

Re-engaging Avery Dulles' theology of revelation in the context of using internet-mediated communication in religious education

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Internet-mediated communication has become commonplace in both professional and everyday life. The internet, first a new tool to serve our communication has now begun to reshape how we communicate as well. Words like email, facebook, twitter, blogging, googling, logging on, uploading and downloading, unknown to us a few years ago have now found a permanent place in our vocabulary. As it can be expected, the new possibilities the internet offers in terms of social communication has caught the attention of our faith communities as well. From websites to blogs to a Second Life virtual presence, churches have perceived these possibilities and are experimenting to integrate them in a variety of ways into the everyday life of the community.

It is undeniable that the internet offers communities of faith the possibility to reach unprecedented numbers of people with vast amounts of information. As an example, on average 15, 000 people per day visit the Vatican website¹, which contains tens of thousands of articles, resources, documents and works of art. This potential to reach people with so much information is especially salient for

¹ <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/vatican.va>

theorists and practitioners like ourselves concerned with religious education, Christian formation, evangelization, catechesis and the like. It is our obligation to take seriously this new and exponentially changing development in social communication for what it means for our ministries of sharing and transmitting the content of our faith. As Pope Paul VI in the 1975 ecclesial document *Evangelii Nuntiandi* puts it: “the Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect”(45.)

The internet as a medium for transmitting the faith is therefore worth a closer look, both because of its often-bedazzling new innovations in social communication as well as from the impetus in our churches to utilize the best ways of reaching people for the sharing of our faith. These two motivating factors, namely the fact that we *can* communicate in new ways, and our evangelizing mission that we *should*, however are still insufficient in making a thorough case for using the internet as a means of social communication for religious education. It is my contention that the use of the internet in religious education merits both a theological analysis and subsequent pastoral foresight and sensitivity. While both of these are important, the focus of this essay is the former. In setting forth such a theological analysis, I am offering to define and connect the theological foundations for the Church’s evangelizing mission to share the faith with the nature of the internet as a communicative medium. In

order to delve into this connection, I find Avery Dulles' theology of revelation as symbolic communication to be invaluable.

Avery Dulles argued that revelation was symbolic communication in that both revelation and symbolic communication have a similar fourfold structure as they unfold in the context of the community. He designated the key moments in this fourfold structure as participation, transformation, influence on action and behavior, and opening to new awareness. Both symbol and revelation draw one in, leaves one transformed as is evidenced by one's behavior and actions, and opens one to new awareness, the horizon of which is always broader than one's particular understanding. Revelation as symbolic communication, understood in this fourfold way, also underscores the importance of revelatory symbols which, in the context of the ecclesial community, are essential for conveying meaning and transmitting the content of the faith.

Re-engaging Dulles' theology of revelation as symbolic communication, where revelatory symbols engage the community in this fourfold way of participation, transformation, new commitment and behavior, and new understandings opens a profound way to dialogue with the internet, itself entirely a symbolic medium. Can we claim then, that because of this commonality of symbol, that the internet therefore is an appropriate medium for the transmission of revelation in the context of religious education? This is the guiding question of the present paper.

This essay first constructs the theological foundation for pursuing this question, by revisiting Avery Dulles' theology of revelation as symbolic communication, and his fourfold schema of participation, transformation, new behavior and commitments, and new awareness and understanding. Bringing the internet into the discussion, this essay next investigates how the category of symbolic communication fits with the internet as the specific communicative medium. Finally, this essay explores specific points of convergence and divergence between Dulles' fourfold schema and internet-mediated communication.

Avery Dulles' Theology of Revelation as Symbolic Communication

Symbol, participation, community: these are the major pillars on which Avery Dulles constructs his theology of revelation as symbolic communication. In order to better understand Dulles' theology of revelation, it is worthwhile to briefly survey the sources and emphases of these foundational elements to his thought.

