

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON LANGUAGE AND TECHNICAL MEDIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

G Á B O R A M B R U S

ABSTRACT

A proper theological perspective on technical media is not possible without a thorough consideration of the role of language in Christianity. Christian theology can gain this perspective in view of the fact that the sphere of language and that of technical media have a large cultural space in common and that language occupies a central position in the theological tradition. A representative example of the theology of language is the Gospel of John, which portrays Jesus Christ as the eternal Word of God, who was sent into the world to proclaim God's incarnate words. The "Word-in-flesh", that is in the flesh of human language, is fully normative to the "Word-in-the-beginning". The term "flesh" may be normative in the full scale of its relevant application, as it may denote and cover all kinds of technical media such as the human body, the printed book and the digital computer. As possible carriers of the incarnate words of the Word, these material media may, to some extent, share the glory of the risen Christ. A theory of God's Medium and media as inspired by the Gospel of John, is necessarily at variance with secular media theory, whose assistance, at the same time, it certainly also requires.

Key words

Theology of language; technical media; media theory; Gospel of John; flesh and materiality

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Introduction: Christianity's Bond with Language in the Age of Technical Media

Before raising the urgent question about "the fate of Christianity in the age of information and technical media", it seems that one is bound to contemplate the Christian faith as ultimately linked with the ancient

mystery of language. This statement might sound like an old-fashioned insistence on a respectable, if outdated, paradigm, yet we experience in the contemporary practice of faith that, despite the thoroughgoing and unpredictable effects of the information age, Christianity's bond with the intricate operations of language is as profound as ever.

To consider and deepen this insight, let us first focus on the issue of language in our age of technical media and information technology and put aside the problem of the Christian faith for a moment. Although technology keeps transforming our experience of the world at an increasingly rapid pace, what it does not seem to change is the essential role of language within this experience. Like a huge amoebic organism, resilient to the harshest chemical conditions, language manages to prevail. No matter how far it unfolds and how enormous its consequences are, not even the worldwide traffic of digital information (the very texture of our contemporary media) can render as an *unreasonable* exaggeration the claim that language is, as it were, the "medium of everything". No doubt, one can argue that this is an exaggeration, but, if so, it is certainly a *reasonable* one. It is a gross exaggeration inasmuch as it might unjustifiably extend an anthropological viewpoint to the whole of the world and thereby demonstrate an anthropological bias since language is, after all, bound up with the "human sphere", with the biased and limited scope of what is "human". Moreover, even if we stay confined within the experience of the world as a human experience, one may be right in embracing a philosophical approach other than a hermeneutical orientation towards language like the art critic and cultural theorist W. J. T. Mitchell, who, as early as in the 90's, argued that there was a "pictorial turn" taking place in culture and the human sciences.⁴⁴ In Mitchell's view, visual culture and visual experience are not only distinct from the cultural domain of language but also equally important. Plausible as this approach may be, it can be similarly argued that, even in media as predominantly visual as cinema, television and the internet, the plethora of images is embedded in a linguistic environment, oral and written, helping us "see", process and understand it. It is therefore *reasonable* to adopt a theoretical standpoint different from Mitchell's, assuming that our cultural fabric, though flooded by images from visual media, still retains language as

⁴⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1994, pp. 11–54.

a cementing force, which may have a life of its own. Indeed, language might achieve much more than what these metaphors may primarily suggest; it might reach deeper than the anthropological fabric of culture, as deep and as far as the recesses of communication between computers. As a matter of fact, one could refer here to various kinds of “programming languages” used by human programmers, and it would be interesting to discuss in what sense this term is applied to their encoding of algorithms. Nevertheless, the sphere of language may reach as deep as the basic level of binary code running *between computers* without human intervention. It would be worth a systematic and historical study on its own to enquire into the way in which the formal logic of the binary code is premised upon the language of humans, the former having developed from a not formalised and rudimentary logic inherent in the latter.

