

# Marshall McLuhan. The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion

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One of the greatest intellectual voyages of the twentieth century began with the study of an obscure but vigorous Elizabethan pamphleteer named Thomas Nashe.

Edited By Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szklarek (Toronto: Stoddart, 1999)

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One of the greatest intellectual voyages of the twentieth century began with the study of an obscure but vigorous Elizabethan pamphleteer named Thomas Nashe. It was the 1930s, the world was in the middle of a great depression and a young man in his mid-twenties named Marshall McLuhan was at Cambridge University working on his Ph.D thesis centered around Nashe.

The choice of Nashe for his Ph.D thesis provided a "small target" for his growing intellectual power. It almost seemed too small and unimportant to qualify as the target for a Cambridge Ph.D thesis. Outside a relatively small circle of people, Nashe is an anonymous footnote buried beneath layers of history. Born in Lowestoft, England in 1561, and educated at Cambridge, Nashe became one of the university wits. Arriving in London in 1588 he wrote for the stage and the press and in 1589 published *The Anatomie of Absurditie* and the Preface to Robert Greene's *Menaphon*.

Nashe was also employed by the Church of England to answer the attacks made on it by a group of Puritan writers collectively known as Martin Marprelate. Under the pen name of Pasquil, Nashe responded with satiric pamphlets like *An Almond for a Parrat* (1590). He also took part in a violent literary controversy against the poet Gabriel Harvey and his brother Richard Harvey, who had been extremely critical of the writings of Nashe and his friend Robert Greene. The church, though, saw little value in Nashe and Harvey's works and in June 1599 banned their books.

McLuhan originally intended to write about the differences between Nashe and Harvey. But soon McLuhan came to see Nashe and Harvey as symbols for something much greater than the petty battles they were engaged in during their time. As McLuhan's son Eric notes, to his father they "were the latest combatants in a struggle that had been going on, by then, for over 1500 years and which for hundreds of years more showed no signs of abating."

McLuhan located this struggle in the famous Trivium of Western intellectual tradition which compressed all knowledge into three streams: rhetoric (communication), dialectic (philosophy and logic), and grammar (literature). Although knowledge about the Trivium has faded in our contemporary world, its three branches serve as the foundation of the elementary school process based around teaching grammar (in grades K-6 and ages 4-11), logic (in grades 7-9 and ages 12-14) and rhetoric (in grades 10-12 and ages 15-18).

McLuhan's studies of the Trivium began with the Greek and Roman educational systems, went through the Middle Ages and ended with James Joyce in the twentieth century. It began with Cicero in Augustan Rome and ran to Nashe in Elizabethan England and concerned itself with the key debates between great universities such as Cambridge, Oxford and Paris.

While many others had undertaken the study of philosophy and literature, it was McLuhan's unique insight to place this study into a type of triumvirate context by considering the relationships between the three disciplines of the Trivium. As Eric McLuhan suggests, his father saw the Trivium "as a set of Siamese triplets." Considered from this viewpoint, the overall perspective of the Trivium changes enormously as well as the developments within each of its three branches.

Thomas Nashe fit into the Trivium scheme because he represented the age-old claims of grammar (allied with rhetoric) for dominance of the Trivium. Against this claim was the rival claim of dominance by dialectical reformers represented by

Gabriel Harvey.

The eventual Cambridge Ph.D thesis of McLuhan on Nashe and the Trivium was one of the most learned papers that Cambridge had ever seen. It also served as a type of "embarkation point" for McLuhan's study of media theory placing it in an overriding religious context.

Yet this religious perspective served more as a hidden subtext to McLuhan's work in media, remaining in the background like the set of a movie rather than out in front of the "cameras" like a leading actor. In a sense, the religious subtext was McLuhan's personal "medium" while the particular "messages" were contained in his books and lectures. This religious perspective was seldom addressed in singular works but rather strewn over a half-century like scattered Tarot cards which were pieces to some great puzzle. The pieces were in the form of letters, essays and interviews - in effect, much "offstage" ponderings and reflections behind his more public persona.

These pieces have recently been collected and published in *The Medium and the Light* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1999) edited by his son Eric McLuhan and Roman Catholic priest Jacek Szklarek. While most of the material has been published in one way or another, this is the first time they have been drawn together. As Eric McLuhan notes, his father had long thought about pulling these pieces together and making a book of them. Appearing for the first time in English, are the four conversations with Pierre Babin recorded between 1974 and 1977.

