

THE MEDIA AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY FROM ANCIENT TO MODERN

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On a weekend afternoon in 2007, the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne became engaged in an altercation with a small group of young skateboarders who were riding their boards around the empty grounds of the Cathedral. As his efforts to remove them developed into a game of chase, he became angry and racially abusive. Unbeknown to him, his tirade was secretly videoed by one of the skateboarders on his mobile phone and several months later posted on YouTube, where it was picked up by the news media and became a headline story nationally and internationally. The Dean was eventually forced to resign his position. This seemingly private incident on a weekend afternoon, dramatically made public, exemplifies how changes in media are changing the terms and conditions under which religious authority is ascribed, recognized and socially supported.

Authority in religion is an important factor in the development and character of religious activities, at an individual level. It is also a crucial element in how religion is organized publicly and integrated into wider social and political structures. For that reason, most political states for centuries have had protocols and procedures for how religious authorities may function in relation to wider political authorities and other social institutions. Chaves argues that the modernist movement of secularization as a political and social strategy needs to be understood as being directed towards religious authority rather than religion in general. "Secularization," he writes, "is best understood not as the decline of religion, but as the declining scope of religious authority." (Chaves, 1994)

With the reemergence of religion as a significant political and cultural force over the past few decades, and changes in the relative balance between individual autonomy and institutional authority in religion, the "secular" model for the modern political

management of religion is being reworked. The questions of what constitutes religious authority and how it is exercised are ripe for reexamination.

As the social marketplace accommodates this growth in religious interest globally, the question of religious authority has become a much broader issue than simply designated leadership positions within recognized religious institutions. In times of significant social change, uncertainty or crisis, such as we are facing today, people look for meaning and answers not just from those in formal positions of authority. They respond to anyone who is providing useful meaning and resources in relevant and dynamic ways at sites and through media sources that people access in the course of their daily living.

This is particularly the case in the present globalized situation, as notions of a nation as a singular unified public sphere change towards that of a proliferation of publics with specific identities and interests that need to be constantly reconstituted. So also the notion of religion as a relative stable network of defined institutions within a bounded society is changing towards that of a religious marketplace comprising not only institutional authorities, but also candidates outside institutional structures whose claim for audience attention and loyalty is based on different appeals and credentials. That religious marketplace now operates largely through the public media.

This new religious marketplace presents political leaders and social policy makers with the need to negotiate a new concept of religious authority that is more individually constructed, defined significantly by media audiences rather than institutions, more consumerist in its approach, and more global in the figures and resources it draws on. Crucial to the successful integration of religious factions within civil society, therefore, is

understanding the relationship of religion and media (Meyer, 2006), and crucial to understanding the relationship of religion and media is understanding the relationship of media and religious authority.

While the place of media in the construction of social realities is being explored across a range of religious phenomena, the connection between media and changes in religious authority has been relatively under-examined. Previously religious authority has been viewed as a relatively autonomous institutional practice. Religious authorities have been quick to argue that while they may use media, their determinations on religious ideas, doctrines and practices are made on the basis of revelation and tradition, not utilitarian or instrumental grounds. That perspective is now largely discredited. How religious authorities are constructed, recognized and exercised are intimately bound up with media factors: the media cultures within which and by which religious authority is constructed, how authority is communicated relative to the audiences it is seeking to influence, and the effectiveness with which religious figures are able to associate and position themselves within the mediated marketplace of political, social, economic and ideological exchange.

This chapter will explore different aspects of that interrelatedness.

What is Authority?

The primary reference point for thinking about authority in general is the work of the sociologist Max Weber (Weber, 1968). Weber defines authority as legitimized dominance, a perspective that has two dimensions. One is the element of dominance. Authority carries with it an implication of power: the ability to force, coerce or compel

people to act in a particular way. Weber describes this dominance as “the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by given groups of persons” (Weber, 1968, p. 212).

The second element in Weber’s definition is that of legitimization. Authority involves more than just the ability to coerce or compel. Authority involves also an element of compliance or acceptance of the coercion by those being coerced on the basis that they attribute a certain measure of legitimacy to what is being done. The exercise of authority, in distinction from the simple use of force, is characterised by a level of voluntary compliance with the power being exercised on the grounds that participants have an interest in obeying (Weber, 1968, p. 212). Authority is a situation in which people cede their full autonomy and accept the direction of another, on the grounds that what is being required is accepted as a legitimate expectation, given the circumstances.

Chapman illustrates this difference through an examination of the two Latin terms: *potestas* and *auctoritas*. *Potestas* was associated originally with the role of the magistrate and the magistrate’s ability to enforce obedience or punishment through coercion – our English sense of *power*. The *auctor* on the other hand, from which comes the term *auctoritas* or authority, was a figure who played an important role of guarantor in the process of inheritance. Their influence arose not from their power to compel, but from the benefit to be gained from the role they were performing and the weight of their opinions reinforced by their social position, their learning or the strength of their personality (Chapman, 2005). Letty Russell characterises authority therefore as legitimated power - “It accomplishes its ends by evoking the assent of the respondent.” (Russell, 1987, p. 21).

For Arendt, the fact that authority is dependent on a perceived benefit and the trustworthiness of the person guaranteeing it makes authority a relationship that links power to the past. The power an authority exercises is a power ascribed on the basis of an existing relationship or perceived value. “The authority of the living was always derivative, depending upon... the authority of the founders, who no longer were among the living. Authority, in contradistinction to power (*potestas*), had its roots in the past.” (Arendt, 1977). While power may be exercised from within or from outside a community, authority is grounded in a community with a recognized history and identity.

This dimension of legitimization of a use of power is so decisive for Weber that he identifies his three “pure” types of authority, not on the basis of the type of force used, but on the basis of how the force and its compliance is justified or legitimized.

Legal grounds refer to legitimization of certain uses of power on the rational grounds of “a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands.” (Weber, 1968, p. 215). Legal authority is an impersonal order or system of rules and laws that has been “established by agreement or by imposition, on grounds of expediency or value-rationality or both, with a claim to obedience at least on the part of the members of the organization.” (Weber, 1968, p. 217) Any legal authority, or any person acting as a legal authority does so only to the extent that they are operating within the system that has been agreed to by the community and which they themselves are also accountable to.

Traditional grounds refer to legitimization of the use of power on the grounds of “an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them.” (Weber, 1968, p. 215) Traditional authority is

domination or the use of power by a person or group of people who has been placed in a position “according to traditional rules” and who is obeyed because of their traditional status, with the discretion to act within “that sphere that tradition leaves open to him.” (p.226) Any person acting in a role of traditional authority does so within certain limits, those understood and recognized by subjects as being defined by the tradition and apply to the person occupying the position.

