

The Polish Cavalry and Christianity in Electronic Culture

by Thomas E. Boomershine

John Burgess' recent *Century* article (March 8), "What theology can't do, if you stop to think about it" brings to mind the Polish cavalry. He is responding to the chorus of commentators who are linking the renewal of mainline Protestantism to the renewal of theological reflection. I will requote sections of the chorus:

- The tenors: Benton Johnson, Dean Hoge, and Donald Ludens: "if the mainline churches want to regain their vitality, their first step must be to address the theological issues head-on (*First Things*, March 1993)."
- The baritones: Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder and Louis B. Weeks in a study of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): "the calls for renewal of theology in mainstream Protestantism come from nearly all directions ... We believe that theology is the most important ingredient in the Presbyterian Predicament and that the recover of theological vision is also crucial for the reform of American Presbyterianism and mainstream Protestantism (*The Re-Forming Tradition*)."
- The bass: Loren Mead in *The One and Future Church*: "the future church demands a new locus of theology, a change from the library and university to the place where the baptized person encounters the world ... The future church demands a new actor in the work of theology: the baptized lay person. The future church demands a new kind of training center for theology: the local church."

While some contemporary theological conductors might note that Burgess neglected to quote the alto and soprano sections in the chorus, his response that theology has the danger of intellectual elitism and cannot guarantee a renewal of faith or unity is true enough. However, both Burgess' response and any such caveat fail to address the scale of the problem.

One aspect of the larger problem is that theological reflection is related to the mind set and forms of literate culture, namely, detached reflection on ideas. As the studies of Walter Ong and Eric Havelock have shown, detached reflection is the most characteristic move of literate epistemology. This move produced a series of characteristic forms, most notably, the philosophical essay and the rhetorical address. These forms emerged at the same time in human history as the dominance of literacy in Athens and were adapted by the early Christian Church as the theological treatise and the sermon as a part of its mission in Greco-Roman literate culture.

In the late 20th century, these forms are in crisis. In the increasingly dominant electronic culture, the sermon has become a cultural joke. The leader of the Taizé community, Brother Roger, who has drawn thousands of young persons to the community has a motto: "Never preach." It is reflected in cultural commentary such as Margaret Miles' statement in *CC* about Robert Altman: "Good filmmaker that he is, Altman doesn't preach." In the oral grapevine I hear increasing reports that the children of the electronic age are demanding no sermons at the one service they can control, namely, their wedding. Preaching a sermon has become associated with top down communication that is condescending, moralistic, and alienating. The cultural revolution that is associated with the emergence of electronic media has relativized the meaning and impact of the characteristic forms of literate culture: the lecture or sermon and the theological essay, the very forms that are most characteristic of the Church.

If this cultural report is accurate, the renewal of the Church will be related to the renewal of its power to communicate the Gospel in ways that are meaningful in the emerging

electronic culture. If the Church's characteristic forms were developed for communication in an earlier literate culture that is confined to a smaller and smaller group of intellectual elites, the call to continue to reinvest our energy in those forms is a call to cultural irrelevance and communication failure. The reason the Presbyterian Church is declining may be related to the fact that it is the most high literate Church in the whole of Christendom. What is declining is the cultural power of the forms of communication that are associated with literate culture. What is being relativized is not the power of the Gospel but the traditions that were developed for its communication in the culture of literacy. The sermon and the theological essay have become associated in the dominant culture with pomposity, with being "above it all," and with talking down to people. It is associated with boredom, irrelevance, and a commitment to abstraction.

The problem facing the Church is that the culture and its dominant system of communication has changed. Until the 20th century, rhetoric was a required subject in the university and the primary art form of the culture. Theology was widely regarded as the queen of the sciences. The culture has, however, changed. And in response the Church is continuing to produce reflective essays and sermons. To move the theological essay from the university and the library to the local church, as Loren Mead suggests, will only exacerbate the problem. To have laypeople talking theological reflection will only produce a somewhat more pervasive sense of the Church's alienation from the people who live in electronic culture. The probability is that the more the laity of the Church succeed in achieving the ability to use the forms of high literate culture, the more their Church will become a defensive and isolated subculture in the 21st century.

