

**Googling Clement:  
Media in the historical construction and  
contemporary deconstruction of Christianity.**

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## **Introduction**

It happens occasionally in the process of doing historical research that one serendipitously comes across a document or an incident that sends you off on a quite different quest or changes the way you think about things. One of those moments for me was discovering the first chapter of a set of books called *Stromata*, written by Clement of Alexandria at the end of the second century.

The books are a miscellany of writings covering a range of theological topics – the word *Stromata* means patchwork or suitcase. In the first chapter of the first book, called “On the utility of written compositions,” Clement gives a justification for why he was writing. It is apparent from the chapter that he was doing so because questions were still being raised at the end of the second century about whether it was appropriate for Christian teachings to be written down.

Discovering this chapter was significant for me for a couple of reasons. One was to find that even in the early development of Christianity questions were being raised about the use of a particular medium of communication as a Christian practice. To a media scholar like me that was significant, because in contemporary discussions about Christianity, theology and media, the practice of writing is simply ignored – writing is naturalised within Christianity to the extent that it is not even considered relevant to any contemporary discussion about media. Clement’s chapter identifies that there was a time when writing as a medium was also questioned.

The other reason the discovery was significant for me is because the questions raised and the justifications given by Clement, parallel what we would see today as a classic media debate whenever a new medium enters a market or society or movement.

I think this historical incident provides perspectives in thinking about Christianity and mediation today. I want to explore them in my address this morning

## **Thinking about “mediation”**

The study of things we now call media has its roots in the early twentieth century.

The dominant paradigm used in research and analysis of media was what's called the instrumental paradigm: the idea that media were simply tools or instruments you chose to use once you had decided what ideas you wanted to communicate. This early concept continues to be the dominant view among most Christian leaders and scholars: mainly because it's simple and it parallels common Christian concepts of proclamation and evangelisation. It also reinforces the institutional view that Christian leaders are the ones who interpret what the beliefs of the religion are, and then communicate these to their followers, using whatever media are considered appropriate. In the Theological College in which I taught, for example, media were considered, if they were considered at all, in the section of the curriculum called "Applied" Theology.

That view of media has been substantially rethought over the past several decades and complemented by a view that sees media not simply as instruments for communicating a message, but as providing the matrix of communication practices upon which all social activity takes place. Far from being neutral tools, the characteristics of those media become part of our cultural thinking and interaction. So the shift in thinking about media has been away from looking simply at particular media and what they can do, to the cultural structures of mediation within which we as individuals and societies develop and function.

You're all familiar with this, of course. It's embodied in the title of this conference – "Christianity and mediation"- except perhaps when it comes to accepting that Christianity also has to be understood as a mediated phenomenon that was born and took its shape within **particular** mediated environments that shaped the form it took. The reluctance to acknowledge this comes from a common view that there is a universal essence in Christianity that is unchangeable, that stands apart from the mundane and messy processes of culture. This idea of an uncultured essence within Christianity underlines the Catholic view of enculturation. It is also reflected in the title of this conference – Christianity ..... and mediation - as if there

are two distinct realities. Is there? Exploring that question is part of the intent of my address today.

Why are media such influential factors, and what makes different media different? The Jesuit scholar, Walter Ong, among others, has proposed that media difference is a function of three core factors.

One is sensory: each medium we use to communicate works by addressing our physical senses in particular ways. Some stimulate our sense of sight, some our hearing, some our taste, some our touch, some our sense of smell. Many work on a number of senses at the same time in different combinations and with different strengths. These differential sensory characteristics of different media have major implications for how we perceive things and the meaning we give to those perceptions, and our bodily participation in society.

A second reason is the different ways different media handle information: how they process it, store it, retrieve it and reproduce it. Because information is central to how we build meaning, the media we use to access and process information are central to how we think and organise our thinking as individuals and societies. How would the theological systems of Thomas Aquinas, Karl Rahner or Karl Barth be different, for example, if they had been required to develop and present them as Tweets? There's a PhD in there for somebody.