Charismatic grounds refer to legitimization of the use of power on the grounds that an individual is recognized or revered as being extraordinary and “endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” (Weber, 1968, p. 241) In contrast to legal and traditional authority, charismatic authority has no external validation apart from the credence given to it by those who recognize it as authentic and act accordingly. For that reason, Weber saw charismatic authority as the more dramatic but also the more transient of the three types. Charismatic authority was “the great revolutionary force,” capable of stimulating action to produce “a radical alteration of the central attitudes and directions of action with a completely new orientation of all attitudes towards the different problems of the ‘world’.” (Weber, 1968, p. 245) However, lacking external validation, it lasts only as long as it is effective for its followers. After its initial impulse, or as the circumstances that gave rise to it change, it commonly disappears or becomes routinized into either a legal or traditional authority structure:

If proof and success elude the leader for long, if he appears deserted by his god or his magical or heroic powers, above all, if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear. (Weber, 1968, p. 242)

Though widely used in social and political theory, Weber's typology has also been subject to a good deal of debate, critique and modification. One of those points of debate has been whether there are grounds of legitimization that Weber has not identified, a potential deficiency readily acknowledged by Weber himself. A number of people advocate for value-rationality as a separate form of legitimization. Value-rationality authority is domination through the use of power legitimated by "faith in the absolute value of a rationalized set of norms." Within this form of authority, those exercising power are "legitimized by their relationship to the goals of the ideology" (Satow, 1975; Willer, 1967), the sort of authority that operates within a professional organization or a Protestant Church for example.

Others question whether Weber has identified and named the legitimizations correctly. Kertcher and Margalit in their work on political authority, for example, replace Weber's charismatic authority with what they call performance-based legitimacy. What is distinctive about charismatic authority, they argue, is not the quality of the person *per se*, as suggested by Weber, but the fact that the qualities of the charismatic leader enable the person to achieve particular goals and meet particular needs of subjects. The legitimization therefore arises not from the personal qualities themselves, but from what those qualities will enable the person to achieve in furthering the interests of the group. Kertcher and Margalit also replace the terminology of Weber's concept of traditional authority with what they call constructed legitimacy, arguing that what is central to traditional authority is not just the tradition itself, but the perceived importance and moral correctness of the tradition. Traditional authorities acquire their authority through the legitimisation of moral rightness (Kertcher & Margalit, 2005, p. 10).

Heidi Campbell, in her work on religious authority and the internet, identifies a different set of loci or layers of authority within religious communities that can be understood as falling within the realm of traditional authority: religious hierarchy (roles or perceptions of recognized religious or community leaders), religious structures (community structures, patterns or practice, or official organization), religious ideology (commonly held beliefs, ideas of faith, or shared identity), and religious texts (recognized teachings or official book)(Campbell, 2007).

Another criticism of Weber's typology is that it is too static, reflecting an outmoded view of culture as relatively stable and clearly segmented, overlooking differences and diversity in favour of simple categories and generalized commonalities. Poststructuralist perspectives see culture as a much more complex, dynamic, and contested domain than Weber recognizes.. In such a view, how authority is recognized, when and why authority is justified and accepted, or not justified and resisted, is much more complex, multi-dimensional, multi-layered, subtle and nuanced than a three-type typology, or even a eight-type typology, can handle. Nor does a simple three-type typology allow for the fact that any one type may be capable of infinite individual variations, some of which may even be contradictory in different contexts. To think about the interaction of media and religious authority, an analysis of authority is required that better reflects that complexity and dynamism.

Authority as Fluid, Contested and Contextual

If one approaches culture as a more dynamic entity than what Weber presumes, it becomes apparent that in any one situation there are likely to be not just several discreet

forms of religious authority at work, but multiple loci, layers or claims to religious authority actively contesting with each other, building their claim for legitimization not only on religious grounds but on non-religious grounds as well. All of these combine into a complex contest of religious authorities that need to be seen as a whole - it is impossible to separate out any distinctively religious motive or quality.

As we will explore in more detail later, in the early formative centuries of Christianity, demonstrating that one was continuing the tradition of the apostles was an important factor in a person's or group's establishing the legitimacy of their actions, beliefs, doctrines or position. However, there was a wide variety of opinions about what constituted the apostolic tradition and these different opinions engaged in an extended and at times violent contest to have their opinion legitimized. Different uses of media, control of media, and alignment with different media cultures played an important part in this. Most of the major early conflicts in Christianity arose out of or involved media contests or differences in cultures of mediation, which were themselves significantly reworked in later periods of significant media change.

Seen within this light, Weber's concept of traditional authority needs to be significantly rethought. Rather than representing "established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions," traditional authority may need to be seen as something that is being continually constructed in the present to support the position of those seeking to acquire or hold power. That is, rather than simply stepping into the shoes of the tradition, it is necessary for a person or group claiming the mantle of traditional authority to make the tradition in a way that supports their cause and converts their power into authority. The media are an important element in this.

Rather than just three dominant forms of authority, therefore, in any situation there are likely to be a multitude of contenders for authority, vying for legitimization on a variety of grounds. All of these can be seen as operative throughout the history of most religions.

Radiated social position and success (social capital) – a person or group is often assigned authority in religious matters on the grounds of their status or success in a related field, such as a senior management position within a corporation, being a successful business person or politician, ranking on social scales such as the rich list, technorati (in the blogosphere), or their recognition as a sports, media or entertainment celebrity. Social capital developed in one area can transfer to the religious domain, particularly when the person's capital is in an area considered to be deficient in the religion.

Recognized general or specific knowledge – authority in religious matters can often be ascribed to a person having general or specialist knowledge in another area, unrelated to religion, particularly if the area of their knowledge is important for the life or goals of the religious group.

Recognized experience or wisdom – religious authority can be ascribed to a person on the basis that they are recognized as having a wide breadth of knowledge or experience across a range of fields and that wisdom can be applied to religious matters as well.

This process of “cultural transfer,” implicit in each of these three areas, is one of the key ways in which a particular religious tradition becomes enculturated or hybridized.

(Canclini, 1995). Along with these, there are other likely contenders for commanding authority at any time.

Charisma. Charisma is a fluid quality, and may reflect talent in a particular area only, or a more generalized ability that crosses a wide field. It is also more temporary. Part of the contest of authority that takes place may include the behavior of a person who is a player in the field on the basis of charismatic authority ascribed to him or her in the past, but who is struggling to retain that authority as they, the group or the situation has changed.

