

Literacy, writing and branding: Media and the episcopal takeover of Christianity

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There has been a significant growth of interest and research in recent years into the interactions now taking place between media and religion. A significant concern being expressed in different areas is what is being described in some Nordic research in particular as “a mediatization of religion.”

The central concern is that media today have become such a powerful institution and cultural force that they are exerting a significant external influence on religious institutions and practices to such an extent the idea that the distinctive character and qualities of religion, and what they are supposed to contribute to a society, are being lost. Religions are losing their character as altruistic, alternative value institutions with their own inner life and logic and are being absorbed in the wider values of the media circus.

Within this view, these questions of mediation or mediatization of religion are seen as distinctively modern or hyper-modern issues. While most religions use media in different forms, the situation today is seen as distinctively different because media no longer exist just as instruments for individuals and social institutions to use, but comprise the ubiquitous environment within which social reality is constructed.

This approach to thinking about media and religion can be challenged on a number of different grounds.

One is connected with the idea that media operate as an external influence upon religion. When you look at the history of a religion such as Christianity, I think it becomes apparent that processes of media and mediation are not external to most religions but are innate within them and integral to the development of religious character and identity.

A second question relates to the implication that media and religion are singular or relatively definable phenomena that can be set against each other – the logic of media versus the logic of religion. Even a single recognized tradition such as Christianity is extremely diverse and pluralistic, with significant differences and contradictions not only in opinions and practices, but at the core of some of its most fundamental beliefs. The only coherence there is in the idea of Christianity comes from particular groups at particular times or in particular places using their power to force other people to accept their opinion and silencing or even murdering those who refuse to. Hundreds of thousands of Christians have been murdered by other Christians throughout the centuries in the process of trying to define what Christianity is. At one stage the Pope in Rome and the Pope in Constantinople didn't talk to each other for a thousand years because they disagreed about one Greek letter in the

Nicene Creed. So good luck to the sociologist or media studies person who tries to build a theory on the concept of the logic of Christianity.

Media **within Christianity** have been important in that religious, hegemonic process – and I stress, this is media within Christianity, not media from outside Christianity. This includes different groups trying to “naturalize” particular communication practices, media hierarchies, discourses and processes of symbolization so that particular media practices appear as innate to the religion, and changes in media practice are portrayed as heretical.

The interactions between media and religion today are fascinating. But the idea that they’re distinctively modern or hyper-modern issues is misguided. They’re not. Certainly within Christianity, questions of how religion is and should be mediated, and the implications of changing modes and packages of communication, have been bubbling since its very beginnings.

To get a perspective on these contemporary issues, I want to look at a number of situations from the early history of Christianity, particularly around conflicts that occurred in the first four centuries between the oral and written mediation of the faith.

The argument over writing in early Christianity

There is a fascinating chapter in one of the third century books of Clement of Alexandria, in which he gives an extended defence and justification for his use of writing.

Writing is such a basic and fundamental medium to us today that we hardly count it as a medium at all. But the contributions that writing made in the development of Christianity were profound, possibly more profound than the implications of media change for Christianity today.

Christianity has, from its beginnings, been an oral-literate movement. But the appropriate uses of both speech and writing, how they were integrated, and the relative authority of each, were matters of importance and the cause of significant debate and contention. It is apparent that, two hundred years after the start of Christianity, there was still sufficiently strong prejudice by Christians **against** writing, that Clement felt it necessary to justify why he was writing.

To understand the roots of these early arguments about media and religion, it is necessary to go back even further to Jesus himself.

Crossan (1994) puts forward a strong case that, contrary to the later written records, it is likely that Jesus, as a rural Palestinian peasant, was **illiterate**. The fact that Jesus was illiterate was politically significant in a social situation where such media questions as the languages one spoke, where one was placed in the protocols of communication, whether one could read or write or not, and the languages one could read or write in, were important markers of social status, access and privilege.

The time of Jesus was a time of imperial domination. Oppressive state and religious taxation was devastating the rural poor of Palestine, and their failure to pay their religious taxes branded them as unclean and shut them out of participation in the religion. Jesus was a member of this class - he identified with them, he took their side, and he spoke in a way they could understand. His oral media style was a marker of this, and the skill with which he communicated orally made what he was saying fully accessible and inclusive to those with whom he was identifying. It also affirmed and celebrated the value of their outcast culture.

