

# The Bible and Media Theory

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Everyone in media studies reveres Marshall McLuhan, whose coinage “the medium is the message” is a foundational axiom of the field. Most of his followers in that thoroughly secular discipline, however, probably don’t know that McLuhan was a devout Catholic.

Another giant in Media Studies, French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul, was a passionate Christian. Professors and college students all over the world read *The Technological Society* (1964) and *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (1965), but they largely ignore works such as *The Presence of the Kingdom* (1948), which explained the role of God’s Word and the Holy Spirit in shaping human history.

And still another major theorist, Neil Postman, though identified as a secular Jew, critiqued modern media by explicitly applying biblical conceptions to it. His canonical studies *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1983) and *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (1992) presume an ideal community that is wholly Judeo-Christian in its conception.

If reminded of the theological commitments of these heroes, my colleagues would most likely be mildly surprised. But they wouldn’t entertain the idea that faith and the ancient books of the Bible have much to say about contemporary media. McLuhan, Ellul, and Postman, though, thought differently.

McLuhan came to the faith after reading Chesterton's *What's Wrong with the World*. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* drew him into the mystery of prayer. In *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* (2010), he recalls:

I had no religious belief at the time I began to study Catholicism. I was brought up in the Baptist, Methodist and Anglican churches. We went to all of them. But I didn't believe anything. I did set to find out, and literally to research the matter, and I discovered fairly soon that a thing has to be tested on its terms. You can't test anything in science or in any part of the world except on its own terms or you will get the wrong answers.

The church has a very basic requirement or set of terms, namely that you get down on your knees and ask for the truth... I prayed to God the Father for two or three years, simply saying "show me." I didn't want proof of anything. I didn't know what I was going to be shown because I didn't believe in anything.

I was shown very suddenly. It didn't happen in any expected way. It came instantly as immediate evidence, and without any question of its being a divine intervention. There was no trauma or personal need. I never had any need for religion, any personal or emotional crisis. I simply wanted to know what was true and I was told... Wham! I became a Catholic the next day.

McLuhan's media ideas were influenced by this newfound relationship with Jesus Christ. McLuhan understood that Jesus Christ was the true medium, stating in *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, "In Jesus Christ, there is no distance or separation between the medium and the message: it is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same."

This understanding of the word and language influenced his initial doctoral dissertation completed at Trinity College, Cambridge. *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time* (1943), as it was called, took the Logos as a basis for communication theory. First, in the creation account, God *spoke* the world into being. Second, according to the Gospel of John in the New Testament, the Word existed in the beginning with God and was God.

McLuhan's faith continued to frame the questions he asked. He wanted to know how human beings changed when their information environments changed. He specifically analyzed how the human sensorium changed in relation to our communication environment. In an oral culture, he believed the ear was the dominant sense. In a print-oriented culture, he believed the eye was dominant. And, in our electronic environment, he thought the entire nervous system was preeminent. McLuhan wanted to know what was happening to humanity in the electronic era. He wanted to know about the role of the church in a technological society. McLuhan believed that we should think not merely with

our heads, but also with our hearts. He believed that faith is an organ of perception; that we need to emphasize not only concepts, but also percepts. Faith enables a person to perceive God at work in the world. Faith enables us to perceive the supernatural in the natural environment. Faith, as an organ of perception, opens a window to understanding the greater universe.

Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) was a French philosopher, sociologist, lay theologian, and professor at the University of Bordeaux. He was another major founder of media studies. Ellul wrote over fifty books and over a thousand articles. Many of his writings are still being translated. Ellul's book *Propaganda* (1965) has been read in media studies and communication programs throughout the world. Also, Ellul's *The Technological Society* (1964) provided a framework for understanding the consuming role of technology in our world. His book *The Humiliation of the Word* (1985) explains Ellul's commitment to the Logos as a prerequisite for rationality and his fear that technologized-images are reducing the significance of the word.

Jacques Ellul, like McLuhan, likewise had a conversion experience that changed the way he studied media and technology. In *Perspectives on our Age* (1981), Ellul explained:

In the Bible, I was led to discover an entire world that was very new to me because I was not accustomed to religious discourse, Christian discourse. A new world when I compared it with the realities of life and of my life and experience. I was converted—not by someone, nor can I say I converted myself. It is a very personal story, but I will say that it was a very brutal and very sudden conversion. I became a Christian and I was obliged to profess myself a Christian in 1932.