A third difference carried by media is in how they set up social relationships – how they link people together. In order to function most effectively, each medium requires a particular structure of relationship appropriate to its function. In turn, social order and interaction become structured in ways that accommodate and take on board those sorts of media requirements. Radio provides an interesting example. When radio was first invented it carried over the relationship metaphor of the telephone – you went into a booth in one city, and spoke to a person in a booth in another city, without the need for wires – hence its original name, the wireless. It was only through the experimental play of ham radio operators that it was discovered that the greatest strength of radio lay not in a one to one telephone relationship, but in a one to many broadcast relationship – a

term, by the way, taken from the suffragette's practice of broadcasting their message by random distribution of leaflets on the street.

I would add a fourth difference to Ong's three. Every medium we use to communicate brings with it associations with social, class, group or institutional power, either through the resources you need to access and use a medium, whether you are literate in the medium or not, the way media are organised as industries, or the social capital that class or group has within a society. While a variety of media may be used in a complementary fashion, it is common in multi-mediated situations for media to form a hierarchy, with one or a couple of media becoming dominant and determinative because of their superior efficiencies or liberties of action. In the process, the values and power of its financial arrangements and its governors come into play. One does not simply decide to use a different medium to communicate with. In the process, one accepts and aligns oneself with the social, economic, political and consumption conditions under which the medium is organised and operates within the public sphere. It is this power that we refer to when we talk about the power of the printing press, the power of television, and the global power structures of the internet and their manipulated algorithms.

With these four media characteristics in mind – sensory, information, structures of relationship, and media's associations with social power - let's return to Clement and the concerns about writing.

## **Clement of Alexandria**

### **Alexandria and Clement**

Clement was a Christian teacher in Alexandria, which at the time and for centuries earlier was the second major city of the Roman Empire. Located on the northern coast of Africa, it was a major multi-racial trading centre where East met West - a crucial port for shipping food and other essentials, such as papyrus, paper, to the centre of the Empire. It was also a major centre of intellectual life, with a textual library that boasted a reported 700,000 books in its collections and scholars foundational to classical thought such as Euclid, Archimedes and Galen. Its well-established Jewish

community produced the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was later adopted as the Christian Old Testament. At the turn of the Christian era, the Hellenistic-Jewish philosopher Philo had developed a philosophy of religion that linked the wisdom of the Hebrew scriptures with the Hellenistic concept of the logos, a concept later used by Christians to link the Hebrew Jesus with Hellenistic philosophy.

Alexandria had a Christian School of Catechetics, which actively engaged with this wider philosophical culture in its biblical interpretation and speculative theology. Its classes were open to pagans as well as Christians, so there was an active interchange going on. At the turn of the second and third centuries, the head of the school was Titus Flavius Clemens, a Roman born of wealthy parents and educated in the Hellenistic traditions before converting to Christianity and becoming the head of the school. Clement wrote extensively on scripture and theology and was a leading figure in the development of what we would now call a Christian literature.

In the opening chapter of the seven volumes of one of his works, *Stromata*, Clement curiously gives a justification for why he's using writing. Though writing had been used progressively in Christianity since soon after its beginnings, the chapter indicates that there were apparently still sufficient concerns about whether Christian teachings should be written down that Clement felt it necessary to justify or explain this particular media practice.

I think we can gain valuable perspectives on Christianity and Mediation today by going back and looking at a time when the use of a particular medium which is now normalised within Christianity was the subject of dispute.

What were the concerns? Four can be identified.

### **Early Christian concerns about writing**

One was a persistent opinion that the living human voice was the best and most appropriate medium for the communication of a personal faith in God. Surely, it was argued, a personal relationship with a personal God could only be enabled by the dynamism and presence of a human voice that mediated that relationship. You do not build a relationship with a living God

by looking at black marks made by someone you may not know, on inanimate material made from dead plants or dead animals.

A second concern was that if Christian teachings were written down, there was no predicting or controlling how they would be used and it would begin to diminish them. In a face-to-face teaching situation, for example, a teacher could decide whether a student was ready for and could be trusted with such valuable teachings, before passing them on. As Socrates had noted centuries before, once a thing is put in writing it drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it but equally into the hands of those who have no business with it or may do harm with it. Besides, the heretics were using clever writing to mislead people - doesn't it weaken the truths of Christianity by associating them with a medium used by heretics?

