

Plugging Into The Electro-Theological Power Grid

by Rick Marshall

I was thrilled, lying in bed deep into the night, ear-piece snug in my ear, listening covertly under my blankets to faint voices tinkling from distant cities as if hearing for the first time signals from outer space. With a delicate movement of my finger on the tuning coil, the new kit-built radio received voices and music. I felt connected to the whole wide world as I never had before. Such power!

The kit was a gift, and I was careful to follow the directions, connecting odd little parts together: color-ringed resistors and round capacitors and bullet diodes and tight coils. It was strange that those few electronic components could tune in the world. It was so simple, and I put it together! It encouraged me to think I could actually understand electronics.

My cousin Roger was similarly fascinated by electronics. He had collected a mute assortment of shot TV sets and whacked radios and other wiry devices in his bedroom, parts spilling from under his bed, cabinets disemboweled, radio tubes lined up on his dresser like soldiers with the intention of building something better out of all the parts. Nothing ever came of it; we just took things apart, looking for the ghost in the machine. Two lame-brain backyard country boys trying to crack the mystery. We were like my cat watching TV then running to the back of the set to see where the bird went. I laugh now at our naiveté, but still find it impossible to explain the connection between the front of the TV and the back of it.

Later on, in the military, I went to electronics school and learned formulae and theories and how to read a schematic and troubleshoot broken equipment. I made glowing green rings spin in beautiful patterns on oscilloscope screens. I did well working the math and had fun playing with the knowledge I learned in Basic Electronics 101. One of the first principles I mastered was Ohm's Law: "A unit of electrical resistance equal to that of a conductor in which a current of one ampere is produced by a potential of one volt across its terminals." Well anyway, the formula is simpler and is one of the fundamentals of electricity; I learned it well and applied it easily. I was emboldened by my success.

But then it came time to actually fix a piece of equipment. I had the doomed feeling of opening the back of Pandora's Box: out popped a tangle of wires and knots of components packed onto boards like colored barnacles. It was a great leap of the imagination, looking at the schematic and then looking at the thing itself, to see any connection between the two. Theory and reality are two separate but strangely related categories. I stood there with a philosophical cramp, wondering: What's the connection between what I learned and this stubborn thing before me? I felt like the Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz, if I only had a brain.

I eventually became an electronic technician in the military, aspiring to enter the ethereal realm of electronic repair. Specifically, I was a Microwave Communication Repairman. More times than I like to admit, being intimidated by these mysteries, I would think the worst, staring stupidly at a machine that wasn't working. When I had the parts laying all over the workbench, looking at the chicken scratches of the schematic, feeling panicky about finding the needle of a problem in the wire-stack, someone would look over my shoulder and check the fuse and, holding it up for everyone to behold, find it blown. I knew that! Or point out to me that the power switch was turned off. I was going to check that! Or the plug wasn't inserted into the wall socket. It was the simple things I overlooked in my rush to anxiety. Such experiences only deepened the mystery and fear of it all. And when I did fix a piece of equipment, I felt relieved at

my dumb luck.

I recently took my daughter's stereo into a repair shop to be fixed. (After looking at it myself, I concluded it had an evil spirit.) The workshop was dark and dense and shrouded in meters and gauges and probes and all kinds of test equipment. Wires everywhere. The shop had a quiet sacramental feel to it, all the visible forms of invisible grace. Surely, the presence of some god is in this place! The workbench was an altar in the center of this temple where the priest invoked the god Electros.

An Asian man came to the counter, speaking a dialect of English with which I was not familiar. For all I knew, he could have been speaking Latin, or in tongues, for that matter. After poking the stereo in meaningful places, and pulling knowingly on various parts, and frowning piously the whole while, the technician told me to call back in a week. I felt a duty to have faith in him. As I left, he was placing the machine on a shelf in line with other "dead" machines, all waiting for some resurrection to happen, or maybe an exorcism.

I realized then that having electronic devices repaired has definite religious aspects. If you think I'm joking, do you understand your DVD any better than you understand, say, the Eucharist? Who is to say transforming radio waves into sound is any less mysterious than turning bread into a body or wine into blood? I had to have faith in the technician; who else would fix the stereo? Certainly not me, or anybody I knew, even though, at one time, I thought I could master the mystery of electronics. As it turned out, I was proficient in a middling sort of way, but I didn't have the Call.

Electronics, to this day, is a mystery to me; I'm baffled by the complexity of our technorigged world. We have the illusion of gaining mastery over it and manipulating it to our advantage and creating all these wonderful, magical devices. But I keep looking for the curtain to be pulled back to reveal a mere man pulling levers and blowing smoke.