The first pillar and basic premise of Dulles' theology of revelation is that revelation as divine self-communication is always mediated through symbols, or "externally perceived signs that works mysteriously on the human consciousness so as to suggest more than it can clearly describe or define." (*Models of Revelation*, 131) Dulles relies on Karl Rahner's ontology of symbolism, where

“all beings are by their nature symbolic because they necessarily express themselves in order to attain their own nature.” (Rahner 224) For Rahner, being is multifaceted, and comes to partial expression in particular ways and contexts. For this reason, these particular expressions are symbolic of the larger and more varied totality of the being’s full essence. Symbolic ontology therefore is an ontology that assumes that there is more than meets the eye: it is an ontology that is evocative and makes room for mystery. Symbolic ontology is especially relevant for Dulles because it suggests a sense of dynamism over completion: a symbolic being always offers and suggests more. This allows for growth and transformation, as noted later in this essay.

In addition to relying on Rahner’s symbolic ontology, Dulles also uses Michael Polanyi’s understanding of symbolic meaning-making, especially Polanyi’s notion of participatory engagement with a symbol. As Polanyi describes it, a sign, such as an arrow, a pointing finger, or even words of a text, holds no inherent interest for us, and focuses our attention on some locus of meaning other than itself, all the while keeping us as observer, external and removed. Symbol, on the other hand, is intrinsically interesting in that it integrates and embodies for us our diffuse memories and meanings which we bring to the focal point. (Polanyi 72-73) In such a way, the symbol is personally engaging in that “in surrendering ourselves, we as selves are picked up into the meaning of the symbol.” (Polanyi 73) Polanyi offers the flag as an example to illustrate this. The flag as symbol

evokes in us and embodies for us our varied memories and meanings we hold about the nation all into one focal object. It is these meanings and memories that are more intrinsically interesting for us rather than the colored textile itself, yet the colored textile as symbol draws us in in such a way as to evoke these meanings. Unlike our mere observation of the sign, we bring ourselves and our meanings to the symbol. In entering into it, or “surrendering to it”, we also open ourselves up to gain new meanings and understandings as well (73). This notion of personal engagement with the symbol gets picked up in Dulles’ theology of revelation in his emphasis on participatory knowledge.

Thus far for Dulles, Rahner’s notion of being, expressed as a particular instance of a greater whole, along with Polanyi’s understanding of symbolism and personal engagement in meaning-making are two of the three major pillars of the theology of revelation as symbolic communication, and both of these pillar focus especially on symbol and symbolic meaning-making. The third pillar deals more with the communicative aspect of revelation, and for this Dulles draws on George Lindbeck’ approach to religious doctrine. Lindbeck describes three approaches to religious doctrine: cognitive, experiential-expressive and cultural-linguistic, lending favor to the third of these in his thought. (Lindbeck 30). In the cultural linguistic approach to religious doctrine, “religions are seen as comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and

world.” (Lindbeck 32) In other words, according to this approach, religion is a cultural-linguistic framework by which one makes sense of life in the world. As one exists in the cultural and linguistic framework of a particular religious tradition, one inevitably picks up on the ways through which to understand the world; the world-views of the community become the lens through which one sees the world as well. For this reason, the role of the ecclesial community is paramount for providing an immersive context in which one becomes not only familiar with the religion but immerses oneself in its world-view. In his own work on the theology of revelation, Dulles embraces Linbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach and renames it “ecclesial-transformative” so as to better emphasize the role of the faith community in this schema.

For Dulles, the role the faith community plays in the theology of revelation is central. For him, “the locus for understanding the self-communication of God, and its symbolic mediation, is the experience of the community of faith.” (Shecterle 18) As Dulles explains: “The deeper insights of revelatory knowledge are imparted, not in the first instance through propositional discourse, but through participation in the life and worship of the Church.” (*Craft of Theology*, 18) It is immersion in the life, language and culture of the faith community which best allows for a person’s meaning-making schemas to reflect those of a particular religious tradition. Propositional discourse, important in its

own right, does better to form a person's faith when it builds upon an *a priori* sense of life in the community.

