

The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization

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Edited by
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media and communications, Christian

Peter Horsfield

The study of Christianity and media flowed from the study of mass media that began in the US in the 1920s. Media and Christianity were understood as separate domains of knowledge and function, so early studies focused largely on analyzing media content from a Christian perspective and evaluating the effectiveness of media for evangelism or social change.

Thinking about media and Christianity in this way began to change in the latter part of the 20th century with a growing recognition that mass media were just one part of the multi-layered mediation of societies and that every form of mediation had characteristics that influenced what was communicated through them. The view of audiences as passive was replaced by a view of audiences as active participants in constructing the meaning of a communication. These perspectives changed understandings of media away from being a single linear transmission of content to one in which media serve as cultural sites through which construction of meaning actively takes place in interaction between the producer, the text, and the audience.

As a consequence, the narrow concern with how Christian individuals or institutions use media has broadened to thinking about how Christianity itself is constructed in its mediation. Key questions include: In what ways does the mediation of Christian belief, practice, and self-understanding influence their character? How have different patterns and changes in the mediation of Christianity contributed to its development and identity?

THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIANITY

After his death, knowledge of what Jesus said and did was preserved mainly in oral form.

Stories, remembered events, prophecies, testaments, dreams, and visions were told, discussed, and retold by eyewitnesses, bystanders, and interested people. Prophet figures traveled the countryside, proclaiming Jesus as alive and demonstrating this through miracles and healings done in Jesus' name. In line with oral practice, the telling involved not just reproduction of facts but also creative interpretation to the circumstances of the telling. This creative and adaptive oral tradition of communication has been one of the persisting genres in the mediation of Christianity throughout its history.

From the earliest times, written text was integrated with this oral communication. Though most of the early Christians came from groups where literacy levels were low, the traditions of text inherited from Judaism meant that written texts quickly became an integral part of Christian life and worship. Snippets of Jesus' stories and teachings, memories, and letters were written, copied, passed around, read aloud, discussed, and memorized by individuals or gathered groups in homes or worship. The first Jewish followers of Jesus also built meaning and significance by interpreting Jesus in the light of written Jewish Scripture. This included creatively reinterpreting old scriptural texts to show that what had happened to Jesus had been predicted.

There was no neat division between this oral and written communication. Written texts were often a record of oral speech and were themselves read aloud; oral communication included the recitation of written texts or remembered writings. While many see the integration of oral and written communication as a complementary relationship, others (e.g. Sawicki 1994) suggest that differences between these modes of communication and their practitioners created tensions in the development of early Christianity.

Jesus is represented in relation to two dominant communication models. One is the skilled oral communicator within the Hebrew oral-prophetic tradition: identifying with the dispossessed, avoiding elite God-language, and presenting faith in everyday, accessible language that addressed concerns of everyday life. His words were backed by dramatic acts of healing, exorcisms, and prophetic symbolism. His use of parables has

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become legendary. The other model is that of Rabbinic Judaism: a teacher among a community of followers integrating written texts with oral reflection and teaching. Jesus as the beloved teacher (Rabbi), whose life and teachings are preserved by his disciples in writing and in following his example, has remained a central motif throughout the history of Christianity.

As Christianity spread into the wider Roman Empire, Greco-Roman practices of writing became influential. Though widely diverse and scattered throughout the region, the early Christians gathered in local households developed a wider sense of identity and destiny through the visits of traveling evangelists and the circulation of Christian manuscripts. Letter writing, in use throughout the empire, was used by leaders such as the Apostle Paul in building a common Christian identity (Richards 2004). Meeks (2006) calls the apostolic letter one of the two most important genres in Christian literature. The other major genre of writing was the gospel, a composition in the ancient literary genre of “lives” (White 2004). The four gospels now in the New Testament were part of a much greater body of written works in circulation by the end of the 1st century, either in whole or part copies. These included other gospels, letters, collections of sayings, commentaries on Jewish Scripture, martyr narratives, apocalyptic writings, instructions in the faith and theological writings.

THE EARLY CHURCHES: 2ND TO 4TH CENTURIES

As the Christian movement expanded, a common authority structure was promoted through collaborations made possible by writing. Ignatius of Antioch (c.35–107) was an important figure in this, using letters and personal visits to promote three orders of leadership – bishop, priest, and deacon. As this hierarchical authority structure developed on a regional basis, access to reading and writing, if not personal literacy, became a necessity for leadership in the wider Christian movement.