The content of his message wasn’t one of universal salvation; it was distinctively Jewish charismatic prophecy addressed to Jewish concerns. His message called on people and Jewish leaders to abandon their religious politics of holiness that arbitrarily created a class of

religious outcasts and recover their calling to be the chosen community of a gracious God. And in line with the genre of charismatic prophecy, he embodied the power of his oral performance by acts of spiritual power and creating a model inclusive community of nobodies, outcasts and women in which all were equal. The content and style of his communication was integral to his message and what he was about.

After his death, the first Christians, 95-97% of whom were illiterate, followed what Jesus had modelled. They spoke in the marketplace, challenged the authorities, healed the sick, and continued to build an egalitarian community. The imperative in their communication wasn't a written **literal** one, simply to preserve an accurate, objective account of the past; it was oral **rhetoric**. They spoke boldly, they performed miracles, they argued with the powers that be, they spoke of God coming to them in dreams and visions, they spoke in tongues, and they adapted the sayings of Jesus and invented new sayings of Jesus to convince and win people over to a new reality.

I'm not trying to preach a sermon here – I just want you to get a good idea of the style and dynamic of the mediated communication that gave birth to the movement of Christianity.

From the very beginning also, possibly even while Jesus was alive, people who could write wrote down things he said and accounts of things that happened. But with 95-97% of the first Christians being illiterate and from the lower classes, and with the model of Jesus freshly in their minds, writing was subordinate in what was a strongly oral speech movement.

As the Jesus movement spread and grew, and as more educated people joined the movement, the amount and use of written material grew also, so that by the end of the first century, even though the vast majority of Christians still were illiterate, there was an extensive circulation of Christian writings taking place: letters, apocalyptic writings, defences of the faith, manuals of practice, martyr stories, fiction even, and gospels – likely hundreds of gospels of different types, ascribed to various apostles, were in circulation (Burns, 1989).

The orthodox Christian position has been that these early written materials were primarily written versions of the oral traditions, and the relationship between the two was a completely harmonious complementary one. But other scholarship suggests that there were significant conflicts between the two. Evidence of those conflicts can be seen in some of the early writings and gospels (Sawicki, 1994). Those conflicts over the proper mediation of the faith were obviously still sufficiently strong by the start of the third century that Clement, writing in Egypt felt it important to address them. So in the first chapter of his book *Stromata* (or *Miscellanies*), he gives an extended justification for why he was writing down his teachings rather than delivering them verbally.

Clement, or Titus Flavius Clemens, to give him his full Roman name, was born of wealthy pagan parents round about 155, and had extensive philosophical training in the Hellenistic traditions before converting to Christianity. He became the head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria, a major imperial centre, where he died in 215. His major writings are significant for going beyond providing just a defence of Christianity, to developing a systematic explication of Christianity in a Christian Platonist framework. Clement was a significant figure in the development of Christian writings into what could be called Christian literature.

A number of issues in the conflict can be identified (Fiskå Hägg, 2006; Kimber Buell, 1999; Osborn, 1959; See among others, Sawicki, 1994). There's a couple of interesting things about them. One is that the arguments being raised about the growing adoption of writing within Christianity parallel the arguments that are raised whenever there is a significant remediation of Christianity, including in the present time. This makes me think that the issue we are dealing with is not a modern one of media changing religion, but of understanding the contribution that media and questions of mediation make to how a religion understands and

expresses itself. The second interesting aspect of these issues is that the concerns being expressed about writing, in my opinion, turned out to be fairly justified. Let me identify some of them.

1. The living voice was seen as the best medium for the communication of Christian truth

This is a question of media and the embodiment of religion. It was inconceivable to many of the early Christians that a faith that talks about a living relationship with God could be communicated in any way other than through the lives and voices of living people. How could black ink on a piece of dead skin or dried reeds be any match for the richness, modulation, passion and presence of the human voice? The Christian Papias, around the year 150, reflected this, "For I did not think that what was to be gotten from the books would profit me as much as what came from the living and abiding voice." (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, iii. 39:3,4) Surely if faith was removed from the human voice and put into a depersonalized medium like writing, it would change the character of the faith.

2. Writings were public documents, and to commit Christian teachings to writing was "to cast pearls before swine."

The Christian concerns here reflect those of Socrates, with whom Clement was familiar: *"Every speech, once it is in writing, is bandied about everywhere equally among those who understand and those who have no business having it. It does not know to whom it ought to speak and to whom not."* (Phaedrus) In a way that is being recovered in modern education theory, face-to-face teaching is an interactive process. The teacher modulates the passing on of information according to the student's development and readiness to learn. Writing down Christian teachings broke the teacher-student nexus and made Christian ideas available indiscriminately. This ran the risk of Christian ideas being misunderstood, changed, cheapened, or even used for evil or destructive purposes.

