

THE SOFTWARE SCHISM

From "La Bustina di Minerva," a column by Umberto Eco, in the September 30, 1994, issue of the Italian journal L'Espresso.

Insufficient consideration has been given to the underground religious war that is transforming the modern world: the division between users of the Macintosh computer and users of MS-DOS compatible computers. I am firmly of the opinion that the Macintosh is Catholic and that DOS is Protestant. Indeed, the Macintosh is counter reformist and has been influenced by the methodical path of the Jesuits. It tells the faithful how they must proceed step by step to reach-if not the Kingdom of Heaven-the moment in which their document is printed. It is catechistic: the essence of revelation is dealt with via simple formulae and sumptuous icons. Everyone has a right to salvation.

DOS is Protestant, or even Calvinistic. It allows free interpretation of scripture, demands difficult personal decisions, imposes a subtle Hermeneutics upon the user, and takes for granted the idea that not all can reach salvation. To make the system work you need to interpret it yourself: the user is closed within the loneliness of his own inner torment.

And what about the machine language that lies beneath both operating systems? Ah, that is the stuff of the Old Testament, Talmudic and cabalistic.