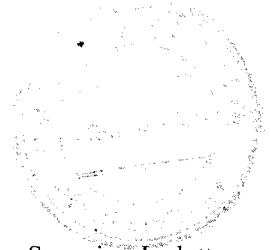# Challenges to Theology
in Malta Today

Peter Serracino Inglott

Nowadays, before one is admitted to a field of study, one often has to go through an aptitude test. In the case of Philosophy, it is said that, in one university, the test was the following: A candidate had just one basinful of water available and two persons, one very dirty and the other very clean, asking for it. Only one could use it: to whom would the prospective philosopher give it and why? He pondered for a while and then said: "To the dirty one, since he obviously needs it more than the clean one". "No, not good for philosophy", he was told. "Why not try social work?". The candidate protested and insisted that it was philosophy he wanted to do. "Try again", he was told. The candidate thought that he could not now possibly get it wrong. "To the clean one, since he obviously appreciates cleanliness more". "No good", he was told. "Try psychology perhaps". The candidate was now really flustered. "Now I really do not know how to tackle your problem", he blurted out. "Very good", he was told "now you have hit upon the attitude with which one needs to tackle a philosophical question".

When I, a philosopher, was asked to tackle a topic which implied having some idea of what Theology is and what theological method consists of, I began by pondering what a good aptitude test for theology could be like. I imagined asking a candidate the following question: "Someone told you, "I am in search of God but I don't know the right way to set about it, what do you advise me to do?" I went on picturing to myself a possible sequel to the adoption of this test.

A first candidate had set about preparing himself for the test by reading the rule of St. Benedict. There he had read that when one asked for admission as a monk, he was asked "What are you seeking?" and the right answer was "God". Therefore the candidate replied to the question put to him: "Go to a monastery". The assessors told him that perhaps that was where he should go rather than to a Theology school.

The second candidate had prepared himself by reading St. Augustine. He answered the question: "I'd suggest that he enter within himself, because there

he would find God". The assessors suggested to him that perhaps he was called to be a mystic but not a theologian.

The third candidate had prepared himself by reading a book on Jewish humour. There he had read that a Christian asked a Rabbi: "Why do you Rabbis, whenever asked a question reply with another question as indeed Rabbi Jesus himself often does in the Gospel?". The Rabbi answered: "Why should we not answer questions by asking other questions?". The candidate answered: "Can you tell me where the person was when he wanted to search for God and when it was?". The assessors straightaway told him: "Yes, you have the right aptitude for Theology".

The assessors plainly agreed with the Dean of our Faculty of Theology or whoever it was who chose the subject of the talk that he took the great risk of inviting me, not a theologian in any strict sense of the word, to deliver today.

The formulation of the title suggests agreement with the widespread opinion today that Theology should be contextual.[1] That methodological conviction means that Theology need not begin with the analysis of discourse about God but should rather begin with the particular context in which a group of people are weaving a relationship of faith (or lack of it) with God.

The most famous of such theologies is undoubtedly that developed in Latin America and called Liberation Theology, but there are also Black Theology developed mainly in the United States of America and Urban Theology developed mostly in the UK with the leadership of J. Vincent.[2] All such approaches in theology proceed in three phases: first interrogating the culture, traditions and identity of a specific milieu; then identifying the challenges which that milieu presents to faith in the light of the Word of God and the history of the Church; and, finally, proposing appropriate responses to the identified challenges, to be expressed in *praxis*, i.e. works and action, just as much as in *doxa*, i.e. writing and oral confession.

1.   S.B. Bevens: *Models of Contextual Theology*, Maryknoll, NY Orbis. 2002
2.   *Crucibles: Creating Theology at the Urban Theology Unit"*, Sheffield University Press, Sheffield 2000

Plainly underlying this methodology is the conviction that there is no single, universal method transcending time and space of search and discovery of God, but that it all depends on where you are at and when it is that you commit yourself to this undertaking, even if it is acknowledged that the impulse to it seems to be present in every human being in every age.[3]

The idea of Contextual Theology is clearly nothing but the development of the Gospel idea of reading the signs of the times highlighted in the Vatican II Constitution on the Church in the World Today *"Gaudium et Spes"*.