3. To write implied that one was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and this was seen as a presumptuous claim

This is a question of changing cultural literacy. When a person was physically present before you, it was easy for an audience to read the person and tell whether they were inspired or not and therefore whether their message was "true" in a personal sense. But how could one tell if a writer was inspired if you couldn't see the writer? How could you judge accurately that a set of marks on one parchment were inspired but another set of marks on another parchment weren't? To adapt Christian teachings to writing therefore required different cultural literacy skills, which at that time were available only to around 5-10% of Christians.,

4. The heretics were using writing to mislead and corrupt people and real faith should be kept separate from that.

This is a question of association, and has been repeated at various times in relation to printing, rock music, television and the internet. How would people be able to distinguish Christian truth from heretical error if they were both in the same medium? Wouldn't encouraging people to read Christian writings also run the risk of having them read heretical ones? This concern even led some to suggest that if Christian teachers were to write it would be better that they write badly, to distinguish Christian writings from the clever writings of the heretics, at least in their form.

5. Writing repositioned Christianity culturally and disenfranchised the majority of Christians, who were illiterate

This is a question of access and participation. Once Christian writings were written down,

only those who could read and write would have full participation in the formation and transmission of Christian truths. The illiterate majority of Christians could see that when teaching became written, they would be excluded from teaching roles. They could also see that those whose leadership was based on their oral communication skills or charismatic abilities would be diminished. So writing posed the threat of erecting a class barrier a community that many still saw as inclusive and egalitarian.

6. Writing severed the links between Christianity and the character of Jesus

This is a question of tradition. One of the important characteristics of the early Christian movement was its attachment to the person of Jesus, the beloved teacher. Stories were told about his identification with the outcast, his Aramaic style of story telling, his down-to-earth parables theology, and his charismatic engagement with people. Jesus was illiterate, he chose mostly illiterate people to be his followers, his message was accessible to everybody. He didn't write and obviously didn't need to write - why should his followers? Doesn't changing the mediation of the faith lose its identification with the character of Jesus?

Crossan suggests, incidentally, that Jesus' illiteracy presented a significant political and cultural challenge to educated Christians who were trying to recommend Christianity to their class. This underlies why Jesus is presented in some of the Gospels as a literate person – the writers of Christianity re-invented Jesus to be one of them.

(Scenes such as) Luke 4:1-30, where his adult skill in finding and interpreting a certain Isaiah passage astonishes his fellow villagers in the synagogue at Nazareth, must be seen for what they are: Lukan propaganda rephrasing Jesus' oral challenge and charisma in terms of scribal literacy and exegesis. (Crossan, 1994, p. 26)

Clement's response

Clement in his chapter responds to each of these concerns, giving what we would consider today to be very valid arguments for adopting what is a very useful medium. He acknowledges their concerns but counters them by identifying a number of distinct advantages writing brings, positioning writing as a complement to the oral communication of faith: it preserves the tradition from being forgotten, it plants seeds in people's minds that can be brought to fruition by others, it can counter the heretics in their own medium.

It were certainly ridiculous for one to disapprove of the writing of earnest men, and approve of those, who are not such, engaging in the work of composition. (The heretics) are to be allowed to write in their own shameful manner. But he who proclaims the truth is to be prevented from leaving behind him what is to benefit posterity.” (Strom 1:1)

Clement even suggests that writing can help Christian teachers avoid flattery, because their audience is not present before them. *“He who speaks by writings escapes the reproach of mercenary motives.”*

This particular debate illustrates an important aspect that I mentioned earlier: that shifts in media do not simply impact on religions from the outside, but tap into constant political and power struggles already taking place within religion about the nature of the faith and its relationship to wider contexts.

Clement did not invent this argument within Christianity, and his defence of writing was certainly not the last word on it. But as Christianity developed and spread, writing grew in importance in coordination of the movement, to the extent that it became almost essential for every Christian congregation to have someone in the congregation who could write, read and interpret the scriptures, letters and other writings. A formal position of *lector* or reader in a congregation is first mentioned by Justin Martyr around the year 160, and being a lector soon became an important step on the path to the hierarchy of leadership in Catholic

churches.

