

## **Power, control and religious language: Latin and vernacular contests in the Christian Medieval and Reformation periods**

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Language is a fundamental component of communication and therefore a fundamental component in the formation of individual and social identities, the shape of social knowledge, the functioning of social relationships and the constructions and contests of social power. As numerous theorists through the twentieth century have posited, language is not just a tool for getting information across: it is a major cultural location where social knowledge, identity and power are fought over and negotiated.

Bourdieu contends that approaching language from a sociological perspective adds different dimensions to those of linguistic and literary concerns, particularly the dimensions of power relations in the construction and operation of communication. In place of instrumental processes of grammar, symbolic exchange and linguistic competence, it evokes questions of how legitimacy, symbolic power and social capital operate in the processes of communication:

*The structure of the linguistic production relation depends on the symbolic power relation between two speakers, i.e. on the size of their respective capitals of authority (which is not reducible to specifically linguistic capital). Thus, competence is also the capacity to command a listener. Language is not only an*

*instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power. A person speaks not only to be understood but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished. Hence the full definition of competence as the right to speech, i.e. to the legitimate language, the authorized language which is also the language of authority. Competence implies the power to impose reception.*<sup>1</sup>

Because of its centrality to all meaningful social activity, language and how language works to position people, ideas and practices in relations of power to each other is a major dynamic in the construction and mediation of religion. What language(s) are to be used, how they are to be used, and who is qualified to use them in the conceptualization, interpretation, expression and structure of the religion has been a major site of religious contest in most religions across their lives.

Because all languages are mediated in some form and because all forms of mediation carry with them through their technologies their own languages of production and interpretation, particular uses of media or changes in media use commonly provoke religious change by imposing or challenging particular structures of linguistic practice and authorization with others. Set in this context, the challenges being presented to many traditional religions by contemporary media developments such as digitization and social media are not novel challenges, but continuous with ongoing historical dynamics of contest and negotiation in the area of religious language and its mediation. A study of how these same dynamics have occurred historically therefore can be helpful in understanding some of the patterns and implications of changes occurring today.

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<sup>1</sup> (Bourdieu 648)

This chapter explores this proposition through a study of the place of religious language and its mediation in the power struggles and development of Western Christianity, particularly during the Middle Ages and its transition into the Reformation period.

## **1 Latin roots**

Unlike some other religions, Christianity had no single sacred language of origin. Though Jesus' primary language was Aramaic, the movement that was built on him emerged in a cultural context where a variety of languages were in use - principally Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Each of these had different cultural associations and implications. As it spread beyond its immediate Galilean and Judean origins, the oral interpretation and communication of Christianity took place in the vernacular languages of the cities and regions where it became established. However, the most widely used common language was Koiné Greek, the major international language of the urban populations, of trade and commerce and of the literate elite across the Eastern and Western Roman Empires. In a relatively short time, the rural Aramaic of Jesus and his disciples had been displaced by this more cosmopolitan language, to such an extent that for the first three centuries almost all Christian letters, theological writings and liturgies were written in Greek. Though not without opposition,<sup>2</sup> this led to its steady adoption into the more philosophical and rhetorical traditions of Greek linguistic culture, displacing the more practical, personal focus of the oral Aramaic-Jewish frame of Jesus. This linguistic shift was most apparent in the

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<sup>2</sup> (Horsfield "The Ecology of Writing and the Shaping of Early Christianity")

extended, hotly debated and highly political theological arguments conducted in Greek during the second, third and fourth centuries.

In these early centuries, Christian thought and writings formulated in Greek were also translated into other written languages. Along with Latin in North Africa and the Western regions, Christian writings were translated into Syriac, Coptic and Ethiopian. This translation reflected a willingness in Eastern Christianity to adapt vernacular languages in the reproduction of scriptures and practice of Christianity as a mission strategy. In some cases, it stimulated the creation of written alphabets for the written translation of Christian materials into what were previously solely oral languages, such as in Armenia and Cappadocia (Gothic).

When Constantine took over as Emperor in 313, Greek-speaking Christianity of the Eastern Empire was the dominant form of Christianity. At the start of Constantine's reign there were sixteen Christian bishops in the whole of Gaul in the West compared to seven to eight hundred bishops in the East.<sup>3</sup> Despite their minority status, the Roman Church and the Bishop of Rome nevertheless held an important place: it was the largest city in the Western Empire and the recognized Western capital; its churches were bigger and wealthier; it had a reputation as the home of Peter and some of the early Christian martyrs; casting the Bishop of Rome as the elder statesman of bishops of the West.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> (Freeman *A.D. 381: Heretics, Pagans and the Dawn of the Monotheistic State* 51)

<sup>4</sup> (Brown 114)

Rome was also the cultural center for the second imperial language, Latin. Though not the majority language of the combined Empire, it was the dominant language of the West including Italy, parts of North Africa, parts of Central Europe, Spain, Gaul and Britain. Even in the Eastern capital of Constantinople, Latin was used as the language of imperial law, was widely used in imperial administration and was spoken in court.<sup>5</sup>

Latin carried with it a different culture from that of Greek. From an early time, Latin poets and philosophers saw Latin as possessing a beauty, order and rationality that was a civilizing and unifying force in itself and the traits of a cultured and civilized person. Latin was a powerful tool therefore in the building of a universal empire. Roman officials were required to use Latin in their dealing with conquered or alien people so that the ability to speak and understand Latin was an important practicality in participating and gaining the benefits of the systems of the Empire.