From the additional perspective of revelation theology, salvation history holds a special place within the larger scope of revelatory modes of God's self-communication (nature, historical events, symbolic words, interior illuminations and propositional statements) in designating God's ultimate self-communication to a particular people, as culminating in the person and event of Jesus Christ. ("Faith and Revelation", 98-99) The church, as the community of believers that, through the Spirit of God, has emerged from the event of God's ultimate self-communication in Jesus Christ, through that same Spirit sustains and transmits records of this human-divine relationship in both Scripture and in the tradition of the life of the church. The community of faith, in its life, language, rituals, narratives and teachings, makes meaning of the world around the ultimate event of God's self communication of Jesus Christ, as inspired, recorded and transmitted in Scripture and tradition. Since the church has a special role in the process of revelation therefore, the ecclesial context of God's self-communication is especially important. As Dulles puts it: "By participating in the community of faith the individual believer can have reliable access to the revelatory meaning of signs and symbols through which God's self-disclosure has taken place and through which God's salvific designs have been made known."("Faith and Revelation" 98)

Because for Dulles, revelation is symbolic, the ecclesial community as special locus of revelation therefore has to deeply engage with symbols; in fact, symbols help to call together, animate and sustain the community gathered around them. The transformative emphasis of Dulles' "ecclesial-transformative" modification of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic paradigm also becomes relevant here, since symbols, as particular instantiations of a broader reality invite those who engage with them toward a greater mystery. As such, symbols as avenues for new and broader meaning effect transformation. This also implies that an ecclesial community formed and gathered around them is always in a dynamic state of growth.

In summary, Dulles' theology of revelation as symbolic communication builds upon a participatory and evocative understanding of symbol and symbolic meaning-making, as this takes place through the language and culture of a community, and in the case of revelation, in the ecclesial community of faith. The above survey of these theological assumptions not only illuminates Dulles' thought process, but also illustrates the relevant suppositions that make symbolic communication work as a model for the process of revelation. This becomes essential when we consider the symbolic structure of internet-mediated communication below. But first, having set Dulles' theology for revelation as symbolic communication in its broader context, we now turn to the heart of his

argument, found in the parallelism he sets up between symbolic communication and revelation.

Dulles first presents the structure of symbolic communication as organized around four properties. Symbol implies participatory knowledge, transformation, influence on commitment and behavior, and new awareness. (*Models of Revelation*, 136-7) Echoing Rahner's ontology of the symbol, Dulles presents symbols as categorical expressions of a greater reality that are "pregnant with plentitude of meaning which is evoked rather than explicitly stated," and therefore, after Polanyi, demand a kind of *participatory engagement* that not merely acknowledges but gets immersed in the fullness of meaning. (*Models of Revelation*, 132) As explored above, this immersion, revealing the broad horizon of meaning is necessarily *transformative* in that it also highlights the narrowness of particular conceptions in contrast and invites broader understanding.

Transformation as the broadening of understanding is made manifest in *new commitments, behaviors and actions*, also becomes an ongoing process as symbol never fully discloses all that it contains; there is always a surplus of meaning. Therefore, symbolic communication orients one to a greater sense of mystery, deepening the possibilities of meaning and *broadening one's horizon*.

For Dulles, revelation can be termed symbolic communication, because these four properties can be fittingly situated in the process of revelation as well. As stated above, knowledge of God's revelation can best be experienced through

full, engaged participation in the life of the ecclesial community, especially centered on the symbolic expressions of the Word of God, made present in Spirit. Such an experience necessarily yields transformation, or conversion in Christian terms, and this conversion is wholly lived out in thought, word and deed. Christian symbols in service of God's self-revelation, being symbols of a community of past, present and future, simultaneously reveal and conceal, and remain mysterious in that they cannot disclose their full meaning until revelation reaches its eschatological goal in the beatific presence of God. Therefore, engagement with a revelatory symbol in the context of the ecclesial community has the potential to wholly reshape a person and to set them in a dynamic relationship with God on a path toward ever-new horizons of meaning, until we see God face-to-face. (1 Cor. 13:12)