Ideological authority. In some religious groups, particular authority is ascribed to ideologies that are seen as representing the distinctive beliefs of the group - theological statements such as “The self revelation of God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit,” or speaking in tongues, or acts of self-sacrifice, for example. Even though they may have no overt or clear practical applications, authority can flow to those who align themselves with the ideological statement or practice and can construct connections between their actions and the ideology.

Sacred texts. Authority in religion is commonly ascribed to the artifact of a religion’s scriptures and its contents – the Bible, Koran, Torah, Bhagavad Gita, etc. Even though there may be substantial disagreement on what the actual contents say or mean, supporting one’s actions or claims by quoting passages from the sacred text can bestow an authority beyond that of the individual alone. In a similar way, establishing a ritual or visual connection between the artifact of the text and an individual can also ascribe authority to the individual.

Religious teaching authority. Bodies or individuals such as the magisterium, theologians or theological faculties, Rabbis, Rabbinic Councils, etc. can acquire authority not just because of their individual competence, but because of their association with or endorsement by the revered position. In most religions, the collective of religious leaders is often ascribed greater authority and dependability than the sum of the individuals involved, so that the individual's representative authority is enhanced through their identification with the collective, as seen in claims made for Roman Catholic authority: "the totality of the bishops is infallible when they, either assembled in general council or scattered over the earth, propose a teaching of faith or morals as one to be held by all the faithful." (Pivarunas, 1996)

The appointed leader or bureaucratic office. This is authority ascribed on the basis that one has been appointed to a position or office within a group or institution that is necessary for the functioning of the institution. This supra-personal authority is constructed and reinforced by various devices, such as giving precedence, interaction rituals such as standing, bowing or kissing a ring, and communication protocols such as addressing the person by the name of the office rather than their personal name (Moderator, Your Grace, Rabbi.)

Rituals. In a number of religions, key rituals have developed significant authority, frequently protected by superstitions that give them an abstract existence and power separate from those who perform them. Being associated with the conduct or interpretations can ascribe authority above that of the individual.

Martyrs and saints. In many religions, past figures who have lived exemplary lives or died exemplary deaths are preserved in memory through stories, relics, festivals,

images and shrines and hover in the background as authority figures whose perspectives must be taken into account.

Proverbial wisdom. Particularly in strongly oral communities, past experience preserved in adages and proverbs hold an authority that contends with other influences in group thinking and decision making. Tex Sample describes a debate in a strongly oral community in which argument proceeded by disagreeing participants citing different adages or proverbs to support their positions, with a view to presenting the most authoritative proverb for the situation (Sample, 1994).

Visual memory. Individual or group memory of things seen or meanings visualized in some form can become an important force that contends for people's loyalty. Augustine recounts an incident in which a largely illiterate congregation almost removed their bishop for using Jerome's new Latin translation of the bush under which Job slept as an ivy rather than gourd vine, an image that contradicted paintings they were familiar with. Writing to Jerome, Augustine comments, "The man was compelled to correct your version in that passage as if it had been falsely translated, as he desired not to be left without a congregation—a calamity which he narrowly escaped." (Epis 71.3) Morgan illustrates how visual images of Jesus may be more authoritative in people's religious understanding than biblical or other written texts.

In any specific religious situation, you are likely to find a range of these different sources of authority coming into play and actively or passively contending with each other for influence and people's loyalty. Given that dynamic situation, religious authority has to be seen as being continually negotiated, established and reestablished.

The process of authority therefore is neither simple nor one way. Part of the complexity of religious authority is that people tend to negotiate their own “packages” of recognition and compliance, placing greater value or legitimacy on a particular authority or combination than others. While people may comply with a particular authority, they may do so in a negotiated way – complying in some ways but not in others. Part of that process of negotiation may also involve a person in a position of authority accommodating themselves to certain of people’s demands in order to retain that authority.¹ While authority may be recognized and obeyed, it may not be in terms that the authority would like or believes is appropriate. This complexity means that authority needs to be understood as territorial or quite specifically contextual in scope, applying to particular groups of people within particular regions. In thinking about the character of religious authority, therefore, specific questions need to be asked of what context, time, or space is religious authority being applied to?

Legitimization and Compliance

As noted above, the strength of religious authority lies not just in the power exercised, but also in the voluntary compliance to that power by those who are subject to it. While one can achieve political order through imposed power, political order based on the power of coercion alone will be unstable and will be subject to (more) frequent acts of resistance and subversion unless it can be legitimized legally or ideologically (Kertcher & Margalit, 2005, p. 8). Chapman illustrates this in relation to the authority of the legal system:

This sense of authority is reflected in the “authorities” of the English legal tradition: judges, whose decisions carry legal and coercive power, are

nevertheless wise to base their opinion on the “authorities” of the legal tradition, even though there is no absolute requirement to do so. This might be referred to as “enabling” authority rather than coercive power. To be effective, coercive power should be based on accepted authority. (Chapman, 2005, p. 105)

Similarly, a religious person or body may take action based on an assumption they have the authority to do so, but unless what they claim is recognized and accepted as legitimate by those they are seeking to command, there is no authority – only attempted power. This process replicates the media perspective of reception theory, which specifies that textual meaning is not created in its production or in the preferred meaning of the producer, but in an interaction between the text, the context, and the audience. The audience is a crucial player and retain significant power in determining whether any action, including domineering power and coercion, is authoritative or not.

The audience, therefore, has significant power in determining what is authoritative or not – power can be taken, but authority needs to be given. This perspective turns attention then to the question of the dynamics or methods by which those in power, or who are seeking to be in power, work to secure the compliance of the dominated, as a means of enhancing their power. Within this framework, the question of “In what ways do media become an element or the means by which compliance is secured?” becomes a pertinent question. In thinking about that question, I want to explore two major grounds on which the exercise of power within religion is transformed into religious authority: legitimization through performance and legitimization through symbolic construction.

