

“Medium through Medium”: Information, Language and the Human Self in the Play of Biblical Revelation

Gábor Ambrus

Within the enormous maze of information society, information as medium inescapably pervades our everyday lives, but religion might be the domain that puts it into the richest and most meaningful context. The most conspicuous and paradigmatic form the medium of information takes is the constant flood of news which we eagerly embrace through all kinds of news media like radio and television channels, the printed press and the internet. The insatiable hunger for news is something quintessentially human, and something fully and pregnantly expressed in religion – not only in Christianity, but also by the Ancient Greeks. In consulting various oracles, the Greeks were keen listeners of the divine, seeking news from the gods in the form of advice or prophecy. Indeed, one of the gods they worshipped was Hermes, who carried news as a divine messenger mediating the will of the gods. When it comes to Christianity, God’s will of their salvation reaches human beings by way of the Good News carried first by Jesus Christ himself and then by the Christian community. The Good News brings to the fore what often remains implicit in our contemporary flood of information, and was perhaps also unclear in Greek religion. Through a grand scenario integrating the medium of information within the medium of language, Scripture and the Good News provide us with explicit interpretive help in spelling out *the problem of the human self*.

The ancient Greeks cherished a very famous aphorism of cultic origin that is most commonly translated into English as “know thyself!”, that is, in modern English, “know yourself!”. There is no reason to assume that this maxim, or the message behind it, has not addressed human beings at all stages of Western civilisation with equal force, and its appeal to them for self-examination and self-understanding certainly remains as relentless as ever. All this notwithstanding, it appears that the care of the self and the related problem of the self have a uniqueness or peculiarity in contemporary times, a period which have given rise to information society, or, on a grander scale, the “info-sphere”. If such a society and such a sphere have their own mysteries, the human self is certainly one of them. I do not think it is particularly difficult to tell why this is the case. Why is it indeed that information theorists, when discussing the place of human beings within the vast info-sphere, cannot help arguing in terms of “identity” and “self” (see, for instance, E. Davies and L. Floridi)? A possible answer includes two interrelated moments. The first is that an age marked by advanced cybernetics and powerful ICTs (information and communication technologies) leaves us in doubt and uncertainty about what humanity is in general and who we are as individuals; in fact, exiled into remote corners of the info-sphere, we have become problems for ourselves like never before. The second moment of a possible answer concerning the relevance of the self is that it is exactly this problem of the self that makes us human beings special in the info-sphere, because, in a universe of information, computers, animals and pieces of inanimate matter do not become problems for themselves, whereas human beings do. Obviously, this answer is just a first attempt, a broad approach to the relationship between the human self and the sphere of information. Much more has been and will be said about it in various fields of research on the ground of human reason alone. What I set myself as a task in the present talk/article is a brief inquiry into the subject of information and the self on the ground of biblical revelation and the Christian faith. As a matter of fact, the concept of information as such does not emerge in Scripture. I can only hope that, in the context of the very biblical problem of the human self, it can be given a biblical meaning. At the same time, my intentions go beyond the Bible, beyond theology and religion. Inasmuch as I present a religious world, I do so with

the presumption that it can have a message for the secular world, which might benefit from what religion has to say about the self and the self's affair with information.

Before proceeding in my argument, I think an important distinction is in order. I have hitherto used the word “**information**” without pointing out **this term's crucial difference from the notion of data**. A piece of information is meaningful, while data points are not, unless they form a piece of information. According to the widely used General Definition of Information (GDI), information is a meaningful entity that consists of data or, in some cases, a single datum. (Let it be added that it must also have either factual or instructional function. [note]) To stick to my subject, let me take Scripture as an example. It is undoubtedly possible to look at Scripture as a huge cluster of information, and one can go even further and see it as an almost endless sequence of data like millions of letters or many more millions of bits amounting to dozens of megabytes. But one may ask what purpose such a gaze would serve, staring at the data of Scripture as such, without any meaningfulness or any wish to understand. No doubt, there are borderline cases like someone turning the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures without knowing any Hebrew. This person might do so out of curiosity; she might take delight in the calligraphic beauty of Hebrew script as a pattern of data. Still, she contemplates these lines against the background of meaningfulness, information, understanding – with a likely desire to learn Hebrew and understand what is written. Or, to take an example which is neither scriptural nor linguistic, researchers of the genome of any species do not see the patterns of the DNA as mere data; for them, a DNA sequence is either information, if decoded, or pregnant with information, if still to be decoded. On the whole, it may be claimed, that, while information is formed through data, human beings see data “through information”, that is, in terms of information and understanding. What is more, I can perhaps go a step further, and venture to say that the term “information” can be reforged as specifically human. What we can call the cosmic-global “info sphere” (Floridi) with a diminishing human presence may perhaps be better termed as the “data sphere”, in which the “info sphere” belongs inseparably to the human phenomenon (see Floridi's criticism of the term “information theory” related to Shannon – it is more a theory of “data transmission”). Much further elaboration on this topic would distract attention from my main argument; suffice it to say that, in the common use of the word, information always reveals something to someone; a piece of information, in its meaningfulness, is always a piece of revelation. Communication between computers (like the Bible as a pdf attachment) or between generations of animals (like their DNA as genetic inheritance) seems to be data transmission rather than information flow.