Immediately in the wake of the Council there was a great flurry of discussion about theological method. This is clearly not the place to attempt a review of the different theories put forward at the time.[4] I only wish to note that three of the most notable of these theories all pointed in the direction of contextual theology. Rahner proposed that one should start with the study of basic anthropological structures since the history of Salvation was for him the divine response to the deepest desires of humankind but these anthropological structures can never be found in abstract, universal form, but only embodied in concrete specific incarnations.[5] Hans Urs von Balthasaar eventually reached the conclusion that the theatre furnished the most appropriate conceptual tools for theology, and obviously the theatre is essentially conditioned by the cultures within which it is enacted.[6] Bernard Lomergan

---

3. No doubt the popularity of this methodology is largely due to the role attributed to space and place as a determinant of meaning by Heidegger. Cfr: Stuart Elden: *Mapping the Present, Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History,* Continuum, London & New York 2001
4. Cfr: Peter Serracino Inglott: "The Humanistic and Philosophical Training of Future Priests", in *Melita Theologica,* XVIII /2(1966) 46-51
 "On Seminary Philosophy, Pro Nomine et Contra Rem", Graduation Day Oration, Faculty of Theology, 1987.
5. "Theologie et Anthropologie", in *Theologie d'Aujourd'hui et de demain,* du Cerf, Paris 1967
 La Riforma degli Studi Teologici, (Zur Neurdning der Theologischen Studien): Translated by G. Moretto: Morcelleana, . Brescia 1970
 Cfr: Peter Serracino Inglott: "Rahner the Philosoper" in *Beginning Philosophy.* Media Centre, Malta 1987 pp. 195-205
6. H. U. Von Balthasar: *My Work in Retrospect,* Ignatian Press, San Francisco 1993
 H. U. Von Balthasar: *Theo-Drama,* Ignatian Press, San Fransisco 1993
 Cfr: Peter Serracino Inglott: "Theatre & Liturgy?, Two Hesitant Footnotes to Hans Urs Von Balthasar" in Hector Scerri (ed), *Living Theology,* Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2007, pg 185-193

expounded a method that owed much to his Theory of Knowledge that had been deeply influenced by the Analytic philosophers who, following Frege, believed that one should never ask for the meaning of a word (or indeed of anything) in isolation but always in the context of a sentence (or way of life).[7] I do not think it is purely co-incidental that all three of these theologians were Jesuits in their intellectual formation.

Actually none of their systematic proposals prevailed, largely because the culture of the second half of the twentieth century came to be dominated by the rejection of any kind of system at all and only the generically dialogic thrust present in each one of the three methodologises was retained. However, in very recent times, the abhorrence of all systems seems to be in the process of losing its force because of what is undoubtedly the most important occurrence in history since the invention of the combustion engine, viz the advent of the electronic media of communication. Hence, a re-instatement of systems-thinking in the most prestigious position is taking place[8] and there is a revival of interest in "systematic theology".[9]

I

SELF-PLACING IN CYBERSPACE

An incidental result of this revolution is that it has generated a paradox in the adoption of the contextual approach to theology. On the one hand, whatever the specific aspects of any local context, there is, most conspicuously at least in the western world, but to some degree everywhere, one most striking feature of any culture within which any theologian may happen to operate today that

---

7. Bernard Lomergan, *Method in Theology*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1990
    Cfr: Frank Bajada "The Sacraments as Symbols, their Constitutive, Communicative and Redemptive Role in the Church's Mission according to Bernard Lomergan" in Hector Scerri (ed.) *Living Theology*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 259-280
8. Gerard Berry: *Pourquoi et Comment le Monde Devient Numerique*. College de France/Fayard 2007-2008 Cfr. Also the special number of *Esprit*, Que Nous Reserve le Numerique?, (May 2006) 121-212.
9. Cfr. for instance John Haldane, *Faithful Reason, Essays Catholic and Philosophical*, Routledge, London 2004, especially the Introduction.

is universal, because it belongs to the temporal context of theologizing today, whatever the place where it takes place: it is that we are now all living in what William Gibson famously called *cyberspace*.[10]

Now, on the one hand, cyberspace has been defined by the second most famous of its analysts M. Benedikt as "a dematerialized space and a disembodied space free from the constraints of geography and physics and, in more extreme cases, the messy contingencies of the flesh".[11] Another great theorist of the electronic revolution, Meyrowitz, reiterated: "the new media have led us to a nearly total dissociation of physical place and social place. When we communicate through telephone, radio, television or computer, where we are physically no longer determines where and who we are socially".[12]

On the other hand, it has been clearly demonstrated by others that Information/ Communication Technology does not *totally* abolish place. Since human agency always remains present, the cultural context typical of a place still continues to haunt the communication that takes place even in the so-called disembodied world of "cyberspace" just as physical absence does not completely depersonalize a telephone conversation.[13] Contextual Theology in Malta today means that account has to be taken both of a temporal context that is common to all places in the world (cyberspace) and also of a spatial context, or, more precisely, of the "spectral traces" of a past identity that still permeates that tiny segment of the globe that we (our nation) has been called by God to inhabit.