*So sensible were the Romans of the influence of language over national manners, that it was their most serious care to extend, with the progress of their arms, the use of the Latin tongue.... The western countries were civilized by the same hands which subdued them.*<sup>6</sup>

These linguistic-based cultural differences began to be reflected in the approach and work of a number of Christian thinkers in the West who, from the second century on, began to write about Christianity in Latin. These are now identified as the Latin

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<sup>5</sup> (Brown 116)

<sup>6</sup> (Farrell 2, quoting Gibbon)

“Fathers” of the Christian Church: Tertullian (160-220), Cyprian (200-258) and Augustine (354-430) in North Africa, Jerome (c.342-420) in Rome and Jerusalem and Ambrose (c.339-397) in Milan. All came from well-to-do families, were well-educated in the Greco-Roman rhetorical and legal system, were familiar with and connected into the imperial communication systems and wrote extensively. Tertullian practiced law in Rome, and Cyprian and Ambrose entered the church from political or diplomatic careers. Their writings show a lesser concern for the highly speculative, metaphysical interests of the Greek-language Christian thinkers and a greater concern for practical theological matters such as religious authority, organizational structure, ethics and behavior, pastoral care and discipline, and the nature of Christian ministry and the sacraments.

While reframing Christianity into the culture of Latin language, they also began to color Latin with a Christian discourse. Dunn describes Tertullian as “a pugilist with a pen” who “preached, interpreted Scripture and wrote in order to argue.”<sup>7</sup> His particular use of Latin terms such as *sacramentum*, *trinitas*, *persona*, *substantia*, and *satisfactio* with a Christian flavor provided Western theology with some of its basic theological vocabulary.

*What Latin it is that Tertullian dared to write! It was without precedent in the literary field. In Tertullian’s writing, we come across the living language of the Christians of the time, the Latin of the growing Latin church, a language which*

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<sup>7</sup> (Dunn 9-10)

*accordingly is filled with loan-words and new coinage to describe the new facts and ideas of the Christian daily life.*<sup>8</sup>

Similarly Jerome, a pedant for good writing, is credited with the creation of 350 new Latin words, all of them ‘both accurately formed and useful words, expressing for the most part abstract qualities necessitated by the Christian religion and which hitherto had not existed in the Latin tongue, e.g. *clericatus, impenitentia, deitas, dualitas, glorification, corruptrix.*’<sup>9</sup>

With such language-specific words becoming so central to this particular stream of Christianity, Latin and the power relations embodied in its written generation and distribution by the educated elite, steadily became central to Christian identity and the structure of power relations within the religion in the West in a way that supports Bourdieu’s reflection on the symbiotic relationship between language and authority:

*A whole aspect of the language of authority has no other function than to underline this authority and to dispose the audience to accord the belief that is required (cf the language of importance). In this case, the stylistics of language is a component of the imposing paraphernalia which serves to produce or maintain faith in language. The language of authority owes a large proportion of its properties to the fact that it has to contribute to its own credibility – e.g. the*

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<sup>8</sup> (von Campenhausen 8)

<sup>9</sup> (Dégert)

*stylistic elaborations of literary writers, the references and apparatus of scholars, the statistics of sociologists, etc.*<sup>10</sup>

## **2 The Latin translation**

The collapse of the Western Roman Empire was a military and political process that took place over seven decades in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. While one view sees the Middle Ages predominantly as the “Dark Ages,” a time of the withering of culture, education, hope and enlightenment across Europe,<sup>11</sup> Brown advocates a different view. He sees the aftermath of the fall of the Western Roman Empire not as a single, unified transformation or degeneration, but as a diversification into different forms of culture through processes of intensification and abatement occurring at different places, different times and with different levels of intensity: a process of intensification and abatement common to the life of many cities and kingdoms.<sup>12</sup>

Political structures shifted from the integrated and centralized Roman control to a number of separate barbarian kingdoms, with loyalty shifting from a distant emperor to a variety of kings. Trade and commerce became more regional and local in character. Without the political, economic and social stability that the imperial order

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<sup>10</sup> (Bourdieu 649)

<sup>11</sup> (Shlain 262)

<sup>12</sup> (Brown 21)

brought, the value of education as a worthwhile individual and social investment declined across most of Europe.<sup>13</sup>

These changes also produced profound changes in communication structures and practices. Green places such a strong emphasis on the communication dimensions of the changes of this period, the contests between the dominantly oral-based cultures of the Frankish and Germanic tribes and the oral-literate culture of the expanding Latin Church that he sees it as one of the primary lenses through which the Middle Ages needs to be understood:

*It is justifiable to see the medieval period as one in which literacy gradually expands, encroaching upon the hitherto oral area of Northern Europe, so that the period is characterized by the clash and interpenetration of orality and writing.<sup>14</sup>*

Christianity played a significant part in this encounter between oral and literate communication practice. As the educational, cultural and literacy structures of the political empire diminished and then collapsed, the Roman Catholic Church became the primary repository of literate practice and education and, through its missionary expansion, a major political influence. In the process Christianity itself was again reshaped and refigured.