Legitimization through Performance

Legitimization through performance addresses the fact that the right to exert power is given to people and groups who can demonstrate or have demonstrated that they are able to achieve goals, to make things happen, or to create the conditions that make life safe, enjoyable and meaningful for those who are being governed. There are some grounds for arguing that attributing authority to someone on the grounds of performance has become a more important factor in the modern age than it was previously. Arguably, performance has always been a factor, but the time frame and tolerance threshold for judging mis-performance have both shortened and changes in the political framework have made it easier for the dominated to shift their allegiance on the basis of those perceptions. The case that Kertcher and Margalit (2005) make in relation to political authority may equally apply to religious authority:

Since the French Revolution, the modern nation-state emphasizes performance. Under this political order, rulers bargain with their citizens for collective citizen's rights guaranteed by the state in exchange for duties. In return for regularly paying taxes and participation in wars, the provisions of security, education, and welfare are assured. (Kertcher & Margalit, 2005)

There are a number of reasons for this: the rise in Western affluence, the multiplication of goods and services available to individuals, and the increase in social and cultural options mediated through the logic of consumerism and the choice of the marketplace. These combined have shifted the balance of legitimization away from Weber's traditional and legal grounds more towards the grounds of performance. Rather than attribute authority to the traditional on the grounds of the sanctity of immemorial traditions, as may have been the case in the past, today we are more inclined to attribute authority to the traditional only to the extent that we perceive it will bring us benefits in doing so. We respect and support a person in a position of traditional authority, and

accept the power they exercise on our behalf or even over us, so long as they continue to demonstrate that they are able to produce the conditions that keep life safe, enjoyable and meaningful for us.

To exist within this cultural context, religion is required to demonstrate its competence against the same criterion of performance, and comparably against its competitors. There are a number of areas where religion has traditionally been competitive: in the practical area, as a community of support, a social meeting place, a provider of health care, education and welfare; in the moral area, as a generator of moral vision and ethical frameworks, an impetus for moral development, a philosophical support for sacrifice and generosity; in the traditional area, as a preserver of the resources of the past, a site for nostalgia, an orienting perspective on time, a site for cultural participation and aesthetics; in the intellectual area, as a provider of information and perspectives by which people are able make sense of events and build meaning; in the spiritual area, a resource for the pursuit and inducement of harmony, peace of mind, hope, reconciliation, oneness and integration.

In a global media environment where there are a number of readily available options, the extent to which a religion continues to be seen as authoritative by individuals or communities is dependent on its capacity to continue to produce benefits in these areas. That is, people will continue to accede practical, intellectual, symbolic or legal power to religion providing religion continues to produce benefits for them in the practical, intellectual, symbolic or legal areas of life.

Underperforming religious authority may be able to be sustained in relatively closed social situations or where competitors are able to be either silenced or suppressed

so that people have few alternatives. These situations still exist in some nations today, and limiting alternatives or eliminating competitors have been strategies utilized extensively by religions in the past to protect their power.

In the West in particular, however, almost all of these performance functions are now competitive, and services once provided exclusively by religion are now available from a variety of alternative sources, including NGO's, the nation state, social action groups, commercial businesses or other religions. This growth in competition has been proposed as one of the reasons for the progress of secularization and decline in religion through the Modern period. Chaves identifies the process of secularization as one of declining religious authority, which he links to the growth of institutional differentiation – i.e. alternative providers of performance based benefits:

This broad shift in perspective appropriately highlights the political, conflictual, and contingent nature of relations among societal institutions in general and between religion and other spheres in particular. Here, society is understood as “an interinstitutional system” rather than as a moral community. In such an interinstitutional system religion is understood primarily as another mundane institutional sphere or organizational sector; it can no longer claim any necessary functional primacy. (Chaves, 1994, p. 751)

In assessing the place of media in this, it becomes apparent that it is inadequate to identify simply individual situations where media is an element. The multiplication of goods and services and the increase in social and cultural options that has shifted the centre of power from institutions to consumers within the marketplace are inconceivable apart from a whole environment of media-based structure and practice. This media-cultural environment includes: the creation of desire through advertising; the spread of awareness of alternatives through the global advertising, marketing, news, social commentary and person to person media network; the construct of difference and

imagined product diversity through marketing; the attempted stabilization of the market through branding; and the globally mediated mechanisms of product research, development, production, search, purchase, delivery, and cultivated consumption that are the nuts and bolts of the capitalist system.

The fragmentation of the present global marketplace means that authority is more likely to be ascribed in more circumscribed areas, on a more conditional basis and for shorter periods of time. Authority is also more likely to be ascribed as part of a wider eclectic package of authorities managed by the individual rather than the individual relegating that power to a single external body. In their study of new media in the Muslim world, Eickelman and Anderson note how the steady adaptation of new media within and across Islamic communities is challenging existing forms of Islamic authority, bypassing traditional practices once considered authoritative and establishing new networks in which authority is more pragmatic, participative, eclectic and transient.

Islam is represented on-line in a *mélange* of wire-service news copy, transcribed sermons, scanned texts of the Qur'an and hadith collections, advice and self-help information ranging from where to find halal butchers and mosques to matrimonial and cheap travel to prayer-times and Islamic educational materials.... This is a social-communicative sphere more comparable to the 'creoles' that Benedict Anderson (1991) identified with the civic publics that arose, without prior design, with the earlier spread of print capitalism and particularly with early modern newspapers. That is, the Internet and its surroundings that enthusiasts call 'cyberspace' or envision as a new 'information age' do not facilitate the spokesperson-activists of established institutions, but draw instead on a broader range of new interpreters or newly visible interpreters of Islam. (Anderson, 2003)

While consumer-based choice has been criticized for its excesses, in reality there is no other way for any individual to function within a globally mediated marketplace of excessive information and unlimited options and choice except by making their own judgments about value and benefit and charting their own course accordingly. In order to

be considered as an option in that choice-making process, any religion, religious individual, or religious institution must establish their authority through a number of actions: organizing to be present in people's marketplace; distinguishing themselves from other competitors in order to be noticed; promising practical, moral, traditional, intellectual, aesthetic or spiritual benefits in line with the needs or aspirations of those in the marketplace; and retaining loyalty by performing, or creating the appearance of performance, in line with those promised benefits.

Legitimization through Symbolic Construction

The second way in which the use of religious power may be legitimized and effective in generating compliance is through symbolic construction, that is effectively discerning values that the subjects consider important and constructing the position of authority or use of power as representing or furthering those values.

Even if a person in a position of authority is largely ineffectual in their performance or in producing benefits, their authority may be maintained if they are able to align their position and use of power with key values of the subjects. Following this line of argument, Kertcher and Margalit (2005) argue that Weber's concept of traditional authority being justified on the grounds of tradition is slightly off-target. They propose that traditional authority is legitimized on the grounds that people see it as morally right.