The heart of the mystery is actually very simple: it takes place when the "ON" button is pushed. All these hard and shiny parts are hooked up and hard wired, but then a strange thing called "power" has to be applied to make it all move, which is where the real leap of imagination comes in. Electricity, what is it really? No one knows. We have developed a whole vocabulary to describe and control it: amperes, resistance, conductivity, induction, voltage. We know the theory of it. We know how to apply it, which seduces us into believing we master it. But what is "it"? The problem is similar to the debate about light, whether it be particle or wave in nature. We usually let the experts argue the abstractions of light theory, and we get on with watching our TV sets and using our computers and seeing with our eyes. We're all hooked to the power grid, and we use the power without fully understanding it.

My mystification began earlier than my electronic-repairman experience in the military: I was shocked to learn in college that the world isn't made up of little bits of inert matter bouncing into one another like billiard balls, but that the world is a swarming, quivering, vibrating matrix of electronic events, fleeting and insubstantial. How could the world be so solid and enduring at the level of trees and tables and human bodies, yet so ephemeral at the level of the electronic? It's like building a house on moving water. How to account for the behavior of electrons? Quantum mechanics, Chaos theory, positive and negative charges whizzing in tiny circles, Quarks, String theory. The deeper we go, the less we find. The universe is a shimmering thing.

At an existential level, when we open the back panel of life, we discover a tangle of energy beyond our comprehension. What sort of technician is going to begin to tinker with this? At this point, we need a shaman or a priest instead of a technician, a Sage rather than an engineer.

At the heart of our technical lives is a great mystery: power. What drives these biological machines? Ohm's Law stands out to me as the symbol of the mystery of electronics. It's a simple formula and it gives the impression of mastery, yet it's a cipher for something beyond us. Once, in a temple, I was listening to Buddhist monks chanting "Ohm" and realized it was a good word for the mysteries. "Ohm" is like the word "God"; it's a symbol that points to a deeper reality. Call it Godot if you wish, but some kind of power runs the universe. Electricity even hums through our own nervous system, generated deep in our body, crackling through the circuitry of our nervous system, animating us, making us move and live and have our being. Where does this power come from? Electronics has a vocabulary to describe and control it, and so does theology.

Theology school was very similar to electronics school. In seminary they gave us theological schematics, equipment and formulae, so that we can connect with the divine power grid and possibly harness it for human good. They gave us several devices: something called an Incarnation, a Resurrection, a Grace, a Faith, a Christ, a Logos, and an apparatus called a Trinity, which is a lot like Ohm's Law in its simplicity: elegance and cryptic muteness. And some dark, tangled thing called Sin, which no one can figure out with the current state of theometrics. Then there was a secret Black Box called God, which provoked a great deal of speculation as to what was actually in the box. Some people said nothing was in there, or only bones, others said a great mystery, or a ghost of a holy nature.

In seminary, we were taught the concepts, and how to apply the formulae, and make all the proper connections, and run the tests. I was well equipped, taking classes in Church Management, Hermeneutics, Theology, Biblical History, Spirituality, Theology of Ministry, Spiritual Disciplines for Survival in the Parish, Fundamentals of Preaching, Church Polity, Process Theology, Foundations for Church Education, Principles of Youth Ministry, World Religions, Christian Ethics, and much more. I learned how to operate all the gizmos and apply the formulae and derive the correct connections. Once, for fun, I connected all these religious devices together and had enough power to make a flashlight bulb glow.

Similar to electronics, the problem comes when the theological devices get old and wheezy; they wear out and fail like any piece of equipment. They no longer do what we ask them to do, and they take more and more work to maintain. When one of these theological devices malfunctions, we assumed it is some complicated problem, crossed wires or a broken component. Sometimes things get connected wrong, or cheap parts are used, or an oaf of a technician messes with it, and then when power is applied, it heats up and blows. Sometimes the problem is that it isn't plugged in. Even in theology, "power" is the problem, how to get it, how to tap into the divine power grid and use it properly, how not to get hurt by it, or worse. (Isn't there some warning in the Bible about the danger of getting too close to God, like touching a million volts? Or read, from an electrical point of view, about Moses meeting God on Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19:16-25.)

Even after learning how to operate the theological equipment, and how to apply the formulae and troubleshoot the problems, I still had the sense I didn't understand power. The temptation is to become arrogant with the knowledge. Like those who work with electricity become so familiar with its ways, they treat it very casually, as if they understand it and control it. But it's dangerous to take it for granted. Just accidentally touch 110 volts and we are reminded who is in charge. Similarly, those who work with the divine power, and are so familiar with its ways, are tempted to treat it very casually, as if they understand it and control it. But come into the presence of God and it will turn your hair gray.

