš, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **10(Suppl. 1)** (2014) 93-98.
- [2] S. Gálik, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(5)** (2016) 5–14.
- [3] M. Gavenda, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(5)** (2016) 39-48.
- [4] P. Hanes and M. Masárik, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(6)** (2016) 5-20.
- [5] G. Paľa, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **11(6)** (2015) 45-56.