An analysis of communication systems and their relationship to religion and culture reveals a characteristic pattern. There is a direct correlation in the history of Christianity between the cultural power of forms of communication and the dominant communication system in the culture. The forms of communication that worked in oral culture are different than the forms that work in literate culture. In oral culture, the most pervasive form was chanted narrative in which the audience participated by clapping, giving words or signs of encouragement, and singing along. The narratives of the Bible, which comprise over 60% of the total collection, are a product of such an oral culture just on the other side of literacy. High literate culture has regarded biblical narratives and their frequent repetitions as primitive. Higher criticism has transformed the oral narratives into documents and interpreted them as theology and history in order to make them meaningful in the communication system of silent reading. So also the forms that had cultural power in manuscript culture with its lower levels of literacy are different than those in high literacy cultures. The practice of ruminating on memorized prayers, psalms, and biblical stories, a pervasive form of religious life in medieval manuscript culture, has become largely meaningless for those who live in high literate culture. The power of any particular form to shape the mind of a culture is directly related to its viability in the dominant communication system of that culture.

Thus, the forms that had power in the high literate culture of the Enlightenment are not necessarily viable in electronic culture. There is a relatively easy test for electronic cultural viability. Take the characteristic products of high literate ecclesiological culture and put them on TV. They become the theological discussion show and the televised sermon. Malcolm Muggeridge has a wonderful characterization of the theological discussion program in his book, *Christ and the Media*, in which, I should note with all fairness, he argues that the Church should have nothing to do with the fantasy world of the media:

And then, panels. Dear God, the panels! Seated round the microphone, a professor of sociology from Leeds, a resonant life peeress with a moustache, a nondescript clergyman heavy with sideburns, and myself. 'Do the Panel Think?' Oh we do, we do. Thinkers all! Participation in such panels over the years is probably responsible for a nightmare that regularly afflicts me. I'm in a BBC studio, deep underground. Above, the mushroom clouds are forming, and the last traces of civilized life are disappearing. In the studio we are engrossed in a discussion about the alarming rise in juvenile delinquency. 'What is needed,' the life peeress is resonantly contending, 'is more and *better* education.' 'If only,' she goes on, 'the age of consent could be lowered to nine, and the school age raised to nineteen; if only birth pills could be distributed to Brownies with their morning milk, and sex education begin in the play school, and *Lady Chatterly's Lover* get into the comics, all would yet be well.' It is at this point that I always wake up screaming, so that I never know how the discussion proceeds, and what is its outcome, if any. (32-33)

I too have participated in televised theological panels. It was and is abominable TV. Bill Moyers has made philosophical TV tolerable, but even Moyers recognizes that the issues about which theologians talk are more removed from contemporary discourse than psychology, politics, healing, or even philosophy. He interviews philosophers such as Cornell West and New Age religionists such as Joseph Campbell, but almost never leading mainline theologians.

And then there are the sermons on TV. Virtually every time you hit a Christian TV channel or program there is a preacher preaching a sermon. The sermons vary in their quality but I have found that I almost never watch more than two minutes of a televised sermon. Most of the time, I can surf on to another TV wave in less than two seconds. Even when I am depressed and go on a TV spiritual quest, I won't watch sermons. And the reason is simple: most TV sermons come off as boring, strident, and tacky. This week has seen the worldwide broadcast of Billy Graham's sermons. I watched the last half of the sermon on Sunday evening. It was a good sermon about the "I am" sayings in John. And Graham was wonderfully dignified and direct in his presence. I liked the fact that his pulpit wasn't plastic and that he simply stood there and spoke rather than prancing. But I was struck by how culturally irrelevant the podium seemed. And finally, the invitation to the altar, even as it tugged at my heart strings, seemed anachronistic. My candid evaluation as a theologian of electronic culture is that the Church is doing damage to the communication of the Gospel in electronic culture by continuing to broadcast sermons.