Communication was a vital factor in Christianity's missionary expansion within and beyond the boundaries of the former Empire. There were a number of elements in

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<sup>13</sup> (Heather 196)

<sup>14</sup> (Green 3)

this strategic communication. One was through impressing and overwhelming pagan people with signs of strength and wonders and the superior material culture of the conquering culture of Christianity.

*Spiritual authority was demonstrated, among other things, by spectacular displays of supernatural power. Saints and their relics worked miracles. Heroic performances of ascetic holiness would be rewarded and authenticated by astonishing displays of quasi-magical power in life or after death. These were not entirely new phenomena but they achieved a degree of prominence they had not had for several centuries.<sup>15</sup>*

Reflecting again Bourdieu's ideas of the language of authority constructing its own credibility,<sup>16</sup> media artifacts of the book and manuscript were significant carriers of this symbolic power:

*The barbarian tribes had no written script. Literacy and Christianity arrived together, and books were long regarded with superstitious awe. Knowledge of writing, the virtual preserve of the monasteries, became identified with authority, both religious and secular.<sup>17</sup>*

The authority of the text in which the Catholic Church held superiority was reinforced in imagery and the construct of the artifact itself. Many images of Christ as

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<sup>15</sup> (Cameron 23)

<sup>16</sup> (Bourdieu 649)

<sup>17</sup> (Wood 82)

judge show him holding a book in his hand. Boniface, the British monk who became a missionary to Germany, on one occasion wrote to a supporter, the Abbess Eadburga, begging her to send to him the scriptural *Epistles of St. Peter*, specifying that they be written in letters of gold so that “a reverence and love of the Holy Scriptures may be impressed on the minds of the heathens to whom I preach.”<sup>18</sup>

A second element of the strategy was cultivation and protection of the Church’s prestige and power as the bearer of literacy. In the wake of the collapse of the political Empire, the wider infrastructures of education and communication declined and the industries that had provided the basic materials and transport for writing disappeared. Though there persisted a number of ‘low-profile centers of book production,’<sup>19</sup> levels of general literacy declined rapidly. In such a situation, the Roman Church gained power as the centre and preserver of literacy and literate practice.

*Books ceased to be readily available and learning became an increasingly ecclesiastical preserve; even those who were not ecclesiastics were likely to get their education from the scriptures or from Christian texts.*<sup>20</sup>

A third communication element in the missionary strategy was the use of writing to transform the diverse Germanic and Frankish cultures of post-Imperial Europe into a dominant Latin Christian one in what Brown proposes as ‘the age *par excellence* of “applied Christianity”’:

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<sup>18</sup> (Halsall)

<sup>19</sup> (Brown 22) See also (Kosto)

<sup>20</sup> Averil Cameron, quoted in (Freeman *The Closing of the Western Mind* 316)

*We are dealing with persons who were deeply committed to bringing the Early Christian past into the present. They wished to make it available in the condensed form of digests, anthologies, and encyclopedic compilations; to turn the recommendations of ancient Christian authors and the rules of former Christian councils into a finely calibrated system of rules, adjusted to the ends of pastoral guidance; and to ensure that even the material aspects of Christianity – and, most especially, its visual impact – should be discreetly disciplined so as to communicate a correct and salutary message.<sup>21</sup>*

Increasingly the Roman Church, having structured itself several centuries earlier on the model of the old Imperial administrative divisions and hierarchies, took on the roles of a de facto secular administration, providing welfare services, measures of education, legal administration and the preservation of a common language.<sup>22</sup>

What gave the Roman Catholic Church this strength and influence was not the Roman Papacy nor a centrally organized and controlled uniformity and structure, but what Brown identifies as “a remarkable inter-connectivity.”<sup>23</sup> It is in the creation and maintenance of that influential inter-connectivity that we can see the crucial role that media, particularly written Latin, played in this institutional power.