Literate leadership engaged Christianity with the culture of literacy within the empire. Miles (2006) notes that “the earliest Christians did not

just produce texts; they created a literary culture.” This was not without opposition, reflected in Clement of Alexandria’s justification for his use of writing (Osborn 1959). Christians widely adapted the parchment codex form of the book because of the cheapness of the material, its easier portability, and its more readily accessible text for reading. Circulated material included doctrine, apology, hero and martyr stories, even apocryphal fiction to compete in the market of light romantic fiction and to commend Christian lifestyles. It included also copying and circulation of old and new scriptural texts, the gradual consolidation of an authorized canon of Christian Scripture, and the translation of Scripture into other languages.

There is evidence that these writings spread widely and fairly rapidly through the empire, indicating that Christians developed facilities for collecting, sharing, reproducing, and circulating text (Haines-Eitzen 2000). Origen in Alexandria, for example, who wrote 2,000 or more works in his lifetime, employed stenographers to take down his sermons and lectures in shorthand and secretaries to transcribe the notes into full text. These went into a library from which a team of calligraphers produced copies on demand for sale or distribution. Those now called the “fathers” of the church were Christian intellectuals whose stature derives largely from the impact and preservation of their writings. Burns (1989) suggests that this significant textualization of Christianity – a diversity of writings covering key aspects of ideas, practical ethics, and ritual, an authoritative canon of Scripture, and established practices of textual meaning and interpretation – was one of the reasons for Christianity’s durability over other religious cultures. “Diocletian’s attempt to stop Christianity by ordering the burning of its scriptures attests to the effectiveness he ascribed to them.”

There were other consequences of this textualization. Küng (1994) proposes that adaptation to the literate philosophical culture of imperial Hellenism transformed Christian faith from existential discipleship of Jesus into a more philosophical soteriological system. Another is the narrowing of early Christian diversity into a doctrinal orthodoxy within a male-dominated hierarchical authority. Control of writing through access to archives, secretariats, and postal services

was a significant source of this power and only those judged to be safe were permitted access to those resources. Women and those expressing ideas contrary to the imposed orthodoxy were forbidden to write and their writings destroyed. Alternative forms of Christian authority that were more oral and local in nature and in which women were more active, were subordinated, at times violently. Gamble (1995) notes, "It is scarcely accidental that from the second century onward . . . the vast bulk of early Christian literature was written by clerics."

When Constantine adopted Christianity as the state religion, he endowed church building projects, making church buildings and their decoration a significant medium in the public communication and identity of Christianity. He also ordered the production of 50 new Bibles for the churches, "on prepared vellum, easy to read and conveniently portable, by professional scribes with an exact understanding of their craft." These moves promoted perceptions of the Bible as a desirable cultural artifact and source of civic pride, not just as a spiritual text.

THE MIDDLE AGES

When Rome fell in the 5th century, literacy withered within the wider culture and was preserved almost solely within Christianity, with the male hierarchy carefully nurturing and controlling it. Writings contrary to the dominant orthodoxy were removed from circulation or destroyed and their authors punished. The extensive networks of monasteries that developed from the 6th century were key centers for the copying and preserving of classical manuscripts and central to Christianity's literacy-based power and the preservation of literate culture in the West.

As Christianity became an empire, Latin became the official language. In popular discourse, oral Latin was constantly changing and over the course of several centuries evolved into the different romance languages we know today. The classical written Latin of the Roman Church, however, remained relatively unchanged and in time became a foreign language to all but those trained within the church. This linguistic difference between official Christianity and the

language of marketplaces eventually restricted laypeople's participation in Christian leadership and cemented the dominance of the male clergy caste over all aspects of Christian life. The linguistic basis of clerical power would not be challenged until the time of printing in the 16th century.

Another arena of media contest was the visual, highlighted in the iconoclastic disputes of the 8th century. The conflicts were eventually resolved through an ecumenical council held in Nicaea in 787 that allowed for the painting and use of images in popular practice, but placing the artist in a subordinate position to church leaders. This iconoclastic conflict is emblematic of the tensions that exist between text-based and visual-based mediations of Christianity and would recur in Protestant iconoclasm in the 16th century and controversies over visual popular culture in the 20th century.

Excluded from full participation in the church, Christianity for common people during the medieval period became strongly visual and oral in character: with the sounds of bells, organs, choral music, the mumbo-jumbo of the Latin Mass, and the exhortations of sermons; the visuality of towers, stained glass windows, statues, and adornments; the spaces of cathedrals and churches; and the interludes of festivals and pageants.

Occasional efforts were made to reform the dominant views of literacy and education by people such as Charlemagne, Francis of Assisi, and Methodius, who affirmed the value of oral popular culture or sought to make literacy more widely available. Denied the same opportunities to write, women's leadership continued to emerge as mystic-prophetic teaching authorities, leaders of monastic communities, and charismatic preachers. However, these were exceptional.

