Electronic Media and the Past-Future of Christianity
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The late 20th century saw a significant decline in the membership and social position of mainline Christian churches in many western societies. A significant aspect of this decline was its generational character. In Australia, for example, the past two decades has seen the virtual disappearance of people under the age of 40 from mainline churches, as illustrated below:[1]

Table 1: Ages of Australian church attendees

	Uniting Church	Anglican	Pentecostal
50 years +	66%	61%	25%
30-49 years	24%	27%	48%
15-29 years	10%	13%	28%

This disappearance of younger people from churches has both practical and symbolic effects. Practically it means a major drop in finances, in the number of people providing voluntary labour for church activities, and future renewal of current membership. Symbolically, young people and children represent new life, vitality and the hope of the future. The disappearance of young people from many traditional churches therefore has created a crisis of faith, hope and morale among those adults who remain.

Are we entering post-Christianity?

There are a number who suggest that this crisis is a sign of the end of institutionalised faith. Sociologist Steve Bruce, for example, sees the decline in churches as a consequence of the steady progress of secularisation, characteristic of society in the modern industrialised world.[2] Bruce argues that the Reformation introduced the voluntary principle into Christianity, opening the way for the element of choice in religious belonging. This lead to the phenomenon of selective church membership and even optional belief, relocating faith authority away from the society to the individual.[3]

While individualism has always had a place in modern religious practice, it has previously meant the freedom to dissent. Now individualism means the right of the individual to determine. According to Bruce, this favours the cult type of religious expression more than that of church, denomination or sect. [4]

In the light of these changes and the decline in Christianity's social and institutional forms, a number of thinkers argue for abandonment of the past forms altogether and the creation of something totally new. Don Cupitt makes this point:

> "Until very recently it was a matter of great grief to me that the Church seemed unwilling and even unable to reform itself: but now it seems that people in general have decided that there is not enough left to salvage. Reform, isn't worth trying for: let the dead bury their dead. It wasn't I who decided that it is now too late, but the general public. In which case it is time to describe something new."[5]

I'm with those who see many of the current institutional forms of the Christian church as well past their use by date. I see great value in the post-modern exposé and dismantling of some of the Christian patriarchal superstructures that over the centuries have been the agency of colonial exploitation, destruction of indigenous cultures, suppression of dissent, the abuse and murder of women, and the suppression of the healthy diversity of human sexuality. Strategically also, there is great value in Cupitt's suggestion that concerned people of faith should cease bothering about trying to change the old and concentrate on facilitating the emergence of the new.

But I also have some questions about the concept of the de-institutionalisation of religious faith. Not because it undermines the power of the current institutions, but because I suspect that the concept of de-institutionalising of religious faith is not a de-institutionalising at all, but a **re-institutionalising** of religious faith **within the institutions of commercial mass media**. Social health, I believe, lies in the maintenance of diversity, and that involves maintaining robust social institutions that contend with the institutional forms constructed and preferred by commercial media.

I believe there is great potential in the current ferment. In faith terms, it can be seen as a creative God pruning the old in order for new life and new forms to come forth. Continuing the gardening metaphor, this process of composting what has died to feed the living has been part of the Christian heritage since its beginnings.

Church analyses of the crisis

A range of Christian missiologists, strategists and theological writers have been addressing themselves to this changing social position of churches. Part of this response has involved strategies for helping churches redefine and reposition themselves. Many of these strategies are retrograde – their operating assumption seems to be a Christendom model of social dominance, political coercion, patriarchal imposition and moral imperialism. It seems as if a major commercial industry has now arisen around selling solutions to churches in crisis.

