

## ORALITY, LITERACY, AND GOD'S WORD IN THE WRITINGS OF WALTER ONG

The workshop was introduced by the reading of a letter from Professor Werner Kelber expressing his deep concern over his physical inability, because of illness, to complete his paper for presentation at the workshop and thus to contribute to his 20-year dialogue with Father Ong. Father Ong had agreed to get the workshop under way without responding to a presentation. On a full-sized screen, a brief introduction and a quotation from pages 190-91 of Ong's *The Presence of the Word* were shown by the moderator to the audience of some 50 workshop participants. Ong filled in with background for the discussion by reviewing the chief psychodynamics of oral cultures from chapter 3 of his *Orality and Literacy* and by adding further material from his 1985 Wolfson College lecture at Oxford University, "Writing is a Technology that Transforms Thought." He called attention to the identity of Plato's objections against writing expressed in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter* and objections urged today against the computer—and earlier against print: when print appeared the technologies of writing, of print, and of electronics all transmute the spoken word, which is always an interpersonal event, a happening, into a thing, interposing technological distance, physical and temporal, in the world of communication and thought. After perhaps some 350,000 years of primary orality (orality with no knowledge of writing at all), humanity has only some 6,000 years of experience with writing. For centuries after writing began, well through biblical times and later, writing cultures retained a strong residual orality.

Ong noted that deconstructionist hermeneutics has given virtually no attention to the orality out of which literacy grew or to the now extensive literature on orality-literacy contrasts. Uprooted from any connection with orality, direct or indirect, any text automatically deconstructs itself. Ong compared the Hebrew *dabar* (an orally grounded concept meaning both word and event), the Greek *mythos* (also an orally grounded concept referring basically to an utterance, a word, saying, story, etc.), and the Greek *logos* (a visually and tactilely grounded concept referring initially to selecting, gathering, spatial ordering, and only by extension to verbal discourse and thought).

Plato isolated *logos* from *mythos* and downplayed *mythos*. Persons in a primary oral culture (one with no knowledge of writing) are forced to think in mnemonic patterns—formulas, proverbs, etc. Oral persons can be consummately wise and brilliant, but they cannot achieve the more abstract ordering of thought made possible by the technology of literacy. In *The Oral and the Written Gospel* Kelber has shown how Mark's text had to be not simple repetition of Jesus' oral proclamation but an interpretation adapted to textuality. The spoken word is always alive, an occurrence in time, but evanescent; the written word always comes out of the

past and of itself has connections with death, although it also enjoys relative permanence.

Ong discussed several theological implications of orality-literacy-electronic contrasts: (1) Jesus did not write a text but proclaimed the gospel orally to ground it more existentially and durably in the personal human lifeworld. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14.6). (2) Authority has its limitations in its perfectly legitimate use of texts, for texts must be interpreted by a reader in order to be understood. (3) Interpretations themselves always remain open. Total verbal explicitness is impossible. The truth in words must always be gleaned ultimately not from words alone but also from their existential context—of which the community of the living church is an example.

The first question posed the problem of today's growing group of "illiterates." Ong questioned how much this group was growing. We are rightly concerned with literacy today because the need for literacy is desperately greater than even in the past. In many cultures today everyone needs to be able to read, for example, "directions for use," but textualized directions for use have been quite unknown until very recently.

How should TV be classified and evaluated? TV and radio and other recent media produce what Ong has called a "secondary orality." They involve sound, but can be produced only by literate cultures. Ong was asked if he had talked with Kelber about orality and proclamation. Proclamation, he noted, is of itself, voice. This led to several interventions on the relations of these issues and the recent loyalty oath. Oaths, too, like all discourse, must be interpreted. This does not mean that truth cannot be obtained in a text but that it can be realized only by text in a context. Several times Ong was asked the relevance of his position to questions posed by fundamentalism. He noted fundamentalism is commonly text-bound, convinced that a text freezes meaning, removes it from dialogue, whereas in fact a text only suspends dialogue. The dialogue is resumed when a reader comes along. Related to the text-bound mentality are the problems of *sola Scriptura* versus tradition in Protestant and Catholic circles and the need for interpretation earlier discussed.

How does Lonergan's comparison between the commonsense and the scientific mentalities relate to Ong's position? Ong believed they were much the same, but disclaimed being an expert on Lonergan's thought.

A final question was whether it was possible that Jesus did not state orally in so many words, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Ong was sure that beyond the biblical text there was certainly something Jesus said on which this key text is based, for this is what the church has always remembered as a central message of his proclamation. On this note, the workshop happily ended.

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