The Maltese Church has for long been characterized by its being the main source for conferring a strong sense of identity to the Maltese people, a sense of belonging to a wider community than the family. There can be no doubt that this function is being eroded by the invasion of *virtual* communication in all spheres of Maltese life. What has been called *social capital*, measured by the

10.   Gibson W: *Neuromancer*, Harper Collins, London 1993
11.   Benedikt M:. Introduction in: M. Benedikt (Ed) *Cyberspace: First Steps*, Cambridge, MA 1992,1-25 . MIT Press, 1992
12.   Meyrowitz, J. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour*. Oxford University Press, New York 1985
13.   Rowan Wilken: "The Haunting Affect of Place in the Discourse of the Virtual"in *Ethics, Place and Environment* 10/ 1(March 2007) 49-63.

intensity (quantity and quality) of communication, is reduced and individualism augmented by the prevalence of virtual media. Just to mention three instances, many marriages are now being generated over the internet through chatting etc; the need to attend physically in church celebrations is felt less and less; the elections are being perhaps decisively influenced by blogs and email. Such developments constitute an extreme challenge to the Church.

Systems of communication have always been crucial for religion as such, but for some religions, Salvation is escape from the world and the rejection of matter, Salvation of the soul but not of body. On the contrary for Christianity the Sacraments are the primary means of Salvation and therefore physical presence is of the utmost importance. The new media of communication have undoubtedly opened up new possibilities of communication in terms of transfer of information, but they provide only an impoverished form of human communication when compared to full bodily communication involving all the senses. Because of its abstraction virtual communication may seem more spiritual, but it is spun not out of what a human being is, but out of what he has, from his powers and not from his fullness of life.

Consequently, it is a challenge to theologians everywhere first to understand the nature and functioning of the new electronic media and then to find the ways that can be fruitfully used to exploit their possibilities, for instance for information diffusion and also to enhance the very celebration of the Liturgy itself, without however becoming themselves a wretched substitute for it.[14] In Malta where there still is exceptionally high, even though decreasing Church attendance, and where Church presence in community and cultural life is still powerful, despite weakening family networks, particular analysis and remedies have to and can be found to meet the challenge of the prevalence of virtual communication in the special forms that it takes in the local context.

The most evident "spectral traces" of Malta's past spatial identity that remain today are the cultural elements that flow from our geographical position in the

14.   Morten T. Hojsgaard & Margit Warburg, *Religion and Cyberspace*. Routledge, London 2005;Levy P., *Becoming Virtual: Reality on the Digital Age,* Plenam Press, New York 1998; Wertheim, M., *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet,* Virago, London 1999.

centre of the Mediterranean and the historical sedimentation that has occurred partly because of that spatial collocation. Pope John Paul II himself on his visit to these islands and on other occasions emphasized that Malta was ideally placed to serve as a centre of dialogue between the three greatest religions of the Book. Malta is not only located at the interface between Europe and the Arab world,[15] but the Maltese are the only European citizens who speak a semitic language. Understanding a language from within, as Wittengstein used to emphasize, means understanding a whole way of life from within. The challenge to the Maltese theologian is therefore not just that of responding to the pseudo-spiritualization represented by the advent of cyberspace but more especially grasping the implications of this advent for the dialogue between the three great monotheistic religions that are distinguished from the other great religious tradition of humankind, the Hindu-Buddhist, by their belief that communication with God occurs mainly in public linguistic dialogue, rather than in the silence of the self. Clearly the use of the body in its totality as the fullest medium for linguistic expression even in the electronic age is a tremendous challenge, the implications of which invest almost all sectors of theology. However, the Maltese theologian has a measure of comparative advantage over all others in approaching this extremely complex and thorny topic.

II

GLOBALIZATION AND SOCIAL DOCTRINE

One very important aspect of the electronic revolution is its effect on the economic and social structures of the world.[16] It is a prime factor of the phenomenon that has been called Globalization. Now the social doctrine of the church that has recently been presented in the form of a Catechism was mostly formulated before the electronic revolution had occurred.