For many thinkers, Thomas Kuhn's[6] concept of paradigm shift has become a common device for explaining the changed social relationships most western churches now find themselves in. In missiology, for example, Loren Mead of the Alban Institute, identifies three paradigms: the Apostolic, the Christendom, and the Emerging paradigms.[7] In theology and church history, Hans Kung's recent major survey of Christian history uses a paradigmatic approach, describing six major paradigms in Christian history.[8]

While this paradigmatic approach falls into all the traps and restrictions of grand narrative constructions, they can provide a useful bridge and construct of coherence for many from which to conceptualise the specifics of the present situation.

The missing factor: the place of media

What is missing from most church analyses of the present situation, however, is any sort of consideration of the part played by changes in the social structures of mediated communication. Five years ago I surveyed ten recent theological texts addressing issues of theology and culture. Of the ten, only one made any mention of media as a significant factor in their cultural analysis. I think this represents more than an oversight. From my work and conversations with church leaders, I have identified a number of methodological or structural factors that create blindness in the minds of many church leaders to the importance of media within culture and cultural change:

- A tendency to view media within an instrumental rather than a cultural framework;
- an intellectual disdain for electronic media as a lower form of culture that is unworthy of theological consideration;
- a tendency to think of faith within an Enlightenment frame of ideas and institutional forms, neglecting other important expressions of faith such as everyday practices, visual and material culture;
- personal media preference. The age and education of most church leaders place them into different media-cultural sub-groups to those of later generations.
- professional practices that lock religious leaders into a particular media culture. Many church leaders tell me - sometimes proudly, sometimes dismissively - that they're too busy to watch television or go to the movies. Their major media activities are reading books and journals, activities that put them out of touch with the most common media practices of the people to whom they're supposed to be communicating.

Reframing perspectives

Part of my professional role for a number of years was to try to reframe these dominant understandings so that churches could begin to engage electronic media-culture in a more positive and less oppositional way.

One of the practical difficulties in doing this is that there is no single, nor simple coherent theory of media and cultural change that one can draw on in order to break open the firm instrumental ideological mindset of most church leaders and theologians. One needs to be honest to the complexity of media-culture theory, but if one is too complex or goes into too much detail, you reinforce the instrumental view because it is at least simple and usable.

Elizabeth Eisenstein notes the difficulties of finding a good balance in her analysis of the social impact of printing on 15th and 16th century Europe. She writes,

> When dealing with these transformations it is important to strike the right balance between the uninformed enthusiasts who assume printing changed almost *everything* and the scholarly sceptics who hold it changed *nothing*. The enthusiasts overestimate the initial changes wrought by print and forget that pre-literate folk were not much affected… The sceptics… do not appreciate the danger that comes from *under*estimating its true dimensions.[9]

The approach I have used in consultations and workshops with church leaders has the following theoretical framework, in outline:

1. Using a concept gained from Stewart Hoover,[10] I challenge the metaphor of the media as instruments and propose the metaphor of media as the web of culture, the framework upon which all other cultural activities and institutions are located and constructed.
2. Drawing on the work of theorists such as Walter Ong, I explore ways in which the characteristics of different media shape or influence the cultural characteristics of those activities constructed through their mediation and ways in which changes in cultural forms can be correlated with changes in structures of mediation.[11]
3. I explore ways in which electronic-based technologies of communication are contributing to changes in the fabric and shape of the cultural web.
4. I propose that these changing patterns of mediated culture are producing major consequences for faith ideologies, practices and institutional forms that were developed to be relevant to the web of previous media cultural contexts. The structural blindness of religious thinkers and leaders to the social constructive role of

media means that religious institutions, which are significantly affected by these changes, lack an adequate analysis on which to respond to them.

Media contests in the development of Christianity

This lack of appreciation for the culturally constructive role of media means that the significant role that media have played in the cultural and institutional development of Christianity over the centuries has been relatively unexplored. As a result, valuable lessons that could be drawn from Christian history that would provide useful perspectives on current developments and possible future responses are simply undeveloped.
Two specific instances from Christian history may serve to illustrate that the current turmoil being experienced within churches today, prompted by the electrifying of the global media web, has precedents in Christian history.

