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ORAL CULTURE AND THE WORLD OF WORDS

INTRODUCTION

I have often been asked to speak about various methods of doing theology in what we might call a "non-book culture", and I've written at length on that subject elsewhereⁱ. In this paper however, I have been asked to go behind the scenes of "non-book" theology and enquire, what makes 'non-book' or 'oral' people tick? How do they learn? How do they think and how do they express themselves - and why? And of course, what are the theological and practical implications of all that? To quote the brief I have been given, I am here seeking to describe, "how people learn in a non-literate culture, and how the content, concepts and methods we normally use in Christian theological education might hinder the learning process." So, let me start by sharing some of my own early learning experiences.

1. MY OWN NON-BOOK CULTURE EXPERIENCE

I was struck by the thought of ordination at an early age, but I had to dismiss the thought because I did not read. I could not read. Why bother to learn when life was much more fun? I do remember trying snatches of "Camp on Blood Island", but it was soon confiscated by my parents. The problem was that reading, especially reading aloud, was obviously the essential skill for a clergyman. Taking services was all about reading. People did little else in church. I however, did not manage to read a book until I was fifteen. But I still found it excruciatingly hard. It was not until I was nineteen that I was diagnosed by a psychologist as being profoundly dyslexic.

I lived in a typical Working class house-hold. Typically, there were books in the house. I well remember "The history of the Motor Car". "Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopaedia" and the obligatory Complete Works of Charles Dickens. Although we never opened them, the books were there in the hope that we could expand our horizons. There was lots of music too in our family. We could all play instruments tolerably well but it is instructive to recall however that none of us could read music.

All that was back in the late 1950's.

I did eventually hack my way to University - only to be told I was there to "read" theology. That reinforced the worst of all my fears. I can't actually begin to describe in public the horror of not being able to read well in that sort of environment. The emotional scars remain quite near the surface to this day.

Later in my life I had the honour to be involved with the Aston Training Scheme which was an Anglican outfit designed to help women and men prepare for theological college experience. It was then that I found out that my experience was not at all unusual. Many of these highly gifted and intelligent ordinands had been disabled by bad experiences at school which had de-skilled them verbally and had reduced their intellectual self-esteem to zero. There was a lot of healing for me during those seven years of work with those wonderful young people.

What became clear was that, although books are of great importance (gifts from God indeed), nevertheless what had brought these fine people to the point of offering the rest of their lives to God, through ordination, had largely been carried and transmitted to them in some other way. The "Word" had penetrated their being in a way that books could constrain and even threaten. For many of these people, the carriers of spiritual wisdom had included shared stories, friendships, sayings, films, pop music, spirituals, poetry, handicrafts, dress, dance and so on. Such things as these had been the carriers of their most profound experiences. And they had been helped to see that, not so much by teachers as by 'coaches' and by 'witnesses'.

2. WE LIVE IN A SECONDARY ORAL CULTURE

But before all that, let us remind ourselves that we do not today live in a "non-literate" society. It's not that simple.

In 1996, the number of book titles published in the UK topped 100K for first time.

This was a 6.8% increase. And the fastest growing category over the last three years is Religion. 4.5K titles in 1995ⁱⁱ. So, there are many books around, although judging by what my own clergy tell me of what they do, I suspect that the majority of religious books sold are not actually read. Perhaps books are more likely to be 'browsed' rather than read today. In some ways browsing saves us from the dangers of information overload. Look at the sheer quantity of printed matter that comes at us today. Time magazine calculates that approx. 20m words of technical information are recorded daily. Reading at 1,000 words per minute for eight hours a day for one and a half months would only leave you five and a half years behind in your reading. And that is an encouragement to give up before you start! So the wise citizen no longer reads but browses, since browsing safeguards the soul.

In fact, it is largely accepted that we are now moving into a period where reading at length and depth is no longer the norm. The advent of new technology for the transference of information has produced what some scholars now term "secondary orality". "Primary orality" was that time when literacy was not known. But having been through a period dominated by writing, we have now been led into a new era of radio, telephone, television, sound recording and the like. Once again, in this new era, we are increasingly using sound, not written script, as the primary method of communication.