---

15. Cfr: Eickelman D.F., "Communication and Control in the Middle East: Publication and its *Discontents*" in Eickelman, D.F. & Anderson, J.W. (eds.), *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, Indiana Univ. Press, Bloomington, Indiana,1999, 29-40.
16. Chloé Keraghel & Jai Sen (eds), "Explorations in Open Space. The World Social Forum and Cultures of Politics" in *International Social Science Journal* Blackwell Publishing/UNESCO, No. 182 (2004).

Pope Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum* many years after the first Industrial Revolution had been set off with the invention of machinery, i.e. of the combustion engine. That invention has proved to be the most consequential in the history of humankind until our own days. Until then work, together with thought and language, which distinguishes human beings from the rest of the animal kingdom was done mainly through the energy generated by the human body itself, with a little help from domesticated animals and some windmill or watermill. Tools were mere extensions of the human body that allowed a human being to use bodily gestures with greater precision and force. The machine changed all that, by allowing much more energy to be generated from the burning of materials such as coal or oil than could ever be produced just by the workings of human bodies. Unfortunately it took the Church half a century to grasp the importance of this change and for the Popes to preach its significance in the History of Salvation.

Now the electronic revolution is once again rapidly altering the conditions of work for humankind and consequently calling for a new turn to be given to the Social Doctrine of the Church. The electronic revolution means that a much greater quantity of work can be done with the use of small quantities of energy as compared with the enormous quantities that machines used up. Consequently the most highly priced and prized resource in the world has ceased to be land (as it was when agriculture was the principal productive activity of humankind) or sources of energy such as coal or oil (as had successively become the case in the age of mechanical industry). Today it has become information, knowing-that and knowing-how.

We are accustomed in the Church to consider knowledge or rather wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit, as something spiritual, but "spiritual" here is not the opposite of material. It signifies that something material has been informed by life, not vegetal or sensitive or intellectual, but Divine. This sharing in the life of God Himself is what we call Grace, the transfiguration of nature. A challenge to the contemporary theologian is how to work out the relation between "information" as understood by the computer scientists and the spiritualization of matter that is the work of what theologians have traditionally called Grace.

In the last Encyclicals of Pope John Paul II, particularly **Centesimus Annus,** there are hints of the beginnings of theological discussion of this most massive

phenomenon of our times.[17] Perhaps the most challenging pioneer in this field of thought was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, but unfortunately Teilhard was brought up in a culture in which Philosophy and Theology were infiltrated by Cartesianism, by the dualism which considered soul or spirit on the one hand and bodies or material objects on the other hand as two quite different sorts of substance.[18] Teilhard sought to counter Cartesianism, but did not have a sufficiently solid Aristotelian/Thomist philosophical background. A satisfactory account of the transformation occurring in the world today has still to be developed.

There is need for spelling out in terms of concrete proposals the meaning of social justice in the globalized world of today by not only considering the problems that are our heritage today of the capitalist system of the first industrial age, but also such problems as those raised by the control of information, the

17. A general introduction to the topic of the renewal of Theology with regard to social issues is provided by Donald Dorr in *The Social Justice Agenda*, Gill & Macmillan, Ireland 1991. Pope John Paul II's first social Encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (1983) focuses on work still mainly in the perspective of the first Industrial Revolution and machine civilization, before the Electronic Revolution had come into full force. Cfr. Lazzati et al, *Lavoro e Chiesa Oggi*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1983.

    Actually Pope John Paul II's second social encyclical *Sollecitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) was hailed as a new departure because of its focusing on North-South divisions rather than on east-West and greatly displeased Right-Wing North American Catholics as much as it was welcomed by Asians and Latin Americans. Cfr: Gregory Baum & Robert Ellsberg: *The Logic of Solidarity*, Orbis Books, New York 1989.

    His third *Centesimus Annus* (1991) was greeted by Right-wing American Catholics as if it were Papal endorsement of their views with a positive revaluation of Liberal Capitalism and the mechanism of the market. Cfr. Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, New York1982;*The Spirit of Capitalism*, New York 1993; and *Will it Liberate?*, New York 1986. However a balanced reading of the Encyclical suggests that the claim by Novak and his allies that it was from them that the Pope had borrowed his ideas is not well founded. While it is true that the Pope takes account of the humanization of the capitalist system in modern times in contrast with what had occurred in the Communist world, the encyclical is more notable for its emphasis on the new potentialities of all work to be "creative" and it is in this light that the value of entrepreneurship is acknowledged (para. 32) Cfr: Joao Cesar das Neves, *Dieu dans l'Economie* ñ, Editions des Beatitudes, France 2005.

