Recent writing on communication and theology

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As the articles published in this issue of Media Development indicate, and as this journal has pointed out in the past (4/1981), scholars and religious communicators combine theology with communication in a number of ways. In a basic and ancient sense, theology in Anselm’s words is “faith seeking understanding”, a systematic reflection on belief.

Reflection in belief does not take place in a cultural or intellectual vacuum; instead, people draw on their understandings of the world and their day-to-day experience for tools, approaches, and frameworks of understanding. In the past, philosophy often played this key role. Today, one could argue that people have become more learned in communication and media than in philosophy, thus calling for a closer link between these disciplines.

The pairing of communication and theology emerges in this context. But people have found many ways to join the terms. Some seek a theology of communication – a theological reflection on communication itself (Fore, 1987); others, a communicative theology – a theology focused on the encounter with God according to the manner of human communication (Hilberath, 1999; Scharer, & Hilberath, 2008); still others, communication theology – communication as a hermeneutical principle for theology (Plude, 2001, 2011; Palakeel, 2003); others, theological communication – evangelism or the spread of faith through a community (Dulles, 1989) or the communication of theological knowledge (Lonergan, 1973); and others, a theological evaluation of communication (Schultze, 1992; Lee, 2009; McDonnell, 2009).

To encompass all of these, and others with perhaps more complicated labels, I will use the simple conjunctive pairing, theology and communication. The fortunes of this pairing of interests – either in practice or in academic reflection – vary over the 50 years since the Second Vatican Council and the World Council of Churches separately called for theological reflection on communication. Both responded to the rapid spread of mass communication and mass mediated culture in the 1960s and both puzzled over both how the church should use these technologies and how these technologies affected people’s faith.

In the time frame set by the editor of Media Development (the last five years or so), writing on theology and communication falls into five general categories: popular culture as a source for theological reflection; the use of communication frameworks, concepts, or theories to elucidate theology; the appeal to “communication” in more properly theological senses; theological guidelines for communication practice; and communication studies that look to theology. Many more have written on the more general topic of religious communication, how churches or religious groups make use of communication, sociological or communication studies of religious communication, rhetorical analyses of religious communication, and so on.

However, these do not appear here because they do not include an explicit link to theology. Similarly, studies not published in academic journals or by an academic press are not included in this brief review. Studies that address theology and communication in other ways have certainly appeared in the past (for some indication, see Soukup, 1983, 2006), but fall outside the limited time frame for this review.
Sources of theological reflection

By far, popular culture and film in particular attracted the most attention from those working in theology. The “themes, ideas, and perspectives” in film provide material “for serious theological engagement” (Sokolove, 2008a). Theologians or theological scholars apply to film the theological or interpretive methods designed to bring out ultimate human concerns — the classic theological themes of salvation, sin, forgiveness, God’s presence, and so on. Johnston (2007) offers a collection that presents new methods for theology to engage film. Contributors suggest ways to move beyond a literary approach, that is, to regard films rather than as texts or plot summaries. Johnston himself suggests that contemporary students of theology apply the four-fold medieval interpretive techniques (literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical) to films.

Another collection, Cinéma Divinité (Christiansen, Francis, & Telford, 2005) sets out a double agenda. ‘The naming of the book signals its authors’ concern with both the means by which cinema presents the pursuit of divinity — in the stories and practices of religious people — and the possibility of divinity’s appearing in the darkness of the cinema itself . . . the wager of Cinéma Divinité is that film can be theology” (p. 8). Reviewing the book, Graham (2006) frankly acknowledges the challenges of this kind of approach: “it is nevertheless hard to figure the means of engagement, and how as viewers, students, and teachers, we need to engage these complex phenomena” (p. 130).

Clarke and Fiddes (2005) offer a collection with a more tightly focused approach, with each essay choosing films to address particular religious topics such as providence or theodicy (Drury, 2007). The collection edited by Shepherd (2008) on behalf of the Society of Biblical Literature features essays in which biblical scholars wrestle with both the potential theological significance of film (including what films might reflect back onto the biblical texts) and with the ways in which biblical studies may offer a method to “read” films.

Another work that combines methodological proposals with film interpretation comes from Deacy and Ortiz (2008). Their book sets out to accomplish two things: to provide an overall method for doing theology in the context of film and to apply that method to a number of themes in contemporary film. In some ways, this volume follows up where Deacy (2005) left off. In that volume, Deacy traced religious themes in film, identifying theological content.

In recent years theology has also looked to both traditional and new cultural expression for dialogue partners. Sokolove (2007b) has worked to promote art and the work of artists as a legitimate theological enterprise. “I want theologians to know that whereas the language of theology is discursive, rational, and logical, seeking ways to say what is universally true about God, the language of art is metaphoric, symbolic, and intuitive, seeking ways to say what is most intensely human. Like theologians, artists are searching for truth, but artists believe that the most universal is found in the most deeply particular” (p. 6).