Opposition to writing in the early church

A persistent issue I have found in working with church leaders around the issue of electronic media is their fear that engaging electronic media seriously will compromise Christian faith. Most Christian leaders I work with are strongly influenced in their cultural thinking by the framework articulated by Richard Niebuhr in his book *Christ and culture*. There, Niebuhr defines faith (or Christ) and culture as separate entities - overlapping and intertwined certainly, but still capable of separate identification. For most church leaders, Christianity is a distinct body of ideas and practices, defined and defended most effectively in theological books and journals. In this common view, electronic media are seen as more than just another form of mediation: their very structure as well as common content are seen a significant threat to Christianity as a thoughtful, ordered, and authoritative faith structure.

One of the useful perspectives of postmodern criticism has been to challenge this view. Far from being a single, unitary, discreetly bounded entity that has moved systematically and paradigmatically through history, writers such as Kathryn Tanner[12] argue that Christianity has always been a diverse, messy and often contradictory movement of individuals, institutions, sentiments and practices that are continually in the process of being constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed in the concrete lives of its adherents and institutions. Christian identity is a continual task, not an accomplishment.

Within this complex dynamic, differences generated by differences in how faith was mediated, and the various power contests associated with those forms of mediation, have been significant factors in how Christianity has developed.

Given the current hegemonic identification of Christianity with written and printed text, it is instructive to note that the adoption of text in the transmission of Christian faith was the cause of strong conflict in the first several centuries of Christianity. The opposition to writing was so strong that one of the early fathers, Clement of Alexandria, in the early third century, felt it necessary to name these objections and respond to them explicitly when writing (!) the first chapter of his book, *Stromateis*.

The objections being voiced, as identified by Clement were these:
    The living voice was the best medium for the communication of Christian truth. Writings were public and it
    was wrong to cast pearls before swine. To write implied that one was inspired by the Holy Spirit and this was

a presumptuous claim. If one must write, it were better that one should write badly. The heretics had shown that a clever style could mislead and corrupt.[13]

These objections indicate an implicit recognition by those with roots in oral forms of discourse that adopting a different mediation of faith would involve significant changes to how faith is understood, embodied, communalised and passed on.

Clement in his work provided counter arguments for each of these objections. Writing had distinct advantages, and not to write simply abandoned the field to those who would use it anyway for adverse purposes. It is obvious that Clement's view won out. Christian men in this period, particularly highly literate men such as Clement and Origen from the literate cultural centre of Alexandria, played a major role in intentionally moving Christianity from the cultural fringes of the Greco-Roman world into the very centre of its cultural life and philosophy.

Writing was not the only influence in this – but it was a very significant one. Writing provided liberties of action that were fundamental to the formulation and ascendancy of Christian ideas and organisational structures within the Roman Empire. Origen, for example, is said to have assembled a team of trained word processors who churned out by hand a massive 6,000 works, only a few of which have survived.
'Stenographers copied his sermons and lectures in shorthand, secretaries transcribed the notes, and calligraphers produced elegant copies.' The stature of biblical studies was increased by Origen's *Hexapla*, 'a kind of study of the Old Testament. It had six parallel columns, one of the Scripture in Hebrew, and the other five of various Greek translations.'[14]

In this deliberate strategy of cultural re-mediation of faith, the formal defining features of Christianity were changed profoundly and the die was cast for its future development into a universal religion within the universal culture of Hellenism. Hans Kung notes the changes brought by these influential Christian men of letters:
> "The centre of Christian theology is now no longer, as in Paul, Mark and the New Testament generally, the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Now largely speculative questions stand in the centre: how the three hypostases in the one Godhead are related; how the incarnation of the divine Logos and the bridging of the Platonic gulf between the true, ideal, heavenly world and the untrue, material, earthly world is to be envisaged; how Jesus can be described as the God-man.... There is no mistaking the fact that already among the early Greek fathers the main theological interest shifted from the concrete salvation history of the people of Israel and the Rabbi from Nazareth to the great soteriological system."[15]

This universalising of Christian thought laid the basis for Christianity to become the religion of the Empire, and the imposition of an institutional order and creedal ideology that has been normative to this day. There were many alternative understandings and interpretations of what being Christian meant, but they were never able to exert the same influence in a centralised manner because their mediation of faith was decentralised, contextual, and fluid.