There are a variety of methods by which a person exercising power may symbolically construct their use of power as morally right or authoritative in order to enlist people's loyalty and compliance. One is through the use of unifying myths and vision. Authority is enhanced when the person exercising power is able to position

themselves and associate their use of power within the symbols and narratives that frame people's world, thereby associating what is being done positively with the group's collective past, history or tradition. Such an association may be overtly or covertly constructed, specifically integrating themselves into events or values from the collective past, or covertly associating themselves through visual imagery or performed actions that evoke memories of past narratives. Another is to construct themselves as acting in a representative capacity on behalf of God, the tradition, or the collective, thereby camouflaging the personal nature of their use of power behind a screen of representativeness. Another is through the creation of exclusive association with other people or objects of power and authority to enhance the impression of wider recognition and influence, or ascribed social capital. Staged and displayed photographs of religious leaders with national and international politicians, business people, pop culture idols and celebrities are part of this enhancement of authority through association with other powerful figures (a practice which has been part of the history of most religions). The restricted access or use of objects seen as powerful within the religion is also part of this symbolic construction of authority.

Authority is constructed and sustained symbolically by the symbolic construction of the universe, the fundamental sense of moral rightness, within which one's authority is justified, within which actions take place and by which actions are conjured as normal or natural, unnatural or inappropriate. Bourdieu has been instrumental in identifying the ways in which the fundamental medium of language and language games structure relationships in particular ways to benefit those in power and disadvantage their competitors by setting the conditions under which a speaker may "command a listener,"

and the conditions under which a speaker may not only be understood, but also “believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished” – fundamental components of authority. Among the elements of such discourses, he identifies “laws which determine who (*de facto* and *de jure*) may speak, to whom, and how... Among the most radical, surest, and best hidden censorships are those which exclude certain individuals from communication (e.g. by not inviting them to places where people speak with authority, or by putting them in places without speech”(Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 649-650).

The constructions put in place by such discursive practices are not durable, but need to be constantly renewed through hegemonic practices, described by McQuail as

“a loosely interrelated set of ruling ideas permeating a society, but in such a way as to make the established order of power and values appear natural, taken-for-granted and common-sensical. A ruling ideology is not imposed but appears to exist by virtue of an unquestioned consensus. Hegemony tends to define unacceptable s to the status quo as dissident and deviant.” (McQuail, 1994, p. 99)

The construction of religious authority therefore is an ongoing process, operating constantly not only to meet its obligations or deliver on its promises, but also to continually construct the world that legitimizes its power.

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.... 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 stylistic elaborations of literary writers, the references and apparatus of scholars, the statistics of sociologists, etc.” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 649)

One could add to Bourdieu’s list, the convoluted abstractions of theological discourse and the mumbo jumbo of ritual language that have frequently legitimized religious authority.

One of the valuable metaphors by which to understand the relationship between media and religious authority is to see all media as the web upon which religion at any particular time takes shape. Thinking of media as the “web” of religious culture² brings into our thinking about religion the fundamental and essential role that communication plays in all social and cultural activity. Though they have different names, communication and culture are symbiotic and inseparable. Communication is a social and cultural activity; culture is basically a conglomeration of activities that communicate. You cannot have a cultural event of any kind, including a religious event, that doesn’t require communication or that isn’t built on a communication practice. In the same way, you cannot communicate without participating in practices that are made available within the culture, that carry with them cultural expectations, values, prejudices and patterns.

While Weber saw this web of culture as relatively stable – “a relatively closed context of meaning-making for a relatively integrated social group” (Lewis, 2005, p. 9) – more recent cultural thinking sees culture and its communication as much more diverse, fluid and dynamic, carrying within itself not only forces that move it towards stability but also forces that challenge that stability and move it towards destabilization and change. Institutions over time seek to manage these differences and change by acting in ways to stabilize social order, structures, language, symbolization and meaning. Such efforts to create stability and a common opinion, however, provoke parallel processes of de-centering imagination and resistance that challenge that stability.

The communication or media web of culture therefore is a dynamic one, with complex pathways and networks continually being formed and reformed. Dominant patterns of communication practice exist beside and are continually being challenged and

subverted by alternative pathways, interconnections, relations and patterns. As recent ethnographic studies of media reception and use are showing, the variety of media webs within any culture are infinite, as individuals put together their own packages of media practice. The interaction of these differences also contributes to the dynamism of culture.

Seeing the web of communication as both fundamental and dynamic allows us to affirm the distinctive place of media and media change in the construction and change of cultures, without reverting to a simple technological deterministic position that says that changes in media have a direct and inescapable effect on cultures in a unilateral and unavoidable way. Certainly, new media can cause significant changes in people's ways of communicating, with consequent changes in social patterns, structures and values. At times these changes can be rapid and dramatic, at others a less dramatic but no less influential ripple effect spreading through the whole pattern of communication practices.

Elizabeth Eisenstein advocates this intermediate view in her major study of the influence of printing in early modern Europe. Eisenstein questions the view that gives equal value to a range of social factors considered to contribute to the extensive social changes that occurred at that time. While acknowledging that other variables were also involved, she argues that printing as a single medium change warrants special attention because its effect was a multiplying one, acting not just as an additional new way of communicating, but also by altering fundamental methods of data collection, storage and retrieval systems and communication networks that set the conditions and provided the mean by which other changes could take place (Eisenstein, 1979, pp. xv-xvi).

The relationship of religion as one social phenomenon to the wider web of communication of the society is an interactive one and varies from place to place and

period to period. New media do not normally impose themselves or intrude without resistance from other major social institutions, such as religion. New media commonly arise from, or are helped in their introduction into a society by a range of supporting factors or potentialities already present within the society. In the case of Christianity and media, for instance, at times media practices that have been rooted in or developed largely within Christian institutions or by Christian individuals have been taken up by the wider society. At other times and in other places, Christian institutions or individuals have adopted new media or new communication practices available or being used in the wider society and adapted them to their purposes.

Significant changes in media can instigate religious change in a variety of ways. They can add options to established ways of communicating, generating new ways of doing things without totally ousting old practices. New media may create a dramatic shakeout or shift in existing institutional practices, though those shifts may be slow or rapid. New media technologies and practices can be taken up in restricted sectors of a religion first and not be given high ratings in other sectors, until the conditions are right for the wider institution to see the new media practice as natural to the religion. As media changes become domesticated, what was once seen as external to the religion may become the legitimized means of significant transformation of religious culture, knowledge, practice, thinking, and perceptions of space and time, authority, political and economic relations, and organizational structure and social behavior.

The relationship between media and religion therefore is a nuanced and interactive one. Particular media configurations, even those that appear at first as foreign,

can become domesticated within a religion and produce changes that in time become an indistinguishable part of the religion's social and cultural life and traditions.

This perspective provides a valuable perspective for thinking about the relationship between media, media change, and the construction of religious authority. Media, because of their central role in establishing and maintaining relationships and the mustering of resources within a community, are a key site of social power. Changes to the communication web upon which any religion is built invariably create struggles by individuals or groups, old and new, to maintain or establish their authority by repositioning or realigning themselves strategically on the new web. Those practitioners whose ideas, practices, or identities are more easily adapted to the characteristics of the new web will find it much easier to establish themselves in key positions of authority than those whose religious formulations and practices are tightly linked to the old.