I would like to invite the readers of *The Christian Century* to a sermon test. I wonder what percentage of us actually choose to listen to sermons on TV *for non-professional reasons*. When was the last time you chose to hear somebody preach an entire sermon instead of watching a sitcom, a ballgame or a news show? I'll be honest. My last TV sermon all the way through was Robert Schuller almost fifteen years ago. I am simply unable to sustain interest in a sermon on TV. My informal poll has revealed that I am not atypical. In fact, I watch more than many of my colleagues. The objective data is not in but I have a hunch that most of us Protestant and Catholic professional religionists don't watch TV sermons because we don't like them. The data might be different if the great liberal preachers of our time were on the tube, but probably not much. Let me be clear: I personally like good sermons. In fact, I am personally a kind of church junky. I play the organ every Sunday and just basically like church, including sermons. But if those of us who are by faith committed to the form regard the form in the dominant communication system of our culture with disdain, what does it say

about the form? Do musicians, or dramatists, or athletes, or even politicians have such disdain for the characteristic form they practice? Yet, as a Church, the sermon, an orally presented short theological essay, is our most widely practiced form into which we pour a substantial percentage of our money and our creative energy as a Christian community. And, whether I personally like it or not, the sermon flunks the electronic culture viability test.

It is true that there are Christians who watch televised sermons and, as Stewart Hoover's research published in *Mass-Media Religion* has found, some even find them meaningful. The cultural dilemma for the high literate mainstream Protestant churches is, however, evident. Having marginalized the eucharistic liturgy, we rise or fall on the sermon. The higher on the literacy scale the sermon is preached, the more problematic it is on TV and, therefore, in electronic culture. Yet the sermon, shaped by the values of high literate culture, is the primary form in which the seminaries train persons for the communication of the Gospel.

This test yields even more deadly results when applied to biblical criticism. Biblical scholars on TV are likely to be of interest only if they are involved in the study of esoteric ancient documents such as Qumran or Nag Hammadi. That is, the more the program is associated with the adventure of the rediscovery of antiquity, the more likely it is to be interesting. Yet the cultural result is that the distance and irrelevance of the Bible in relation to contemporary culture is thereby emphasized. Constructive historical critical exegesis and interpretation of the texts of the Bible in relation to contemporary culture, however, never even makes it to a television program except in sermons. And TV sermons rarely include any sustained historical exegesis. Thus, the interpretive systems that were developed for the explicit purpose of making the Bible meaningful in the culture have become unusable and irrelevant in the dominant cultural communication system of our age.

What then do we do? Instead of continuing to invest our energy, our money and our thought in reinvigorating the forms that have made the Gospel boring in electronic culture, we could reinvestigate our tradition to discover the forms of the religion that will be meaningful in the communication system of electronic culture and invest our energy in them. The energy of Christian creativity needs to be poured into other forms than the essay and the sermon. These forms do not comprise the Christian tradition. The Bible, for example, is overwhelmingly composed of forms other than the theological essay and the sermon. Paul's letters are the only biblical literature that even approximates the theological essay and there are, at most, some snippets of sermons. The tradition of the Church has many forms--story, sacrament, liturgy, song, prayer, icon, poem, proverb, diatribe--that are directly relevant to this culture and that will work in its communication system. The current renaissance of storytelling and narrative in virtually every area of Christian thought and ministry--narrative exegesis, narrative theology, narrative preaching, pastoral counseling--is a sign of this recognition. And new forms will emerge in the interaction of Christianity with electronic communication technology. This will only happen, however, if we are willing to leave behind our exclusive reliance on the forms of communication that were meaningful in an earlier culture.