While the validity of language as a “medium of everything” does not cease to make sense and offer a plausible theoretical standpoint in our age increasingly dominated by technology, there is no question about technology’s considerable impact on language. Clearly, language does not provide a distinct alternative or full counterpoint to technology in the manner in which the late Heidegger’s criticism of technology resorts to language and poetry as quasi redemptive forces.⁴⁵ It would be difficult not to see the great extent to which contemporary technologies reconfigure our everyday use of language. Social media websites (like Facebook), translator programs (like Google Translator) and speech recognition softwares (like Apple’s Siri) are powerful players in a game which moves our understanding of language from a “subjective achievement” towards something like an “impersonal operation”. It may be said, however, that the presence of technology *within* language is almost as ancient as language itself. Such ancient technology is alphabetic writing and the phonetic constitution of language which is certainly much older than the actual appearance of the phonetic alphabet; the latter could be invented only if there was a ground prepared for it in spoken language by an evolving set of phonemes and their combinations.⁴⁶ These considerations notwithstanding, one may venture

⁴⁵ Both the theme of technology and that of language are main strands in the late Heidegger’s thought. Perhaps the most magisterial among his late pieces discussing both themes is *Was heisst Denken?* Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag 1954.

⁴⁶ Cf. the brief and explicit statement that “writing (and especially alphabetic writing) is a technology” by the American philosopher and historian of culture Walter J. Ong in:

to say that language, insofar as it is used by humans, cannot be fully covered by technology and fully described in the deterministic terms of calculation. In like manner, language, with its indispensable “anthropological residue”, will hardly ever be a “medium of everything” in the same sense as digital information is.

Considering the great challenge which digital technology and technical media present to the Christian faith and Christian theology, it seems that faith and theology cannot give a proper spiritual and intellectual response to it without a thorough reconsideration of the bond and affinity that exist between Christianity and language. What we can see in Christianity’s intriguing affair with language is the elevation of language to unprecedented heights, and language has in turn penetrated, as it were, into the heart of faith. It is thus not the case that Christianity has a contingent relation to language like any other religion or any worldly event does. If we dub language “the medium of everything” and take it as such, then we are, of course, to conclude that everything has something to do with language. Christianity’s bond with language, however, is not confined to a series of contingent instances or genres like “gospel”, “creed”, “sermon” and “prayer”, or, to put it more precisely, these genres lose their contingency and turn out to be necessary as soon as we look at them in the wider perspective of this bond. Indeed, they come into their own the moment they are put in the context of the most momentous manifestation of this bond, the Prologue to the Gospel of John with its emblematic revelation that *in the beginning was the Word*. Over two millennia, the superb diction of the Fourth Gospel about the Word’s creation of the world and his incarnation in Jesus Christ has not lost its weighty and somewhat mysterious meaningfulness which might come to take a new shape under the cultural and technical circumstances of our historical present.

In what follows, I shall, firstly, enquire into a possible theology of language as offered by the Gospel of John and especially the Gospel’s Prologue. Secondly, I shall discuss whether the Johannine term “flesh” (John 1:14) may denote and cover any material-technical media that are able to enclose and carry language. Finally, I will juxtapose a possible Johannine theology of media with secular media theory.

Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word. 5th ed. London and New York: Routledge 2012, p. 80.

A Theology of Language according to John

“In the beginning was the *Logos*”, the evangelist announces, and we are invited to consider the whole of his Gospel in our wish to decide what the word *logos* might mean here. One cannot help wondering whether the term “Word” renders it correctly. Although the philosophical background of the Johannine *Logos* is of great importance, what one must primarily focus on is the Gospel’s overall message and its absolute protagonist, Jesus Christ, who is identical with the pre-existent *Logos*. One may, no doubt, recourse to Hellenistic philosophy and Old Testament theology, such as the ideas of Stoicism, Gnosticism, Philo or the Wisdom literature, in trying to solve the riddle of the *Logos*, but it will only reveal its full secret by a close and careful look at the figure of Jesus Christ.⁴⁷ And what the Fourth Gospel draws to capture the figure of Jesus Christ is not the portrait of “eternal Reason”, “God’s Wisdom” or even a “cosmic Mediator”, but it describes someone who is sent from God to speak, that is “to speak the words of God”.⁴⁸

It is quite striking to see how markedly the Gospel of John differs from the Synoptic tradition in this regard. While the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke report the teaching of Jesus in a great number of richly varied and relatively short pericopes, the Fourth Gospel presents him most characteristically as an assertive speaker talking at length in relatively long and continuous speeches, each being a fairly repetitive, almost schematic, even obsessive, yet able to deliver its basic message powerfully. The Johannine Jesus Christ’s power of speech evokes admiration and confession both inside and outside his circle of disciples.⁴⁹ When he asks the twelve whether they also want to leave him