Some Christian people get careless, even cocky about the Bible, as if knowledge of chapter and verse puts them in a superior position with God (not to mention, with other people). They see it as a kind of manual or schematic of life: follow the directions closely, understand the theory, memorize the principles, make all the right connections, install the parts properly, tune it up, and, presto!, you end up with divine power at your disposal, or something to that effect. Some even delude themselves into thinking they speak with the very voice of God about judgmental matters concerning other people. Yes, Divine power is like any kind of power. In the raw, it's wild and dangerous, and it must be harnessed properly for it to be safely used. But how can we think we have the right to manipulate the Divine Power so presumptuously?

We still have the problem of the connection between the theory and the reality. What is the relationship between the Bible and my life? Theologies tend to emphasize concepts, like items in a museum on display for viewing, or components wired together, or tools on a workbench. If that's the case, then being a Christian is a lot like being a technician, learning how to use the various theological devices. I've met some people who know theology so well, they sound like engineers reeling off theorems and postulates and laws and treat the Bible like an operating manual, and yet they live constricted, joyless lives. It's like someone who is an expert in art theory, but can't put brush to canvas with any artistic sense to save their lives. Knowledge is not the problem, it's the superior, over-blown claims we make about ourselves resulting from the knowledge.

Lest we forget: The theory of light, though highly useful, is not light. The theory of electronics, though eminently applicable, is not electricity. The theory of God, though awe inspiring, is not God. Creeds, confessions, concepts and theological systems, though clarifying, do not add up to a spiritual life. No matter what we might think of life, what theories about it we might hold to explain it, or even our blissful ignorance about it--none of this affects the basic reality of some kind of divine power at the core of life and the problem of how to connect to its grid and safely harness it for human good. The power is there, whatever name we apply to it, or how we describe its nature. Some people call it God, others the Power of Life. Whatever. A rose is a rose by any other name. We tend to go astray with concepts in general, thinking they do more for us than they really can. For example: "Trinity" is a concept that took centuries to work out, all with the intention and scientific precision of cracking the divine genetic code. The end product of all that work, and all the fighting that went with it, is a tangle of barbs, shards and sharp contradictions. Instead of being a tool to help us understand the nature of the divine, it becomes a hammer which knocks us senseless. "Trinity" stands out to me as the supreme symbol of the divine mystery. It's a simple formula and it gives the impression of mastery, yet it's a cipher for something beyond us. "Trinity" can be extremely useful if we let it stand as a symbol of the limits of our knowledge of the divine. After all, we are called to worship the divine, not to try to control it by turning it into a formula.

Whatever we call it, we still have the problem of harnessing the divine power, which is oddly similar to the problem of harnessing the power of electricity, and it's a simple problem, really.

When Bill Clinton was first running for President, the story was that there was a sign posted in the campaign office: "It's the economy stupid!" It was meant to remind everyone what was at the heart of the election. If we were going to post a sign in church which reminds us of what's most important in life, what would it be? If we were to express religion in its simplest form, what would it look like? Micah gave it a shot: "God has told you what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and

to walk humbly with your God?" I think that's about as simple as we can get it. Jesus knew all the formulae and laws and he boiled it all down to this: "Love God with all your heart, mind and soul. And value your neighbor the same way you value yourself." Simpler still, treat everything with respect. Respect. With all the flashing lights of worship and prayer, the liturgy, the candles and hymns, the bread and the cup, it all comes to treating everything with respect. That's seems to be the axiom of our religion.

It's interesting to notice that our theological maxims are action oriented: do, love, walk, value. The verbs are the conduits for the energy. And there are other important verbs: love, trust, worship. All the nouns are abstraction and theory, which is okay as far as they go. At least they help us keep the concepts straight, like a peg board with the outline of each tool indicating where it goes. But, once again, the outlines are not the tools themselves, just like the nouns are not the things they name. Nouns are the parts and verbs are what connect us to the energy. We need both the parts and the energy. The parts don't generate the energy that must come from another source. Looking at things from this point of view, spirituality is the practice of connecting the theological components to the divine energy.

Theological concepts are like electronic components. When they are connected in the proper way, and they are all functioning well, and when power is safely applied, they work. We need both the nouns and the verbs, the concepts and the application, the theory and the practice. But the theological concepts, no matter how well designed, are nothing without the applied power. Likewise, a life, however sophisticated and well designed, if it's not safely connected to the divine power grid, is like a TV set that isn't plugged in.