As an artist, Kapikian (2006) writes of her creative process as a kind of theology. According to Sokolove, “Kapikian uses her personal experiences in working with congregations, students, and colleagues to reflect on the role of art in worship, in theological education, in personal devotion, and in the ongoing life of the church” (2007a, p. 46). Beginning with theology, Austin (2005) approaches the question of art expansively, looking at the broader role of the arts, including liturgy, have played in Christian understanding.

On the popular culture side, Marsh, who writes extensively on film, popular culture, and theology, has tried to develop the theme “how theology is to be done in a media age” (2006, p. 447). He has returned to various aspects of the question a number of times (Marsh, 2007, 2008), each time raising interesting questions as to the nature of theology when its traditional cultural partners have changed.
Adams (2010) turns his attention to probably one of the newest cultural expressions, video games, arguing that these deserve the interpretive attention of theology no less than film or art. “A game . . . uses religious language, symbols, or assumptions to create its world. I won’t even bother to make a comprehensive list here, because once you start looking for religious content in games, you’ll find it everywhere” (p. 298).

In this first instance, theology finds rich sources of reflection in communication artifacts, seeing in them both a cultural manifestation for an anthropological theology and an alternative means of expressing theological meaning.

**Communication elucidating theology**

But theology also turns to communication in conceptual ways. In this second category of theology and communication, theological writers draw on communication studies for ideas that help them to illuminate theological problems. Franke (2008) looks to Habermas and his account of communicative reason in order to address the apocalyptic genre of theological discourse. He adapts the theory of public reason to one of “communicative revelation”. Probably the most well developed approach in this area comes from the “communicative theology” group in Germany. Scharer and Hilberath (2008; Hilberath, Hinze, & Scharer, 2007), an English-language translation of a German work released in the same year, draws on Ruth Cohen’s “theme-centered interaction” communication theory to propose a complete theological method.

In their definition, communicative theology “is a critical reflection on communication against the background of religious and ideological conflicts in a knowledge-based society. . . Communicative theology is an ‘anthropologically oriented theology’: to its object belongs, on the one hand, the encounter with the communicative God of revelation in God’s de facto communication in history, that is, the tradition . . . and, on the other hand, the encounter with unstable and broken human experiences of communication in groups, in parishes, in the church, and in society” (p. 139). The method they propose applies equally to the work of parish-based groups and to that of academic theologians.

Raja (2008) adopts the psychological and communication research which investigates dialogue to support his development of a theological dialogue among religious groups. “This essay seeks to create dialogic space between different religious communities at the grass roots. Taking Carl Jung’s method and Gestalt therapy, [Raja] argues that one has to recognize the dialogic communication between different perspectives within oneself” (p. 562). Dialogue also forms the background for Hinze (2006), though this work restricts itself to “practices of dialogue within the Roman Catholic Church.”

Tong (2006) revisits the possibilities of narrative theology for contemporary explorations of theological discourse. This approach, first popularized some 30 years ago, draws on communication and literary studies of narrative, arguing that narratives (such as those found in Biblical accounts) matches contemporary cognitive understanding more closely than the logically reasoned, highly developed theological discourses found in academic circles.

Moon (2010) looks to contemporary communication and information systems theories, particularly those of Niklas Luhmann, to inform an exploration of both theological methods and concepts of God. Beginning with a “post-metaphysical epistemology”, Moon aims “to develop a public theology for an age of information media (or media theology)”; the essay “proposes a new God-concept: God is a communicative system *sui generis* that autopoietically processes meaning/information in the supratemporal realm via perfect divine media *ad intra* (Word/Spirit)” (p. 105). Moon proposes a communicative model of God as Trinity and a symbolic-communicative model of revelation.
A last entry in this category draws on hermeneutic and rhetorical studies. Andrews (2010) returns to Augustine to ground the connection between rhetoric and theology. “The discussion highlights that rhetoric is defined loosely as ‘communication’: the focus is on the target audience, not the mode of delivery” (p. 184). Rhetoric, of course, describes both the most ancient part of communication theory as well as an important contemporary approach to audiences.

**“Communication” in the language of theology**

Each of these writers draws on communication to illustrate or develop classic theological topics. In a next (and related) category of work in communication and theology, a number of theologians make reference to “communication” in more properly theological senses, that is, in ways that first express a theological reality. Several explore the idea of the Trinity as communicating both within itself and with humans, much as Moon does, but without the full development of a communication theory. Chung (2008) looks at Trinitarian self-communication as a possible grounding for interreligious communication. Vanhoozer (2009) also take Trinitarian communication as a starting point for the development of the theological claim that “God speaks”. DeVries (2009) more clearly specifies this focus on the Trinity by exploring how the Trinitarian communication with the Holy Spirit moves into the Gospel and into a more general theological approach to evangelism.