At the local level, it had a readily transportable structure and communication model – ‘a bishop, a clergy, a congregation and a place in which to worship’ - that

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<sup>21</sup> (Brown 25)

<sup>22</sup> (Freeman *The Closing of the Western Mind* 305)

<sup>23</sup> (Brown 13)

could be quickly adapted in the fluid conditions of the post-imperial situation. The religion had a common book of scripture. Worship was conducted with written service books that mediated local worship into a global inter-linked community. Bishops and priests were connected and supported each other practically through the constant circulation of news, books and letters, giving them the sense of being part of ‘a world-wide textual community.’<sup>24</sup>

The bishop’s palace in Rome modeled and facilitated this mediated connection. It had a library, ecclesiastical archives and processes for managing a constant flow of correspondence. A designated group of Papal notaries under a *primicerius notariorum*, trained in stenography and shorthand notation, took down, wrote and dispatched all the Pope’s correspondence and managed all aspects of document registering, processing, storage, access and reproduction. In this they reproduced registry processes and practices that had been followed by the secular Roman bureaucracy.<sup>25</sup> They assisted deacons in church administration and acted as the Pope’s delegates on diplomatic missions and in delivering important messages to other bishops and patriarchs. Other episcopal offices, particularly in the larger cities, had similar media offices and processes in place, though not necessarily to the same extent.

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<sup>24</sup> (Brown 14)

<sup>25</sup> (Wessel 23-24)

### 3 Victor Latinus

The political influence of the Roman Church expanded significantly with the conversion to Catholic Christianity of the Frankish King Clovis in 496. In the decades that followed, under his influence other Germanic tribes abandoned their earlier adherence to Arian Christianity in favor of Catholic Christianity. This identification of the Franks with Catholic Christianity started a mutually beneficial political-religious relationship that climaxed with Charlemagne being crowned as the Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III in 800.<sup>26</sup>

While the translation of Christian texts into vernacular languages was a strategy of mission in Eastern Christianity, mission in the West followed a different linguistic strategy. That was the restriction of textual writings and religious activities to Latin. There were a number of reasons for this.

Theologically, Ecclesiastical Latin, as it came to be known, was suited to the purposes to which the Roman Church was putting it: clarity and directness for administration, conciseness for explaining theological doctrine, and logical for arguing and defending a position. Even today, some see it as the purest of languages, grammatically, rhythmically and expressively:

*easy to understand, with natural and predictable grammar and very few needless rhetorical flourishes .... the language of a people who actually use the language to*

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<sup>26</sup> (Cross and Livingstone 1062-63)

*communicate important ideas and place high value on intelligibility and utility over stylistic considerations.*<sup>27</sup>

It had developed a vocabulary suited and necessary to Latin theology. With a vocabulary of distinctive terms essential to Western theology, the language itself had become functionally essential to the religion and its religious identity.

Politically, the installation of Latin as the official language of Western Christianity associated the Roman Pope and Roman Catholicism as the successor to the former Empire and the aura and nostalgia of its civilization. Part of Charlemagne's concern to improve the clerical use of Latin throughout his Kingdom was to construct his kingdom as a continuation of the ancient Roman Empire and himself as the new Roman Emperor.

Practically, the use of a shared language made possible communication across different language and ethnic groups, a crucial requirement in the building and maintaining of any empire. Latin was already in wide use as the imperial language of the West, and even into the last century of the Empire had been replacing local languages, to the extent that 'by the end of the sixth century around the Mediterranean and throughout much of Gaul, a simple Latin, shared by all classes, replaced the previous local languages, with the exception of Celtic in Britain and Basque in the Pyrenees.'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> (Boniface)

<sup>28</sup> (Brown 232)

Across the centuries of the Middle Ages, however, that simple Latin, shared orally by all classes, began to diverge from the Latin used within the Roman Church based on writing. As a spoken language, the spoken Latin of the marketplace was constantly changing. Speech adopted and adapted words and grammatical usages from other localities and regions and other languages and changed with everyday use to evolve into the different dialects and regional variants that we know today as national languages: Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, German and English.

Along with the linguistic differences, in the syncretizing of language practices oral Christianity also incorporated useful practices and beliefs of oral-based religions into their fluid Christianity. So by the end of the seventh century, as Butt observes,

*animistic and magical practices had become the norm for many who claimed to practice Christianity, including many of its clergy... Customs that had been pagan were often absorbed into Christianity to make the new religion more palatable. Pagan gods were turned into saints. Pagan celebrations such as the winter solstice were combined with Christian holy days so that the birth of Jesus, a date that was not known nor of much concern to Christianity, became Christmas.<sup>29</sup>*

In its written form, the theological Latin of the Roman Church, carefully nurtured and preserved to retain its aesthetic qualities and theological and organizational precision, remained relatively unchanged. As a result, the two Latins – the Latin of the Church and the Latin of the marketplace – diverged, to the extent that they became different languages.

