The Ecology of Writing and the Shaping of Early Christianity

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The intersection of media and religion has become a topic of quite extensive interest in the past three decades, spurred on by the rapid expansion and extension of mass media through the twentieth century and the rapid development of digital technologies and social media through the new millennium.

The distinctiveness of these new media developments and their implications for social religiosity can make it appear that what is happening today is unique and unprecedented. My proposition in this chapter is that the changes in social religiosity taking place today and their connection to new media developments are not unprecedented. Though distinctive in many of their particulars, they are continuous with changes that have taken place at numerous times in the past as the processes of the social construction of religion engage with the opportunities and constraints of social contexts, including the opportunities and constraints presented by the means of communicating within those contexts.

The issues raised by contemporary media developments provide a valuable lens by which to reexamine religious history to see to whether contemporary perspectives on media may give new insights to an understanding of the interactions of media and religion in the past. I want to explore that proposition by looking at the contest between oral and written cultures in early Christianity, and the influence

these contests had in the subsequent development of Christianity as we know it today.

The Media Culture of Early Christianity

From its beginnings Christianity has been an oral-literate movement. How those two cultural media forms—the oral and the written—have manifested themselves and their relative influence in the development of Christianity, however, has varied from time to time and from place to place. At the inception of Christianity, the relative proportions of the two were quite marked, with an estimated 95% of the first Christians being illiterate (Crossan, 1998). As critical theorists such as Bourdieu (1977) and Foucault (1972) have argued, language itself, the appropriate uses of spoken and written language and how they are integrated, are matters of social, political, and religious importance. There is evidence to indicate that the implications of these differences in language cultures and practices were the cause of significant debate and contention within early Christianity.

The roots of this contention are linked to Jesus himself and the high position he holds within the religion that bears his name. Jesus was strongly oral in his communication practices. Though the more common assumption and argument is that Jesus was also literate (see, for example, Borg, 1987), Crossan (1994) presents a strong argument that Jesus was illiterate and that his illiteracy was an important factor not only in his communication style but also in his self-concept and the political nature of his mission. A major theme in his religious message was the plight of the exploited, largely illiterate rural poor in Palestine—Jesus's own class. Whether he was illiterate or not, his communication style reflects strongly the characteristics of oral discourse and oral cultural practice that affirmed and validated the culture of the population to whom his message was addressed.

Oral patterns were dominant in the earliest communication of his first followers as well. The imperative in their communication wasn't a written *literal* one, it was performed oral *rhetoric*. In continuity with Jesus's religious vision and public practice, the followers spoke boldly, performed miracles, argued with the powers that be, spoke of God coming to them in dreams and visions, spoke in tongues, healed the sick, adapted the sayings of Jesus, and even invented new sayings of Jesus to convince and win people over to what they saw as a new reality.

From the beginning, possibly even while Jesus was alive, people who could write also wrote down things he said and accounts of things that happened. Though in the earliest stages 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. 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, defenses of the faith, manuals of practice, martyr stories, gospels, and even fiction. Alfred Burns (1989) proposes that of gospels alone there were likely hundreds of different types and ascribed to various apostles.

Clement and the Defense of Writing

The relationship between the oral and written in the early formation of the Christian tradition has been the subject of a good deal of scholarly exploration and discussion. Much of the focus has been on the transition of oral traditions into the written record. More recently, scholars have begun to investigate differences between the oral and written traditions within early Christianity not just in content but also in their conceptualization of the nature of the faith and their hermeneutical methods for building meaning in communication with their audiences (see, for example,

Kelber, 1997; White, 2004). Sawicki (1994) proposes that evidence of these conflicts can be seen even in some of the early writings and gospels.

Concerns about the adaptation of writing in the development of the young faith were strong in the end of the second century. The influential Christian teacher and writer Clement of Alexandria felt it important to explain and justify why as a Christian teacher he was writing. The issues identified in his *Stromata* provide a valuable insight into perennial issues arising in the relationship between media, media change, and the character of religious faith and identity. Clement, or Titus Flavius Clemens, was born of wealthy pagan parents around 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 center, where he died in 215. Clement's significance and the significance of his writings lie in going beyond a conceptual defense of Christianity to developing a systematic explication of Christianity into the intellectually and culturally influential Platonist framework of his time. He was a significant figure in the development of Christian literature.