What then are the necessary properties for revelatory symbols to be able to function communicatively in this fourfold way? In exploring revelatory symbols, Dulles maintains that they can be natural, historical or sacramental; thus their actual expression can be varied. A revelatory symbol, whether natural, historical or sacramental, should in any case possess "an indefinite range of potential significations," which they integrate, though do not fully disclose, in one concrete form. (*Models of Revelation* 141) The best way therefore to characterize a revelatory symbol is concrete physicality paradoxically coupled with a measure of ambiguity, in terms of surplus of meaning.

Thus far this essay has explored Dulles' symbolic communication approach to revelation, both in terms of its sources and its fourfold structure as described by Dulles. We learned that symbols, as categorical expressions of a greater mystery, draw us in and broaden our meaning-making horizons. When experienced in the context of the ecclesial community, these symbols, whether natural, historical or sacramental serve the process of revelation through which God communicates Godself to humankind, and particularly, the church. Having established these as the elements of symbolic communication within the process of revelation, this essay now turns to consider another symbolic communicative medium: the internet.

Internet-mediated Communication as Symbolic

At first glance, one may easily propose that communication through the internet takes place in an entirely symbolic way. When it comes to the language of cyberspace, meaning those specific elements through which communication takes place, it is generally either textual or visual/auditory. In this sense, internet-mediated communication is symbolic in as much as textual and visual/auditory communication is symbolic. Similar to communication mediated through written correspondence or television and other mass media, words, sounds and images have the potential to convey meaning broader than their categorical expression. Recalling Polanyi's distinction between sign and symbol

however, these language elements could equally just function as sign-pointers to a focal point of meaning with no inherent value or interest in themselves.

Therefore, it is insufficient to claim the symbolic nature of the internet based on its language elements alone. It proves more helpful to consider these language elements in the uniquely interactive context of the online medium, which brings an added dimension to symbolic communication: that of presence.

Because of the interactivity of the online medium, the words, sounds and images we encounter on the computer screen communicate to us not only information about, but the actual presence of the other person. This presence is more pronounced in real-time interactions like online chatting or video-conferencing, but leaving posts or sending messages to another and anticipating their response, or detecting updates and changes on their social networking profile, blog or website all conveys to us the vibrant sense that they are “there” and can communicate with us. Yet this sense of presence is undoubtedly different from sitting across from someone face-to-face.

Jonathan Steuer offers a helpful distinction between immediate presence and telepresence to clarify this difference. According to Steuer, presence is natural perception of the environment, while telepresence is the mediated perception of an environment (“Defining Virtual Reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence,” 36) Communicating in the immediate presence of another follows a classic model of sender directly conveying content to receiver.

Communicating in telepresence, both sender and receiver interact directly with a third medium to convey content, but not directly with each other. As Steuer explains: “Telepresence view focuses attention on an individual who is both sender and receiver and on the mediated environment in which he or she interacts. Information is not transmitted from sender to receiver; rather mediated environments are created and then experienced.”(37) In other words, the mediated environment, in this case, the internet, acts as a virtual environment which holds the content we wish to share with our communication partner. In actuality, when we are interacting with the other in cyberspace, we are literally communicating with the online environment, which also communicates the same way with our dialogue partner. When I am sending an email to a friend, my concrete communication and takes place with a computer software. When I look for my friend’s response, I look for information received through that same computer software. Communication online therefore is not literal interaction with another person, but rather the experience of information about them in a virtual environment, however vivid it may seem.