In an essay entitled "How I Discovered Hope," Ellul stated:

Reading the eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans was a watershed in my life... Never before had a text so suddenly transformed itself into Absolute Truth, truth beyond debate, truth like a blinding light... It became the place where I simultaneously encountered the Absolute and Eternity.

Ellul viewed every book he wrote as just one chapter in his larger book. He would write a book from a sociological perspective and then a counterpoint book from a biblical perspective. Examples are *The Political Illusion* (1967) and then *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (1972); *The Technological Society* (1964) and then *The Meaning of the City* (1970). In his words, "I confront theological knowledge and sociological analysis without trying to come to any artificial or philosophical synthesis; instead, I try to place the two face-to-face, in order to shed some light on what is real socially and real spiritually."

Ellul's belief in the transcendent provided an answer to his sociological critique. Ellul understood that the technological society would lead to alienation, anonymity, and despair. He wrote, in response, of the need for an eternal hope—a hope that can ultimately come from a relationship with the One who has designed us. Ellul also understood that we are immersed in the technological system and we need an outside vantage point, and a stable position from which to critique the system. As he states,

“...the person of this age no longer has a fixed, sane, and reliable point of reference whereby to direct his activity and his life, whereby to arrive at some judgment of what he himself is doing and what is being done around him. He no longer has a clear and certain criterion for distinguishing the good from the bad. All that is being offered him is a compass gone berserk and misplaced lights in a fog.”

Ellul believed that Jesus Christ would allow us to step outside of the system and see life from an entirely different point of view.

Ellul also believed that our current reality can be changed, and that Jesus Christ enables transformation. As he explains in *Perspectives on our Age*, “We must be quite clear that what we believe is that God's promise, received in faith, borne by us, truly changes the conditions in which we live and act. In other words, the presence of faith in Jesus Christ alters reality.”

Ellul's Christo-centric response to our current technological environment, provides hope for the hopeless, insight and creativity for our lives, and revolutionary change for society. Most analysis of the media and technology provides no solution, no answer to the world in which we live. Ellul was one of the very few who had the courage and the insight to speak the word of Truth.

Neil Postman, too, was a great defender of the Word. He critiqued contemporary media precisely on the grounds of how it destroyed authentic community, creativity, reality, and delayed gratification. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) Neil Postman singled out his inspiration:

In studying the Bible as a young man, I found intimations of the idea that forms of media favor particular kinds of content and therefore are capable of taking command of a culture. I refer specifically to the Decalogue, the Second Commandment of which prohibits the Israelites from making concrete images of anything. ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water beneath the earth.’ I wondered then, as so many others have, as to why the God of these people would have included instructions on how they were to symbolize, or not symbolize, their experience. It is a strange injunction to include as part of an ethical system *unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture.*

As Postman critiqued culture, his basis and standard of evaluation derived from biblical foundations. The Judeo-Christian faith is based on reason, rationality, logic, and narrative. The printing press which helped to get the Bible into the hands of everyday citizens, supported the development of literacy, rationality, reflection, continuity of thought, character development, and truth. As Postman observed television he saw how it presented an image worldview—a worldview based on technologized images rather than words. It fostered emotional thinking rather than rational and logical thinking. Television also gave us a fragmented view of the world. Postman referred to television news as the “now this” medium. A person could be watching a serious news story and then be interrupted by a television commercial. Postman claimed that news, politics, education, and religion were influenced by television’s entrainment values. Postman’s deep respect for the Logos and his understanding of what makes us human—our ability to use language—informed his cultural critique.

In our contemporary media environment—an environment of emotion instead of logic, an environment of cruelty instead of civility, an environment dominated by power instead of truth, media studies would become a much richer and relevant discipline if it remembered the biblical inspiration of its founders. McLuhan, Ellul, and Postman thoroughly understood the relevance of the Logos for understanding our world today. Possibly more than ever before, we need to recover the transcendent word for our analytical practices.