THE REFORMATION AND MODERN PERIOD

The development of printing in the mid 15th century created an alternative mechanism of social power that challenged the institutional power of the Roman Church (Eisenstein 1979), leading the Fifth Lateran Council in 1515 to forbid the printing of books that did not have the prior approval of a church authority and threatening the publishers with delicensing or

excommunication. The differences made by printing though are seen most clearly in the reform movement of Martin Luther.

Luther saw the printers as a powerful ally in building a popular base against the institutional power of the Roman Church, catering to their commercial interests by writing in a popular style in vernacular German, for which there was a growing market. The Reformers perfected the use of the quarto vernacular pamphlet, a relatively cheap and profitable format that was easily transported, readily concealed (for smuggling), and well suited for popular sale. During the crucial years of the Reformation, printing of pamphlets increased more than forty-fold, and books more than threefold, with Luther being by far the most popular author. For good reason, Edwards (1994) calls the Reformation “the West’s first large-scale media campaign.”

Luther’s decision to adopt vernacular German for his printed materials repositioned religious debate away from the clerical confines of the church. Defenders of the Catholic faith, who wrote their defenses in traditional Latin, had limited circulation and were unable to counter the impact of Luther in the marketplace. The other major Reformer, John Calvin, was likewise a prodigious writer, though he brutally controlled the use of printing presses to maintain his power.

The shift of Christian discourse from the old ecclesiastical language of Latin to the new national vernacular languages is one of the more profound media and religious changes of this period. Scripture translation was a significant part of this. Luther’s 1522 German New Testament was a 16th century bestseller, with 43 distinct editions selling around 86,000 copies in just over three years (Edwards 1994). Luther’s 1534 Bible was a literary landmark for German prose, as was the King James translation for English in 1611. By the end of the 16th century, the Bible was available in vernacular translation in most of the major European languages, reflecting a new attitude toward the Bible as a force in itself, and the start of a movement that has seen translation of the Bible into every language, including the creation of written versions of traditional oral languages to enable Bible publication. The shift to the vernacular in Christianity encouraged the growth of national languages and national

Christianities, increased lay education and participation, and led to the eventual dismantling of western Christendom.

The challenge of the Protestants stimulated renewal in the Roman Church, which included an increased adaptation of print in worship, education, and mission. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) endorsed the Tridentine Catechism, the Breviary, the Missal, and the Vulgate. Notebooks and handbooks became more common for clergy, many of whom did not read Latin. Use of the visual arts, print reproductions of pious works of art and imagery, and the decoration of churches were part of a wider promotion of visual and popular piety. The *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, issued in 1564, was a continually updated list of prohibited books and those that had the church’s *imprimatur* as being free from error (*nihil obstat*). A frequently controversial process because of its perceived restrictiveness and inconsistencies, the Index continued until the Second Vatican Council in 1966. The Jesuit Order, with its emphasis on education, was an important force in engagement with the new literacy, promoting the study of the classics as well as contemporary vernacular literature and rhetoric.

Printing was an important tool in Christian mission and education during the period of western colonization. Newly formed Catholic orders and Protestant missionary societies readily adopted printing in their missions, seeing it as a God-given tool for evangelization. Christian missionary bodies were among the first to establish printing presses in many of the newly conquered colonies.

Printing was fundamental to the profound cultural changes of the modern period, with media developments such as popular newspapers, journals, magazines, novels, encyclopedias, dictionaries, maps, the growth of private and public libraries, the universal literacy movement, and the growth of the author as a public figure. Printing provided the infrastructure for colonial administration. During this period, printing and printed material became an integral part of Christian thinking and practice. Churches saw literacy as a tool of religious progress and improvement and became involved in its teaching. Christian publishing houses were established globally, printing extensive religious material that paralleled that of secular publishing. As popular literacy

and education increased, new methods of textual interpretation were explored in biblical study, and theology developed as a book-based, largely academic, discipline with an increased abstraction and complexity. Lay education stimulated new forms of Christian discourse and communal participation.

THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

The development of photography during the 19th century provided the means for mass visual reproduction. Its rapid uptake in social documentation, family portraits, news media, advertising, and art challenged the dominance of verbal text in the representation of reality, social meaning-making, and identity formation. The new technologies of the telegraph (1844), telephone (1876), and radio (1896) transformed cultural perceptions of time and space. In 1888, electricity was linked with photography to create moving pictures, the basis for the two great cultural shapers of the 20th century: cinema and television. The application of electricity to music produced sound recording and electrified music, the foundations of the rock music revolution.