In some ways, the materials in the book serve as a background to McLuhan's eventual conversion to Catholicism. Yet, as interesting and important as McLuhan's conversion to Catholicism might be, *The Medium and the Light* is really about far more than one influential individual's conversion to the Catholic religion. Rather its real subject is more about an awakening rather than a conversion. The awakening was to a faith in percepts over concepts, and yes, an early discovery that "truth" and "light" is to be found in the acknowledgment of the surrounding "medium" of life rather than in the analysis of the "messages" and concepts inside this life. In effect, McLuhan never set out to understand the idea of religion but to admit particular feelings he had.

It was the admission of these feelings, not the attempt to understand them, that led to his conversion and his ultimately his great discoveries in media. For McLuhan, Catholicism was not the great churches and the grand liturgies. It never was contained in that great Emerald City Dorothy set out to find in the Wizard of Oz. Rather it was the fleeting shadow of something only glimpsed at in the fading twilight hours of the day. An awareness rather than a particular shape inside this awareness. It allowed him to relate to media in a new way, not as contents within an environment but rather as the environment itself.

For McLuhan, concepts that stood in the way of knowledge. He once wrote his friend Jim Taylor, editor of *The United Church Observer*, "I do not think of God as a concept, but as an immediate and ever-present fact -an occasion for continuous dialogue...I don't think concepts have any relevance in religion. Analogy is not a concept. It is a resonance. It is inclusive. It is the cognitive process itself." Analogical awareness, McLuhan observed, "begins in the senses and is derailed by concepts or ideas." Faith is a mode of perception, a sense like sight or hearing or touch and as real and actual as these.

While the battle between idea and feeling was a relatively settled personal issue for McLuhan, he knew that it was not a settled one for the great mass of humanity bringing about a continuing battle of religion with other branches of the Trivium for dominance of historical periods. The dynamics of this battle came to be seen by McLuhan as one of the key problems of the modern condition.

This battle underlies one of the most interesting themes which emerge from *The Medium and the Light* as McLuhan speculates on the future of religion. In a March 27, 1970 interview with Hubert Hoskins in *The Listener*, he offered some observations on the possible future of Christianity from a media perspective:

"Christianity definitely supports the idea of a private, independent metaphysical substance of the self. Where technologies supply no cultural basis for this individual, then Christianity is in for trouble. When you have a new tribal

culture confronting an individualist religion, there is trouble."

The relevance to our modern electric world is obvious. Christianity arose during a linear, visual technology which encouraged privacy. Yet the dominant medium today is the non-linear and auditory one of electricity. As he often noted, the electronic medium makes the world into one great tribal village where privacy (of early Christianity) is no longer possible. In a letter to Alexis de Beauregard (5/11/72) he wrote "If the private person is an artifact, then it becomes criminal to perpetuate him technologically in the electronic age."

Towards the end of his life, McLuhan pushed this speculation even further. In "Tomorrow's Church: Fourth Conversation With Pierre Babin" (1977) he made the following startling observation:

"In a certain way, I also think that this could be the time of the Antichrist. When electricity allows for the simultaneity of all information for every human being, it is Lucifer's moment. He is the greatest electrical engineer. Technically speaking, the age in which we live is certainly favourable to an Antichrist. Just think: each person can instantly be tuned to a 'new Christ' and mistake him for the real Christ."

The crucial thing needed in this critical period, is not the ability to see a new concept but rather to feel a particular "frequency." As McLuhan notes in the final paragraph of *The Medium and the Light*, "At such times it becomes crucial to hear properly and to tune yourself to the right frequency."

The ability to listen rather than look for the answers to life, goes back to those early years in McLuhan's life when he listened to his heart at the beginning of his journey through life rather than looked with his mind. To be sure, it was one of the greatest minds of this century but it was always a mind tuned to the frequency of life rather than a mind which tried to change this frequency.

While the collective mass is caught up today in the old trance of visual images in a non-visual time, the "frequency" of Marshall McLuhan resonates with a message more urgent than ever. Is it a tiny little radio station broadcasting to no one or will a new generation "tune" in to hear and feel rather than see? Only time will tell but at least we have a brilliant number of "behind the scenes" speculations in *The Medium and the Light*.

In this sense, these speculations serve more as a testament to the potential in each one of us rather than as a road map to a particular destination. Will we ever realize the possibility that "truth" has already arrived on earth and that we don't know this because we keep looking for it with our eyes rather than feeling for it with our hearts?

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