COMMUNICATION THEOLOGY

Topic: Media Practice and Religious Imagination
Convener: Frances Forde Plude, Notre Dame College, Cleveland
Moderator: Bernard R. Bonnot, Unda-USA and Odyssey Network
Presenter: Kathryn E. Tanner, University of Chicago
Respondents: Mary Hess, Boston College

This continuing group contends that new communication technologies provide a new interactive model for social processes of communication and that this new model has significant implications for how the nature and tasks of the church are conceived, including theology. Kathryn Tanner examined the interactive model and its implications in terms of "Cultural Contest and Theological Communication."

Drawing on British cultural studies, Tanner explored three specific implications of the interactive communications model: (1) the church becomes a community of argument over fundamental Christian beliefs and values; (2) contest over the meaning of terms significant to the wider society is constitutive of communication processes that form the church; and (3) God communicates Godself in and through the cultural contests identified in (1) and (2). All this is modeled in Christ.

British cultural studies contend that messages are constructed through contests or negotiations between contending forces, namely sender and receiver(s). This involves a certain "competition," such as one finds for example in U.S. political processes. There public debate and policy fights lash specific proposals to broadly shared civic values. Through that process political coalitions are fashioned that hold the society together and move it forward.

This same dynamic is operative in the church. It functions as a community of argument over fundamental Christian beliefs and values. Every member can somehow participate in the argumentation, whatever the particular structure of their church. Power differences abound in this model. The elites (e.g., clergy, theologians) generally hold the power to create messages for popular consumption, but the recipients of those messages (laity, nontheologians) have the ability to refashion those messages, adapting them to their own non-elite interests. The new communication technologies may undercut this control of the elites since they empower many different levels of society and church to generate messages that reach a large public. Still the dynamics of cultural contest will hold. For example, today anyone can generate a website, but visitors to said site are totally free to use it as they wish.

Discussion confirmed Tanner's thesis. One participant noted that the power to disregard has always been present in the church. Another participant observed that meaningful homilies are the fruit of negotiation between homilist and congregation. The group began negotiating the meaning of Tanner's remarks with her.

In a second section, Tanner elaborated on the way the church's efforts to communicate to the wider world involve cultural contests and how through that very engagement meaning is constructed both within the church and in society. The church does not bring to society a meaning it has either received as such from God

or completely worked out in isolation from the society, communicating said message in a kind of second moment. Rather the church arrives at its sacred meanings only through interaction with the society with which it wants to share its wisdom. Eucharist is an example. The church best arrives at its meaning by exploring with the society the significance of table fellowship generally in the society. Thus Christian beliefs, values, and practices emerge from tension-filled interaction with the beliefs, values, and practices of the larger society.

Tanner concluded with the thesis that God communicates with us through this very process. God does not so much tell us something that we are then to tell others, but challenges our beliefs, values, and practices, wrestling with us until they are transformed by grace. God is present to us in this very process of meaning making and cultural transformation. The incarnation can be viewed as this kind of contest between the Jewish-Greco-Roman humanity of Jesus and the Word that assumed it, transforming that culturally shaped humanity into the supreme manifestation of God's love in the world. This process continues endlessly in the efforts of the church to transform the wider world.

Mary Hess responded to Tanner from the perspective of religious education, applauding the cultural studies approach to the reality of communications. She finds it a great improvement over the sender-message-receiver model. It is more adequately descriptive of what in fact happens. She especially appreciated Tanner's look at the power relationships between *elites* and *non-elites*, finding them quite pertinent to the theological contestations going on at the grassroots level among Catholics.

Picking up on Tanner's notion of God revealing Godself in and through our arguments, Hess challenged theologians to explain how God is revealing Godself in and through our society's engagement with commercial mass-mediated popular culture. Today's religious media are irrelevant to many while contemporary commercial pop culture provides them with religious meaning. Theologians need to help us understand what is going on, what God is revealing. Hess pointed to such films as *The Matrix*, *Galaxy Quest*, and *American Beauty* as relevant examples.

Hess further proposed that much public reasoning is taking place in and through digitally produced media today rather than in traditional institutions of education and research. Mass-mediated popular culture is one of the primary places where people are making meaning. Theologians and magisterium need to engage their imaginations and get involved in the cultural contests raging around them in new and responsible ways.

Joan Mueller inquired "Who is the elite?" in this context. John Farelly noted that our heritage is faith and reason, but faith and culture are much richer and need to be addressed. If, as Hess argues, we have moved from philosophical argumentation to "sympathetic identification" (Tom Boomershine) as the prevailing way of persuasion, then theologians must develop and express their thought in a fresh way. One participant proposed that theologians need to see themselves in a missionary role to the culture, venturing forth from the academy.

The Communication Theology Continuing Group will look at the communi-
cation of theological content through cultural forms in the coming years. The 2001
focus will be on music.

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