

Technology, Communication and the Future

It says on the program that today I am going to reflect on the future. That, I suppose, is a good example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. I am not sure how to do that. None of us really has any privileged way of looking into the future. Our best shot at futuring usually involves some kind of extrapolation of present trends. And yet, even if we can only hunch that the future will have some connection to past and present, it is not easy to discern which of the many present trends ought to be extrapolated. The future has a way of falsifying our best guesses.

To talk of the future, then, is always to talk about the present in an oblique way. How can we understand the present?

What I would like to do today is to reflect on some thoughts that have been suggested in the work of Gianni Vattimo, a contemporary Italian philosopher. Vattimo (*The Transparent Society*). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press) describes our situation in the late 20th century as the emergence of what he calls a "society of generalized communication." Our time has been marked by the proliferation of communication media. In our time, Vattimo suggests, everything has become an object of communication.

Vattimo connects the proliferation of communication with the emergence of pluralism. He remarks on the convergence of the end of colonialism following the second world war and the development of global communication systems. The result of this development -- which is one aspect of the technological domination of the world -- is that the situation is created where multiple stories can be told. In modernity -- which coincides with the period of Western expansion and the hegemony of Western imperialism -- there was one dominant story, one view of history. This view saw history as moving in the direction of increasing rationalization. It was a story in which history moved one direction, named as "progress."

The technological domination of the world, in Vattimo's analysis, results in the society of generalized communication. When that

happens, however, there can no longer be one dominant and official history. In a society of generalized communication, we may say that the media are hungry for stories. Every story can be told. Every story must be told. The paradoxical result of the Western movement towards the rationalization, and hence the technologization of the world, is that the Western story -- the story of rationalization, progress, technological domination -- becomes one story among others. Technology has at least this emancipatory effect. We now live in a world of multiple histories.

If we think of the history of the world since the end of World War II, we can think of many of the new stories that have been told, many of the communities which have found a voice: the national stories of Africa and Asia emerging with the dissolution of Western colonial empires, the black community in the United States who could no longer be ignored, at least in part because of the media coverage of the civil rights movement; the feminist movement in which the story of women found its voice, the gay/lesbian movement. Today we are further jolted by the voice of the far right, of those alienated people who form the militia movement who are given a voice by the same media. In this process, who controlled the media and what point of view the media have represented is not a major factor. Since the media need something to cover, the same media give voice to whoever it is they cover.

In his remarks on this matter, Vattimo has in mind the proliferation of mass media, particularly radio, television, the cinema, the press. He does not explicitly address -- although his insight can certainly be extended to -- the particular proliferation of communication media in which we are involved. If the mass media give voice to any and every community, however defined, computer communications extends the ability of minorities to speak beyond anything the mass media can muster. On the mass media, as we know, everyone is allotted their 15 minutes of fame. That is, even though the mass media are information hungry, there are limits to what they can carry. If the mass media are caught up in a frenzy over the OJ Simpson story or the Oklahoma bombing story, then there are other voices who have to wait patiently until they, too, can have their turn. In other words,

in the mass media, an economy of scarcity still rules. If we are obsessed with the militia groups, there are other, hopefully more positive groups, who are not being heard.

The Internet is in many ways a paradigm Vattimo's analysis of the society of generalized communication. In the anarchy of the Internet, every voice can speak. And on the Internet, those who have ears to hear can hear. Every group -- whatever their ideology, whatever their commitments -- can stake out a corner. Their message can be made available for anyone who wants to search it out at for those who just happen to stumble over it. The pluralization proceeds to the point that everyone can have a Web page, can tell their own story, promote their own version of the truth for all the world to hear.

A world in which every voice can be heard is, as we are beginning to realize, not an unmixed blessing. There are some voices that we would prefer not be heard. Communication does not always promote understanding. We are discovering quickly that a world in which so many voices can speak is a disquieting and dangerous world. When we free peoples to speak, we free everyone to speak, even those who represent points of view and commitments that we believe to be inimical to human life and community. As what Vattimo calls the "end of modernity" has given us emancipation from a single point of view, a single story, a unified version of history, it has also ushered into a world that is chaotic and dangerous. There are some stories we would prefer not to hear, some points of view we would prefer not understand.

Yet that, I venture to say, is the world in which we have been introduced -- decisively introduced -- by the technology that we have been celebrating here. In the world of generalized communication, the world in which everything concerns the transmission of messages, we have to discover anew what it means to be church. The models of the past will not help us. This is not the world of the Pax Romana with all of its ambiguities. It is not the world of Christendom, with its benefits and its liabilities. It is not even the world of modernity, of belief in rational progress, and the liberalisms and fundamentalisms that it fostered. It is a new world that has none

of the certainties that the church has used to understand its identity in those ages.

None of us is able to say with any certainty what it means to be church in a society of generalized communication. But I think a few guesses can be attempted.