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<sup>29</sup> (Butt 107)

The conflict between the two came to a head in the reign of the Frankish ruler, Charlemagne. A formidable and meticulously planned military strategist and, by the turn of the ninth century, the undisputed ruler of Western Europe, Charlemagne saw himself and his destiny through twin lenses: one in the tradition of the best of the Roman Emperors, the other in the tradition of the godly kings of the Old Testament.<sup>30</sup>

In line with his vision of himself as both Emperor and God's agent on earth, Charlemagne implemented an extensive program of cultural, educational and religious reform that touched almost every aspect of life: politics, civil administration, finance, law, moral behavior, education, learning, culture, the church and religion. He imported scholars from around the Christian world and made his palace a center of study, discussion and education. He funded and promoted book production and the development of literacy, including adoption of the 'Caroline minuscule,' a smaller, more regular and more legible Latin script to make book reading more user-friendly and to facilitate the accurate reading aloud of the Christian Law for the illiterate.<sup>31</sup>

Seeing Catholic Christianity as a unifying ideology and management structure, Charlemagne positioned himself as the governor and protector of orthodox Christianity and the authority on matters of faith throughout the empire. Every Christian was required to be able to say from memory the basic elements of the faith, the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles Creed. He re-established local and regional bishoprics and archbishoprics as administrative units, charged not only with religious

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<sup>30</sup> (Hamilton)

<sup>31</sup> (Altman 70)

duties but also with governmental responsibilities for implementing imperial directives and legislation and for collecting rents, taxes and tithes. To equip them to do this, churches, dioceses and monasteries were endowed with extensive lands, peasants and income.<sup>32</sup>

With the assistance of his religious adviser, Alcuin of York, a variety of measures were enacted to counter the oral assimilation of pagan beliefs into Christianity and restore orthodoxy of the Catholic faith. Ecclesiastical Latin became an important tool and site in these reforms. Bishops were made responsible for training their clergy to read and write Latin so they could properly lead services, preach and interpret orthodox Catholic doctrine. The various liturgical rites that had been used in different regions of the kingdom were replaced by the Roman Latin rite as the official rite of the kingdom.<sup>33</sup>

However the Latin that was being used as the measure of Catholic orthodoxy was a particular form of written Latin. Alcuin, coming from Britain, brought with him an understanding of Latin learned and practiced from books in an isolated context where it was not spoken as a mother tongue – ‘a perfect language because it was a perfectly dead language.’<sup>34</sup> What he encountered in continental Europe was Latin spoken and written as a living and changing mother tongue by people who still saw themselves in some ways as Romans and speaking as Romans. Alcuin considered such Latin as

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<sup>32</sup> (Brown 31)

<sup>33</sup> (Dowley 148)

<sup>34</sup> (Brown 447)

‘barbarous,’ and set out to reinstitute doctrinal and liturgical orthodoxy by re-instituting what he saw as proper Latin in terms of grammar use, orthography and pronunciation.

The impulse in instituting these reforms through the reinstatement of Ecclesiastical Latin was more than just linguistic. Serious issues of faith and piety were considered to be at stake. Brown notes that Charlemagne’s *General Warning* decree issued in 789 reveals that there was ‘a vigorous, “vernacular” Christianity which, just because it was largely oral, expressed a Christian piety which experts such as Alcuin found difficult to control.’<sup>35</sup>

However in the eyes of an orthodox reformer such as Alcuin, these mistaken dialects reflected corruptions not only of Latin but also of Christianity, a corruption that it was considered placed people’s eternal destiny at risk. The risk to the Catholic faith was no longer coming from paganism but from vernacular Christianity propagated by ‘literate and half-literate believers who were convinced of their own essential orthodoxy.’ Against this, ‘the new elite, “correct” Latin stood for an entire view of a world restored to order.... “Correct” Latin texts were to be the basis of a more wide-reaching reform of piety.’<sup>36</sup>

Along with the religious purpose of preserving what they saw as the orthodoxy of the Catholic faith, the standardization of the language, liturgy and doctrine of Catholic

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<sup>35</sup> (Brown 450)

<sup>36</sup> (Brown 449)

Christianity had an important political purpose also, the unification of the diverse tribes of the Frankish kingdom.<sup>37</sup>

The promotion of Latin literacy among the wider population served a number of other purposes. One was to develop a larger cohort of literate people to service the running of Charlemagne's far-flung empire. In his *General Admonition* of 789, he decreed,

*And let schools for teaching boys the psalms, musical notation, singing, computation and grammar be created in every monastery and episcopal residence. And correct catholic books properly, for often, while people want to pray to God in the proper fashion, they yet pray improperly because of uncorrected books. And do not allow your boys to corrupt them, either in reading or in copying; and if there is need to copy the gospel, psalter or missal, let men of full do the writing, with all diligence.*<sup>38</sup>

Charlemagne saw the teaching of literacy and the study of literature as important in the development of faith and the more intelligent understanding of scripture. His circular letter, *Encyclia de litteris colendis* notes:

*For since there are figures of speech, metaphors and the like to be found on the sacred pages, there can be no doubt that each man who reads them will*

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<sup>37</sup> (Küng 356)

<sup>38</sup> (King 217)

*understand their spiritual meaning more quickly if he is first of all given full instruction in the study of literature.*<sup>39</sup>

As Alcuin's version of proper Ecclesiastical Latin became widely implemented, a separation developed between the language of ecclesiastical Christianity and the working language of the people. It was permitted that Christianity still be addressed in the working oral languages of the different regions, but only for the secondary purpose of interpreting the meaning of the official Latin texts of the scriptures, prayer book and official sermons. A Council of Bishops in Tours in 813 decreed that homilies comprise the written sermons of authorised preachers, first read in Latin, but then translated by priests into the vernacular of the people – *rustica Romana lingua* or German – so that people were able to understand what the Latin texts meant.