In the midst of an immense data traffic, the human self is in the flux of something much more than sending and receiving data. Clearly, the famous tripartite communication model by Claude Shannon falls short of the truth the very moment we start reckoning with the human self. Shannon's model that, with some simplification, consists of a sender, a channel, and a receiver, must be supplemented with a bipartite model of the self which is in communication with itself through a medium [note: Shannon]. **The self is self-mediated**. It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of this claim for the subject of this talk/article. Human beings do not have any access to themselves and any understanding of themselves without a medium. While exchanging data, information, words and sentences with the other and also understanding what the exchange is about, human beings are in the flux of self-understanding through the medium of this exchange [see, for instance, H.-G. Gadamer's idea of “conversation” in his *Truth and Method*]. Within the tradition of biblical revelation, it is a crucial, age-old experience of the faithful that any dialogue with God or about God does not imply only an understanding of God, but thereby also an understanding of the human self [see Gadamer, “Die Marburger Theologie”, p. 203]. The medium of language in which such dialogues evolve is something like a stream which is

wider and more continuous than data of speech (like phonemes), or pieces of information about God and human beings, would in themselves suggest.

The difficult problem of **the relationship between information and language** is of great importance to any theological evaluation of the concept of information and the self. [Floridi does not tackle this problem in "The Philosophy of Information" apart from some remarks, see p. 84.] Whereas there can be information carriers other than language, like diagrams, maps or road signs, their meanings are mostly dependent on, or at least equivalent to, explanations through another medium that is the most typical form of information: the proposition or declarative statement. ("Yesterday the Foreign Secretary made an announcement." "There is a spider in the cabinet.") No doubt, declarative statements play a significant role in the life of natural languages. Let me, nevertheless, make two remarks in this regard. My first remark is to extend the scope of information in language beyond declarative statements. For it is clear that some information-content is to be assigned to other types of sentences like questions, requests or commands as well. (In sentences like "What was the Foreign Secretary's announcement?" or "Don't kill the spider in the cabinet!", speakers indicate the information-content of what it is that they know.) This is what D. M. MacKay calls "indicative meaning" or "selective content" in his book on semantic information, in which he dedicates a whole chapter to non-propositional or non-declarative information. ["Information, Mechanism, Meaning", p. 94-104.] My second remark is to reduce the scope of information within natural languages. Certainly, this scope is to be reduced on account of the inherent figurative nature of language by means of irony, puns, metonyms, metaphors and so on. [See P. de Man on Locke and others having trouble with the figurative nature of language. See U. Eco's book "In Search of the Perfect Language", too.] (If I claim that "Yes, spiders are exquisite creatures", does it mean that I am literally an arachnophile, praising spiders as skilled weavers, or an ironic arachnophobe, expressing disgust with them?). Let me emphasise that there is much more in language than mere ambiguity. In venturing out from the safe ground of everyday language to poetry, we will most likely find the concept of information too factual and referential to be of much use to reading poets, let alone those like the 19th century French symbolists. Much of Rimbaud's and Mallarmé's poetry would cause enormous trouble to any reader searching in it for information. The spectrum of poetry, however, is very rich. Other styles and genres such as didactic poetry in Antiquity and in the Age of Enlightenment may lend themselves to information as an interpretive concept. Virgil's *Georgica* and Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* are pieces in verse with the aim of giving instruction about agriculture and the proper judgement of poetry itself. When it comes to information in biblical poetry, special attention is due to those psalms that recount the events of salvation history [note]. Ritual formulas aiding biblical memory would be particularly enigmatic, yet promising examples in any theological inquiry into information. They inevitably raise the question whether the faithful in Judaism and Christianity would subscribe to any view of these formulas as pieces of information about God's historical deeds.