⁴⁷ A clear and reliable exposition of the possible theological and philosophical background of the Johannine *Logos* can be found in the commentaries by, for instance, Rudolf Schnackenburg (*The Gospel according to St John*. New York: Herder and Herder 1968, pp. 481–493) and Raymond E. Brown (*The Gospel according to John*. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. London: Geoffrey Chapman 1971, pp. 519–524). For a very concise overview of the possible contexts of the Fourth Gospel’s concept of the *Logos*, see pp. 448–449 in Ed. L. Miller. The Johannine Origins of the Johannine *Logos*. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112/3 (1993), pp. 445–457.

⁴⁸ This is the insight on which Miller’s main argument draws (see note 4).

⁴⁹ However, there is something similar in the reaction of people to the Sermon on the Mount in the Synoptic tradition: “And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7:28–29).

like some other disciples did, Simon Peter answers: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).⁵⁰ (Indeed, in the following verse, these “words of eternal life” prompt Peter to add and confess: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”) When the pharisees and the chief priests first attempt to arrest Jesus (John 7:32), the officers sent by them fail and return with the words of admiration: “No man ever spoke like this man!” (John 7:46) Moreover, Jesus himself presents his mission as a mission of speech. When his hour comes and he summarises his ministry in the so-called “high-priestly prayer”, he turns to the Father as follows: “I have given to them [i.e. to his disciples] the words which You have given Me, and they have received them” (John 17:8).⁵¹ Thus, what we can, somewhat unsurprisingly, see in the Gospel of John is that its portrait of Jesus Christ as the incarnate *Logos* invests even the identical figure of the pre-existent *Logos* with the very basic meaning of the word, that is “something said” by someone who speaks.⁵² It is God who speaks *through* and *in* God’s *Logos*, and the *Logos* seems to be quasi identical with his own speech that is tantamount to God’s speech.⁵³ Hence the *Logos* is the Word of God in the widest sense of something said by God.

Clearly, the Johannine Jesus Christ confirms the argument that, despite its philosophical background, the major foundation of the meaning of the *Logos* in John’s Prologue is Scripture itself. The argument gains even greater validity if we consider the Fourth Gospel’s obvious references to the Book of Genesis. It is the formula “in the beginning” which starts the initial stage of Creation in both the opening verse of the Book of Genesis and that of the Gospel of John. In both books, God acts as Creator, by direct speech in Genesis (Gen. 1:3 f.) and by the Word’s mediation in the Gospel (John 1:3). Indeed, the Gospel captures the moment of God pronouncing words in Genesis

⁵⁰ All biblical quotes are from the New King James Version.

⁵¹ The Gospel’s Chapter 17 convincingly demonstrates the equivalence of the term *rhemata* (17:8) and the term *logos* (17:14) which is so characteristic of the whole Gospel. Cf. Miller. *The Johannine Origins*, p. 450 and n. 13.

⁵² Cf. Barclay M. Newman (ed.). *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 2010, art. *logos*, p. 111.

⁵³ In Schnackenburg’s view, a sharp distinction is to be made between the *Logos* himself and the words of the *Logos*, see Schnackenburg. *The Gospel*, p. 483. Nevertheless, I find more convincing Rudolf Bultmann’s approach that in the Prologue the proper name *Logos* retains its meaning of a concept, a common noun: see Rudolf Bultmann. *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. 4th ed. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1961, p. 416.

and transforms it into a full, distinct, majestic Word.⁵⁴ What gives rise to the notion of the Word as an idea and theological reality is a double difference, grounded in the difference between Genesis and the Gospel that comes about by the Gospel's own difference between God and the Word of God. What is more, this Word of God in the Gospel of John moves into the very centre of events by taking the position of God the Creator as presented in the Book of Genesis; the opening phrase in Genesis that "in the beginning God created" gives way to John's formula that "in the beginning was the Word". After being perplexed by a God speaking at the beginning of everything, one finds oneself in a state of even greater perplexity when encountering the fact that this speech of God has taken a distinct shape and become a principal figure of the Word of God. One has every reason to ask in what sense one may interpret that there is a Speech of God or a Word of God in the beginning. After all, speech and the words of speech are formed by speech organs and very often transmitted and even produced by various technical media – surely there were neither speech organs nor any media in the very beginning? And even if the pre-existent Word and the incarnate Jesus Christ were identical, the ability of Jesus to speak was surely the matter of his incarnation; it was surely not present in the very beginning?