The impact of changes in the media web upon which any religion is constructed and relationships of power and authority in the religion, therefore, can be explored through a number of questions:

Who has access to and who is excluded from the religious web, at what level, and with what authorization?

Who has the right to participate in particular gatherings, forums or institutions where information is communicated, discussions take place and decisions are made?

Who has the power, literacy and resources to produce information and the power to receive it and be in "the loop" in relation to key media of religious communication?

What factors enable or restrict that access, such as speaking the language, knowing how to read or write, knowing the jargon (be that theological or technical),

belonging to the appropriate class, gender or race, being perceived as trustworthy, having the resources required to access the web (e.g. a telephone, television set, or computer to access the internet), having the resources and knowledge to put one's perspectives into the flow of communication, or having superior military or coercive power to impose one's possession?

The impact of media change, therefore, needs to be understood within the context that religious authority is neither fixed nor rigid. Authority needs to continually establish itself through language and communication within a marketplace of competing claims and interests. When the needs of the market change, or when a new contender emerges, the symbolic power of the established position needs to be argued and reaffirmed, not just according to the innate value of their way of communicating, but also its economic relevance, or value, to the new market and its dominant symbolism. This struggle occurs in a range of ways, from attempting to censor or censure the new, through hegemonic efforts to portray the established ways as natural or orthodox, to competing within the marketplace.

These struggles can be seen and need to be considered on a range of levels of analysis: at the level of individual thought and practice, as a person's values, beliefs, perspectives and practices change; at a sub-cultural level, as authority patterns within groups change under the impact of new people, new cultural influences, new information, or material conditions; at an inter-cultural level, as particular forms of Christianity (conservative vs liberal, western Christianity vs southern Christianity) gain dominance over others and acquire greater symbolic capital; at a macro-social level, as national

material conditions and communication patterns change, raising the symbolic and practical value of particular expressions of Christianity over others.

This particularity is important. For while the technological characteristics of new media are important factors in social and religious construction and change, they are just one factor. How the media are used and appropriated also need to be considered. The particular technological characteristics of a new medium do not become culturally significant until they are implemented in particular ways in different contexts. In practice, social arrangements and change are rarely the result simply of new technologies in a deterministic fashion, but a complex product of political negotiation and maneuver, economic pressures, opportunities for implementation, social competition, individual persuasiveness, and sometimes sheer accident or coincidence. There is no inevitable law or cause-effect predictability about how any new medium will develop or the consequences it will have. As Ruth Finnegan has noted:

"The medium itself cannot give rise to social consequences - it must be used by people and developed through social institutions. The mere technical existence of writing cannot affect social change. What counts is its use, who uses it, who controls it, what it is used for, how it fits into the power structure, how widely it is distributed - it is these social and political factors that shape the consequences." (Finnegan, 1988)

Media and the Early Reconstruction of Christian Authority

Much is made in the New Testament gospels that when he began his mission, Jesus had no structural authority to draw on. His authority was a personally embodied one, strongly in keeping with Weber's concept of charismatic authority – someone who came to be recognized by many as being endowed with apparently supernatural or superhuman powers and qualities. The four Gospels develop the meaning of Jesus'

authority by drawing on three models of religious leadership embedded in Judaism: that of the oral prophet, the Rabbi or sage, and the martyr. Since these are later reflections and constructions of the Jesus story, and only four “authorized” versions out of a much larger number of Gospel written at the time, it is difficult to know the extent to which these models of religious leadership were influential in Jesus’ developing self-understanding.

Following the death of Jesus, the earliest Christian movement was a diverse movement, as the ambiguous meanings inherent in the untimely death of Jesus and his proclaimed resuscitation were developed and interpreted to different contexts. Conflicts are evident in the earliest Christian writings between different groups and opinions that are significantly media related: Jewish and Gentile interpretations, the interpretations of the dramatic and itinerant Christian prophets and evangelists, whose constructions and performances were strongly oral in character, the influential minority of followers who were literate and favoured the establishment of a written tradition interpreted orally by authorized teachers, and the martyrs and the symbolic influence of their martyred death.

By the end of the second century, a number of recognizable streams of interpretation had developed: the Jewish Christian stream, who maintained their links with Judaism, saw Jesus as the Messiah but not the Son of God, and favoured the authority of disciples within the structure of Rabbinic Judaism; the Gnostic stream, which interpreted the Jesus tradition through the lens of the wider philosophical and cultural movement of Greek Gnosticism; Marcionite Christianity, which interpreted Jesus separate from his Jewish roots; Montanist Christianity, which retained a strong emphasis on charismatic practices and structures of authority; and Catholic or Logos Christianity, which adapted Jesus’ original message to the Logos philosophy of neo-Hellenism. In

keeping with the practice of Jesus, a number of those streams involved significant leadership by women.

Yet pretty much by the end of the third century, that diverse movement of Christianity had been narrowed to one dominant stream, the Catholic or Logos version of Christianity, which had succeeded in establishing themselves not only as the dominant interpretation but as the only true interpretation of who Jesus was and what Jesus meant. This dominance was established despite the fact that the Catholic Party implemented a particular model of authority and leadership that was restricted to males (despite Jesus' involvement of women in his mission and affirmation of the importance of women in leadership), was strongly literate in its leadership structures (despite the fact that the vast majority of Christians and possibly Jesus himself were illiterate and oral in their communication and cultural practice), and strongly hierarchical in nature (despite Jesus' teaching that his followers were to eschew hierarchy and the exercise of power in favour of relationships of mutual service).

It is frequently represented in histories and theologies of Christianity that this one particular stream dominated because it was the true embodiment of Christianity. This view needs to be challenged in the light of the struggle for power that took place and the dynamics of that struggle by which the catholic position established its hegemony. Hatch advocates this need for reviewing this dominant view:

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 recognised exponents; and that outside this body of doctrine there was only the play of more or less insignificant opinions, like a fitful guerrilla 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 at once of conservatism and of speculation. (Hatch, 1957, pp. 10-11)

There were many reasons for this hegemony that go beyond the scope of this study, but it is valuable to note the particular ways in which strategic uses of media were key elements in this early narrowing of Christianity, an imposed hegemony on the movement of Christianity that continued for more than a millenium. A number of media factors can be identified.