A number of scholars identify this decision and its implementation as decisive in distinguishing the Latin of Medieval Christianity from the oral Romance languages, and the time when the language of Christianity become alienated from the languages of the people.<sup>40</sup> A number of profound consequences ensued.

One was that the liturgy of worship was entrenched in what was to the majority of Christians a foreign language. The same applied to all official church documents and discussions. In time, only those chosen by the hierarchy of the Roman Church as suitable to be educated in Latin could participate in the discussions and decisions of the faith.

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<sup>39</sup> (Loyn and Percival 64)

<sup>40</sup> See for example (Farrell 5) also (Green 43)

As verbal participation diminished for lay people, the visual became a primary means of engagement with faith. Physical performances became exaggerated, and an increasing number of actions such as genuflections, signs of the cross, censing, the ringing of bells, the raising aloft of the bread and wine developed as a substitute means of addressing faith to people. Altar tables at which the priest conducted his foreign language rituals were built higher and higher and placed against the front wall with the priest conducting worship with his back to the people, physically constructing power in the position and in the institution of the church as an indispensable intermediary between God and people. Ornamentation and visual storytelling in the form of stained glass, paintings and statues increased. Without a vernacular verbal account by which to understand what was going on, what was once a reenactment of the Lord's Supper by believers became a "hocus-pocus"<sup>41</sup> to be watched rather than a communal activity to be participated in.

Though there is evidence of lay people in the Middle Ages who could read and/or write,<sup>42</sup> the Church's hold and dominance over literacy gave them enormous advantages. It made them indispensable as amanuenses and gave them access to the highest levels of political power and the centre of political administration. It also gave them a monopoly control on the interpretation and dispensation of faith. Christians

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<sup>41</sup> The term is used by Küng. It is believed to be a perversion of the Latin words spoken in the mass when the host is raised '*hoc est corpus meum*,' 'this is my body.' The perception that the Latin words had a magical power to transform a piece of bread into the body of Jesus supported its later adoption in a corrupted or even satirical form of words used in magic.

<sup>42</sup> (Green 25). See also (Kosto)

became dependent on the interpretation of the clergy, installing a hierarchical relationship of production and reception in which it was made clear that it was the Church's role 'to read, interpret and pass on religious writings in Latin,' and the layman's 'to accept his inferior status as recipient.' The oral status of the layman became a device of diminution reinforced in language, with laymen commonly referred to as *illiterati*, *idiotae* and *rustici* (illiterate, idiotic peasants) and clergy as *doci et cauti* (trained and cautious).<sup>43</sup>

Clerics were reluctant to share a medium which gave them such power with those outside their circle and they protected their advantages vigorously. Unlike Eastern Christianity, the Catholic Church in the West resisted the creation of vernacular literature and vernacular translations of the scripture. Education in literacy was carefully controlled to ensure that only those favourable to the position and interests of the Catholic Church were taught to read. It is instructive that the reform efforts by Charlemagne (as a layman) to establish monastic and cathedral schools to educate lay people were abolished by the Synod of Paris in 829, just 15 years after his death.

The reforms that took place in the time of Charlemagne and under the direction of Alcuin consolidated written Latin as the universal language of the Church, education, culture and political and legal administration across much of Europe for centuries. It was a significant unifying political and culture force against the perceived threat of diversity: in languages, legal systems, belief systems and cultural practices of the oral-based traditions of the previously scattered Frankish and Germanic tribal groups. It was also a major tool in the bringing to heel of the diverse "unorthodox" beliefs that

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<sup>43</sup> (Green 25)

had developed in Christianity through its oral communication practices. As the primary repository of literacy, the enforcement of Latin as the language of international discourse cemented the power of the clerical hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church and their immense financial and political interests. This centrality of Latin to political, cultural and religious power continued through the following centuries until the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation.

#### **4 The vernacular Reformation**

A range of social, cultural and political factors and coalitions have been identified as laying the foundations for the success and influence of the Lutheran Reformation. From a media perspective, one of those is the correlation between the Reformation and the development of the printing press in the previous century. Numerous works now address the various ways in which the production capacities of the printing presses of Europe provided Luther with an alternative source of media power to match the institutional communication infrastructures of the Catholic Church and facilitated the multiplication and spread of his theological and pastoral ideas to a wide audience.<sup>44</sup>

The focus of this chapter is the importance of the coalition between Luther and printers in breaking the political and religious power of the Roman Catholic Church held through their control of the language of religious discourse.