The *Stromata* falls within a particular genre of writing, a collection of writings on particular themes. In the first chapter, Clement addresses what appears to be a series of concerns and objections to his writing down Christian teachings, concerns that were apparently of sufficient importance that he felt the need to address them explicitly.

> *Book I Chapter I.—Preface—The Author's Object—The Utility of Written Compositions.*

> . . . that you may read them under your hand, and may be able to preserve them. Whether written compositions are not to be left behind at all; or if they

are, by whom? And if the former, what need there is for written compositions? and if the latter, is the composition of them to be assigned to earnest men, or the opposite? 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. (Clement of Alexandria, c. 198)

What is of interest for this particular study is that the concerns identified by Clement parallel significant concerns that are raised within Christianity whenever a significant remediation of the religion occurs. This suggests that the questions about mass and electronic media in our present time are not exclusively modern questions. They are questions rather of how a religion is related to that religion's identity and practice. From his analysis of the chapter, Osborn (1959) identifies four major concerns that Clement was addressing. Osborn's analysis was primarily on the theological aspects of these (see also Fiskå Hägg, 2006; Kimber Buell, 1999). From a communication perspective the concerns identified provide an insight into the impacts being felt of the growing adaptation of writing into what were previously dominantly oral activities.

One was the perception that the living voice was seen as the best medium for the communication of Christian truth. "The writing of these memoranda of mine, I well know, is weak when compared with that spirit, full of grace, which I was privileged to hear" (Clement of Alexandria, c.198, Chapter I). In a movement that was dominantly illiterate and where the spread of the faith had been achieved through effective oral communication, it was difficult for many to perceive how a faith whose emphasis was on a personal relationship with God could be effectively communicated in any way other than through the lives and voices of living people. The Christian Papias reflected similarly when he wrote around the year 150, "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). If communication of faith was separated from the interpersonal situation and put into a depersonalized medium such as writing, would it change the personal character of the faith?

A second concern was that writings were seen as public documents and to commit Christian teachings to writing was to be indiscriminate in who Christian teachings were given to, running the risk of their being misunderstood or even misused. This reflects a critique of writing by Socrates, of whom Clement would be well aware from his Hellenistic education:

> And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. (qtd. in Hackforth, 1952, XXV:274B)

For many Christians, speaking and teaching face to face had been the dominant mode of teaching within the religion since its beginnings and provided a much more controlled situation for how Christian truths were to be preserved and passed on.

A third concern identified by Osborn (1959) centered on the question of inspiration and its place in judging the truth of a statement. In a face-to-face oral situation, it was possible for everyone present to read the person's body and reach a judgment about whether that person was "inspired" with the spirit of God or not— and therefore whether the message was true in a personal sense. The oral prophets and evangelists of Christianity argued the truth of their message on this sort of embodied communication. The question arose, How can one tell if a writer was

inspired if you couldn't see the writer? How could a person, particularly one who was illiterate, judge accurately that writings on one parchment were inspired but another set of writings weren't? Literacy has developed quite refined skills to discern differences in types of writing through nuances of grammatical structure, word selection and use, logical reasoning, cadence, and literary flow. The threat felt by illiterate Christians was they didn't have those skills and as a result were potentially being disenfranchised within the faith.

The fourth was that the heretics were seen to be using clever writing to mislead and corrupt people, and true faith should be kept separate from that heresy, not only in content but also in form. If Christian truth and heretical error were reproduced in the same medium, how would people be able to distinguish one from the other? Wouldn't encouraging people to read Christian writings also run the risk of having them read heretical ones?

Underlying each of these is a perception that the apparently simple act of remediation of the faith carried with it the potential of changing the faith culturally and in the process disenfranchising the majority of Christians who were illiterate. In line with Bourdieu's (1977) analysis of the power dynamics inherent in linguistic constructions, once Christian writings were written down only those who could read and write would have full participation in teaching roles and in the formation and transmission of Christian truths. Illiterate or orally based Christians could see that if Christian leadership required literacy, their authority and the contribution they could make to leadership would be diminished.