The concept of information has a critically important aspect which must have a direct bearing on any theological approach to information and the human self. What a piece of information reveals is **a fragment of reality**. It behaves the same way as its most common form, the declarative statement. As M. Heidegger convincingly pointed out, statements are derivations from the flux of understanding and interpretation [Being and Time, p. 150]; they are only a peculiar case of what the Greeks called *logos* and also, which is not the same, what we call language [p. 148-149.]. In its subject-predicate structure, the statement can reveal something only by a sharp limitation; it manifests explicitly "what is manifest in its determinacy through the explicit limitation of looking" [p. 145]. Although he discusses the nature of statements here, Heidegger's words correspond to how pieces of information function and how they bring about an essentially fragmented reality. Information itself is

described by E. Davies in broadly similar terms: "(...) information suggests a practical chunk of reified experience, a unit of sense lodged on the hierarchy of knowledge, somewhere between data and report." [Davies, p. 98-99.] The fragmented picture created by these chunks of reification and units of sense becomes especially problematic once we want to place the human self into it. There is an overarching tendency in the human existence and self to live life as a continuous unity. As H.-G. Gadamer puts it, it is "a continuity of self-understanding that alone can sustain human existence". It is this continuity in which "human existence moves". But what we have here is not only the continuous unity of self-understanding, but also that of the other, the understanding of the other, especially of the world as a whole – and, let it be added, of God. "Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the *unity* and *integrity* of the other" [italics mine]. By the same token, "we sublimate [*aufheben*] the discontinuity and atomism of isolated experiences [*Erlebnisse*] in the continuity of our own existence." (Truth and Method, p. 83) Accordingly, if the concept of information is in any sense relevant to the human self, the limitation and fragmentation which pieces of information bring about (and also originate from) show them as derivations from the continuous whole of self-understanding. What is, then, the truth claim of such derivations?

At this point, insights into the Christian religion and Christian faith can greatly contribute to my argument. What is revealing at this point is **the fragmented way in which Christians** (and non-Christians) **often treat Scripture**. I do not only mean that Scripture is an extremely divided text, divided into many thousands of loci like many thousands of plots – the most divided text in Western civilisation. Rather, each and every verse may function as a link to a well of information about how this verse has been interpreted in the long course of the history of Christianity. In pointing this out, I *might* miss the point concerning how Scripture is really interpreted in Christianity, but not quite. With an appeal to the authority of Scripture, single phrases or sentences have always been quoted from it to prove one's stance; such use of the Bible's text was far from being unique to the Catholic-Protestant disputations of the 16th century with parties throwing biblical verses at one another. We all know the magic formulas: "it is written", or "Scripture says". And there is a remarkable thing about these formulas. They can transform the whole text of the Bible into declarative statements or pieces of information, even those phrases that are not statements at all, and do not sound anything like information. Nevertheless, such a way of using the text is sanctioned by the Bible itself. The Gospel of Matthew features a striking passage about Christ's temptation by the devil (Mt 4, 1-11). The passage presents them as disputants, and includes four biblical quotations, three by Christ, one by the devil, each introduced by an "it is written" formula. It is clear from the behaviour of the disputants (as it is from that of any disputants ever since) that the quotations with the formulas are more than subjects with predicates. The statements declare more than the fact that each quotation *is* written and *is* in Scripture. To be in Scripture means to have Scripture's authority. And, amazingly, both Christ and the devil submit to this authority. Indeed, it does not explicitly emerge in the passage how their self-understanding is affected by the biblical fragments as such; what, however, emerges is their obedient self-subjection to Scripture.

The attitude of submission to Scripture as a set of truths is exactly what a long theological tradition defined as the essence of faith. This tradition embraced a concept of divine revelation that can be dubbed **the "information theory of revelation"**. The tradition in question was of the opinion that God revealed for the salvation of humanity a cluster of statements which qualify as objective truths comprehensible to every human being. [See "The Models of Revelation" by A. Dulles.] Faith is a humble acceptance, disbelief is an arrogant rejection of the revealed statements as truths. It should come as no surprise that such a view on faith and revelation still enjoys some currency in both Protestantism and Catholicism; what is more, it belonged to the mainstream of Catholic theology up until the eve of the Second Vatican Council. [See the Herder commentary, ed.