18. From the immense bibliography related to Teilhard the following recent studies contain up to date discussions of Teilhard especially with reference to ecology and globalization, but there is no focusing on the significance of the growth of electronic communication in a Teilhardian perspective.Gerard-Henry Baudry: *Teilhard de Chardin ou le retour de Dieu*. Aubin ed. France 2007; Arthur Fabel & Donald St. John, (eds) *Teilhard in the 21st Century, The Emerging Spirit of Earth*, Orbis Books, New York 2004; Remo Vescia (ed) *Colloque International Teilhard de Chardin, Batir, proteger et partager la Planete Terre*, Editions Jesuites, Paris ñ Le Caire 2002

source of greatest economic wealth today: For instance, there is the issue of the governance of internet which today is totally in the hands of American business.[19] There are also such issues as the promotion of open source systems that are in line with the concept of knowledge as common heritage of mankind.

These issues are obviously related to the more general questions concerning what has now been called somewhat paradoxically "intellectual property". Legislators both at the national and international levels have already had to confront such problems as whether there can be rights of property exercised over new biological organisms or parts of the human genome.[20]

All these questions have to be explored in relation to possible new systems of world governance.[21] It is almost universally acknowledged that a totally free market mechanism will not by itself ensure justice. The social ethics of a knowledge economy has still to be convincingly set up by moral theologians. Here again, the problems are global and have partly to be met at global level, but they also appear in often idiosyncratic form at the national level. At least it could be argued that in places where there is an exceptionally and perhaps even uniquely strong tradition of dealing with particular topics there is a special call upon theologians in that locality to bring their acumen to bear upon such topics. For instance it happens, not probably for purely accidental reasons, that in 1967 the doctrine of the common heritage of humankind derived from Pope John XXIII's Encyclical *Pacem in Terris,* was historically developed in Malta and proposed by Malta, at the United Nations.[22] Likewise today there are special

19.   Cfr: Castells, M.," The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet", *Business and Society*, Oxford University Press 2001
20.   "The Genome Project, Individual Differences and Just Health Care" in Timothy Murphy & Marc Lappe, (eds,) *Justice and the Human Genome Project*, University of California Press, Berkeley1994;W.W Norton & Co. Cork-Diegan, Robert, "*The Gene Wars: Science, Politics and the Human Genome"*, New York 1994.
21.   Nico Stehr: "The Social and Political Control of Knowledge in Modern Societies" in *International Social Science Journal* No.178 Blackwell Publishing/UNESCO, UK 2003
22.   *Cfr:* Peter Serracino Inglott: "Introduction", *Malta and the Law of the Sea: A Vision ñ An Initiative*, Saviour F. Borg, (ed.), Malta, Multilateral Affairs Directorate. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malta 1996. and: "The Law of the Sea and the Development of Mediterranean Regional Institution", in P. Worsley and P. Kitromilides (eds.), *Small States in the Modern World: The Conditions of Survival,* The New Cyprus Association, Nicosia1979; Elisabeth Mann Borgese: *The Oceanic Circle: Governing the Seas as a Global Resource,* United Nations University Press, Tokyo 1998.

circumstances that give a comparative advantage to Maltese theologians to work out implications of the common heritage doctrine in such areas as the human genome or "intellectual property".[23]

It has been said that the most burning political issues confronting legislatures today are in the field of bio-ethics, such as cloning. The role of the Church in a secularized and pluralist world with regard to these issues has become unclear in most of the world. There is probably no other nation than ours left in the world in which the relationship between religious and political authorities can still be established according to concepts derived from biblical/traditional sources in harmony with rational thinking. It is increasingly recognized even by such masters of contemporary liberal thought such as Habermas[24] and Dahrendorf[25] that such deep and complex moral questions as research involving stem cells are not probably best settled by majority voting, nor even by reference to scientists (upholders of blatantly immoral views have always been able to find some scientist or other to back them). Without removing the ultimate responsibility for legislation from properly constituted political authorities, democracy requires that particular respect be paid to the views of those who are generally accepted by the people as repositories of wisdom.

