A RESPONSE TO DAVID C. ROBINSON

INTRODUCTION

David, there are several assumptions that are obvious perhaps, but remain unarticulated, in the introductory section of your paper that I would like to lift up for discussion. One is that telecommunications technology and the electronic media that we use to communicate with each other, acquire needed information, teach and learn—only one of which is the personal computer—has created vast information networks and indeed, a whole new cultural reality called "cyberculture."[1] This reality is not just *a* "sign of the times" that needs to be "read," but has become *the very world* in which we are reading, interpreting, and discerning signs of the times. This shift has great import for theology and theologians because—to point out another assumption of your presentation—theology is but one, complex information processing modality among thousands, and thus is a part of a process of system interdependency. I think I know what you mean here, but perhaps an example would be helpful.

Todd Gitlin, in *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* tells this little parable:

> A customs officer observes a truck pulling up at the border. Suspicious, he orders the driver out and searches the vehicle. He pulls off panels, bumpers, and wheel cases but finds not a single scrap of contraband, whereupon, still suspicious but at a loss to know where else to search, he waves the driver through. The next week, the same driver arrives. Again the official searches, and again finds nothing illicit. Over the years, the official tries full-body searches, X rays, and sonar, anything he can think of, and each week the same man drives up, but no mysterious cargo ever appears, and each time, reluctantly, the customs man waves the driver on.
> Finally, after many years the officer is about to retire. The driver pulls up. "I know you're a smuggler," the customs officer says. Don't bother denying it. But damned if I can figure out what you've been smuggling all these years. I'm leaving now. I swear to you I can do you no harm. Won't you please tell me what you've been smuggling?"
> "Trucks," the driver says.[2]

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[1]Pierre Lévy has explored the impact of digital technology on global society, especially in relationship to knowledge and social exclusion, in his *Cyberculture*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[2]Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms*

Gitlin's point is that the media have been "smuggling" the habit of living with the media. As he says,

> for all the talk . . . the main truth about the media slips through our fingers. Critics and commentators look for contraband but miss the truck—the immensity of the experience of media, the sheer quantity of attention paid, the devotions and rituals that absorb our time and resources. The obvious but hard-to-grasp truth is that living with the media is today one of the main things Americans and many other human beings do.[3]

Let me give my own example, drawn from what it's been like this year as a theologian living at the epicenter of the current crisis over clerical sexual abuse in Boston.

At first, when the crisis began, I used to make sure that I read at least news-papers (the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*) before leaving for school. Now I make sure I have National Public Radio on my clock radio. "Good Morning America" is muted on the TV while I am gathering things up getting ready to leave. My home computer is powered up and I eat breakfast in front of it, checking my New York Times "tracker" to see if there are any articles there, which I then print up and put in my shopping bag of clippings that might prove relevant for the calls from reporters which I will find on my voicemail when I get to the office. But, on second thought, after checking my Palm Pilot to review the day's appointments, I realize that I better check my voicemail from the car, which I do using my cell phone (wearing a headset, of course!), all the while listening to "Morning Edition," on the way to the university. When I get there, I find several crises that need immediate attention, have a class to prepare, teach, and still further decisions to make about how I will participate in this whole system of communications. The editor of the BC Alumni magazine wants a short piece on the crisis from me. A call comes from Los Angeles. Will I be able to do an interview on a noontime radio show? The publicist from a local PBS newsmagazine calls. Can I can make a 4:00 p.m. taping? Fortunately, I can't. We have a department meeting. But she doesn't give up and I get another call the next day.

Now, it is important to point out that all of this is also dependent upon whether there is a *power outage* that prevents my access to any of these electronic information media; whether the server is "down," whether I'm in a "bad patch" so my cell phone "breaks up," and, of course, whether I *have* the time or will *make* the time to utilize these systems. So, I must say, reflecting upon the complex world of information systems that make up my daily world, made me appreciate more than ever what Michael Himes was saying Thursday

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Our Lives (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2001) 3-4.
[3]Gitlin, 5.

night regarding *time*—it is not just the envelope in which we live, but is the center of our finite being.

You will recall that Michael Himes [first plenary session] gave that wonderful example drawn from his own personal history "in time" in order to remind us that Jesus' human existence, too, is the result of a series of such chance human meetings, and that this is what is involved in speaking of the Incarnation as God entering time and history. I wonder if perhaps there is a connection here in what you are saying about the nonlinear and associative networks that rely on "data links" rather than "discipline-specific" conceptual connections?

You also seem to be telling us that "theological reflection" involves more than theology, something with which I think most of us in this room would agree. Therefore, according to your definition, theology is "but one, complex information system processing modality among thousands . . . a part of a process of system interdependency. Perhaps it is the "process of system interdependency" where one locates the activity of "reading the signs of the times"? I would want to add, however, that there is more to theological reflection than simply attending to *present* signs. As a theologian, I also access *the past* [the tradition] in order to discern whether what is happening now is in continuity with it, or stands as an interruption. Theologians are called upon to use their imaginations, drawing upon symbols that speak to the community or culture in which one is located. This is necessary in order to move to a constructive moment, to redefine, or express in new language (by which I mean more than words) a response to the creative action of God's Spirit working in these very "signs" which are being "read."