Literacy and the dominance of the Catholic Party

It's my contention that writing was a significant factor in how Christianity developed, to the extent that Catholic Christianity became synonymous with Christianity in the West. Understanding how that happened provides a valuable perspective on how media and religion interact with each other.

By the second century, Christianity was a diverse movement, with a number of identifiable streams, all of which had adapted the original Jewish prophetic message of Jesus in different cultural ways:

- ❖ Jewish Christianity, which saw Jesus as the predicted Messiah but not divine;
- ❖ Gnostic Christianity, which aligned the Jesus tradition with the wider dualistic philosophical and religious movement of Gnosticism;
- ❖ Marcionism, which saw the god of the Jewish scriptures and the god of Jesus as different gods;
- ❖ Logos or Catholic-Orthodox Christianity, which aligned Jesus with Hellenistic culture through the philosophical concept of the Logos;
- ❖ Montanism, which was a largely oral, charismatic, prophetic, apocalyptic movement, led by two women.

Out of this diversity, by the middle of the fourth century, one of those streams had become dominant: Logos Christianity or the Catholic-Orthodox Party. Though it was only one of the various cultural adaptations that had been made of the original story of Jesus, Catholic Christianity had established itself culturally to such an extent that it was adopted and politically enforced by the Roman Emperor as the official and only true version of Christianity. The nature of Christianity as developed by the Catholic Party is significantly different from the religious vision originally posed by Jesus.

- ❖ There is only one correct form of organization that is truly Christian: local communities headed by a male priest linked in a hierarchical form of authority under a regional male bishop or overseer. In contrast to Jesus' example, women are excluded from positions of leadership.
- ❖ Only one set of Christian beliefs and practice are recognized as right – that defined by the bishops. The Jewishness of Jesus is downplayed and Jesus is equated with the Hellenistic philosophical Logos principle and declared to be God, requiring development over a period of several hundred years of a complex Trinitarian god-concept in which God is declared philosophically to be Three Persons in One Substance.
- ❖ The relationship with God is reconstructed as an inter-mediated relationship - salvation and forgiveness are dispensed by the Catholic Church. Developed into a formal doctrine *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*
- ❖ The large number of Christian writings in circulation are vetted and a small number that support the Party's theological positions are authorized as the canon of Christian scripture;
- ❖ This version of Christianity was the one adopted by the Emperor Constantine. To support his political agenda of stability, the Emperor stabilized the religion, called a church council to resolve some doctrinal differences, built a number of big new Catholic-

Orthodox churches in key imperial centres and commissioned 50 elaborately produced copies of the new canon of scripture to standardize the core documents.

- ❖ Alternative cultural and regional adaptations of the Jesus tradition are defined as deviant (heretical), suppressed and their writings outlawed. Many Christians adhering to these alternative traditions are either exiled or executed.

The sum of reasons for these changes, of course, are extensive. As with any cultural phenomenon, there are political, sociological, economic, practical, and organizational factors that interact and converge in such an outcome. But I would argue, as Eisenstein does in her analysis of the influence of printing in early Modern Europe, that mediation factors associated with the use of writing can be singled out for special attention because of their multiplying effect, acting not just as a single factor, but providing the means and setting the conditions by which other changes were able to take place.

I'm not thinking of writing in a purely instrumental way. The Catholic Party was able to gain dominance over other Christian views, by shaping Christianity as a particular form of religious media culture aligned to wider practices of cultural and political power. The success and dominance of this particular mediated construction of Christianity had a number of elements.

1. The re-positioning of Christianity culturally

Because Christians did not become involved in literacy education until well into the third century, those Christians who **were** literate in this early period tended to have received their education within the Greco-Roman educational system **before** they became Christians. They were also therefore more likely than most other Christians to be members of the middle or upper classes, moving them more quickly into positions of religious leadership. They brought with them into their leadership of Christianity, therefore, familiarity with and appreciation for Greco-Roman values, political processes and the cultural interests of the literate classes. In their writings they “naturally” addressed Christianity to their familiar class and culture.