Unfortunately, our reliance on the forms of the sermon and the exegetical/theological essay is only a symptom of an even more pervasive and complex problem. The Church is committed to the communication system it developed for ministry in the print culture of the 18th and 19th century. The Church is like the Polish army in those fateful days in September, 1939, when Hitler's blitzkrieg was launched against it. Hitler sent 14 armored divisions across

the Polish border. The Polish army was committed to the traditions of the cavalry and sent 12 cavalry brigades against the German tanks. In the tradition of the great cavalry divisions of the Prussian army, the Polish cavalry was molded for warfare as it had been fought in the 18th and 19th century. When the divisions of German armor came streaming across the border, therefore, the Polish generals sent wave after wave of cavalry, men mounted on horses, against the tanks. The battle lasted about three weeks. The fields of Poland were choked with the bodies of horses and brave men who had gone into battle with a strategy formed for warfare in a previous period.

Today the Church goes into spiritual battle in an electronic culture, seeking to communicate the Gospel in a new cultural environment. Into a culture dominated by television, films, CD's, and computers, the Church continues to pursue its strategies that were developed for a culture in which books, journals like *The Christian Century*, and rhetorical addresses were the most powerful means of mass communication. The basic elements of the present system are familiar. The Church is formed as a network of local churches in which the reading and interpretation of books is the central common ritual. Its network of scholars employed in seminaries and universities produce a steady stream of books and articles. The books, articles, and printed curricula are published and distributed by the system of church presses for the network of local pastors and churches. Described as a communication system, the Church is a literate oral communication system designed for maximal production and distribution of sermons and essays.

The intellectual systems for the interpretation of the tradition are in turn formed for the production of data that will be meaningful in that communication system: argument, sorting of data according to criteria of historicity and theological rationality, and authoritative interpretation on the basis of mastery of the literature. The primary criterion for meaning in this system is the ability to engage in critical theological reflection. The community is organized as a literary hierarchy in which authority is directly related to the level of acquired degrees which are in turn granted for the degree of mastery of the communication system of reading and writing.

As the system now churns out more masters and doctors trained in book production, many of whom are or will be unemployed and unable to use their hard-won skills, the major Protestant Churches are in a spiral of decline that approximates the pattern of a crippled airplane on its way to the ground. We are writing more and more books that are read by fewer and fewer people with less and less impact on the culture. A major reason that mainline churches are declining is that persons who live in electronic culture are not interested in participating in the churches' communication system. The mainline Protestant churches are failing to communicate the Gospel effectively to the young people of the electronic age because we are throwing sermons and theology books at them. Like the Polish cavalry, we are dying in this culture.

At the same time, the Church's effort to form a viable communication system for the authentic communication of the Christian tradition in electronic media is virtually non-existent. The mainstream Protestant churches have given up even trying to communicate to persons who live in electronic culture through electronic media. In fact, because of the budget crisis created by the aging of its literate culture constituency, the Protestant and Catholic churches are now reducing their already minimal efforts to develop electronic cultural ministries. The Faith and Values cable network is the only viable distribution electronic distribution system of the mainline churches and it is in trouble because of inadequate church

support. In both Protestant and Catholic seminaries, programs in electronic communication are being cut back or discontinued. And the presses, while beginning to produce and distribute some audio and video tapes, pour virtually all of their editorial energy into the production and distribution of books. This policy is the functional equivalent of the Polish military strategists who bought more horses rather than investing in tanks. In fact, the priorities in the way the major Protestant churches spend their intellectual, creative, and financial capital in the formation of a communication system have not basically changed since the 19th century.