This media shift also raised important questions and a potential shift in the nature of Christian identity. 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 parable-based theology, and his charismatic engagement with people (White, 2004, pp. 122–125). Jesus was possibly illiterate, he chose mostly illiterate people to be his followers, his message was accessible to everybody whether they could read or not, he didn't write and obviously didn't need to write. Why should his followers? Would adopting a medium of communication that is accessible only to a minority of people lose this identification of the faith with the character of Jesus?

Clement responds to each of these concerns, not denying them but instead giving what we today consider to be valid arguments for adopting a useful medium. He counters the concerns by positioning writing as a complement, not a substitute, to the oral communication of faith: "If, then, both proclaim the Word—the one by writing, the other by speech—are not both then to be approved?" (Clement of Alexandria, c.198, Chapter I). He also identifies a number of distinct advantages that writing brings: it preserves the tradition from being forgotten and plants seeds in people's minds that can be brought to fruition by others. It can also 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. (Clement of Alexandria, c.198, Chapter I)

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" (Chapter I).

This particular incident from the third century illustrates a number of important aspects of the discussions about media and religion. Shifts in media that take place within the wider culture do not necessarily introduce something new into a religion that wasn't there before. Media changes frequently tap into and become part of differences and political struggles already underway within the religion, privileging one party over another or making overt something that is already latent. Clement's incident also highlights that changes in the mediation of religious faith have implications for the culture and identity of the faith that need to be negotiated.

The Consequences of the Widespread Christian Adaptation of Writing

Clement did not invent this argument within Christianity, and his defense of writing was certainly not the last word on it. But as Christianity developed and spread, writing grew in use and importance, to the extent that in time 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 a place within the hierarchy of leadership in Catholic churches.

To understand the contribution that the media differences of writing had in the development of Christianity in its early centuries, it is necessary first to deconstruct the hegemony that has been built of what Christianity is. It is common in Christian theological thought to recognize a basic identifiable body of thought and practice as orthodox or "The Apostolic Tradition." Tanner (1997) provides an

extensive critique of such a singular view. Questioning that hegemonic view is necessary also if we are to engage adequately with the diversity of Christian opinions that existed in those first centuries and the power struggles and the factors that contributed to the dominance of one of those opinions over the others. Hatch (1957) advocated the need to recognize a variety of "Christianities" in the religion's first centuries:

> If we were to trust the histories that are commonly current, we should believe that there was from the first a body of doctrine of which certain writers were the recognized exponents; and that outside this body of doctrine there was only the play of more or less insignificant opinions, like a fitful guerilla warfare on the flanks of a great army. Whereas what we find on examining the evidence is, that out of a mass of opinions which for a long time fought as equals upon equal ground, there was formed a vast alliance which was strong enough to shake off the extremes of at once conservatism and speculation. (pp. 10–11)

By the end of the second century, Christianity was a diverse movement with a variety of streams or traditions, all of which adapted the original Jewish prophetic message of Jesus to different cultural and philosophical contexts in different ways. Among what Hatch (1957) referred to as "a mass of opinions which for a long time fought as equals upon equal ground" were streams such as Jewish Christianity, which continued to see Jesus within Jewish terms as the predicted Messiah but not the Son of God; Gnostic Christianity, which aligned the Jesus tradition with the wider dualistic philosophical and religious movements of Gnosticism with a strong aescetic emphasis; Marcionism, which saw the god of the Jewish scriptures and the god of Jesus as different gods; Montanism, which was a largely oral, charismatic,

prophetic, apocalyptic movement lead by two women; and Logos Christianity,

which aligned Jesus with Hellenistic culture through the philosophical concept of

the Logos within hierarchically structured communities.

Out of this diversity, by the middle of the fourth century the Logos

Christianity stream, or what I am calling the Catholic-Orthodox Party, had become

dominant, even though it was only one of various cultural adaptations that had been

made of the original narrative of Jesus. It was helped in its dominance by the

Roman Emperor Constantine, who saw in the Catholic-Orthodox Party's literate

male leadership, cultural alignments, and centralized organizational structures a

valuable religious tool in his political agenda of unifying and stabilizing the Empire.

Constantine strengthened these political utilities by narrowing and standardizing

Christianity within the Catholic-Orthodox model. He called, funded, and oversaw a

church council (Nicaea, 325) to resolve ongoing doctrinal differences. He funded an

extensive building program of new Catholic-Orthodox churches in key imperial

centers and endowed the churches with wealth and lands to support their clergy and

ensure their ongoing upkeep (Cameron, 2006, pp. 546–547). He commissioned 50

elaborately produced copies of a set of scriptural writings in line with Catholic-

Orthodox thought to standardize the core documents (Herklots, 1994).