The Church can exercise its proper role in a secular, pluralist, democratic society essentially by having its "expertise in what it is to be human" recognized even by those who do not acknowledge that it has received any mission as interpreter of Divine Law. It is on this ground that both the Magisterium and theologians will be listened to even when propounding minority views. The responsibility of all theologians to deal with those matters with real knowledge of natural realities as well as of the Word of God is great, but there are certain places where the intersection of universal phenomena and local singularities place theologians in a position of comparative advantage in dealing with these issues.

23. The concept of the common heritage of mankind gave rise subsequently to the development of derived concepts such as that of "common concern of humankind" (applied to climate change) and "global public goods" put forward by United Nations Development Programme in 1991. For a discussion of this concept cfr: Jean-Jacques Gabas et al: *Biens Publics a' l'Echelle Mondiale,* Colophon Editions, 2001.
24. Jurgen Habermas: *The Future of Human Nature*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK 2003.
25. Ralf Dahrendolf: *Dopo la Democrazia*, Laterza, Roma 2001.

Once again these bio-ethical issues constitute the terrain on which it is perhaps least difficult for Jews, Christians and Muslims to find common ground, sometimes in confrontation with the rest of the world that succumbs only too easily to prevailing winds of relativism and liberalism. On this terrain, the Maltese theologian has once more a triple advantage. Not only was Malta the nation within which the concept of the "common heritage of humankind" was developed in its applicability to ocean space in international law, and not only is Malta one of the few if not the only member state of the United Nations where there still is consensus on the central issues of bio-ethics, but Malta still has a voice that rings with credibility in the post-colonial world, and particularly in the Arab and Muslim universe.

If Christian theologians have something to say in the global debate about bio-ethics, it is important that they say it in a way that enables the believers belonging to the other branches of monotheism, who therefore share a certain idea of the dignity of the human person derived from the status of interlocutor with God Himself, to concur. There can hardly be other theologians than the Maltese who have been so singularly blessed both by nature (the location of their birthplace) and by grace (the early coming of St. Paul to our shores) for this task. Surely it is incumbent upon us to provide leadership in the efforts that are difficult to accomplish both conceptually and thereafter politically to achieve a common Mediterranean approach to the issues of social justice in the knowledge economy of the electronic age.

III

ANALOGUE AND DIGITAL

Another important effect of the electronic revolution is on the kind of language (implying a way of thought and indeed a way of life) that has become prevalent. Very schematically it can be said that a triple shift has occurred in dominant ways of thinking. First, there is a shift from the analogical to the digital. The analogical means that there is a resemblance between the sign and the signified, as in ideographic scripts, like the Egyptian or even the Chinese; the digital implies no such likeness but only operative convention, as in our alphabetic script. Digitalization is almost everywhere substituting analogicity in all kinds of discourse construction. I suppose that the widespread calling into question of the metaphysical discourse leading to the rational affirmation of the existence

of God based essentially on the assertion of the "analogy of being" is rooted in this more general rejection of analogous language in favour of digital.[26]

It has to be remembered that classical theories of truth including that in Wittgenstein's Tractatus were all based on the supposition that there was some sort of formal likeness between signs (propositions or smaller or larger units of meaning) and their reference (facts, the world, etc). Today most philosophers deem instances of such likeness to be incidental. For them the concept of truth arises only in dialogical context, and not out of any purely logical necessity. Truth implies that there is some kind of relationship between words and things, but the concept only arises as a necessity of interpersonal dialogue, that is, in a communicational context. Thirdly, in a pluralist society, it has come to be assumed that the ordinary force of utterances is not categoric but modal. Consequently it is not only strictly analogical discourse about God that has come to be rightly or wrongly rejected but also language that pretends to be scientific.

Instead the normal form of theology has been increasingly taken to be narrative ñ i.e. the telling of a story, or of stories (not necessarily fictional but possibly historical).[27] Theology deals with contextualized events, happening in space and time, although with significance possibly transcending them. Consequently the analysis of literary forms is very relevant to the theologian's task, for instance, studies such as those of Bakhtin on Dostoevsky are very illuminating. Bakhtin shows that often Dostoevsky writes a "novel" in the first person so that it reads like an autobiography, but even when he does not do this it seems, at least

---

26. Cfr from the School of Phenomenology on the Continent Jean Luc Marion, *Dieu sans l'Etre. God without being*: Translated by Thomas A. Carlson, Chicago Univ Press, Chicago 1991;Jean-Louis Chretien, *La Voix Nue: Phenomenologie de la Promesse*, Minuit, Paris1990 and from the Anglosaxon world, John Milbank: *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Blackwell, Oxford 1990.