If it is an extension of the idea of language by the way of the normativity of language that we are here faced with, it certainly goes hand in hand with the normativity of revelation. This direct correspondence between revelation and language comes clearly to the fore in the two different fashions in which God speaks in the Old and in the New Testament. The normativity of revelation concerning creation applies only in a narrow sense within the inner coherence of the Old Testament to the same degree as the normativity of language. If God's revelation to Israel through the lips of the prophets is normative with regard to the portrait of God in Genesis as creating through speech, it is only normative in the sense of a historical experience conducive to a metaphor or an analogy. Within the theology of the Old Testament, there is no theological ground for bridging the gap that remains between the prophets' grave announcement, "thus says the Lord", and the solemn

⁵⁴ With its focus on God's word itself as a substance but still not an independent being, Psalm 33:6a represents an intermediary phase between Genesis and the Gospel: "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made."

formula in Genesis, “then God said”. What is in force in this formula is the normativity of prophetic revelation through language, albeit only in a narrow sense, in the sense of the *analogia entis*, a theological rule which allows us to relate worldly and historical entities as metaphors to the transcendence of God. God speaks through the prophets literally, whereas, in Genesis, God says “let there be” only metaphorically and analogically. It is by definition that the operation of analogy includes a gap. However, in the theology of the New Testament as attaining a zenith in the Gospel of John, the analogical gap between revelation and creation gives way to a kind of continuity between them. Indeed, the words of Jesus Christ as the incarnation of the Word (John 1:14), who is the Word of God in the beginning (John 1:1–2), lead to the inevitable conclusion that the normativity of revelation and language must be understood here in the fullest sense. The event of incarnation bridges and in fact fills the gap between revelation and creation by establishing a continuity between the words of Christ and the pre-existent Word: it is already a Word that reaches into the world that is the world of language, language (the words of Christ) being fully normative to the Word, through which “all things were made” (John 1:5). Accordingly, as there is no longer any gap, the rule of the *analogia entis* is no longer applicable. As God speaks in Christ literally, his incarnation into the world of language releases a motion of incarnation the other way around, rendering the statement about the Word in the beginning (John 1:1) a literal one.⁵⁵

What is the opening statement in John 1, 1 (“In the beginning was the Word”) supposed to mean as a literal one? In what sense is it literal? A literal sense of “the Word in the beginning” as a human speech of human words in the beginning may mean that the Word has never *become* flesh, but he has always been flesh. Such an approach may contradict the Gospel’s text. How shall we avoid such contradiction? This problem comes down to which verse from John is central and normative to the Gospel as a whole. Is it John 1, 1 (“In the beginning was the Word”) or John 1, 14 (“And the Word became flesh”)? To answer this question, one must consider that the hypothesis of a “Word in the beginning” without any flesh whatsoever is an entirely theoretical

⁵⁵ Cf. Brown’s tentative insight which he formulated in response to Serafin de Aulsejo’s idea that the *whole* Prologue is about Jesus Christ as the Word-become-flesh: “At least one may say that even in its opening verse the Prologue does not conceive of a Word that will not be spoken to men” (Brown. *The Gospel*, p. 23).