3. PROBLEMS FOR THE CHURCH

And where is the Church in all this? I think all this leaves the Church in serious trouble. African missionaries, of the nineteenth century, soon learnt that the local natives were referring to Christian worship not as worship at all, but as 'reading', for that seemed to be the essence of what these Christian missionaries were doing when they met in church. My experience as a Bishop tells me that we have learnt nothing since those days. When I go to church after church and address the gathered congregation with the words: "The Lord be with you!" at that signal, although they know the response by heart, their heads go down to their books to read, "And also with you." I'm left there looking at the tops of their heads. Without the book they cannot say hello to the minister, let alone to God.

Perhaps the Church of England is still captive to the Reformation era; for it was said then that the incense of the Reformation was the smell of printer's ink. Print - that newly discovered invention which brought reading to the masses and yet paradoxically

individualised them at the very same time. For in time the printed book saved individuals congregating together to hear the Word. They could now have their own little Word in their home or even in their pocket. The Word had become a private commodity.

4. SCRIPT IS A RECENT PHENOMENON.

Let's go back a little however, and remember that script is in fact a very recent phenomenon. *Homo sapiens* has existed for perhaps 30-50,000 yrs. The earliest known script however only came to birth about 6,000 yrs ago. It was the invention of Sumerian accountants in Mesopotamia in about 3,500 BC. The cuneiform alphabet came along two thousand years later, and with the Greeks there came at last the first alphabet complete with vowels. It is estimated that there have been tens of thousands of languages through history, and yet only 106 have ever been committed to writing. And of the 3K languages spoken today only 78 have what we might call a 'literature'.

However, a deep commitment to writing can take a particular dialect and transform it into what we might call a grapho-lect. (a written dialect of the language) Thus, over many years, the grapholect we call "standard English" has accrued a recorded vocabulary of more than 1.5 million words. Whereas an oral dialect has only a few thousand words and no dictionary to check or standardise their meanings.

Today, primary oral culture like this hardly exists. Yet many cultures preserve something of that mind-set. It's difficult for us even to understand what pure orality could actually be. Try now for example to think of the word "nevertheless" just as a sound and not as a written word. -"Nevertheless"- just sound. Not easy! A totally oral person will only think of a word as sound, not a thing in space. A literate person will hardly begin to comprehend that.

5. FOUR LINGUISTIC SCHOLARS

To help us grapple with all this I think it is helpful to look at the research of four linguistic scholars in particularⁱⁱⁱ.

A. MILMAN PARRY

The first is Milman Parry^{iv}, who in 1928 discovered that whoever Homer may or may not have been, his long poems were not verbatim memorisations but had been constructed by stitching together, in the oral mind, prefabricated phrases or clichés - using a Greek form not used in everyday speech, but a series of formulaic thought patterns, or jigsaw pieces already in existence in the shared mind of the bards. The bards would weave these set phrases together into a rich fabric as they spoke the poem. They would quite literally 'rhapsodise' as they spoke the poem. (The Greek word *Rhapsodein* means "to stitch songs together". So the oral poet was a technician rather than a creator. Lebanese and Xhosa poets today work in the same way - carrying the essentials for wisdom, poetry and effective administration in pre-formed clichés and proverbs and, knitting them together into woven tapestries of great complexity. That's why the words 'text' and 'textile' belong together.

This of course was why the literate Plato was racked with concern about oral poets and did not allow them into his Republic. In his mind, they did not think critically or question sufficiently, but just rehearsed pre-formed formulae.

So Parry teaches us that the oral mind uses cliché and the well-worn phrase to brilliant effect - but within prescribed parameters.

B. A. R. LURIA

The second linguistic scholar to mention is A. R. Luria^v. Luria's research took place in the early thirties in the remotest regions of Uzbekistan where he interviewed intelligent people who had no notion of what script could be.

Their way of thinking proved to be totally different from ours.