This re-positioning of Christianity involved not just administrative uses of writing, but the creation of a Christian literate culture, designed to pitch Christianity to this powerful political class. (Mitchell, 2006) Part of this literate culture, where antiquity was a valued quality, Christianity was constructed as an old religion. Identifying Jesus with the eternal Logos principle (“In the beginning was the Word”) downplayed his recent Jewish existence and recreated him as eternal. Arguing that Christianity was the fulfillment of the old religion of Judaism appropriated the antiquity of Judaism and is part of the reason for Christian polemics against Judaism. Eusebius in his fourth century Ecclesiastical History locates the beginning of Christianity not with the birth of Jesus but the beginning of time.

2. Enlistment of the literate-educated into Catholic leadership

The centralized, empire-wide organizational and theological structures of Christianity as it was defined by the Catholic-Orthodox Party required literate, experienced people to lead it. Though the other streams of Christianity also had literate people within their leadership, the Catholic Party leaders actively promoted the literate leadership class into church leadership. Two examples can be given:

- ❖ Cyprian was a wealthy, aristocratic property owner in Carthage during the first half of the third century, with experience in politics, the law and civil administration. He was made bishop of Carthage and the overseer of the whole North African Church two years after he became a Christian. He played a key role in shaping the Catholic Church as a religious empire.

- ❖ Ambrose was the son of a Praetorian prefect in Gaul. Educated in Rome for a civil career, he became governor of Northern Italy in Milan. As governor he was called in to resolve a church dispute about the election of a new bishop and in the process was elected as bishop himself, even though he wasn't baptized. He went on to become an influential theological writer.

Example 1 - Origen c. 182-251

Origen was a pupil of Clement. He was born into a Christian family in Alexandria but educated fully within a Hellenistic cultural framework. Küng describes Origen as “the only real genius among the church fathers, a man with an insatiable thirst for knowledge, a wide-ranging education and tremendous creative power.” (Küng, 1994) The focus of Origen's intellectual attention was to arrive at a definitive reconciliation between Christianity and the Hellenistic world, and to this end he taught and wrote prodigiously.

Only a fragment of his works remain today, partly because he was a controversial theologian and many of his books were destroyed. Eusebius lists more than 2,000 written works, though Miller suggests there may be as many as 6,000 (Miller, 1994), which is an average of 4 a week) on a vast range of topics: a scientific doctrine of the Trinity and the first known systematic theology, writings on the Christian life, writings against pagan criticisms, a theology of asceticism, extensive biblical works and commentaries, including the *Hexapla*, a manuscript of six parallel columns setting out side by side six versions of the Hebrew scriptures. Laying out these versions side by side exposed differences in the literal forms of the text, so Origen developed a new system of biblical interpretation that recognized three levels of textual meaning: the somatic or literal sense, the psychic or moral sense, and the allegorical or spiritual sense.

Origen's extensive influence on the philosophical development of Christianity was facilitated by the establishment of what was in effect a media production centre, funded by a wealthy patron. Eusebius describes the arrangement in the following way:

“Ambrose urged him not only by countless verbal exhortations and incentives but also by furnishing abundant means. For, as he dictated, he had at hand more than seven shorthand writers, who relieved one another at appointed times, and copyists no fewer in number, as well as girls trained in beautiful penmanship. For all these Ambrose provided the necessary means in abundance. (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History VI.23)

Origen also traveled extensively, visiting Christian communities on invitation as a speaker or to mediate in church disputes, and like a rock star on tour to promote his latest CD or an author on a signing tour, he took with him copies of his writing to supplement and reinforce his personal presence. Origen did not invent re-interpretation of Christianity out of its illiterate Aramaic origins in Palestine into the sophisticated literate Greek culture of Hellenistic philosophy, but he contributed to it significantly.

Example 2 - Cyprian of Carthage c.200-258.

Cyprian was bishop of Carthage in North Africa from 248-258, a crucial time of empire-wide persecution of Christians. Prior to becoming a Christian, Cyprian was an educated, wealthy, aristocratic Carthaginian property owner, probably of senatorial rank. He was trained within the Greco-Roman education system as a rhetorician, was a skilled debater with likely experience in politics, the law, and civil administration. He became a Christian when he was 46. Two years later, when he was 48, he was made bishop of Carthage and overseer of the whole North African Church.

Cyprian's conversion to Christianity was partly a result of disillusionment with the political instability of the Empire and the decline in standards of civil society. When he became a

bishop, he drew on his legal and civil administration experience to further the development of the church as the new Roman Empire, divided into a curial class of clergy and lay people, parallel to the Roman division of citizens into property owners and ordinary citizens. The bishop was the central authority of the regional church, the Bishop of Rome the first bishop, and just to tidy it all up the College of Bishops acting together was declared to be incapable of error. The Catholic institutional church became the civil service of salvation, replacing the personal relationship with God that Jesus advocated with a church-directed system of penances dispensing salvation.