Building on the cultural changes of the Renaissance and its humanists and in cahoots with the commercial printers, Luther achieved more than just put into the

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<sup>44</sup> (See, for example, Edwards; Eisenstein; Scribner)

marketplace new perspectives on Christian beliefs and practices. By shifting religious discourse into the vernacular of German and in a style of German that appealed to a mass/popular audience, he subverted the linguistic monopoly on which the Church's authority and political control had been built.

While oral vernaculars were used extensively in daily discourse and even had their own oral literature, oral vernaculars had little influence in religious matters because of their local character, their lack of a developed written form, their history of subordination to the imperial language of Latin, their perceived threat to imperial unity, and their unsuitability to deal with the complexity of some of the doctrinal and institutional issues that characterized Christianity and for which Latin had developed a particular vocabulary.

Through use and over time, however, vernacular German began to develop written forms. These remained culturally subordinate to Latin and served mainly as devices for helping students in monastic schools to learn Latin, not as a substitute for Latin. Green<sup>45</sup> tracks the process of this development: beginning with isolated glosses of German words inserted into Latin texts to explain unknown Latin words; the extension of these isolated glosses into glossary lists paralleling Latin words with their vernacular equivalents; to full translations, where Latin words came to be rendered in German in an interlinear way.

The path of development however was irregular. It wasn't till the thirteenth century that literacy began to be acquired and taught without recourse to Latin; and

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<sup>45</sup> (Green 50-54)

German secular and religious literature began to be developed for lay men and women and even clerics who wanted to read religious materials but were not literate in Latin.<sup>46</sup>

The development of printing in the 15<sup>th</sup> century accelerated this vernacular production. Within fifty years of its European invention, ‘printing presses existed in more than 200 cities and towns, and an estimated six million books had been printed... (more) than had been produced by scribes and monks during the entire Middle Ages.’<sup>47</sup> This body of publications included not just works in Latin. As the volume of publications increased, the price of published material dropped and printers found a ready market for printed works in the various vernacular languages of Europe, expanding the reach of printed works beyond just academics and the wealthy. Engelsing estimates that though the literacy rate across Germany was probably no higher than five percent, in the cities and towns it could have been as high as thirty percent.<sup>48</sup>

It was this more popular German market that Luther tapped into and expanded considerably in his reformation project. The impact of Luther is evident from the publication figures for the time. While at the beginning of the sixteenth century there

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<sup>46</sup> (Green 9-10)

<sup>47</sup> (Ozment, quoted in Andersson and Talbot 35)

<sup>48</sup> (Quoted in Scribner 2)

were forty editions of German works produced each year, in 1523 there were 498, a third of which were from Luther alone.<sup>49</sup>

Even before he posted his disputative theses in 1517, Luther was familiar with the potential and processes of printing and the intellectual community that developed around printing businesses. The printing press of Wittenberg University was housed for a while in the Augustinian Convent in which Luther lived. Along with textbooks, it also published humanistic works, primarily in Greek and Latin. Prior to the start of the Reformation in 1517, two of Luther's works had been printed by the press, written in German with the specific intent of reaching the widest possible public, not just for scholars and students that would have occurred had he written in Latin. His style reflected this intent to such an extent that he discouraged his scholarly colleagues from buying the work. As he explained in a letter to the humanist Christoph Scheurl,

*They were written not for the Nurembergers, that is, for very fine and very cultured beings, but for the rude Saxons as you know them.*<sup>50</sup>

Luther's desire to reach a wide audience coincided with the interests of the printers who, whatever their ideological commitments, were also in the business of making money. It was apparent that vernacular literature addressed to a general audience held much more potential for profit than works produced for the saturated Latin market. Luther's *Die sieben Busspsalmen*, published in German in 1517 was

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<sup>49</sup> (Scribner 2)

<sup>50</sup> (Grossman 73)

quickly reprinted in several cities to meet demand and went through a number of editions.<sup>51</sup>

Once the Reformation began, Luther wrote prodigiously. In the peak publication year of 1522 there were 55 first editions of his work. Edwards identifies a lifetime (24 years) total of 544 first editions of his works and a total of first and reprint editions of 3183. This was eleven times more than the next Evangelical writer. Conservatively estimating each printing at 1,000 copies makes the total number of Luther's publications during his lifetime at 3.1 million copies.<sup>52</sup> Not all of these were polemical works but included also sermons and pastoral and biblical works. Though there had been earlier instances where printing had been utilized to build public opinion, the sheer volume of publications has lead Edwards to name it as the first mass propaganda campaign.