They had no abstractions. So for example, when shown a geometric figure, they would identify it not as a 'circle' but as 'plate' or some other non-abstraction. Similarly, when asked to find the odd one out of list, they would group them according to real situations, not pre-conceived abstract categories. So for example, when asked which was the odd one out when shown a picture of a hammer, a saw, a log, and a hatchet, they would say they all belonged together. After all, what was the use of a hatchet without a log to go with it? The abstract category of 'tool' meant nothing to them, and they could not see the sense of it even if the questioner introduced the thought. Likewise when asked, "what is a tree?" they would refuse to respond to such a ridiculous question, and simply point the questioner to a tree. So, we literates must learn that we think differently, and are different from, those in oral cultures. And we don't have to go to Uzbekistan to prove it.

C. BASIL BERNSTEIN

It was in 1971 that Basil Bernstein^{vi} engaged in his radical research in contemporary British culture. The outcome was his distinction between two types of language code. Ask a middle class woman, who uses what he called 'elaborated language code', why leaves fall from the tree and the answer will involve talk about seasons, gravity and maybe even plant enzymes. Turn though to my own cockney culture and observe that when the child of a mother from such a culture asks: "Why do leaves fall?" the answer is apt to be something along the lines of "Because they do," or "because trees are like that." The literate may think this an inadequate answer and seek to rectify it. But like the Uzbekistan answer, the cockney mother has focused on the thing at hand. The thing itself, the tree and its situation is attended to, rather than elaborating a controlling or analytical answer. The tree is allowed to be a tree in all its mystery. Bernstein called this second type of language the 'restricted language code', but it is a code which, whilst not proving useful in scientific discovery, in theology opens up all sorts of possibility for what Rudolf Otto called an "I-Thou" relationship with the Other - in this case the mystery of creation within the tree. So it is quite easy in an orally coded culture for the simple 'tree' to become a 'burning bush'!

Bernstein also noted that oral culture, with its restricted, public-language codes, are characterised by over-indulgence in nonce words (like 'innit') in repetition, rhetorical questions, esoteric slang and 'in' phrases. These tricks of the oral cultural language do not seem to serve a purpose until they draw you in. It is then that you realise that the oral language codes are designed not to analyse but to create a sense of belonging amongst its speakers. My cockney mother tongue was a series of questions, wasn't it? It included you, didn't it? Whilst middle class written language-codes are focused on private and exclusive experience, cockneys talking rhetorical questions over the bonnet of the car know who belongs, even if it does not get the car going again. 'Know what I mean?'

Like the language of the New Testament, the Cockney language is full of rhetorical question, contradiction, ambiguity, word-play, and hyperbole. But language reflects experience. Inner city experience is full of conundrum and ambiguity, which is inevitably reflected in the language structure and style. The language is brutal, random, literal, non-analytical but questioning, with nonce-words that have no referent at all. It is a language which you might say is ideally suited to religious experience from the inner city, since such a religious experience simply cannot be logically ordered. It cannot admit of a systematic. Perhaps it is for the same reason that we find little systematic theology in the Gospels. The experience from which it comes is not abstract enough.

D. ALBERT LORD

The last of our linguistic scholars is Albert Lord^{vii}, who in 1960 published his study of Yugoslav bard singers who can evidence remarkable feats of memory. Everyone believed that these singers remembered the text word for word, but Lord's recordings proved it otherwise. The extended songs certainly sounded very similar each time they were rehearsed, but they were certainly not being remembered in a 'word for word' fashion. For the Yugoslav singers, what they were extraordinarily adept at remembering was not a learnt script, but a 'performance' - an event. The written word is an abstract thing. The spoken word is an event. Indeed, the oral word can only be understood as a time-limited event. As Ong^{viii} observes, "When I pronounce the word "permanence", by the time I get to the '-nence', the 'perma-' is gone, and has to be gone. If I stop the movement of sound, I have nothing - only silence."

In Hebrew DABAR means both Word and Event. It is not something you see in space, like a written word is 'seen' on the page. This is important to the theologian trying to make sense of the interaction of God with the created order. For according to this oral cultural understanding, the incarnation of the Word, is not so much the advent of an idea but a Word event - the Christ Event. In the oral culture, the Word is always an event.