Papanikolaou (2006) offers a book-length study of divine-human communication grounded in Trinitarian communication. Beginning with the Orthodox understandings of the Trinity as argued by Lossky and Zizioulas, Papanikolaou seeks a middle ground between the two, that is, a position about divine revelation (or the divinization of the human) that mediates Lossky’s idea of apophasis and Zizioulas’s of Eucharistic ontology. The discussion remains solidly theological but cannot escape invoking communication, particularly in terms of divine-human interaction.

The last example of this category of theological scholars employing a communication reference comes from Monsour (2009) who develops the idea of “God’s self-communication”, a term used by Bernard Lonergan and other theologians in the 1960s and 1970s, without any reference to communication media or communication theory.

**Theology evaluating communication**

In the fourth general category of interaction between communication and theology, theological scholars directly examine communication, offering a critique or guidelines for communication based on theological topics, often those rooted in religious ethics. Writing from the Quaker tradition, Muers (2004) provides the most general of these works, developing a “theological ethics of communication” in a book-length study focused on silence. “Looking at theological uses of the theme of silence draws attention both to how theology constructs itself as a form of communication, and to the wider communication environment in which theological discourse is placed.” Muers seeks to ask how silence can “reshape understandings and practices of communication in the 21st century” (p. 3).

Other writers focus on particular areas of communication. Lee (2009) offers the beginnings of a theology of communication rights. Briefly, Lee starts by “identifying ‘pointers’ drawing on the theory and practice of communication for development, the ‘capability approach,’ and the right to communicate debate.” He then “argues that, if globalization is to have moral validity, it must bring with it an enhanced sense of globalized humanity” (p. 191). From these points he seeks a more global theological underpinning for people’s right to communicate and to receive communication. McDonnell (2009) provides a review of Roman
Catholic ethical approaches to the Internet and to the uses of the Internet. While not developing the thought, his summary proves quite useful in putting the development of the Catholic positions into historical and theological contexts.

Communication studies of theology
The last general category of works that bring communication and theology together starts from the side of communication. While the topic areas resemble those already reviewed, the methodologies employed in these publications differ, with the use of social science methods or interpretive methods predominating. Grace (2009) approaches the religious film and its theology from within communication studies. The book proposes a genre study based on given religious themes; in so doing, it suggests a theological discourse within both film content and film style.

Mugridge and Gannon (2008) offer a detailed reading of the communication material associated with the papacy of John Paul II. During the 26 years of his papacy, he or the various Vatican offices under his direction published a fairly large body of work addressing communication, much of it with a theological orientation. Because the theological commentary ranges over so many years and comes from a number of different offices, Mugridge and Gannon must at times limit their analysis to descriptive studies.

Only recently have communication scholars moved from sociological and descriptive studies of online religion to a more careful theological interpretation. Spadaro (2011a, 2011b) has perhaps most consistently raised the theological issue, discussing the theology of computer hacking, the new theology of online activity, and the connections between liturgy and the online world. Keeping to the networked world of new media, he does not try to develop his theological reflections alone but invites others to join him in online theology. (See his online resources at www.cyberteologia.it)

As noted above, this review addresses only published materials (books and academic journals). However, more material on communication and theology now appears online, with a number of dedicated websites, which feature papers and other materials. See, for example, www.theocom.net which aggregates a good deal of material. A Google search for the terms “communication” and “theology” will also bring up hundreds of individual papers.

The online community of scholars and practitioners interested in communication and theology gives one indication of future directions for this important area of reflection. In that future one could expect more materials published in non-traditional venues, a continuing and increasing theological attention to popular culture and, as communication study becomes more established and known, an increasing use of communication constructs, concepts, and theories in that theological reflection.

However, few have seriously examined whether the very processes of communication have theological value, considering, for example, theological language, the media of communication as sacramental, or the necessarily mediated nature of communication. While some in the past have urged attention to the theological potential of these taken-for-granted aspects of communication (McLuhan, 1999; Blake, 2000), these areas remain undeveloped.

Communication media and communication practices have appeared transparent whereas communication content attracts attention. The task for a true theological reflection on communication lies in seeing communication itself rather than its content.

References


Paul A. Soukup, S.J., 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). This latter publication grows out of his work on the American Bible Society’s New Media Bible (www.newmediabible.org). 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) as well as an Ong Reader (2002). These volumes have led him to examine more closely how orality-literacy studies can contribute to an understanding of theological expression. Pauline Books and Media published his most recent book, Out of Eden: 7 ways God restores blocked communication, a series of meditations on communication and theology, in 2006. A graduate of the University of Texas at Austin (Ph.D., 1985), Soukup teaches in the Communication Department at Santa Clara University.