*The printing press played more than just an assisting role in this many-sided contest over authority. It broadcast the subversive messages with a rapidity that had been impossible before its invention. More than that, it allowed the central ideological leader, Martin Luther, to reach the 'opinion leaders' of the movement quickly, kept them all in touch with each other and with each other's experience and ideas, and allowed them to 'broadcast' their (relatively coordinated) program*

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<sup>51</sup> (Grossman 73)

<sup>52</sup> (Edwards Loc 501)

*to a much larger and more geographically diverse audience than had ever been possible before.*<sup>53</sup>

At first Luther's disputes with the Catholic Church were written and published in Latin, the language of scholarly discourse, but this quickly changed as it became apparent that there was wider public interest in the issues being raised. From his first disputation in 1517, it took only two years before Luther was publishing more of his works in German than in Latin. By 1523, 81% of 55 new editions and 89% of 390 all editions (new and reprints) of Luther's work were in German.<sup>54</sup>

In contrast, Catholic responses to Luther's work were not only fewer but were written predominantly in Latin. From 1518 to 1544, 60% of 2551 printings of Luther's work were in German, compared to 40% of a total of 514 Catholic publications for the same period - a total of 765 German works of Luther in the market compared to 154 Catholic ones.<sup>55</sup>

Luther's media strategy presented his Catholic critics with a dilemma. In order to counter Luther effectively they had to do so where he was having greatest impact: in the market, in the vernacular. Yet to do so undermined the grounds on which the church held its authority and power: that church leaders were the proper determiners of religious truth, not lay people; that Latin, not the vernaculars, was the proper

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<sup>53</sup> (Edwards Loc 128)

<sup>54</sup> (Edwards Loc 262)

<sup>55</sup> (Edwards Loc 381)

language of Christian discourse; and that the proper site for religious debate was within the institution, not the marketplace.

*Not to reply was to surrender much of the vernacular reading public to Luther and his friends. To reply was to further by both message and medium the position of the Evangelicals. This was the Catholic dilemma.*<sup>56</sup>

As a result the Catholic response was ineffectual. The recognition and efforts by some in the Catholic Church to provide and promote their own publicists as a counter to Luther and other reformers failed to gain any support from the Catholic hierarchy. Their primary response was to utilize their traditional position of power and authority, as had been done by the Orthodox-Catholic Church since the early centuries of Christianity, by attempting to censor and prevent the circulation of alternate opinion. In the Edict of Worms (1521), the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V condemned Luther, banned his writings and forbade people from printing, possessing or reading them. “With the publication of the Edict of Worms, we have the beginning of a general imperial censorship for Germany.”<sup>57</sup>

The success of such a response was limited. Condemning Luther and banning his publications was no match for the popular demand for his writings, the ready accessibility of their contents and form, and the commercial interests of the printers, traders and smugglers to promote and distribute him not only for ideological reasons but also for commercial ones. As Eisenstein notes,

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<sup>56</sup> (Edwards Loc 766)

<sup>57</sup> (Putnam 85)

*The linking of concern about salvation with shrewd business tactics and a so-called 'hard sell' seems to have been no less pronounced in the early sixteenth century than among Bible salesmen today.*<sup>58</sup>

As an example of this interconnectedness of the religious Reformation with commerce, in 1524 the Leipzig City Council petitioned their Catholic Duke on behalf of the printers of the town to lift the ban on printing Lutheran materials because it was undermining the future of their businesses. The Council's argument was that Luther's writings were in high demand and were being imported or smuggled in and purchased by people anyway, but the local printers weren't allowed to print and sell them. All that was permitted was Catholic treatises which 'they have in over abundance (but were) desired by no one and cannot even be given away.'<sup>59</sup>

It wasn't until the second half of the century that a more determined effort was made to counter the effects of Protestant propaganda and political action, with a more determined effort to prohibit the publication of books without prior Papal approval through published Indices, to hunt out prohibited publications through the Roman Inquisition, and to develop its own counter-propaganda through more extensive publishing efforts.

By that stage, however, the cat was well and truly out of the bag. The monopoly of the Catholic Church over the language of faith had been broken and Protestant Christianity in the local vernaculars had become politically established in a number of

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<sup>58</sup> (Eisenstein 309)

<sup>59</sup> (Edwards Loc 214)

European countries. Vernacular versions of the Christian scriptures were published in German (1522), French (1523), English (1525), Swedish (1541), Danish (1550), Dutch (1558), Italian (1562) and Spanish (1569).

What is instructive is that it did not take long before newly established Protestant authorities began to put in place their own policies of regulation of printing, book distribution and reading to protect their recently acquired power. This included the construction of new Protestant orthodoxies of theology, authority and practice of Christianity that hegemonically hid their connection to and dependence on the literary cultures and industries of printing.<sup>60</sup>

What is challenged in Christianity by new media developments today is not necessarily Christianity itself, but the particular mediation and authorized languages of Christianity that developed on the foundation of the cultures and industries of printing through the modern period. Print-based Protestant thought and practices were able to establish themselves through those media processes as unconditioned orthodoxy. Where the changes now being brought by recent changes into digital language and distribution will lead is yet to be seen.

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