27. Stanley Hauerwas & L. Gregory Jones, *Why Narrative?, Readings in Narrative Theology*, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, USA 1989. Stanley Hauerwas is better known for his contributions to the renewal of Christian Social Ethics, notably *The Peaceable Kingdom, A Primer in Christian Ethics*, University of Notre Dame, USA 1983 and *After Christendom*, Abingdon Press, Nashville 1991. The influence of Hauerwas has perhaps been only second to that of Alasdair Mcintyre, possibly because of a style that prefers to move in minor key, somewhat like the "weak thought" recommended by the Italian post-modernist philosopher, Ganni Vattino. Cfr: Claude Poln, "Stanley Hauerwas" in *Catholica* 99, (Paris 2008) 97-110.

sometimes, that the different characters are projections of different aspects or ways of seeing himself. More than the record of an inner dialogue, there is a polyphonic expression of the same 'subject'. Accordingly theologians today are attracted to regard the Bible and Revelation as a whole as a kind of polyphonic autobiography by God Himself.

Of course, the most traditional Christian doctrine of God represents Him as a plurality of Persons, the Trinity, which makes polyphonic autobiography a manifestly most apt genre for Him to express Himself in. This is only one obvious way in which the semiotics that have become dominant, thanks to the new media of communication, reverberate in theology. Another obvious application would be, in continuity with the exposition of the Church as communion more importantly than as hierarchy, since it is primarily a means of informing its members with the common life of the Trinity, to describe the relations between its members as those between the nodes of a network. This re-thinking of theology using the conceptual apparatus that has been made available because of the advent of cyberspace is another major challenge of our times to theologians.

Once again the understanding of Divine Revelation in the light of the communication theories that cyberspace has generated provides ground for a renewal of dialogue between the adherents of the religions of the Book. The theologians who have developed theology mainly as the analysis of narrative have made major use of the analysis of folktales by ethnographers and anthropolgists. The Mediterranean world has often been characterized as a civilization in which story telling is central.[28] In Homer, Odysseus is held to be even greater because of his ability to narrate his own adventures than because of his being the hero who lived through those adventures. Again the Maltese theologian who inherits this approach to meaningfulness that is not based on any belief in the naturally analogue nature of language and does not hold that the only form of truth is that of the sciences, but rather assumes that truth is communicational, dialogic and narrative, has a comparative advantage in that the context in which he operates makes him attentive to those semiotic modes of operation that are characteristic of a digitalised world in a particular local context.

---

28. Cfr: Peter Serracino Inglott: "The Mediterranean Story-Telling Sailor: Odysseus and Sinbad", in G. Dotoli (ed.), *Atti della Terza Assemblea Plenaria della Comunità delle Università Mediterranee*, Comunità delle Università Mediterranee, Bari 1989, 51-65.

There is no way in which a conclusion could be appropriately formulated for this somewhat picaresque talk. My only hope is that you can turn it into a conversation. My starting point was that anybody committing himself to any semblance of theological thinking in Malta today has to place himself at the interface between the global and the local. The global appears most impressively as cyberspace but the universal dwelling in cyberspace does not mean the annullment of the localized character of any human habitation. Any would-be theologian, from the decrepit to the budding at this time and this place finds himself situated at a cross-roads: on the one hand there is the part of the world where the owners and controllers of the instruments of digitalisation act like the "invisible hand" that Adam Smith believed ruled the world economy; on the other hand there is the other part of the world caught up in the inexorable process of digitalisation without even being allowed for the most part to understand what is hitting it.

A second dimension following in the wake of the technological is the process known as economic globalization with the Maltese theologian finding himself on the edge between the so-called developed and developing worlds, trying to figure out how the concept of the common heritage of humankind that came to be his own particular intellectual heritage can be applied in a world where knowledge has become the most important economic resource available to promote the justice that should be the evermore visible mark of the Kingdom to come.

A third dimension of this singular point of intersection between the global and the local makes the puzzled hero of my talk stutter in fumbling efforts to translate the language in which he believes God to have spoken to humankind into the strange semiotic systems that appear at times extremely wretched vehicles, at other times rich in imaginative potential and that alone flourish in cyberspace. Can it be that the Holy Spirit has given those born in our native place a special gift for undertaking this task?