The result was that by the middle of the fourth century the Catholic-Orthodox

Party version of Christianity was politically enforced by the Emperor as the only

true version of Christianity, even though, it could be argued, some of the key tenets

of the Catholic-Orthodox Party position were significantly different from the

religious vision originally posed by Jesus. In place of the inclusive communal

authority advocated by Jesus, authority became hierarchically vested in male priests

at the local level under a male bishop or overseer at a regional level. The Jewish

monotheistic theological framework of Jesus was elaborated into a Hellenistic Trinitarian one. A direct human relationship with God espoused by Jesus was reconstructed theologically and ritually as an inter-mediated relationship in which divine salvation and forgiveness was dispensed only by the hierarchy of the Catholic-Orthodox Party.

Work on social movements identifies the processes of framing, or the construction of shared meanings for collective understanding and action as important elements in how social movements develop within themselves and in relation to their wider environment. Benford and Snow (2000) see this "reality construction work" as being "embroiled in the politics of signification," whereby different contenders for influence within the movement draw on extant and innovative "meanings, beliefs, ideologies, practices, values, myths, narratives and the like" to impose their cultural position and collective actions as definitive of the movement's identity (pp. 625, 629).

Communication scholars such as Ong (1982, 1985), Innis (1950), Goody (1987), and Finnegan (1988) have been foremost in identifying the character of the media factors of orality and literacy in the construction of cultures, patterns of consciousness, and social organization. While there has been significant analysis of the theological factors involved in the early development of Christianity, little has been done on the role of media in this formative early period. The contention explored in this study is that the widespread adoption of writing by the Catholic-Orthodox Party and its growing importance to the identity and spread of the religion was a significant factor in how Christianity developed and a key element in the narrowing of the diversity of Christianity in its first centuries to be synonymous with just one of its expressions. Understanding the broad role that writing played in

this provides a valuable perspective on how media and religion in general interact with each other.

A number of elements can be identified in the creation of this Christian hegemony.

1. The Repositioning 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 (Gamble, 1995). They were therefore more likely than most other Christians to be members of the middle or upper classes, a social capital that moved them more quickly into positions of religious leadership. As part of this social capital they brought with them familiarity with and appreciation for Greco-Roman values, Roman political processes, the cultural interests of the literate classes, and knowledge of and familiarity with the powerful communication systems of the Empire (Bourdieu, 1977).

This repositioning of Christianity into Roman literate culture involved not just administrative uses of writing but also the creation of a parallel Christian literate culture designed to pitch Christianity to this powerful political class (Mitchell, 2006). Part of the recommendation of Christianity to this literate class, where antiquity was a valued quality, was the construction of Christianity as an "old" religion. Indicative of this is Eusebius's influential *Ecclesiastical History* (early fourth century)*,* which begins the history of Christianity not with Jesus but with the beginning of time.

The widespread recognition of the importance that Christian literature played in its wider cultural positioning is reflected in the Emperor Diocletian,

during a period of persecution of Christians, issuing a decree that Christians hand over all their texts to be burned. Diocletian's successor, Maximus Daia, saw Christian writings as sufficiently influential that he composed a counter-literature, *The Memoirs of Pilate and the Savior,* and instructed that it be taught to school children for their memorization (Mitchell, 2006).

2. Enlistment of the Literate-Educated into Catholic Leadership

The centralized, empire-wide organizational structure and increasingly complex theology of Catholic-Orthodox Christianity required literate, experienced people to lead it. Though the other streams of Christianity also had literate people within their leadership, the Catholic-Orthodox Party actively promoted the literate class into church leadership. Cyprian, addressed in more detail below, is one example of this. Similarly Ambrose, a highly educated and ranked Roman civil leader, when governor of Milan was called in to mediate a church dispute over appointment of a new bishop and was appointed as bishop himself, even though he wasn't baptized. It is not coincidental that the people now recognized as the "Fathers of the Church" were all writers and literate in writing before they became Christians.