David, your paper tells us that diverse fields are pointing to the interdependence of elements within systems, no matter what the difference of scale. These interdependencies are integral to the *acquisition, assimilation* and *application* of information. Here I would be helped by some concrete applications, by some examples of how this would actually work in theology. Let me try this one.

I recently gave a continuing education workshop to pastoral ministers on "Women Leaders in the Early Church." The presentation involved using various scripture texts, but also images from art which illustrated, for example, how the character of Mary Magdalen has been conflated from a number of Gospel passages (i.e., the sinner woman who anoints Jesus, Mary of Bethany, the woman caught in adultery, Mary Magdalen as the first witness to the resurrected Jesus, etc.). I used PowerPoint to show the images and present students with examples of the renewed attention that both scholars and activists are paying to the figure of Mary Magdalen. For example, I pointed out how the process of canon formation excluded texts from the New Testament that were labeled "gnostic" (that is, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Phillip, the Sophia of Jesus Christ) but that feminist biblical scholarship is currently investigating these texts for the light they shed on the figure of Mary Magdalen as well as the whole issue of women's leadership in the early Christian community.

Secondly, we reviewed the efforts of Christian women (mainly Catholic) who are proposing alternative liturgies that can be held on July 22, the feast day of Mary Magdalen, as a way of recalling women's leadership in the past and the need for new models in the present. My own *acquisition* of information here involved not only "texted artifacts," but use of the web (where I found most of the digital art images, as well as the website for FutureChurch and its Mary Magdalen liturgy). The *assimilation* process involved my recalling previous studies in ecumenical dialogues concerning the role of Peter in the New Testament that was done some years ago and how useful it became for reaching agreement between Roman Catholics and Lutherans on the notion of a "Petrine function" present in the New Testament that could perhaps provide eventual ecumenical consensus on the notion of papal primacy.[4] I began to think, where might our discussions concerning women's leadership in the church go if we could propose a "Magdalen function" or "Magdalen principle" that could serve as a scriptural basis for women's leadership in the church? One that could be institutionalized as an office? This would certainly be, to use your framework, a new *application*—a new "iconic frame." I am sure that there would be plenty of discussion and debate concerning whether my proposal was based upon "acceptable evidence," and whether I, as a systematic/constructive theologian, have a right to work with the "privileged information" that belongs to another field of inquiry. But this is how I am understanding what you are saying.

APOLOGETICS

Theology as a discipline that originated from an experience of living faith assimilated itself to a variety of empirical disciplines, which has resulted in clinical detachment outside the grounding experience of the communities which gave birth to these theologies. Using your metaphor of the computer, where the disciplines of theology are the hard drive memory, the method is the software code and the products are the media connection, you emphasize the "media connection" as the place where the theology has become the most constrained. You say that theological communication (by which, I presume you mean "the media connection") has "moved from a catechetical frame to an ecclesial one," then from a philosophical/scholastic perspective to one modeled on the social sciences. You propose that the "geometric expansion of our data sets" combined with "ever more intricate methodological procedures" will yield a new set of media possibilities that will force us to redefine our method and disciplines. Could you be more concrete and specific here?

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[4]See Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, and John Reumann, eds., *Peter in the New Testament: A collaborative assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1973).

Again, just to try out an example that comes from my own experience, I recently visited the John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, D.C. I admit, that I did so with a certain amount of initial skepticism. I expected something fairly doctrinaire and apologetic, perhaps based entirely on the Catechism of the Catholic Church. I was pleasantly surprised, however, to see a well-researched, fairly presented, and truly interactive introduction to Catholicism and Catholic culture. The organizing principle for the Center is the social encyclicals of the pope. The variety of "media connections," however, makes one's visit a "two-way street." For example, in visiting the room devoted to "hope," one can make a video tape or type into a computer keyboard one's hopes for the future of the church. These then run continuously on a screen visible to any visitor to the room and is joined to others who had previously left messages. The result is a very interesting *sensus fidelium* that certainly records the pluralism that exists in the Catholic church today. Of course, I didn't return the next day to see if my message (which concerned the future of women's leadership in the church) was still there. But it did remain the whole time of my two and one-half hour visit.

THE GUTENBERG HOLOGRAM

David, you describe the pattern of educational, scholarly and theoretical writing following a certain pattern: 1) premise; 2) supporting information; 3) conclusion. This is a linear method that helps readers track a logical pattern of thought. But this is only one way the human brain functions. The verbal-cognitive operations that are so central to logic, language and linear rationality are part of a fascinatingly complex set of processes that also include memory, imagination, emotion etc. Thus, you see a different hologram coming into prominence. One can see this in comparing the difference between "the book" or, as you say, "texted artifact" with the worldwide web, where the pattern is not linear but associative. Through the use of hyperlinks, web-based information does not unfold in A-Z progression, but employs the neural patterns associated with narrative symbol, visual imagery, aural impressions, a variety of information transmitters.

