

ORAL CULTURE AND THE WORLD OF WORDS

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1. INTRODUCTION

I have written at length elsewhere about the various methods of doing theology in what we might call a 'non-book culture'.¹ In this paper, however, I want to enquire, how do 'non-book' or 'oral' people think and express themselves - and why? And what are the theological and practical implications of that? Let me start by sharing some of my own early learning experiences.

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. 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 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 cannot 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.

What had brought these fine people to the point of offering the rest of their lives to God through ordination, had largely been transmitted to them in some way other than books. The "Word" had penetrated their being in a way that books could constrain and even threaten. 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 carried their most profound experiences. And they had been helped to see that, not so much by teachers as by 'coaches' and by 'witnesses'.

But first, let us remind ourselves that we do not today live in a 'non-literate' society. It is not that simple.

In 1996, the number of book titles published in the UK topped 100,000 for first time. And the fastest growing category has been Religion: 4,500 titles in 1995.² 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.

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 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. Sound once again has become a primary method of communication. The Personal Computer screen has brought text back into view, especially during its earliest years, but icons, graphics and sound-cards have now become so dominant that, although a minority 'literary class' are bound to their writing, for the vast majority of our western populations it is sound and graphics which are our context - a 'secondary orality', and reading has given way to browsing.

2. 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 particular.³

A. Milman Parry

The first is Milman Parry,⁴ 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, a series of formulaic thought patterns, or jigsaw pieces already in existence in the shared mind of the bards. 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 is why the words 'text' and 'textile' belong together. 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.⁵ 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. When shown a geometric figure, they would identify it not as a circle but as a plate, or some other non-abstraction. Similarly, when asked to find the odd one out of a 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 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 simply point the questioner to a tree. We literates must learn that we think differently, and are different from those in predominantly oral cultures.

C. Basil Bernstein

It was in 1971 that Basil Bernstein⁶ 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 a child asks, "Why do leaves fall?", the mother's answer is apt to be something along the lines of "Because they do," or, "Because trees are like that." Like the Uzbekistan answer, the mother has focused on the thing at hand. The thing itself, the tree, and its situation is attended to, rather than elaborating an answer in an analytical, perhaps even controlling fashion. The tree is allowed to be a tree for itself, 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 still opens up all sorts of possibility. It is quite easy in an orally coded culture for the simple tree to signify a transcendence, to become a burning bush!

D Albert Lord

The last of our linguistic scholars is Albert Lord,⁷ 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.

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 2:20, oral folk would not have thought of this as categorising or labelling, since that notion was beyond them, but as 'having power over' them. That is 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.

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 how do people of oral cultures 'think memorable thoughts'? Let us list some answers from Lord's research.

1. 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 makes the word memorable.
2. Music, rhythm and rhyme and number-sets are all factors which aid learning and recalling.
3. Ritual is often utilised to recall the word. Ritual recalls the living Word. You can see this ritual in any Arab *souk* bazaar today! It is not just a purchase, it is a word event. Likewise, Eucharistic ritual is a recalling of the Word.
4. Just as was evident in those Homeric legends, 'big' characters and heroes are invented on which can be hung, and thus remembered, all sorts of ideas, events and attributes. It is 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. Most important of all, the Story is the key to making thought memorable.

Let me though, add to that list some other characteristics of oral story telling.³

- a. In oral stories the subordinate clause is used only sparingly. The first Genesis creation story repeats 'and' nine times or more.
- b. Analysis gives way to cliché. Crystallised formulae, slogans or good sound-bites, are modified at your peril.
- c. Repetitious and 'copious' narrative is characteristic of oral story. You easily forget where you are up to in the story if you do not keep going back over the ground in order to trigger the next episode in the mind. Hesitate and you are 'lost' in story-telling, so one moves on very slowly, repeating all the way, which is so unlike a written text. When college tutors tell oral students to stop repeating themselves in their essays, they are de-skilling them.
- d. 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. Orality inhibits experimentation or explanation. Story-tellers constantly re-shuffle the facts, but they are not expected to invent.
- e. Oral story-telling keeps close to human life as it is lived out in practice. As the research has shown us, oral cultures know few facts, statistics or abstract concepts divorced from human story or activity; but those activities are used to teach deep thoughts.
- f. There is no objective distancing. In our culture, knowing is the possession and classification of information. In oral cultures, knowing or learning means achieving close identification with the known. That is 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. The gospels give us lots of examples of that conflictual place of oral learning.

- g. 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 are 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.
- h. 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.
- i. But above all, oral culture, as we have stressed, is situational rather than abstract. It is the world of 'The Archers', not 'Farming Today'.

3. 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 heavily indebted, goes so far as to say: "More than any other human invention, writing has transformed human consciousness."⁸

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 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 telling of the story can unify human groups, celebrate the clan, keep folklore 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. 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. It 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. If everything in the garden looks rosy, you will not learn. Writing allows for psychology and deeper introspection. It reinforces the 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.

4. FOUR OBSERVATIONS

Finally, I would like to make four, condensed observations.

A. What sort of learning are we seeking when we do theology?

Theological learning is necessarily concerned with human formation, not just learning information, because it is the "pure in heart who will see God". Doing theology includes growing in Godwardness. "Doing theology" needs both purification and godly information - and I maintain that together, the oral and written cultures will give us that healing mix.

An allied point is that 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. 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? 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 of theology. I use the phrase 'pastoral cycle'⁹ 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.

We are not after a top-down 'telling' of the answers. 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,¹⁰ I have referred to them as "People's 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. I have endeavoured to spell out how this may be done in my book, "Let's Do Theology". We need coaches and witnesses as our theological mentors who understand orality and are steeped in it.

D. For all that we are now learning about Orality, 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 be part of the whole cycle. 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. In our theological education, in our book-ridden worship, in our abstracted thinking about God, the Church needs a firm spirituality of the Word - and from oral cultures we may learn more of what that can be.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Let's Do Theology, Laurie Green, Mowbray 1990; Power to the Powerless, Laurie Green, Marshall Pickering 1987

² Statistics are drawn from Quadrant magazine (May 1997)

³ In what follows I am heavily indebted to the work of Walter Ong. See especially: Orality & Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, Methuen 1982

⁴ The Making of Homeric Verse: Collected Papers of Milman Parry, ed. Adam Parry, Clarendon Press, 1971

⁵ 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

⁶ Basil Bernstein: Class, Codes, and Control. Theoretical studies towards a Sociology of Language, vol.1. Routledge, Kegan and Paul. 1971 & 1974

⁷ Albert Lord: The Singer of Tales, Harvard University Press, 1960.

⁸ Ong, 1982 p.78

⁹ See my Let's Do Theology: a pastoral cycle resource book, Mowbray 1990

¹⁰ Let's Do Theology, p.124