P. Hünnermann, on the constitution Dei Verbum.] An obvious shortcoming of this theory that it posits an implicit view of human self-understanding only within the attitude of humble obedience to God's will through revealed pieces of information. Self-understanding remains obscure as to what revelation really has to say.

Let me return for a moment to **the episode with Christ and the devil**. There is certainly more in it than a mere disputation between them. The devil tempts Christ by an implicit declaration of him as Son of God, the Messiah. And the way he does so is paradigmatic to the whole of the New Testament. ("Then the devil took him up into the holy city, set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him: 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written, *He shall give His angels charge over you, and, in their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.*' Jesus said to him, 'It is written again, *You shall not tempt the Lord your God.*'" Mt 4, 5-7.) The devil's portrait of Christ as someone who fulfils the Scriptures as prophecies is at the core of the New Testament's theological method. [See G. Lafont's remark in his *Histoire théologique de l'Église catholique*.] And the method of providing a mutual illumination between Christ and the Scriptures becomes especially revealing about information and the human self in the Bible as soon as Christ himself employs the Scriptures in announcing or explaining his suffering, death and resurrection.

The Synoptic Gospels feature several **passages in which Christ predicts what will happen to him** in Jerusalem; let me present only two of them, one from Luke, and the other from Matthew. The report I quote from Luke is the third one in the series of Christ's predictions: "Then he took the twelve aside and said to them: 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. For he will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. They will scourge him and kill him. And the third day he will rise again.' But they understood none of these things; this saying was hidden from them, and they did not know the things which were spoken." (Lk 18, 31-34) Here Christ unlocks what is hidden in the prophecies of the Scriptures, and, by way of disclosing information, renders it his own prophecy about what awaits him in Jerusalem. What I really mean here by information is not in the superficial sense of a prophecy as "information about the future". The information about the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ does not need to disclose a future event to prove utterly unlikely and improbable to the disciples of all ages; the reports of the Gospels clearly show how shocked and taken aback the disciples actually were at the Crucifixion while having all the prophecies, all the knowledge about Christ's suffering and death, and, later, all the news about his resurrection. Luke's account in the above passage of the disciples' total lack of understanding provides a telling foretaste of what is to come for millennia. Their self-understanding can only be inferred here, but already there is a hint at the distance between, on the one hand, Christ and God, and, on the other, the human self.

What is implicit in Luke emerges explicitly in Matthew. "From that time Jesus began to show to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord; this shall not happen to you!' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are an offence to me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.'" (Mt 16, 21-23) While Matthew's account does not specify that Christ's prediction was through the Scriptures, it reveals the distance between the things of God and the things of human beings as an absolute one. Christ's disclosure of the information about his suffering, death, and resurrection makes Peter uncover an abyss, and God only declares through Christ who Simon Peter is and what human beings are. God lays bare the human self for Simon Peter and all human beings. God comes close to humanity in Christ, as close as his death on the cross, and this is exactly the opposite to how God is supposed to act as God. [Cf. Luther's

idea of a *deus absconditus sub contrario*, a “God hidden behind a contradiction”.] As long as they think in a human way, human beings remain utterly distant by refusing to accept such absolute closeness to God. To undo this yawning gulf of a paradox, human beings must convert to thinking like God. This is the play of revelation, the play of distance and closeness, between the understanding of God and human self-understanding. It is in the enormous space of this play (the greatest space possible and imaginable) that the whole of the Scriptures is to be read and interpreted.

The theological concept of self-understanding was an unmistakable hallmark of the Marburg theologian R. Bultmann’s work [note: Gadamer: “Die Marburger Theologie”], but this article’s position on the concept is distinctly different from Bultmann’s. On the one hand, I fully subscribe to his point of departure that God is “the wholly other” who profoundly seizes and determines human existence. On the other hand, it would be difficult not to contest his claim that our quest for God is completely identical with our search for answers to our questions about our own existence. Bultmann asserted that “speech about God is only possible as speech about ourselves” [note: Hit és megértés, p47.; Glauben und Verstehen I, p?]. Can such a claim possibly hold true? No doubt, God’s self-revelation always implies God’s revelation of the human self, and every human act of understanding God is at the same time an act of self-understanding [Pannenberg, p. 215]. The phrase “at the same time”, however, does not mean “identity”; rather, it signifies “concurrence” and “mutuality”. The move from and towards the “wholly other” always propels a move towards the self. It is in this sense that I mean the grand play of revelation as a play between the understanding of God and human self-understanding.