Likewise, the spoken word can only be sounded by the application of inner power - it really is breath - RUACH. That is why the word was always thought of as having powerful magical properties. Words cannot exist in time as sound without inner power being breathed into them. So when Adam names the animals in Genesis 2 verse 20, oral folk would not have thought of this as categorising or labelling, since that notion is beyond them, but naming the animals to the oral mind means 'having power over' them. The Word, DABAR, LOGOS, is a power event. That's why swearing is important in oral cultures; but it should not be understood as labelling somebody. It is making use of a word as a power event. Blast!

For our purposes today, we also learn from the Yugoslav bards that the learning systems of the oral culture are significantly different from those in a chirographic or writing culture.

To think through something to its conclusion is a waste of time if you cannot think of a memorable way to recollect the thought later. Otherwise it will remain forever lost as just a passing fancy. So to have wisdom in oral culture you must "think memorable thoughts." "You know what you can recall."

So our question for today must be - How do people of oral cultures think "memorable" thoughts? Let's list some answers from Lord's research.

1. First, because the word is a total, bodily 'event', it is signalled by gesture and enacted movement. The singers move with and are moved by the word. This movement helps them remember and makes the word memorable.
2. Second, music, rhythm and rhyme and number-sets are all factors which aid learning and recalling. We can see this in the Aramaic originals of the Parables of Jesus that Jeremias has reconstructed for us. Rhythm and Rhyme being used masterfully.
3. Ritual is often utilised to recall the word. [There's a whole doctoral thesis waiting in there for someone] Ritual recalls the living Word. You can see this ritual in any Arab *souk* bazaar today! It is not just a purchase, it's a word event,. It's a ritual.
4. Just as was evident in those Homeric legends, 'big' characters and heroes are invented in oral cultures on which can be hung, and thus remembered, all sorts of ideas, thoughts, actions, events and attributes. It's interesting in this regard to see how those hero figures have re-emerged in modern film and fantasy. The newspapers too use exactly the same method - the creation of the larger-than-life 'celebrity'.
5. Fifth, and most important of all, the Story is the key to making thought memorable. Every newspaper knows it must search for the Story.

So, from analysis of the learning techniques of Yugoslav singers we learn how oral societies learn.

6. FURTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF ORAL LEARNING

Let me though, add to that list some other characteristics of oral story telling, before beginning to draw out some conclusions for theology. And as I list these characteristics you may wish to reflect on biblical texts that come readily to mind.

1. *In oral stories the subordinate clause is used only sparingly.* The Genesis One creation story repeats "and" nine times or more.
2. *Analysis gives way to cliché.* Crystallised formulae, slogans or good sound-bites, are modified at your peril. Get a good phrase and stick to it.
3. *Repetitious and 'copious' narrative is characteristic of oral story.*

You easily forget where you're up to in the story if you don't keep going back over the ground in order to trigger the next episode in the mind. Hesitate and you're 'lost' in story-telling, so one moves on very slowly, repeating all the way. So unlike written text. When a college tutor tells oral students to stop repeating themselves in their essays - they are de-skilling them.

4. *Oral stories are usually conservative and traditionalist.*

Apart from changing the story marginally to please a particular audience, the oral story-teller simply repeats the story. Start changing the story and it will all get muddled. Orality inhibits experimentation or explanation. The story-teller constantly

re-shuffles the facts, but they are not expected to invent. [See how Jesus constantly uses pre-existing stories and shuffles the elements - and when he steps out into what is new, he defends himself by strongly maintaining that he is repeating only what he hears from the Father]

5. *Oral story telling keeps close to the human life-world.*

As the research has shown us, oral cultures know few facts, statistics or abstract concepts divorced from the human or quasi-human story or activity; but those activities are used to teach deep thoughts. The teaching of Jesus feels very home-spun.