These new technologies supported the building of a powerful commercial media sector in most developed countries. Christianity responded to this explosion of new media industries in several ways. One was as a media producer. The publishing of Christian material through the 20th century has been a major and at times overlooked aspect of the global publishing industry. Christian materials have covered the spectrum of what is produced by secular publishers, ranging from academic tomes and educational materials to mass-market Christian comics, fiction, and practical manuals. The Christian Bible remained the highest-selling book globally for much of the century.

Apart from small units producing film primarily for educational or evangelistic purposes, Christian institutions have not been extensively involved in film production, even though *Soldiers of the Cross*, produced by the Salvation Army in 1900, is recognized as the first feature film in the world. Christian history or Bible stories have been occasional topics of major Hollywood productions, such as the Cecil B. DeMille

productions *King of Kings* (1927) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956).

Radio has been a more popular medium for Christian institutions, partly because of its lower cost of access and distribution and because the word- and music-based format of radio more closely resembles Christian preaching and worship. HCJB Radio in Ecuador, which began broadcasting in 1931, exemplifies Protestant uses of radio for mission activity, while Vatican Radio in Italy (1931) and Radio Veritas in Asia (1958) are examples of Catholic radio. There are now around 1600 Christian radio stations in the United States alone.

Christians have also been active as media critics. Criticisms of secular media, particularly the commercial sector, have been frequent, focusing primarily on books, Hollywood films, television, or rock music that contradict perceived Christian moral positions or values. While Christian bodies have organized book and record burnings, film and television boycotts, preached against immorality in the media, and encouraged censorship, Christians have also been involved in defending media against these attacks and protecting media freedom.

Christian organizations have also been actively involved in media advocacy. Many Christian newspapers have served as sources of alternative news, representing the interests and issues of those not covered by the mainstream press. Many Christian radio stations in the developing world, established initially for evangelistic purposes, became alternative voices for people who had been shut out of mainstream debate and the sites for the preservation and celebration of indigenous cultures. Church statements such as *Communio et Progressio* (1971) are distinctive in setting out a comprehensive reflection on the responsibilities of mass media within modern societies.

THE LATE 20TH CENTURY

Television as a broadcast technology was generally too expensive for Christians to own. Early Christian activity in commercial television in the West was generally through programs produced by the major Protestant and Catholic denominations, and broadcast free on a weekly basis by

stations as part of national licensing agreements. Smaller evangelical bodies purchased time for the broadcast of their material. Occasionally, personalities such as Bishop Fulton Sheen in the US hosted competitive commercial programs. In the late 1960s, policy in the US changed to allow stations to count time they sold for religious broadcasting in their licensing arrangements. This change triggered a displacement of free-to-air denominational programming with paid evangelical programming, giving rise to televangelism, independent Christian organizations buying airtime for their preaching, talk and mixed format television programs, and funding their activities with money raised directly from audiences. The televangelical model has since spread internationally and to other religions.

As with earlier media changes, the media shift has had a number of significant consequences. It repositioned evangelicalism within the mainstream of American religious and cultural life, giving church-growth evangelicalism the aura of being the new Christianity (Hoover 1988). It also shifted the financing of Christian activity from members to distant audiences, leading to the adaptation of mass marketing and branding techniques that were more effective in building loyalty among anonymous consumers. This has encouraged a reconstruction of Christian ideology toward emphasizing the benefits and material rewards of faith, sometimes called “health and wealth theology.” The consumer repositioning of Christianity has spawned an explosion of media activity that has created a lucrative consumer market of Christian products including music, romance and fiction, magazines, educational materials, popular spirituality and self-help manuals, movies, video games, comic books, religious kitsch, and niche-market editions of the scriptures, such as the fashion Bible. At the end of the century, there were an estimated 340,000 different Christian books published annually in 164 languages and an estimated 25,000 different Christian periodicals. It has been estimated that around 58 billion copies of the Bible have been produced in 367 languages.

The telecommunications revolution of the 1980s and 1990s has provided the background for today’s context of globalization. Electronic technologies such as mobile telephony, digital photography, and digital virtual realities linked to the Internet and Web 2.0 have greatly

expanded the means for anyone to produce and distribute individual religious information, making it possible for smaller institutions and individuals to compete with larger institutions in producing and distributing Christian ideas. As the speed of communication and change has intensified, the concept of distance and boundaries between the private and public and between nations is collapsing. With changes in the nature of text from a fixed primary meaning to interchangeable alphabetic and visual text capable of multiple meanings, today’s “producers” of media assume a more active role in constructing their own meaning from a variety of available sources. This is shifting engagement with religious information, products, and symbols away from religious institutions to the media marketplace, with profound implications for the previously institutional structuring of Christianity.

SEE ALSO: Cinema, Christian; Publishing, Christian; Radio Evangelism; Televangelism

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