one; it represents a borderline case with the presumption of a Word which is entirely inaccessible as such. By contrast, the Word in flesh, who is incarnate Jesus Christ and his incarnate words, makes himself manifest and accessible to us. On the one hand, it is true that we *approach* “the Word in the beginning” from our experience with the “Word in flesh”. What we have here, on the other hand, is much more than that, much more than our “approaching” and “experience”. The statement that “the Word became flesh” is central and fully normative. The event of incarnation establishes continuity and a kind of dialogue between the incarnate words of Christ and the Word in the beginning. The incarnate words start to permeate “the Word in the beginning”, they start to enclose him in flesh; the “after” of incarnation penetrates into the “before” of incarnation. The reason why the “after” of incarnation, the incarnate words of Christ, is so scandalous among all the words of the human world is that the glorious heavenly “before” of incarnation, “the Word in the beginning”, speaks *in* them. The continuity between the “after” and the “before” of incarnation is in fact an interplay and dialogue between them. This interplay and quasi dialogue finds its perfect manifestation in Christ as he is sent by the Father in flesh and returns to the Father in flesh.⁵⁶ The Word has always been a Word, even before becoming flesh, and the evangelist’s declaration that the Word came into the world as “to his own” (John 1:11) perfectly applies to the Word being sent *as* incarnation into the words of language. Language is particularly his own. This makes it all the more striking that his incarnation proved to be a scandal, and “his own did not receive him”; the conflict between the Word and the world is best to be viewed as a conflict within the world of language. It is, however, not only the Word that becomes flesh in language, but the flesh of language also clings to the Word; this is what Christ’s return to the Father necessarily implies. What the words of the risen Lord to the Apostle Thomas reveal to us is not only the assumption of Christ’s body into heavenly glory, but also the Word’s everlasting retention of incarnate language. Indeed, Christ’s risen flesh, into which Thomas was able to put his hand (John 20:27), is a carrier and condition of Christ’s incarnate words, words which come to cover the Word that was in the beginning. The “after” of incarnation moves into the

⁵⁶ The trajectory of Christ is briefly captured in his own words in John 16:28: “I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father.”

“before” of it, and so it happens that the Gospel’s opening statement, that is “in the beginning was the Word”, may have a literal meaning.

The “Flesh” as a Theological Category for Various Material-Technical Media

Although the term “flesh” (*sarx* in the Greek original) has been treated so far as an equivalent to Christ’s incarnate language, it must definitely have a wider sense, a sense as wide as a possible platform for a theological integration of the problem of material-technical media. *This* wider sense is diametrically opposed to *another* wider sense of the word that made a distinguished career in modern theology with its emphasis on Christ’s incarnation into history, culture, society and “context”.⁵⁷ The term “flesh” may indisputably involve contextual spaces as wide as these, and the universal dimension of language (that is the “medium of everything”) as the prominent place of incarnation certainly allows and evokes such fully fledged extensions, yet it is exactly the idea of language that can make the concept of flesh turn in a thoroughly different direction. As it is the case with every human being in general and with Christ in particular, language is embedded in the flesh; in fact, it participates in the very materiality of flesh. We as human beings are enabled to speak only because the materiality of our body as flesh is capable of developing this admirable ability as a result of a long learning process. This is the most plausible and consequent reason why language may be viewed as flesh, but the idea of the unity of language with flesh may, upon due consideration, be extended to other instances of flesh, too, inasmuch as the term “flesh” may possibly stand for various other kinds of matter other than living organism. As language may “inhabit” a remarkable variety of material environments as instances of flesh, the words of revelation may be transmitted by a number of material media like manuscripts, printed books, radio, television and computer networks.

One might ask, however, whether this inclusion of all kinds of media in the term “flesh” is not a far-fetched attempt for a possible unified

⁵⁷ Traces of such theological approach, typical of modernity, can be found in the commentaries on John like those of Rudolf Schnackenburg and Raymond E. Brown. In the former’s opinion, flesh/*sarx* “indicates full human reality” (Schnackenburg. *The Gospel*, p. 268); with the event of incarnation, as the latter puts it, “the Word of God was now inextricably bound to human history” (Brown. *The Gospel*, p. 31).

theory. After all, nobody would deny that digital computers with their signal transmission and human bodies as living organisms capable of speech are enormously different kinds of material media. Is it not obvious that the use of language by humans and its transmission by means of digital technology require different theological perspectives? However correctly these objections may apply, a unified perspective on these seemingly quite disparate phenomena is far from being implausible. Even if scholarly inquiry into language cannot be confined to a technological approach, and contemporary media technologies like television and the internet can, of course, be described in different terms from those of a language-inspired model, there is a possible approach to language which puts it on the large and varied map of media technology. This possible approach is radical enough to reach deeper than an evident orientation towards language as transmitted by technical media or towards writing as an ancient technology of language; it is more ambitious than that, aiming at a possible technological view of spoken language itself as used by humans in everyday conversation. Spoken language may be regarded as the most ancient media technology as it imposes itself on the “flesh” to enable the human body to produce and transmit very complex and nuanced signals. Indeed, nothing is natural about the imposition of speech on what we call speech organs and what originally developed to fulfil functions markedly different from speech. The following quote fully captures the artificial nature of the process of speech:

Speech starts simply enough with air in the lungs. The air is forcefully expelled in an exhalation, and it makes sound because of the parts of the body it blows over and through – the vibrating vocal chords, the flapping tongue, and the throat and mouth, which rapidly opens and closes in an odd, yapping munch. It’s easy to underestimate the athletic precision employed by the many muscles of the face, tongue and throat in orchestrating speech. [...] It takes at least ten years for a child to learn to coordinate lips, tongue, mouth, and breath with the exacting fine motor control that adults use when they talk. To get an idea of the continuous and complicated changes your vocal tract goes through in the creation of speech, read the next paragraph silently, letting your mouth move by making no sound – just *feel* the process.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Christine Kenneally. *The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language*. London: Penguin Books 2008, p. 141.

Clearly, speech can be viewed as a difficult imposition of media technology on the human body. It is thus possible, through the lens of the term “flesh”, to place language into a theological perspective that is, at the same time, a perspective on technical media. The “flesh” includes the technical apparatus of speech organs which make possible the articulation of human words. In fact, they enabled also Jesus Christ to articulate his own words.

Whatever kind of materiality – a human body, a printed book, a television set, or a personal computer – the term “flesh” may happen to signify, this piece of material medium is mysteriously connected with Christ in his return in flesh to the Father, insofar as what it comes to enclose and carry is the incarnate words of Christ. As the real meaning of Christ’s return in flesh is that a part of the world comes to belong to God by virtue of God becoming that part of the world, any piece of material medium enclosing the Word is a piece of the world which belongs to God. As the eternal Word of the Father finds a perfect “habitat” in the technical apparatus of Jesus Christ’s body,⁵⁹ which, as a consequence, comes to belong to the same eternal Word (that was “in the beginning”), the Word may find a similarly perfect “habitat” in a book or in any set of technical medium, which can thereby, in a sense, share the fate of Jesus Christ’s body. As a matter of fact, no worship is due to a book or any other medium in the way in which the Word’s incarnate body has always been worshipped by those who believe in him. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind those acts of veneration in Catholic and Orthodox liturgy that surround the book of Scripture *as a material object*. The book of Scripture and any material medium enclosing the Word belong to God and, in a sense, are on their way to God in agreement with the manner in which Christ’s glorified body, a piece of the world, belongs to God and returns to God. Accordingly, it makes sense to claim that a devout attitude of veneration is due to material objects such as a printed book or a computer screen, insofar as what they carry are the incarnate words of the Word.

If Christian theology wishes to develop its own theory of media and mediation, a theology of language as presented, for example, by the Gospel of John may undeniably serve as a relevant starting point. What

⁵⁹ This claim may be read as a reformulation of Raymond E. Brown’s statement that “in becoming flesh the Word does not cease to be the Word, but exercises his function as Word to the full”, *The Gospel*, p. 32.

offers a compelling argument in favour of language as a starting point is, on the one hand, its dominant position in theology and religious life, and, on the other, the unifying perspective it provides upon all kinds of material media. While there is no doubt that theology must undertake a distinct and detailed inquiry into each kind of material medium and its technical peculiarities, the present study, with its focus on the terms “Word” and “flesh” in the Gospel of John, has confined itself to a first tentative step in a vast and challenging field of research. It has portrayed language as a primary concern of the Fourth Gospel, which gives an appealing account of how inseparable Word and flesh are and how indispensable the Word’s incarnation in flesh is in the same way as language is inconceivable without material and technical media such as the human body, printed book, television, mobile phone or personal computer. There is not any kind of “immaterial language” as such; it is always embedded in the “flesh” and in whatever the term “flesh” may comprise.