6 *There is no objective distancing.*

In our culture, knowing is the possession of information. In oral cultures, knowing or learning means achieving close identification with the known. Not classifying it but being with it. That's why the Hebrew word for sexual intimacy is 'to know'. Because knowledge here is intimacy not information. It is because it is intimate that there is so much struggle in oral learning. Writing fosters abstractions divorced from the human arena, but oral proverbs and riddles engage in one-to-one human conflict. Jesus teaches eyeball to eyeball, not pen to paper. The gospels give us lots of examples of that conflictual place of oral learning.

7. *Oral culture is essentially an Homeostatic culture.*

The oral world likes balance and equilibrium. Try to upset it or question it and you will feel the backlash. Oral history for example is not about the past, but is really about the present and how the society feels about itself now. The hi-story can therefore be conveniently changed to fit the need. Only people who write down history can check it, but without writing, history can change to serve this homeostatic purpose. And if you're the only writer in an oral society, as I suppose the Deuteronomist of the Old Testament may have been, then you can have a field day with the history.

8. *All learning is done by apprenticeship, not abstraction.*

Groups of disciples or apprentices offer the intimacy and cultural immersion required to learn the oral patterns. This comes through so strongly from the Gospels.

9. *But above all, oral culture, as we have stressed, is situational rather than abstract.*

It's the world of 'the Archers', not 'Farming Today'.

7. WRITING RESTRUCTURES CONSCIOUSNESS

I hope by now that I have convinced you of my major thesis, that writing restructures consciousness. Professor Walter Ong, to whose work I am indebted, goes so far as to say: "More than any other human invention, writing has transformed human consciousness."^{ix}

A: ORAL CULTURE

So, if we were to pit oral culture against written culture we might say, in favour of orality:

First, that writing has proved to be unresponsive to the human event. It is a thing, a manufactured, unnatural technology. Whereas, the speaking of the 'Word' is a power event.

Writing destroys memory and seeks to control by analysis. The writer's audience is always fictional with no 'cut and thrust' of natural argument. Argument has to be manufactured in the written text. The oral mind, on the contrary is orientated towards action and the thing in itself rather than abstraction.

What is more, the performance of the oral narrative, the telling of the story, can unify human groups, celebrate the clan, keep folk-lore alive, and can educate in a style, interactive with the audience. Books however, have the capacity to disable. That was certainly my experience.

Jesus did not choose to write a book and indeed chose working folk who were not in the main from the literate classes. And even today some academics would maintain that all their book-learning has in fact kept them distanced from engagement with life, which may prove to be better raw material from which to do theology.

B: CHIROGRAPHIC CULTURE

But on the other hand:

writing has allowed for exploration. Where would the world be without the "list"? Writing has enabled the development of food production, trade, political organisation, religious institutions, technical skills, and education practice. It has utterly changed the means of production and transportation, and family organisation. It has diffused knowledge, and altered social and intellectual life.

Writing can also be uplifting, since it heightens consciousness. It offers alienation from the natural world, which gives perspective and objectivity - for as John Hull, and Bertold Brecht before him make clear, alienation and 'cognitive dissonance' is a necessary part of learning. If everything in the garden looks rosy, you won't learn.

Writing also allows for introspection and psychology. It introduces that sense of self and fosters more conscious interaction between persons. Unlike orality, it is essentially divisive and alienating, but eventually brings a higher unity since it is consciousness-raising. Even though it is unity at a higher price.

8. FOUR OBSERVATIONS

Finally, I'd like to make four observations. They will inevitably be condensed, and I'd love to come back and discuss those with you another time, but the clock dictates that I simply touch on them now.

A. First, what sort of learning are we seeking when we do theology?

Now, it has often been said that whoever discovered water, it was not a fish. It can't see the culture that's all around it. And like the fish, we are usually blind to the culture which has spawned us. We must therefore learn not merely to translate learning from our written-word (chirographic) culture into the oral culture in an imperialist and patronising

way, without an awareness of what that oral culture itself can teach us. Nor without an awareness that there will be some learning out of each culture which simply cannot be translated into the other culture! All theology is contextual both in its means of conception and in its means of expression.

Now, theological learning is necessarily concerned with human formation, not just learning information, and this not out of dubious desire to control others, but because it is the "pure in heart who will see God". Doing theology includes growing in Godwardness. Theology and learning of God is therefore a matter of purification as well as imbibing information. "Doing theology" needs both that purification and godly information - and I maintain that together, the oral and written cultures will give us that healing mix.