Cyprian exercised this substantial influence from his North African diocese by drawing on his knowledge and experience of the imperial culture and systems of writing. In the last eight years of his life, Cyprian wrote around a dozen treatises, some of them several volumes long. He also wrote at least 82 letters, many in multiple copies with multiple attachments that were intended to be read aloud publicly. He wrote frequently to other bishops and church officials around the Empire - Spain, Gaul, Cappadocia, Rome, Italy - encouraging them, giving them his opinion of things, urging them to desist from behaviour he considered to be destructive or damaging. One letter is ccd to 18 different recipients, another has 13 attachments, another includes with the letter a long attachment with a 2,500 word critique of the attachment. All of these were written and copied by hand, requiring resources which one can assume were brought into Christianity by Cyprian from his privileged background.

One of his letters to Rome includes a list of all the African bishops and their sees to keep the central mailing list in Rome up to date, indicating that the Roman Church was a central archive and production house for Christian manuscripts. Cyprian claims of one open letter that "it has been circulated through the entire world and reached the knowledge of every church and every brethren." (Epis 55.5.2.)

Example 3 – Distribution

Cyprian (200-258, Carthage, North Africa)

Letter 49 reports to Rome the outcome of a church council that had just finished in Carthage. The letter ends, "We are sending over news of these events written down the very same hour, the very same minute that they have occurred; and we are sending over at once to you the acolyte Niceforus who is rushing off down to the port to embark straight from the meeting."

Augustine (354-430 – Hippo, North Africa)

had so many copyists at his disposal in Hippo that "new books were distributed quickly and easily" and he was able to make a gift of the 13 volumes of his *Confessions* in short time to a literary enthusiast who asked for it. The convent in Hippo (c.412) had its own library with a staffed lending desk.

Rome

While different church centres had archives and means of distribution, Rome was a central one. One of Cyprian's letters to Rome provides an updated list of bishops in North Africa so that they can be included on the central mailing list. Cyprian writes of one open letter that "it has been circulated through the entire world and reached the knowledge of every church and every brethren."

4. Constructing the brand "Catholic"

The dominance of the Catholic Party was also achieved through a hegemony-building strategy of identifying the Catholic stream with "true" Christianity – what we would readily

identify today as a media strategy of brand creation. This involved a number of elements.

- ❖ Appropriation of the name Catholic.
The word “catholic” or “katholikos” means universal. Though meaning literally all Christian communities, it was appropriated early by Catholic Party male bishops for their stream of Christianity, churches headed by male bishops.

“Wherever the bishops shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful without the bishop to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast; but whatsoever the bishop shall approve of, that is pleasing to God.” (Ignatius, c.106)

- ❖ Construction of an official history
Eusebius’ ten volume Ecclesiastical History, which appeared in a number of editions between 313 and 325, is a good example of this. In what is basically a PR-style historical recreation, Eusebius gave legitimation to the Catholic Party as the only embodiment of the apostolic tradition, and successful defender of the true faith against all other contenders, who are described as deviant or heretical. His history supports male Episcopal leadership by constructing a genealogy that located every bishop in an uninterrupted historical chain of command directly to Jesus’ original disciples.
- ❖ Defending the brand
The monopoly ownership of the brand “Catholic” was finally enforced politically by Emperor Theodosius I in 380:

“We desire that all people under the rule of our clemency should live by that religion which divine Peter the apostle is said to have given to the Romans... as for the others, since in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics, and shall not presume to give their conventicles the name of churches.”

5. Effective utilization of the systems and political advantages of writing

The Roman Empire had in place a strong, fast and effective Empire-wide infrastructure of communication to support political, military, cultural and trade activities. The Catholic Party of Christianity attracted and enlisted individuals and groups who understood these systems and were experienced in utilizing them. These were people who had the resources to translate Christianity into cultural forms and directions that could be strategically placed and promoted upon the media systems of their time. Some of these factors were:

- ❖ Skills and familiarity with literate practices and protocols;
- ❖ Knowledge of how the media systems worked and how to use those systems;
- ❖ The leisure time to write;
- ❖ The financial resources to build their own media institutions to acquire a regular supply of writing materials, to purchase other people’s writings, to establish and maintain effective libraries and archives, to employ people to reproduce what they’d written, and to organize and pay for distribution.
- ❖ The adoption of the codex as the dominant media form for written materials.