One of those streams of alternative understanding and organisation was in the oral-charismatic Christian communities, whose leadership included a high proportion of women. In the dynamic messiness of contestation, the power brought by writing was an important factor in determining who had access to the processes within which significant decisions were made. This included, for example, specific actions to ban Christian women from writing and to suppress and declare as heretical women-lead oral-prophetic communities, such as the Montanists.

The contest around oral and written mediation of Christian faith in early Christian communities is a rich area waiting further research.

What reality do words of faith refer to?

Several years ago I viewed a quite gruesome but powerful commercial film called Butterfly Kiss. It tells the story of a sexually-abused and self-abusive young woman called Eunice who is travelling through northern England in search of a mother-like figure called Judith. On her travels, she is propositioned sexually by a number of men, to whom she responds by killing them. A waitress called Miriam, a symbol of the good, befriends her and travels with her to help her find Judith and prevent her from killing people. In the middle of the movie, there is a scene in which Eunice discloses to Miriam her deep anguish:

> 'I've been forgotten. I kill people, and nothing happens... You'd think that God would smite me, or take me into bondage. But nowt! He doesn't see me. He doesn't see me. It's like I've disappeared and become invisible.'

The scene struck me particularly powerfully at the time because of work with people who were survivors of sexual abuse within church communities, for whom these are common existential and theological questions. Eunice's experience also struck me as emblematic of a recurring question I hear, particularly from young people, of faith validation. What 'reality' do words of faith refer to or invoke?

In her study, *Seeing the Lord: resurrection and early Christian practice*, Marianne Sawicki provides an analysis of the construction of faith meaning in the New Testament period and the influences of different mediations of faith in that construction.

Sawicki notes that the earliest sayings and stories of Jesus travelled across Palestine and across social frontiers for the most part as oral recitations, not as written texts. These oral recitations shared characteristics common to many forms of oral history and story-telling, in which the past was recounted, adapted and continually made real in the present in the person and actions of the story-teller or the oral prophet.

Jesus himself stood in this tradition. He was itinerant, validating his words by deeds: exorcising demons, healing and performing wonders. His teachings were improvised and adapted for the situation. The earliest Christian prophets and story-tellers followed this teaching and working style of Jesus: they travelled, exorcised demons, healed, preached in the name of Jesus, and uttered new sayings as if they came from the mouth of Jesus himself. Resurrection was proclaimed as a real-time experience: Jesus was not remembered as someone from out of the past whose life had closed. 'The prophetic way was to proclaim that one now lives and works among the people, who is Jesus, who died.'[14] The Jesus who died was identical with this person speaking and making things happen in the midst of the people.

There were a range of advantages in this mode of communicating faith. It located faith within people through the richness of presence, voice and personal actions that produced physical effects. It also allowed for the past to be continually adapted relevantly to the present through the process of creative re-membering and re-telling.

But there were also a number of disadvantages. If the power of one's words was dependent on making things happen, things had to keep happening in order for the communication to be validated. If Jesus was continually saying new things through the prophets, there was an emerging problem of maintaining continuity between the new things Jesus was saying and the words of the original Jesus. Prophets were also notoriously undependable. Fired by the spontaneity of the spirit, they could often disappear just when you needed them.

These disadvantages created the practical need to locate the faith within something more stable. Writing had liberties of action that appeared to provide that stability. The original sayings and stories of Jesus began to be written down in order to preserve them. The past was stabilised and fixed in the written text.