Telepresence’s emphasis on interaction with a mediating environment can be a fruitful way for revelation theology to dialogue with internet-mediated communication. If we maintain after Dulles that all revelation is symbolically mediated, then the interactions of the divine-human relationship unfolding in revelation are generally not conveyed from sender to receiver directly, but rather,

both God and humanity interact with the mediating environment of the created world, its natural elements, its history, sacraments, etc. Therefore, both revelation theology and telepresence maintain the centrality of mediated presence. Even though internet communications theory paradoxically maintains the “real world” as the venue for unmediated interaction, revelation theology makes the case that, because of the transcendent source of meaning in God’s self-communication, the “real world” is already a mediating environment. Suspending this difference that arises from the differing sources of meaning in the two schemas (transcendent vs. human), the internet as telepresent medium can actually serve to illuminate the dynamics of revelation as symbolic communication. Just as textual and visual/auditory elements of self-expression mediate the presence of sender to receiver in the online medium, elements of the created world and its history, sacraments, etc. do the same to convey God’s self-communication to humankind. Both the created world and the online environment are symbolic media for communication to take place.

Revelation and Internet-mediated Communication: Points of Convergence

Having thus established a common ground of symbolic mediation between revelation theology and internet-mediated communication based on presence, it is now appropriate to consider some of the internet’s more specific characteristics in light of Dulles’ theology and fourfold schema. Recalling, however that our typical

faith community for the purpose of this essay is one that exists in a traditional face-to-face context and is exploring the possibility of establishing its online presence as well, it is most useful to consider how symbolic communication can take place in the context of such a community with both face-to-face and online media at its disposal. For this reason, instead of simply imposing Dulles' fourfold schema of symbolic communication on internet-mediated communication, it is more useful to find original and mutually illuminating points of convergence between the two. Characteristics of internet-mediated communication most salient for this include: interactivity, identity and access.

Interactivity

The first of these elements is interactivity we experience online, already noted above as a sense of the other being "there," and the possibility of an exchange between us taking place. More than any other medium, the internet can be an immersive environment that allows us to interactively participate in the communal sharing of information online. This sense of interactivity, hallmark of the online medium, also recalls Dulles' emphasis on participatory knowledge: we know because we have taken part in the life of the community. Whether the communities we take part in online are communities in the same sense Dulles intends it is beyond the scope to this present essay. However, online interaction with others can and does generate cultural and linguistic norms that set the

parameters for what the online community is, and how its members interact. In entering into an online community, one quickly assumes these norms as well, which, for the lack of other cues that we take for granted in the offline world, become more pronounced and important online. Because of the more limited set of communicative elements online, all information that is present carries more weight.

Cyberspace is an artificial environment, and as entirely constructed, every bit of its content is deliberately chosen by its designer, and therefore has intentional meaning. From the color of a website's backdrop to the font of the text and the order and spatial organization of the words and images, all is directed and determined through html (hypertext markup language) codes chosen by its designer. Therefore, when considering the internet as a community's communicative medium, it is important to recall that even before specific content appears online, the artificially and intentionally constructed medium already communicates, and all of these constitute together the cultural and linguistic norms that express the community's identity.

In the same way, interpersonal communication in the interactive online medium is also highly constructed, where subtle descriptors and associations we choose to share about ourselves become symbolic and take on extra layers of meaning. The presence of the other that we encounter online, whether through email, a blog, a video, or another type of message, is highly constructed through

the particular elements chosen by the other to convey him or herself. The process of constructing one's profile on a social networking site, for example, is the most pronounced and clear expression of this kind of behavior of choosing how to best express oneself through descriptors and associations. However, the process takes place even in our most mundane online tasks, like choosing how to sign an email, what the subject line of the email should be, or even what email address we choose to communicate from (academic, professional, or the one that contains our college nickname and is provided by a free online mail service). Whether interactive online communication is communal or interpersonal, it is important to recognize that participation in the life of the community online creates a different kind of reliance on communicative elements to convey meaning, where each element we encounter is deliberate and meaningful. In the context of the internet, Dulles' notion of participatory engagement with communally shared norms demands therefore that we consider all the communicative elements we encounter online as possible conveyors of such norms.