3. 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 individuals attracted, enlisted, and promoted by the Catholic-Orthodox Party had the necessary knowledge and resources to place and promote Christianity strategically into cultural forms and directions that exploited the media systems of their time. This included 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; and the financial resources or networks to procure a regular supply of writing materials, purchase other people's writings, establish and maintain effective libraries and archives, employ people to reproduce what they'd written, and organize and pay for distribution of what they wrote.

Writing provided those who could use it powerful "liberties of action" (Sawhney, 1996) or affordances not available to the illiterate membership of Christianity. Having the social and financial capital to locate oneself within the Imperial communication system made possible a range of social and political connections that weren't available to those Christian leaders whose power, authority, and activities were primarily oral and local. Written media made possible the wider spread and influence of the opinions of literate Christians over others. It gave this small minority within Christianity the ability to network and organize a common opinion against alternative Christian opinions on a regional and empire-wide basis. The permanence of written communication over the oral meant that the ideas of Christianity preserved for wider dissemination, later access, and reference were almost exclusively the ideas of the minority literate class who wrote.

Two figures serve as good examples of the extent to which key leaders of the Catholic-Orthodox Party were effective in making writing a significant factor in the shaping of the culture of belief and practice within Christianity.

Origen (c. 182–251) was a pupil of Clement, 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, p. 163). The focus of Origen's intellectual attention was to

arrive at a definitive reconciliation between Christianity and the Hellenistic world. To this end he taught and wrote prodigiously.

Only a fragment of Origen's works remains today, partly because he was a controversial theologian and many of his books were destroyed. Eusebius, who inherited Origen's library, lists more than 2,000 written works, though Miller (1994) suggests there may be as many as 6,000. They covered a vast range of topics including a scientific doctrine of the Trinity, the first known systematic theology, writings on the Christian life and critiques of paganism, a theology of asceticism, and extensive biblical works and commentaries. His biblical works included the *Hexapla*, a manuscript of columns setting out side-by-side six versions of the Hebrew scriptures and a 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 center, 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. (Pamphilius, 1890, VI.23)

Origen traveled extensively, visiting Christian communities on invitation as a speaker or to mediate in church disputes, and took with him copies of his writing to distribute and reinforce his personal presence. Origen did not invent the reinterpretation of Christianity into the sophisticated literate culture of Hellenistic philosophy, but he contributed to it significantly.

Cyprian of Carthage (c.200–258) was bishop of Carthage in North Africa from 248 to 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. Trained within the Greco-Roman education system as a rhetorician, he was a skilled debater with experience in politics, the law, and civil administration. He became a Christian when he was 46 and two years later 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 (J. Burns, 2002). When he became 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 laypeople parallel to the Roman division of citizens into property owners and ordinary citizens. In Cyprian's political ecclesiology, the bishop was the central authority of the regional church, the Bishop of Rome the first bishop, and the College of Bishops acting together declared to be incapable of error. In Cyprian's world, the Catholic institutional church became the imperial civil service of salvation, replacing the personal relationship with God that Jesus advocated with an institution-based system of penances dispensing salvation (Clarke, 1984).

Cyprian could not have exercised this substantial influence from his North African diocese without using his knowledge and experience of the imperial culture and systems of writing to extend his influence beyond his local setting. In the last eight years of his life, Cyprian wrote around a dozen treatises, some of them several volumes long. He wrote at least 82 letters to bishops, dignitaries, and officials around the Empire, many in multiple copies with multiple attachments that were intended to be read aloud publicly (Bévenot, 1961). One letter is copied to 18 different recipients, another has 13 attachments, another includes with his letter a long attachment of another writing with his 2,500-word critique of the attachment. All of these had to be written and copied by hand, requiring resources that one can assume Cyprian brought with him from his privileged background.

In a way that directly reflects Harold Innis's (1950) ideas about writing and the construction of empire, Cyprian provides a number of good examples of how the Catholic Party used the media distribution systems of the empire to transform Christianity into a global religious empire.

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

Letter 49 reports to Rome the outcome of a church council that had just finished in Carthage. It ends with a good example of how powerful writing was: "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."

In similar fashion, the influential theologian Augustine, at his base in Hippo North Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries, had so many copyists at his disposal 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 (Meer, 1961).