In many ways the process of writing down the stories and sayings about Jesus was continuous with and complementary to oral tradition.[15]

But writing also created discontinuities with oral practices of faith. Writing down stories and sayings was an innovation and a significant departure from the style and method of Jesus.[16] While fixing the past in written text solved the problem of stabilising the past against continual modifications and the unpredictability of the Spirit, it created a problem of its own: that is, once Jesus was fixed in the past, how was one to have real-time contact with Jesus in the present? How can Jesus be risen Lord, how can Jesus perform present wonders, if Jesus is buried once again in the text?

The solution for the writer of the Gospel of Matthew and of Luke-Acts was through obedience. Jesus comes to life out of the text by readers and listeners following Jesus' teachings and by ritualising his presence. How do you know what Jesus' teachings are in a textual community? You need somebody who can interpret the text – a teacher.

The process of writing down the sayings and stories of Jesus therefore involved a gradual displacement of the mediation role of oral-prophets with the mediation role of teachers and leaders of the ritual. It involved also a realignment of the relationship between words and actions: away from the miracle-working presence of the oral prophets towards a focus on ethical behaviour and ritualised presence within the community.

As noted earlier, this shift did not happen without contestation and this contestation can be seen in various places. The writer of Matthew's gospel warns in a number of places against the danger of false prophets and prophetic signs. Gradually the kinds of works that were to be done in Jesus' name were no longer wonder-works but deeds of justice and compassion.

Within a textual community, teaching takes on a new significance. Sawicki notes how, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus' actions as a prophet were downplayed in the text as Jesus was constructed more as a teacher, consistent with the known Greek social practice of *paidea*. So Jesus was made 'real' by reconstructing Jesus in the text in a way that resonated with known cultural practices and roles. In the process, the role of the teacher became a significant one, for "in the days before widespread literacy and inexpensive printed bibles, access to the text is through teachers alone."[17]

Within this framework, the early gospels can be seen as more than just a written record of events. They represent a constructive media exercise, an effort to found the Christian movement on a particular media-based methodology of making faith real, i.e. grounded in the written text as a basis for teaching and ritualised presence.

In this context Matthew's attacks on the prophets, like the later attacks on the oral-prophetic Christian communities by those who were trying to establish Christianity through centralised, hierarchical structures, reflect more than just a difference of ideas. They reflect a polemic by particular groups who were grounded in a particular mediation of faith against differently mediated faith cultures that were seen as potentially subversive or damaging.

Continuation of contested mediation

The method of making faith real by grounding it in a text, interpreted by accredited teachers into ethical actions and re-membering rituals has remained a very effective method for making faith real within Christianity to his point. To a significant extent, the 'reality' of the words of textual faith have been validated by the development of powerful religious institutions aligned with significant political, military and economic forces. Reality was constructed in the words through the churches' political and social power to discipline, socially ostracise, or even execute those who ignored them.

Today, there is a convergence of factors that are undermining these text-based strategies of making faith real. One of these is the decline in the social and political power of churches to coerce acceptance of preferred meanings in Christian words and symbols. The second is a radical shift in mediation and construction of social reality, away from the social and cognitive characteristics of text-based mediation within which 'official' Christianity has largely been based, to the more dynamic, transient and sensory fluidity of electronically mediated reality.

The consequence is that the social and cosmological view that gave meaning to Christian words and ritual practices is no longer there. The crisis in much of traditional Christianity is not just a crisis of institutions: it is a crisis of meaning. Faith words continue to have their own consistent internal logic for those who know the grammar, but increasingly they are losing their power to evoke material meaning for those whose feet are in differently mediated cultures.

The changes taking place in a major faith tradition like Christianity today cannot be fully understood without an analysis of the crucial role of different forms of mediation in the construction of culture and cultural meaning and the shifts that occur when that structure of mediation changes.

Notes

[1] Australian National Church Life Survey, 1997.