This is more than just an instrumental use of media. Having the social and financial capital to locate oneself within such a system made possible a range of social and political outcomes that weren’t available to those whose power and activities were oral and local:

- ❖ It made possible the wider spread and influence of the opinions of literate Christians over others, even though they were in a distinct minority within the religion;
- ❖ The ideas of Christianity that were preserved for later access and reference were almost exclusively the ideas of the minority who wrote;
- ❖ Writing made it possible for this small minority within Christianity to network and organize on a regional and empire-wide basis a common opinion against alternatives.

It is not accidental that the people now recognized as the “Fathers of the Church” were all writers.

Two figures serve as good examples of this, and it’s good to go into a little detail with each in order to get a sense of the extent to which Catholic Christians at this time practiced their religion as a media exercise.

6. Media censorship and control

As well as actively promoting their own opinions through their writings, and recognizing that writing was a significant source of their religious power, Catholic-Orthodox Party male leaders acted to control what was written and who could write. This also involved a variety of strategic actions:

- ❖ Media censorship. Oppositional texts were burned or doctored and those possessing them were condemned. Even today, what is known about alternative movements of Christianity is known only through what is said about them in Catholic condemnations of them.
- ❖ Media control. As much as possible, what was written in Christianity was brought under the control of the bishops. This was a significant strategy in subverting the leadership influences of women. Women’s nature and leadership was denigrated in male writings. Writings by women were branded as fanciful and dangerous. Women’s access to writing was progressively denied:

“A woman may not write to other lay Christians without her husband’s consent. A woman may not receive letters of friendship addressed to her only and not to her husband as well.” (Synod of Elvira, early 4th C).

- ❖ Control of prophecy. One of the major challenges to the writing, office-based authority of the bishop was the performance of the oral prophet, which in both style and substance challenged the ordered approach to religion that the Catholic Church was building. To consolidate power in the stability of the writing-based episcopal office, the unpredictable and challenging oral charismatic style that has persisted in Christianity to this day had to be brought under control.

As the Catholic Party consolidated its organizational structures, the unpredictable prophetic impulse was routinised and brought under the control of the hierarchy. At first the gift of prophecy was seen as strengthening the authority of the local bishop, then the gift of prophet was declared to be a gift of the bishops, until in later centuries, only the official hierarchy could claim to speak with God’s own voice.

Though close to the Catholic Party in its theological beliefs, part of the reason for declaration of Montanist Christianity as a heresy was because it was strongly oral and charismatic in its style and shared authority among its members rather than follow a hierarchical authority model. The other major threat posed by the Montanists was that its two key leaders were women.

This censorship and control of writing became entrenched in the West during the Early and Late Middle Ages, when classical Latin was instigated as the universal language of church writing. As spoken Latin mutated into the various romance languages, the language of writing – Latin - became in effect a foreign language, taught only by the Catholic Church to people authorized by the Church. That media control by the Catholic hierarchy would remain the case for almost a thousand years, until commercial printers encouraged Martin Luther to bypass Latin and publish his religious arguments and the scriptures in vernacular German.

Transformation or re-configuration?

There is little doubt that Christianity at the end of the fourth century is a markedly different phenomenon than it was at the end of the first. I hope that I've presented at least a feasible argument that issues of mediation and mediation changes were important elements in that transition.

From this brief historical survey, it should also be obvious that I see media not just as an external technological influence acting upon religion, but as something inherent within religions and integral to their development. Media in their fullest sense – as instruments, texts, technologies, industries, aesthetic formations, and cultures - are the means within which religions are constantly figuring out their sense of character and identity. Because of the important role these processes of mediation play, it is common for contests to occur within religions over media: what is appropriate and what is inappropriate in the mediation of the religion.

In that sense, a social phenomenon like media does not **determine** change or the nature of change in religion in a deterministic way, but interacts with dynamics, potentials, contradictions and contests already at work in the religion to reconfigure existing power relationships, give greater relevance or advantage to some aspects of the religion over others, and facilitating the development of some latent potential within the religion while laying something else to rest.

As I look at changes taking place in religion today, the analogy that comes to mind is an adaptation of the speech of Mr Jensen in the classic movie, *Network*: "It's cosmic ebb and flow, Mr Beale. The bishops and theologians used media to take Christianity away from the

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