4. Constructing and Protecting the Brand "Catholic"

The dominance of the Catholic-Orthodox Party was also achieved through a hegemony-building strategy of identifying this particular stream of Christianity with "true" Christianity—what we would readily identify today as a media strategy of brand creation (Mendels, 1999). Such a strategy would not have been possible without the extensive use of writing. Reading these early centuries from this perspective, a number of elements in the building of this hegemony can be identified.

Appropriation of the concept (brand) "Catholic." The word "catholic" or *katholikos* means universal. Though meaning literally all Christian communities, it was appropriated early by Catholic-Orthodox Party male bishops and consolidated in writing to refer exclusively to their particular stream of Christianity, that is, 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, 106, Chapter VIII)

Construction of an "official" history of "Catholic" Christianity. Eusebius's 10-volume *Ecclesiastical History* (Pamphilius, 1890), which appeared in a number of editions between 313 and 325, is a good example of this. Preserved through constant reproduction across the centuries and therefore widely influential in shaping Christian self-understanding Eusebius's *History* is a partisan construction that gave legitimation to the Catholic-Orthodox Party as the only embodiment of the apostolic tradition and successful defender of the true faith—"We shall introduce into this history in general only those events which may be useful first to ourselves and afterwards to posterity" (Chapter 8. 2.2–3). Alternative Christian opinions are positioned as deviant or heretical. His work creates a historical justification of the male episcopal leadership with a genealogy that located every Catholic-Orthodox bishop in an uninterrupted historical, physically transmitted chain of transmission directly to Jesus's original disciples.

Defending the brand. The Catholic-Orthodox Party in its writings and statements continued to present itself as the only embodiment of what was universal and orthodox in Christianity. Their monopoly ownership of the brand "Catholic" was finally affirmed and 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.
> ("Theodosian Code XVI.i.2," 1943)

5. Media Censorship and Control

As much as possible, what was written in Christianity was brought under the control of the bishops, backed by the political and military might of the Emperor in line with his program of imperial unification, Christian understandings that differed from the Catholic-Orthodox views were suppressed and Christians adhering to alternative understandings were declared deviant (heretical) and either exiled or executed. Christian texts expressing alternative views were burned or doctored and those possessing them were condemned. This censorship was so effective that until just recently, what was known about many of the alternative movements of Christianity was known only through what is said about them in Catholic condemnations of them (Ehrman, 2004).

This was a significant strategy also in minimizing and subverting the influence of alternative leadership models, including the challenges presented by the leadership of women and the oral prophets. Women's nature and leadership was denigrated in male writings (Schussler Fiorenza, 1983) and writings by women were branded as fanciful and dangerous (Davies, 1986). Women's access to writing was progressively denied to the extent that they were forbidden to write or receive letters without the explicit consent of their husbands:

> 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 fourth century)

This media control included control of the authority of the oral prophets, the other major center of authority within Christian communities, the major alternative media form in the spread of Christianity, and the major source of women's

leadership within the movement. To consolidate power in the writing-based episcopal office, the unpredictable and challenging oral charismatic style was routinized organizationally. At first the gift of prophecy was declared as strengthening the authority of the local bishop, then it was declared to be an *ex officio* gift of the bishop, then in later centuries the challenge of the power of the oral prophet was fully contained by declaring that only the official hierarchy of male bishops could speak with God's own voice (Schussler Fiorenza, 1983).

The reasons for this ascendancy of the Catholic-Orthodox Party in Christianity were extensive. As with any cultural phenomenon, there are political, sociological, economic, practical, and organizational benefits and factors that interact and converge in such an outcome. There are numerous studies that explore these different aspects. What has not been studied to the same extent is the contribution that communication, in particular writing, played in this shift. This study seeks to open up that dimension.

This is not to say that writing was the sole nor necessarily the most significant influence. However it needs to be considered as more than just one factor. Eisenstein (1979) in her analysis of the influence of printing in Early Modern Europe and Finnegan (1988) in her case studies of orality and literacy, both propose that media change needs to be considered in a different category from other contributors to change because of the multiplying effect that new media make possible. The extensive use of writing by the Catholic-Orthodox Party was not just one single factor but provided the means and set the conditions by which other changes were able to take place, in time shaping Christianity not just as a user of writing but as a particular form of religious media culture aligned to wider practices of cultural and political power.

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