The Theology of Media and Secular Media Theory

It seems proper to come to a conclusion by saying a few words about whether secular media theory applies to the Fourth Gospel’s teaching about language and medium. The Gospel assigns a central role, indeed a kind of absolute role, to the incarnate Word as God’s Medium, and this role flatly contradicts what common sense would attribute to a medium’s operation. The common sense understanding of media is clearly confirmed by contemporary media theorist Sybille Kramer, who puts a particular emphasis on their necessarily heteronomous character. There cannot be any autonomy in the operation of media; on the contrary, they should be regarded as messengers who must disappear behind their mission of delivering a message.⁶⁰ The required heteronomy of media finds an excellent allegory in the image of the “dying messenger”, a literary topos whose most famous example is the Greek soldier, who, after running the long distance from the Battle of Marathon to Athens, collapsed and died the very moment he had managed to announce the news of the Greek victory. In comparison, Christ’s death on the Cross according to John is completely at odds with the

⁶⁰ See Sybille Kramer. *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2015, especially pp. 27–37.

self-elimination of the dying messenger. When he senses that his death is drawing very near, he tells his disciples that “the hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified” (John 12:23), and his final prayer to the Father includes a clear reference that his death would be as glorious as his heavenly existence with the Father: “O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (John 17:5). Indeed, however fervently he submits himself to the Father and seeks to perform his will,⁶¹ Christ is as assertive and self-referential in his death as he has been in the course of his public ministry. It perfectly fits the general air of a Gospel starting with “In the beginning was the Word” instead of “In the beginning was God” that its protagonist, the majestic Word, sovereignly presents himself as the “I am”: “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35), “I am the light of the world” (John 9:5), “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11), “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25) and especially “before Abraham was, *I am*” (John 8:58). The Fourth Gospel’s teaching about the Word as God’s Medium is in accord with what the great originator of media studies Marshall McLuhan recognised about the medium’s major significance. His famous dictum “the medium is the message” implies that the medium conditions and overpowers the message; as a huge material environment, its social and cultural importance dominates over the contingency of what it carries, the multitude of messages.⁶² Accordingly, Christ’s multitude of words amounts to the single message that he is the Word as God’s Medium; his central message is not exactly the Father, but Himself and his relationship with the Father⁶³ – the Medium itself and the Medium’s relationship with God and with those who believe in him.

Despite being a Medium assertive and self-referential, the Johannine Jesus Christ does not conform to the principle that the medium is “something third in the middle”, that is “something in the middle between sender and receiver”.⁶⁴ The Gospel does not allow a triadic

⁶¹ Among many relevant loci, see, for instance, John 12:49.

⁶² See Marshall McLuhan. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. 2nd ed. Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1994, pp. 7–21.

⁶³ Consider Rudolf Bultmann’s insight that the principal content of the Johannine Christ’s message is Himself as Revealer (Bultmann. *Theologie*, pp. 412–422), and cf. the limited relevance of Raymond E. Brown’s criticism of Bultmann: Brown. *The Gospel*, p. 32.

⁶⁴ See Wolfgang Hagen’s and Sybille Kramer’s contributions in: Stefan Münker – Alexander Roesler (eds.). *Was ist ein Medium?* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2008, pp. 13–29

structure which is characteristic of secular media theory; Christ the Word is not an “independent third” between God and the world. In agreement with the Fourth Gospel’s *dualism* of God and the world, Jesus Christ is a kind of “overlapping” of God and the world. Christ is God’s self-referential “I am” in the world, the paradigmatic instance where God becomes part of the world, but he is also the paradigmatic instance within the world that belongs to God and returns to God. Christ the Word is paradigmatic indeed as any piece of material medium enclosing the incarnate words of the Word is to be conceptualised according to this paradigm of overlapping established by Christ. As a matter of fact, the paradigm of overlapping does not, at the outset, abolish the opposition between God and the world. Instead, at the present moment of salvation, it entails and maintains a tension, which is best exemplified through Christ’s little community of disciples; they were born of God (John 1:13), and, consequently, “they are not of the world” (John 17:14), but, at the same time, “they are in the world” (John 17:11), and Christ explicitly says He does *not* pray that God “should take them out of the world” (John 17:15). Clearly, there is a tension here, and this being-in-the world also informs and binds any material media that are, at the same time, born from God by mediating the Word and the Good News of Him.