Construction of the Catholic Brand

One of those strategies was a branding one, with a strategy readily identified with media-based branding today. The term “catholic” comes from the Greek adjective *katholikos* meaning "universal." One of the first uses of the term was by Ignatius around the year 106 in a letter to the Christians in Smyrna. In that letter, though Jesus is identified as definitive of Christianity, Ignatius links the brand “universal” with a particular type of authority structure, one governed by bishops.

Wherever the bishop 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 either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God, so that everything that is done may be secure and valid. (Chapter VIII)

The term is used again in the account of the Martyrdom of Polycarp in 155. The Muratorian fragment, one of the earliest lists of the books of the New Testament from around 170, also uses it. In both cases it is used in the context of ecclesiastical discipline.

Though the term ”catholic” literally refers to all Christian communities (i.e. universal), through its hegemonic use the concept of *universality* has become identified with a *particular* stream of Christian opinion, and increasingly that being defined by the

powerful bishop of Rome. By the end of the second century this hegemony had become entrenched. In the year 380 the exclusivity of the brand was enforced politically and in Roman law by the Emperor Theodosius I with a decree that the term *catholic Christians* would be reserved only for the version of Christianity he endorsed:

We desire that all the 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, and which it is evident that Pope Damasus and Peter, bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic sanctity, followed; that is that we should believe in the one deity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with equal majesty and in the Holy Trinity according to the apostolic teaching and the authority of the gospel....as for the others, since in our judgement 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. ("The Codex Theodosianus: On Religion, 4th Century CE,")

The political will of the Emperor was embedded in Christian doctrine the following year in the definitive Nicene Creed with the inclusion of the statement, "I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church."

Media and Consolidation of Power in a Hierarchical Organization

Another major contributor to the overall supremacy of the catholic party was the effort put into the creation and normalization of a centrally managed, hierarchical organizational structure that located power and authority in the male leadership position of bishop.

The Catholic Party's hierarchical structure of bishop-presbyter-deacon was not native to early Christianity. Jesus rejected the exercise of power by any one person over another and, reflecting his emphasis on mutual love, promoted a collegial relationship characterized by mutual. This was enacted in the earliest years of the movement in a communal form of leadership, with particular authority ascribed to those who were part

of Jesus' original inner circle and those seen as gifted. This included resourceful women who found in Christian communities opportunities to exercise leadership and gifts in a way that was denied them in the wider society. The development and implementation of the Catholic male episcopal structure included therefore a significant effort to subordinate the leadership of women and charismatic-based leadership within the male-lead hierarchical structure. In line with Innis' arguments about the importance of writing in the construction of empires (Innis, 1950), the male bishops' superior ability to access and effectively utilize the resources of writing was a crucial factor in this dominance.

One of the earliest to promote the view that the bishop was the defining authority in the church, with other offices such as presbyter, deacon, and widow subordinate to the bishop, was Ignatius (died c.117)., himself a bishop of Antioch and therefore arguing in justification of a system that supported his own power. Ignatius was also one of the first to ascribe the term catholic or universal to this hierarchical view of the church, and therefore instrumental in linking religious authority in Christianity with a particular hierarchical organizational structure. The opinions of Ignatius were contained mainly in seven letters he wrote while under armed escort on the road from Antioch to Rome where he was to be executed. His writings acquired greater authority because of his impending martyrdom and the drama generated along the way as he passed through. The letters were also widely copied and circulated.

Reinforcing this view was another bishop, Irenaeus of Lyons, who in his major work, *Against Heresies*, written in 180, promoted the position of bishop as a bulwark against the theological threat he saw being posed by Gnostic expressions of Christianity. Irenaeus set bishops apart as the bearers of true Christianity on the basis that they were

the ones to whom the original apostles who knew Jesus personally passed on the true tradition. He justifies this idea with a rather mechanical concept of apostolic succession, i.e. the tradition of the apostles is preserved by a sequence or succession of bishops who hand it on to each other. He supports his argument with a constructed sequence of bishops going back to the apostles, though there is significant debate about the accuracy of his list. What we see from this, though, is a transformation of the more charismatic view of religious authority into an institutional one that is more defined and controlled. Irenaus' dubious demonstration of direct succession also illustrates the point made earlier, that the exercise of religious authority within Christianity has involve not just acting in a way that implements the authority, but also an active process of constructing a particular worldview, theology and organizational structure to legitimize the power being taken.

At the time, most bishops would have overseen small Christian communities or groups of communities. Throughout the second and third centuries there was an increase in the number of church councils held locally or regionally in which all bishops participated, though many were poorly educated and barely literate and scarcely able to participate in the heavy literate theological debates that were taking place at the time. As a result, greater power accrued to those who were bishops in the small number of major cities of the Empire because of the greater wealth in their churches, the greater number of clergy under their command, the civil importance of their cities in the imperial order, and their access to the facilities and resources for writing. With the exception of Irenaeus, almost all of the major Christian writers of the period of the second and third centuries

were bishops or connected with the five major imperial cities: Alexandria, Antioch, Carthage, Athens and Rome.

Writing was a powerful weapon used extensively by bishops to normalize the structure that supported their power, to organize opinion, to link with other bishops in their common cause, to quote from each other as apparently distant and impersonal sources in support of their own local authority, and to exploit as a common group the concept of one church and the church universal. As Fox notes:

Literacy also allowed bishops to outmanoeuvre opponents, display a common front of opinion, abjure or cure mistaken Christians, or ‘sign up’ lists of names for creeds and disciplinary rulings, texts which allowed yet more power to be mobilized. (Fox, 1994)

The resources that the bishops were able to muster for the production and distribution of written texts (a number came from wealthy families and brought these resources with them) allowed for the production and circulation of manuals of practice that implemented the particular organisational structures being promoted by the Catholic Party. *The Apostolic Tradition*, for example, was an influential and widely circulated seven thousand or so word document from the early third century that provided detailed directions on the choice and ordination of bishops, presbyters and deacons, the preparation of people for baptism and the conduct of baptism, the conduct of the eucharist, guidelines for personal religious practices. A clearly hierarchical organization is promoted through directions on who is to be ordained and set apart (bishops, elders and deacons – “ordination is for the clergy because of liturgical duty”), and who are not to be ordained (widows, readers, female virgins, sub-deacons and those who have received a gift of healing by revelation – “for the matter is obvious”). These particular interpretations of Christianity are universalised within the document by identifying them

as the essence of the tradition. The hegemonic nature of this document is apparent in its unquestioned affirmation that this is what Christianity has always been:

Now, driven by love towards all the saints, we have arrived at the essence of the tradition which is proper for the Churches. This is so that those who are well informed may keep the tradition which has lasted until now, according to the explanation we give of it, and so that others by taking note of it, may be strengthened (against the fall or error which has recently occurred because of ignorance and ignorant people). (Para 1.2)

Part of the consolidation of the power of the bishops and their view of Christianity included keeping a tight control of the production and circulation of alternative Christian opinions. Alternative Christian views, such as Gnostic Christianity, Arianism and Montanism were declared “heretical,” their writings were destroyed and severe penalties were imposed for anyone found possessing them. Alternative centers of spiritual power and authority, such as that of women and the oral prophets, which had been major forces in the communication and interpretation of the meaning of Christianity from its beginning, were brought under the control of the bishop. Christian women were forbidden to write and the role of prophecy, in a clear example of Weber’s understanding of the routinization of charisma, was declared to be a function of the bishop, regardless of whether the bishop possessed charismatic gifts or not.