Why is this happening? There are times when it looks as if we have simply shut our eyes to the realities of the world around us and have decided that we will simply plow ahead regardless of the consequences. In fact, however, my conclusion is that this is an act of communal faith. Like the executives at National Cash Register who argued that the company should continue to produce cash registers rather than switch to computers (fortunately for NCR they lost), the Church is continuing to place its faith in its most recent traditions rather than recognizing their cultural relativity. The underlying conviction driving this apparently obdurate cycle of ineffectiveness is faith. The faith is that if we continue to believe in the tradition and to invest our energy in what we developed in the past, we will in the end prevail. The memory of the Polish cavalry haunts me.

Yet in other areas, we steadily affirm that rigorous thought and critical analysis is of the greatest importance. It is time, therefore, to do a critical analysis of the Church's present communication system and of the forms of communication in which we have placed our faith. We need to identify the theory, the cultural history, and the theological and institutional presuppositions of our present communication system. The system needs then to be rigorously evaluated in the context of the mission of the Church in the emerging global electronic culture. In light of this analysis, new systems need to be developed that will communicate the Gospel faithfully and effectively in this new cultural environment. Components of that new system may be: local use of video and computers as an integral part of congregational life, electronic production and distribution systems, the formation of multimedia translations and interactive commentaries on the Bible, training and educational institutions structured around electronic communication systems, a satellite system for worldwide transmission of audio and video programs, and systems of thought that will reinterpret the Christian tradition for post-literate culture by the integral use of music, image and narrative.

Whether the Church is so wedded to its present system that change cannot happen without further erosion of its ministry remains to be seen. My life experience and analysis of the powers invested in the maintenance of the present system make me skeptical in the short run. My observation that God is apparently slow but endlessly creative makes me optimistic in the long run. At some point, however, we must begin to identify the problem and to develop systematic ways of addressing it. The alternative is that we will see empty and abandoned Protestant churches strewn America's landscape like the horses and men of the Polish cavalry on the fields of Poland.

In the end the question is the appropriate location of our faith. Is our faith appropriately placed in the systems formed by our most immediate predecessors? Is our present strategy of resistance to television and electronic culture a defense of the Christian tradition or of the values of the high literate culture of the Enlightenment? To what degree are our present systems-scholars producing theological and exegetical treatises and preachers

delivering rhetorical addresses organized around theological arguments--culturally relative to the communication culture in and for which they were formed? Are new systems needed that will be viable and faithful in the post-literate, electronic culture that is emerging as the dominant culture in the world?

Of course, there are no simple answers to these questions. One cannot simply throw away the old forms and systems and build new ones. Analysis of the Church's response to earlier shifts in communication systems such as the Reformation make it clear that the old forms and systems do not disappear. Instead they both continue and are reformed into a new synthesis. Thus, neither medieval chant nor allegorical exegesis of the Vulgate disappeared. They were, however, integrated into a new synthesis that was dominated by hymns, literal/figural exegesis of the original Greek and Hebrew texts, and the mass distribution of new vernacular translations. The communities of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation also formed new systems of communication--presses, seminaries, and a vast network of schools and universities--and new systems of interpretation for the new print culture. In an analogous manner, significant elements of the tradition will continue to be meaningful in the future while other elements will decline in importance. This sorting of new and old wine and old and new skins is immensely complex. Simple formulas or reductionist solutions will not accomplish the task. The answer can only emerge out of an intensive reexamination of the traditions of the Church in their cultural contexts and a clear headed commitment to effective and viable communication of the Gospel in this new culture and its dominant system of communication.

Critical reflection on the forms and media of communication in the history of Christianity from the Jerusalem council to Nicea to Trent to Vatican II reveals a clear pattern. The answer to effective mission in a new communication culture is **not** a steady reaffirmation that the source of the renewal of the Church will be further investment in the forms and systems of communication that were developed for the Church's mission in an earlier culture. The way forward is to form a new system that is designed for ministry and mission in the new culture. The Christian Church in the electronic culture of the late 20th century needs to do significant theological reflection on the Polish cavalry.

Quotations from an article by John P. Burgess, associate for theology with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). in *The Christian Century*, March 8, 1995, Vol 112, No.8.