An allied point. Christians are formed by a yearly celebration of the events of our faith, by a weekly cycle of praise, by fasting and feasting, singing and reciting. So, one learns of God in community - by belonging. Should our theological learning therefore be primarily to inculcate belonging or believing - and which culture, the oral or the chirographic, is more suited to each? Belonging or believing. I think the research to which I have alluded gives us clear and challenging pointers to this teasing question.

B. We require above all, a new understanding of power in our theological processes.

The bourgeois hegemony of religion, the "let me explain the answer to you" type of religion, is epitomised in some theological cultures. I believe however that in theological education, sensitive use of the theological pastoral cycle radically changes the power structure and power balance of theology. I use the phrase 'pastoral cycle'^x to refer to that process which begins with experience and after analysis moves into theological reflection and then discerning action. And one of the ways in which this process changes the power structure of theology is by allowing orality to enter once again into the heart of the theological enterprise.

As a group engages the cycle, the confidence and ability of erstwhile reluctant folk increases and within that body of theological endeavour, they take on theology and make it their own again. Members bring their own story and after analysis, put alongside their experience the Christian Story, and so make connections and move into appropriate Christian action together.

We are not after a top-down "telling" of the answers but a new understanding of power. We must be the Eucharistic community, discerning the body, not just the logic.

C. What sort of theological teachers do we need?

This educational process requires teachers who are coaches and witnesses rather than didactitians. Because I am sold on both the oral and the written, I do not believe entirely in the de-schooling of society, but I do believe in a new type of teacher. Elsewhere^{xi} I have referred to them as "Peoples' Theologians". These are those who immerse themselves in the people's culture and language, carrying with them the Christian Story and the tools of adult group education. It is not part of my brief today to detail how all that is done, and how doing theology might best take place in a secondary oral society, but I have endeavoured to spell that all out in my book - "Let's Do Theology". But I do stress, we

need coaches and witnesses as our theological mentors, who understand orality and are seeped in it.

D. For all that we are now learning about Orality and about the technologies which now surround the Word, we need a new Spirituality of the Word.

It is a profound misunderstanding of the nature of theology to equate 'doing theology' with 'theological reflection'. Engagement and social analysis must also be part of the whole cycle which we call "doing theology". And it is after this engagement and analysis that there comes the complex processes of theological and biblical reflection. This of course leads into new action or awareness. Theology is not all abstraction, but includes those elements which the oral culture is well placed to teach us. For example, the oral culture can teach us that the Word is essentially Event. It can be reflected in script - it can even be reflected upon theologically - but the spirituality of the forceful Ruach of the Word demands the full and physical Doing of Theology, not just theological reflection. The Church, in our theological education, in our book-ridden worship, in our abstracted thinking about God - in all this the Church needs a firm spirituality of the Word - and from oral cultures we may learn more of what that can be.

ⁱ Let's Do Theology, Laurie Green, Mowbray 1990; Power to the Powerless, Laurie Green, Marshall Pickering 1987

ⁱⁱ Statistics are drawn from Quadrant magazine (May 1997)

ⁱⁱⁱ In what follows I am indebted to the work of Walter Ong. See especially: Orality & Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, Methuen. 1982

^{iv} The Making of Homeric Verse: Collected Papers of Milman Parry, ed. Adam Parry, Clarendon Press, 1971

^v A.R.Luria: Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations, ed. Michael Cole, trans. By M. Lopez-Morillas & L. Solotaroff, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 1976

^{vi} Basil Bernstein: Class, Codes, and Control. Theoretical studies towards a Sociology of Language, vol 1 Routledge, Kegan and Paul. 1971 & 1974

^{vii} Albert Lord: The Singer of Tales. Harvard University Press.1960.

^{viii} Ong, 1982 p.32

^{ix} Ong. 1982 p.78

^x See my Let's Do Theology; a pastoral cycle resource book, Mowbray 1990

^{xi} Let's Do Theology p. 124