How the biology of the human brain contributes to the way we do theology is something that is only beginning to be investigated by theologians. The connections between neuroscience and theology are fascinating subjects that need much more theological reflection, particularly from those of us engaged in theological anthropology and spirituality. I highly recommend reading Mark Salzman's *Lying Awake*, a novel that raises very interesting issues with regard to religious experience and neuroscience.[5] I also recommend delving into the work that is being done in artificial intelligence. Noreen Herzfeld's book, *In Our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit,* is an excellent example of theological engagement with the field of A. I. Her work is also important for

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[5]Mark Salzman, *Lying Awake* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

reflecting on the ethics of computer technology, particularly as it relates to the motivations for creating machines that attempt to replicate an "other" in our own image.[6]

EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND COGNITIVE PARADIGMS

You point out that learning systems rest upon epistemological foundations and that our definitions of intelligence come from a limited set of functions in the cerebral cortex which are quantitative and sequential, whereas the associative and imagistic aspects of learning are treated as secondary and that the models we have relied upon in teaching and doing theology are in a "positive feedback loop" that reinforces the status quo. I find that my students have taught me a lot about just such an expanded notion of intelligence that you are proposing. Associative and imagistic qualities are very important to them and this way of "thinking" seems to cut across traditional barriers of race and class, and perhaps even cultures. I do wonder, however, if it cuts across gender? I do not really know too many young women or girls who are addicted to computer games as many boys are. A few years ago Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite had some very interesting things to say about what she called the "*Ur*-narrative" of technology, which tends to separate the mind from the body.[7]

Thistlethwaite argues that virtual reality allows one to "experience" the world without a human body and permits the high degree of abstraction necessary to separate good from evil. In examining her teenage sons' Nintendo games, she sees uncovers a gnostic strain, where the fight between good and evil is absolutized and projected onto a cosmic screen as two gods "fight it out." Her thesis is that the virtual reality craze that appears to dominate the consciousness of many young Americans, with its extreme polarization of good and evil, is "on a trajectory with some of the body-cheapening theodicies of Christianity." Feminist and womanist theologians have drawn our attention to the negative consequences that dualistic thinking has for the flourishing of the full humanity of women. Thus, I can't help but ask if this is why video games seem to be less appealing to those groups whose *embodied* experience has been negated or neglected in the Christian theological tradition.[8] Many of us "think" with pens,

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[6]Noreen L. Herzfeld, *In Our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002). Herzfeld is associate professor of Computer Science at St. Johns University, Collegeville, Minnesota. She also holds a doctorate in theology.

[7]Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Virtual Reality Christianity," *Theology Today* 52 (1995): 225-35.

[8]See, e.g., Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The 'Loves' and 'Troubles' of African-American Women's Bodies," in Emily M. Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1993) 232-49; Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman, eds., *Race in Cyberspace*

but most of our students "think" with computers. What I find missing in your presentation of this particular vignette, however, is a critical awareness that these new paradigms may not be any more "neutral" than any other human cultural creations.

LINEAR AND NONLINEAR SYSTEMS

Just a brief question to this vignette: If talking about the universe involves a complex of probabilities and contingencies, incapable of reduction to deterministic chains of causes and effects, is this simply a new way to recognize the presence of *mystery*?

METHODS OF CYBERTHEOLOGY

The transformation of learning is aided by a communications tool, the computer. As you rightly point out, we are only beginning to explore the potential that this human creation has for theology. Although I express a certain wariness about virtual reality, it would indeed be wonderful to be able to use that technology to take our students to sixteenth-century Wittenberg, for example, and watch Martin Luther nail his ninety-five theses to the cathedral door, and then simply by opening a "virtual door," walk into a meeting of "Voices of the Faithful" in a Boston parish in 2002!

But, I return again to the question I raised at the very beginning. What about the time that all of this takes? I recall Lonergan's insight into the growing complexity of theology in the twentieth century and his emphasis on developing "functional specialties" I'm not yet able to see how getting beyond "the Gutenberg hologram" will liberate theology from that endeavor. And what about the inevitable glitches? Is this "original sin" of the digital variety? And what about evil in general? These same systems can control and manipulate. They are capable of setting up a vision of reality that can perpetuate inequality, exclusion and invisibility. In short, telecommunications technology and multimedia possibilities, as fascinating as they are, and as potentially useful they may be for teaching and academic discourse, also contain the possibility of being in direct opposition to the vision of the reign of God that is central to Christianity. For me, this must be the ultimate, critical gauge that I would want to use in deciding whether the "new cosmos of technologies" are actually worth "the gamble a lifetime."

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(New York: Routledge, 2000).