Identity

Related to interactivity through deliberately meaningful elements is the second point of convergence between Dulles' revelation theology and internet-mediated communication: identity. Nowhere is it more clear perhaps than in cyberspace, where online identity may or may not correspond to actual identity,

that one's particularly chosen self-expressions are partial and there is a wider reality concealed behind them. The internet clarifies in a special way the adage that symbols simultaneously reveal and conceal. Because the online medium is so highly constructed, and one has choice in how to convey oneself, playfulness has won out over truth or actuality when it comes to questions of identity. Since we are interacting in a mediated environment online, we have no way of making sure that our intended communication partner is really the one replying back, or, whether our partner's self-description corresponds to the truth. We therefore have to accept the playfulness as part of the experience, and interact online based on trust.

This sense of playfulness, coupled with the added layers of meaning of the communicative elements available to us online both recall a sense of mystery and the broadening of the horizon of meaning in Dulles' schema. The internet illustrates particularly well that there is always more than meets the eye, because what meets the eye is, as noted above, limited and highly constructed, and may not even correspond to the truth. Therefore, online interaction could help to foster a sense of openness and continued exploration, and an overall dynamic approach to meaning-making.

Furthermore, online as well as offline, we grow in our own understanding of self and others through continued mutual interaction. The feedback of others and our assumptions about how others view us have an immense influence on our

identity, especially if a significant aspect of one's identity is affiliation with a religious community. The internet can help provide a space for interaction with others toward this aim, with the added benefit of 24-hour availability and easy access, often from the comfort of our own home.

Access

In addition to converging well with both participatory knowledge and openness to new meaning and understanding, internet-mediated communication also connects with transformation of thought and behavior in Dulles' schema. This essay opened by acknowledging how the internet is not only a new tool for communication, but it has changed the way we communicate as well. In addition to gaining new vocabulary for net-based concepts, we have also gotten used to having easy access to vast amounts of information. As noted above, the Vatican website alone avails us to thousands of documents and resources at the click of the mouse. From researching to shopping to getting driving directions, such easy access to useful information is making older ways obsolete. In this sense, the internet has transformed our expectations about finding information and how we go about getting it. Because of the constant and easy availability of information, we not only expect instantaneous results to our queries, but also give preference to those resources we find most easily. When it comes to revelation theology, these transformations in our thought and behavior are especially relevant. For one, in

such a fast-paced world of information, can we still allow for God to communicate Godself in God's own time? If the internet is deemed a theologically appropriate medium for the transmission of revelation, what does its fast-paced communication signify regarding God's self-communication? In addition, in the midst of vast amounts of information how do some faith communities signify authoritative content as part of their tradition? Questions of authorship, truth and authenticity, hierarchical ordering of doctrine are just a few more issues to continue to consider when it comes to internet-mediated communication of revelation.

Conclusions and Departures

Avery Dulles' theology of revelation as symbolic communication has provided a way in this essay to continue to make sense of internet-mediated communication and its potential for religious education. As this dialogue between revelation theology and internet-mediated communication has revealed, when we consider both of these as symbolic media, they mutually illuminate one another. The dynamics of telepresence in internet-mediated communication illustrates the reality of symbolic mediation at the heart of revelation theology as well. At the same time, the interactivity of the internet, along with the dynamic notion of meaning-making online help underscore in a different way what Dulles means by participatory engagement and surplus of meaning in symbolic communication.

While these convergent foundations to both revelation theology and internet mediated communication underscore the internet's potential for the transmission of revelation, some enduring questions invite further consideration. As noted above under access, the availability of often-uncategorized information, questionable authenticity and authorship, and the instantaneous nature of accessing such has not only impacted our thinking, behavior and expectations about communication, but also seems to conflict with traditional ecclesial ways of transmitting revelation. Noting the potential of the internet and its convergence with revelation theology on symbolic communication, if our church communities engage in internet-mediated communication for the purpose of sharing the faith, these questions about transmission of revelation need to be explored further.

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