First, in a society of generalized communication, any Christian voice will be a multiple voice. The distinction between orthodoxy and heresy will become increasingly problematical.

The Christian church has always had to deal with the fact that different voices have claimed to speak for the Gospel. In the world of the Pax Romana the church struggled, with only partial success to insure that it would speak with a single voice. In struggling against heresy in the form of Gnosticism, it attempted to insure that a single, orthodox Christian voice might prevail.

In Christendom, aided by the power of the state, a single official voice could claim to speak in a unitary and definitive way for the church. This was largely successful, especially in Western Europe where the power of the papacy assured the hegemony of a single Christian voice.

In modernity, the Christian voice was fragmented. Nevertheless, various churches continued to insist either that theirs was the only legitimate Christian voice or that there was a common orthodoxy which was shared across at least certain denominational tradition and which constituted the authentic and legitimate Christian voice.

In a society of generalized communication, orthodoxy and heresy both have a voice. The very idea of a single authentic Christian voice becomes problematical. Orthodoxy and heresy exist side by side, both insisting on their legitimacy and authenticity. Indeed, this is already happening. On Ecunet, the meeting "Confessing Christ" is attempting to deal with the problem of the multiplicity of the Christian voice within the United Church of Christ. As I read what is going on in that meeting, a group of UCCers, under the theological

leadership of Gabriel Fackre, are attempting to define a center, a core position which constitutes the single authentic Christian voice and from which one can judge, at least roughly, that some other voices are not authentically and genuinely Christian. There is, to use Fackre's terminology, a common Christian story which defines the "center" and which can be acknowledged as distinguishing the common core of any authentic Christian voice.

The Fackres and their friends are struggling with what has become a common problem for most, if not all, of our denominations. In a time that the voices within each of our denominations become increasingly diverse what can we do about heresies of the left and of the right that persist and even prosper within each of our communions? Can we succeed in holding on to a common center? I do not think so. The pluralization of the denominations are symptomatic of this society of generalized communication which contemporary communications media have made possible. In cyberspace, then different voices will exist side by side. No voice will be able to assert itself as definitive of the Christian Gospel.

Secondly: In the society of generalized communication, Christian voices exist as one among many. We find ourselves crying in the wilderness, with no assurance, other than the count of the hits on our web pages, that anyone can hear. Christian voices have no special privilege. We speak on an equal footing with people of all faiths and none at all. We speak only as one voice among many. While we can speak to all the world, so can everyone else. Any claim that we make to have the unique and ultimate word about the human condition becomes more and more problematical, more and more incredible in a situation where, de facto, no voice is privileged.

Thirdly: In a society of generalized communities, those who have formerly had no voice, who have been marginalized to the extent that they could not be heard, will be empowered to speak. Not even the economics of communication will be an absolute bar for any voice to speak. Even the homeless can have a Web page. This is not, of course, a guarantee of equal access to the media. It is an assurance that even the voice of those who cannot afford access will speak,

even if in a somewhat muted way. One of the mandates of the Gospel to the church in a society of generalized communication may well be to enable the marginalized to have access to this medium that their voice may be added to the multiplicity.

Fourthly: In a society of generalized communication, we are constantly involved in the transmission of messages. The task of transmitting messages involves us both in the transmission of messages with our contemporaries and the transmission of messages between past and future. In a world where multiple stories exist side by side, we are involved not only in hearing each others stories. We are forced to continually reinterpret our own in response to the multiple voices we hear. As Christians, then, we find ourselves plunged into a world for which we are not totally unprepared. The transmission and interpretation of messages has always been part and parcel of the life of the Christian community. In the society of generalized communication, I would suggest, the transmission and interpretation of messages takes two forms. These are dialogue and witness. The church is called to be in the society of generalized communication as a community that listens as well as speaking. We need to be willing to engage the multiple voices that speak. The society of generalized communication could be a Babel in which everyone speaks but no one listens. No one attempts to understand. One of the roles of the church is to engage those voices - to listen, to understand, to challenge.

That is the dialogical calling of the church. To witness, on the other hand cannot be construed as asserting some privilege for our own version of the Christian story. That, I believe, would be an exercise in futility. In a world of multiple voices, the Christian response of witness is one of pointing to and naming the signs of the Spirit in the multitude of voices. It is the task of discerning the Spirit, of locating Pentecost in the cacophony.

Gianni Vattimo, the Italian philosopher with whose thoughts I began this reflection, elsewhere (*Oltre l'interpretazione*) emphasizes the kenosis of Christ as one of the keys to interpret our time. Kenosis

may indeed be an important model to understand what is happening to us in the society of generalized communication. The society of generalized communication involves the emptying of every story of its stability and of its privilege. To become one voice among many, is, in this sense, not a compromise. It is God's call to kenosis in the contemporary world.

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