As soon as it is a *theological* media theory that aims to develop a concept of medium, it must come to terms with the absolute grandeur of its subject. When confronted with the absolute terms of a descending God and the consequent dignity of a possibly ascending world, theological media theory must be prepared to be at variance with secular media theory whose subject lies merely within the world. The dualism between God and the world as presented in the Gospel of John must be reckoned with if theology wishes to consider the incarnate Word of God the starting point of its own media theory. Nevertheless, even if the dualism involving an opposition between God and the world requires a theological media theory which is “at variance” with its secular counterpart, this divergence should not and cannot become an antagonism, given the inevitable fact that, at the present time, any media transmitting the Word are still within the world and under the circumstances of the world in the same way as any other media which transmit fully

and 65–90, especially 72–73. Cf. Alexander Roesler – Bernd Stiegler (eds.). *Grundbe-griiffe der Medientheorie*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink 2005, p. 150.

secular matters. What secular media theory has to say about the technical details and the anthropological consequences of communication media is of major significance to related theological research.

To demonstrate the theological relevance of secular media theory, the following – perhaps not quite hypothetical – example may be illuminating: Let us contemplate a world which is no longer opposed to God since the Church fulfils her mission in the world, and let us imagine that the aforementioned “overlapping” no longer implies a tension, and that our planet, in its present state with all its technical apparatus, turns into a place where the primary concern of all communications is the Word incarnate. At that stage, when the world is no longer secular (as the whole of it shall be, as it were, “within God”) and all technical media will turn into sacraments, theology’s striving to contemplate the Word as medium *in* technical media shall still make good use of what has been said before in the field of secular media theory. In a sense, secular media theory would survive the end of the secular world in a way similar to Greek philosophy’s survival and use in theology after the end of antiquity and pagan culture.

If such a state of the world and of the “human community” were to come about, it would be markedly different from that of the primal Christian community in the Cenacle, that is in the room of the Last Supper. This difference between what was there and what might come about does not spring from a pure and unmediated unity in the former as though it took place in a kind of primal innocence unstained by the presence of any media. In the Cenacle, of course, we can suppose a genuine unity between Christ and his disciples (and so between the disciples and God) as never before, a perfect unity fulfilled by signs like Christ washing their feet (according to John) and dispensing them bread and wine as his body and blood (according to the Synoptics), a unity which Christ’s interpreting words were supposed to testify to and perform. Still, the disciples’ lack of understanding bear witness to an in-between in their unity with Christ and God; the Word, who is the Medium himself, was not there unmediated in their midst; the words of the Word and the words of the disciples were witnesses to the fact that even the touch of Christ, the eating of bread and the drinking of wine did not happen without mediation, without an in-between. In fact, washing, eating and drinking are parts of the process of mediation gliding, as it were, under the disciples’ skin. By the same token, under our skin, there is the operation of contemporary technical

media, which has, nevertheless, developed into a vast and sophisticated material environment since the primal Christian community. If the human community of the present digital age, in the middle of this environment, converted to the Word incarnate, this event would not happen in the clear-cut sequence of a primary conversion of human beings and then a subsequent change in technical media. The change in media would not be subsequent to ours as they are more than mere tools, neutral and extrinsic to us and to what they mediate; instead, they are rather active messengers, intrinsic to us and to the mediated message.⁶⁵ It is even plausible to assume that, in a sense, humanity's possible conversion to the Word incarnate as God's Medium may start from these media themselves as they have the potential to be intrinsic to the Word and participate in Him and contribute to Him. Such changes and such a conversion would give rise to a stage of history in which all language and communication would be devoted to the Word, albeit with an intensified visuality and permanent, maintained connectedness which was unknown to the primal Christian community in the Cenacle. Then, the flesh of the Word would be extended from the individual body of Jesus Christ to all communication technology in the world.

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⁶⁵ This contrast corresponds to the distinction in German media theory between the so-called "weak" understanding ("*schwache*" *Bedeutung*) of a medium as tool (*Mittel*) and the "strong" understanding of it ("*starke*" *Bedeutung*) as active mediation (*Vermittlung*). See Roesler – Stiegler. *Grundbegriffe*, p. 151. Let it be added that the Church's traditional approach to media is closer to the "weak" understanding, cf. the conciliar decree on mass media (*Inter mirifica*) which views media as instruments for good or bad use. See Norman P. Tanner SJ (ed.). *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*. Vol. 2. London and Washington: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press 1990, pp. 843–849, especially, pp. 843–844.