The important role played by writing in this episcopal takeover of religious authority is well illustrated in the work of Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage during the mid part of the third century. Cyprian was an educated, wealthy, aristocratic Carthaginian property owner, possibly of senatorial rank. Trained within the Greco-Roman education system as a rhetorician, he was a skilled debater with likely experience in politics, the law and civil administration. He was elected as a bishop two years after his conversion to Christianity – a singular example of religious authority being ascribed on the basis of a

person's position in the secular world. As a bishop, and reflecting his Roman imperial experience and interests, Cyprian actively promoted a singular concept of church as the one visible orthodox community of Christians, with a universal unity of monarchical bishops as the sole authority in Christianity.

There is one God, and Christ is one, and there is one church, and one chair (episcopate) founded upon the rock by the word of God. (Letters)

Contributed to the further transformation of Latin (Western) Christianity into the Catholic model, as an imperial structure with clear parallels between church government and civil government. The consolidation of a clergy class separate from lay Christians paralleled the secular separation of the curial class (property owners) from the plebs. This structure of authority in Christianity that as parallel to that of the Empire allowed a ready accommodation of Christianity to the political power of the Empire. With the wealth of the church in Rome, its claims of direct connection with the apostles Peter and Paul and hosting their burial sites, and the importance of Rome as the centre of the Empire, it was not long before Rome acquired the position of senior bishop of catholic Christianity.

Cyprian's influence was extended beyond his local North African diocese through the skills and experience he had in building political networks through personal contact and constant writing. In the eight-year period between 250 and 258, Cyprian wrote around a dozen treatises, some of them several volumes in length. Eighty-two of his letters from this period are preserved, others are referred to for which copies no longer exist. Many of his letters were produced in multiple copies with multiple attachments.

The letters of Cyprian that have been preserved indicate that most were not just private correspondence but public letters, intended to be read publicly, freely copied and widely distributed. His correspondence is broad and frequent in its scope, with evidence

of communication with Christian communities in Spain, Gaul, Cappadocia, Rome and elsewhere in Italy. In one of his letters Cyprian includes a list of all the African bishops and their sees, apparently to keep the central records and mailing lists held in Rome up to date. He wrote frequently to other bishops and leaders in other churches, encouraging them, telling him his opinion of things they're doing or urging them to desist from behavior he considers divisive or damaging.

Many of Cyprian's letters are addressed to multiple recipients - one is addressed to 18 different recipients, relaying to them decisions of councils or common action. A good example is Letter 73, written to an unidentified "Iubaianus, my brother" in response to an enquiry about Cyprian's thinking on the question of baptism of heretics. The letter is a 6500-word epistle and includes as an attachment a copy of another long treatise *On the virtue of patience*, which Cyprian notes "we are sending to you as a token of our mutual affection." On another occasion, when questions were being raised about his actions, Cyprian wrote to the presbyters and deacons in Rome to correct misperceptions. This particular letter includes copies of thirteen of his former letters as well. Letter 74, written to refute the opinions of a fellow bishop, included not only a copy of the original letter, but also a further 2,500 words of his critique of the letter.

Cyprian's Letter 49 provides another insight into the central place of writing in the maintenance of the Catholic organizational structure. It is a letter written immediately after the close of a local Council to report the findings of the Council to the Bishop of Rome:

To you, my dearly beloved brother, 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. (Epis. 49.3.1)

This distribution process indicates the existence of an uninterrupted ease of communication around the Mediterranean region and a constant circulation of Christian letters and other writings around this communication network. Cyprian claims of an open letter written by the Roman clergy that “it has been circulated through the entire world and reached the knowledge of every church and every brethren” (Epis 55.5.2.). He is able to cross-reference previous letters of his on the assumption that they have been widely circulated and their contents are part of the shared knowledge.

Fox (1994) refers to this as the use of Christian writing for “the organization of opinion” and demonstrates the advantages that writing gave to those Christian leaders who had the resources to utilize it. Haines-Eitzen argues that this flurry of output reflected “circles of readers and scribes who transmitted Christian literature individually and privately” (Haines-Eitzen, 2000).

A central bishop such as Cyprian could not maintain such a volume of output and copying without scribal support and the organizational or personal resources to sustain it, giving distinct advantages to those who were able to access those resources. On a wider scale, a major centre like Rome, with its greater resources, was able to place itself as a clearing house for distribution, with extensive secretarial, duplication, archival and distribution systems in place enabling quick communication through the extensive communication networks of the empire.

These few examples illustrate that authority within Christianity is not an inherent quality. It is a construction developed through active contest between different centers of power, in which media - the ability to produce, reproduce, distribute, shape and control information – are crucial components not just in positioning a person as a person of

authority, but in constructing and maintaining the hegemonic world view in which that authority makes sense. The Catholic Party of Christianity was able to subdue alternative embodiments of the Christian faith through its ability to co-opt and utilize the literate culture and resources of the Roman Empire and position itself culturally and politically within the power structures of that Empire. With the collapse of the political Empire in the fifth century, the Roman Catholic Church had the organizational structures in place to become the dominant imperial political structure in the West, an influence that continued for more than a millennium till the birth of the printing press changed the media-cultural dynamics to facilitate the new Christian authorities of the Reformation and the Modern world to be sustained.

Those media-cultural structures and dynamics are changing again under the impact of digital media technologies. The way in which religious authority is being changed and re-ascribed on this new media playing field is open to new analysis.

¹ There is an amusing anecdote told of an inner city pastor whose congregation voted to move from their troubled inner-city location to a more comfortable suburban one, contrary to the pastor's wishes. When asked what he would do, the pastor replied, "I must go with them, I am their leader."

² I first became aware of the concept of media as the web of culture through Hoover (1993). It also builds on Weber's concept of culture as the web of meaning.

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