[2] Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (OUP, Oxford, 1996). Bruce writes, 'The basic elements of what we conveniently refer to as 'modernisation' fundamentally altered the place and nature of religious beliefs, practices, and organisations so as to reduce their relevance to the lives of nation-states, social groups, and individuals, in roughly that order.' (p1)

[3] The fragmentation of religious culture that took place in the Reformation and post-Reformation period, according to Bruce, "was, in time, to see the widespread, taken-for-granted, and unexamined Christianity of the pre-Reformation period replaced by an equally widespread, taken-for-granted, and unexamined indifference to religion." Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World*, p4.

[4] 'Modernisation makes the church form of religion impossible. The church requires either cultural homogeneity or an elite sufficiently powerful to enforce conformity.... Modernisation also undermines the hierarchical and rigid

social structures which permit the maintenance of mono-cultures.' Steve Bruce, "Cathedrals to Cults: The Evolving Forms of the Religious Life," in Paul Heelas, ed., *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, (Blackwell, Oxford, 1998), pp23-24.

[5] Don Cupitt, 'Post-Christianity,' in Paul Heelas, ed., *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1998), pp218-19.

[6] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1970).

[7] Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (The Alban Institute, New York, 1991).

[8] Hans Kung, *Christianity: The Religious Situation of Our Time* (SCM Press, London, 1994). Kung's paradigms are: The Jewish Apocalyptic Paradigm of Earliest Christianity; The Ecumenical Hellenistic Paradigm of Christian Antiquity; The Roman Catholic Paradigm of the Middle Ages; The Protestant Evangelical Paradigm of the Reformation; The Paradigm of Modernity, Orientated on Reason and Progress; and The Present Paradigm.

[9] Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, 'The Emergence of Print Culture in the West,' *Journal of Communication* Winter (1980), pp99-106.

[10] Stewart Hoover, 'What Do We Do about the Media?' *Conrad Griebel Review* Spring (1993), pp97-107.

[11] See for example, Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologising of the Word* (Routledge, London, 1982). There is a range of criticisms of Ong's approach, such as Ruth Finnegan in *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Blackwell, London, 1988). Where appropriate it's important to address those criticisms. But for those who have never given consideration to any other view than that media are simply instruments for getting across one's message, Ong's work is useful for exploring the correlations between the characteristics of the form by which reality is mediated and the shape and character of cultural forms, practices and ethos that form around, through and within those mediations.

[12] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997).

[13] Eric Osborn, 'Teaching and Writing in the First Chapter of the *Stromateis* of Clement of Alexandria, *Journal of Theological Studies* 10 (1959), pp335-43.

[14] Stephen Miller, 'Mavericks and Misfits,' *Christian History* 43 (1994), pp18-21.

[15] Kung, *Christianity*, pp167-68.

[14] Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practice* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1994), pp85-6.

[15] 'These (Gospel) texts should be read as traces of oral practices occurring before the writing, continuing alongside the writing, and often persisting independently after the writing. Each saying had plenty of variants, and they could bundle with other sayings or stand alone, depending on the needs of the occasion. A Gospel writer had quite a few to choose from; or to put it another way, the writer had ample precedent to mix and match and improvise in accordance with traditional oral practices.' Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord,* p29

[16] 'There was a time when a textual, written Gospel was an oddity, a curious innovation amid the Jesus' movements. Sayings of and about Jesus ordinarily were recited to the accompaniment of certain distinctive practices, which could not be replicated in texts. The textual practice of writing itself does not come from Jesus; writing Gospels was an innovation introduced in several early churches. This new way of remembering Jesus severed the traditional interaction among spoken words and their context. The 'old' way, the way that arguably came from Jesus, was to vary the sayings about God's kingdom and to improvise.' Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord,* p29.

[17] Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord,* p87.

For further reading

Pierre Babin, *The New Era in Religious Communication* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1991).

Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996).

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Paul Heelas, ed., *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1998).

Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby, eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1997).

Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Yale University Press, New Haven 1997).

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