It appears that the information about Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection coincides with what is called the “Good News” in Christianity. Indeed, the Good News is centred on the so-called triduum of Christ, the three holy days, the process and meaning of which is perfectly recapitulated and explained by a short ritual hymn in St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians: Christ descended from God, from being equal with God, and became man, descending to the depth of being man down to the point of his death on the cross, and then, through death, he ascended to God, being exalted to Lordship over all creation (Phil 2, 5-11). If the degree of improbability is the measure of any information’s value [note], then the Good News is more improbable and more unlikely than any other information that has ever been.

Against an interpretation of the Good News as information, however, a number of objections can be raised. The first objection concerns the highest degree of improbability involved in the Good News. Is this degree not so high that the Good News does not qualify as information at all? Is it not the exclusive matter of faith, a faith shared only by a statistical minority, especially when it comes to Christ’s resurrection? Further objections can be made to the Good News as information within the domain of faith. Is it not the case with any news or any piece of information that it has an information value to a given person only once, and then enters the realm of well-known facts? Furthermore, we have said that every piece of information reveals only a fragment of reality. If so, is there not a discord between the theological centrality of the Good News and its fragmentary nature as a piece of information?

As to the Good News as possible disinformation and an exclusive matter of faith, it seems plausible for Christian theology to embrace a larger view of it than God’s call intended for “inner use”, for “those who believe”. According to the primary meaning of the Good News, it is a proclamation reaching out to those who do not believe, and must have a vital role in mission and in dialogue with non-Christians. Non-Christians cannot be expected to give an instant response of faith, instantly entering into the play of revelation between the understanding of God and self-understanding. [See A. Dulles’ criticism of the revelation model of “dialectic theology”.] The Good News must have something of an objective value as a piece of truthful information to be disclosed and shared, even if, as a

matter of fact, it cannot offer the irrefutable proof of a scientific evidence. Nevertheless, the Gospels portray themselves as witnesses and give the account of witnesses (and so does St. Paul in the First Epistle to the Corinthians [15, 3-8.]). At the beginning of his Gospel, St. Luke the Evangelist explicitly refers to “eyewitnesses” and to what they testify as “certainty” (Lk 1, 1-4).

Within the life of faith, the Good News remains information and repeatedly comes to the fore as such through its profound relationship with the whole of the Scriptures. The Nicene Creed proclaims that “he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” [note], and this profession is to be assigned a wider sense than the New Testament’s presentation of Christ as a fulfilment of prophecies (from what Christians call the “Old Testament”). The phrase “in accordance with the Scriptures” can also mean the whole of the Christian Bible, the Old and the New Testaments, the unity of which is guaranteed by Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection as hermeneutical key to the whole. In accordance with each and every biblical verse, the Good News as information about Christ’s triduum comes to the fore again and again in the course of a lifetime’s interpretation of the Scriptures. The Good News is, so to say, “relational information” by being “in accordance with the Scriptures”. Moreover, the Good News is indeed a piece of information with the limitation of a reality-fragment which, as it is formulated and also narrated in the Bible, in fact figures as a fragment of the Bible. Still, this fragment is the one that can propel the grandest and most holistic play, the play of revelation between our understanding of God and our self-understanding, between the greatest distance and the greatest closeness – the play which, in the medium of language, sublates the fragmentation of the Bible into coherence and unity. And it is primarily through the medium of language that such grand and holistic play evolves; language is the Bible’s primary medium which the medium of information, the fragmentary verses, issue from and return to. The biblical pieces of “what is written” issue from and return to a larger current of fluidity. [See H.-G. Gadamer on Hegel in his “Hegels Dialektik”.] If the Bible can appear as a vast sequence of information, it does so only by way of a “medium through medium”, that is, “information through language”.

In conclusion, it may be claimed that the Christian religion and faith includes a unique and unparalleled constellation of information, language and the human self. Throughout the continuous whole and all the information-fragments of Scripture, the Good News as a relentless piece of information can bring about the deepest crisis and the highest elevation in human self-understanding. The Good News is exceptional in withstanding the process in which the fragments of the biblical text emerge from and dissolve into the stream and fluidity of language. In the manner of a powerful contradiction, what makes the human self transform from the fragmentation into the continuity of self-understanding is the information-fragment of the Good News.