A third concern centred on the question of inspiration. It was easy to tell if a speaker was genuinely inspired by the Spirit of God through such things as their body language, their speech rhythms, their passion, how they interacted with their audience. How could you test if a writer was inspired by God or not, if you couldn't see or hear the writer?

A fourth concern was that writing threatened to separate the faith from Jesus. Early Christianity was marked by its close connection to the person of Jesus: discipleship was understood as the faithful imitation of the Master, who was remembered and cherished for his oral stories, his down-to-earth theology, his compassion, his personal strength and courage, and his connection with the poor and outcast. Jesus himself didn't write - his message was accessible to everybody, whether they could read and write or not. Why should his followers depart from the example of their teacher?

What was interesting to me was the way in which the issues being raised here in the second century, parallel historic debates around media change that arose also with printing, radio, television, and now electronics.

So what was Clement's response? In his chapter he provided counterarguments to these concerns

## **Defence and consequence**

He drew attention to the advantages of the medium.

Writing things down enabled a teacher to share wisdom more widely and to pass on the tradition. It was also advantageous in challenging Christianity's critics - as long as the apostolic tradition remained unwritten, he said, the writings of the heretics and pagans were not being challenged.

He argued that writing was advantageous in preserving teachings that might otherwise be corrupted.

And, as teachers got older, writing served as a remedy against forgetfulness.

*"This work of mine in writing is not artfully constructed for display, but my memoranda are stored up against old age, as a remedy against forgetfulness, truly an image and outline of those vigorous and animated discourses which I was privileged to hear."*

He noted also an argument of pragmatic realism: writing is here to stay, wouldn't we be foolish to ignore it?

*"It were certainly ridiculous for one to disapprove of the writing of earnest men, and approve of those who are not such."*

With these advantages in mind, he proposed what we would now call a concept of media complementarity: writing and speaking should be seen as working hand in hand: the one to sow seeds, the other to bring them to fruition.

*"But the husbandry is twofold, -- the one unwritten, and the other written.....If, then, both proclaim the Word -- the one by writing, the other by speech -- are not both then to be approved, making, as they do, faith active by love?"*

Clement's view of media complementarity reflected and provided a rationale for the media development of Christianity. Adapting the medium of writing did not displace oral speech, nor other media such as architecture, rituals, artefacts, symbolism, physical gestures or visual images. As Christianity developed and spread, writing continued to grow in importance to the extent that Christianity became known as "a religion of the book" (although it's worth noting, not "a religion of readers," because the vast majority of Christians actually couldn't read). The effective use of writing was a significant factor in Christianity's growth into the very powerful social and political force it became.

A good decision, we'd say! Yes?



## **What was missed?**

But what Clement missed in his justification of the use of writing was the fourth element we noted, that is the exclusiveness of writing as a medium and its associations with particular classes of social power. The effort, time and costs required at the time to learn to read and write and to use writing, meant that writing as a medium was restricted to a small number of trained officials and the ruling classes, where the ability to read and discuss writings was a sign of an educated and cultured person. Writings were copied and shared among small networked groups of privileged people who could afford to own, buy or reproduce them and meetings were held among these groups where works were discussed and refined cultural exchange took place.

To write, therefore, was not just a pragmatic act of adding another medium to communicate the faith with: it was also relocating the teaching of the faith out of the context of the socially disenfranchised that Jesus addressed and had his roots in, into the social culture and interests of the powerful and wealthy ruling classes. In time, the hierarchical values and interests that were associated with that class were reproduced within Christianity – and, I propose, the fears expressed by those early Christians about the impact writing would have on the developing faith can be seen to have been quite prescient. Let me note just a couple.

In a movement whose founder most likely couldn't read or write, most of the disciples he chose to continue his work couldn't read or write, and the vast majority of those attracted to his message couldn't read or write, writing became so central to the movement that, regardless of your personal leadership qualities you couldn't become a leader in the Christian movement if you didn't have the personal wealth and connections to learn to read and write or employ someone who did. And writing became so important to Christianity that people from that elite class of society who became Christians, were fast tracked into leadership positions.

The concept of an inclusive community and leadership based on service to others that was advocated and modelled by Jesus, was replaced by a writing-based, networked, hierarchal religion run by a select group of

men, who reproduced their class interests and values in their interpretation and organisation of the faith. Stark notes that as Christianity spread into the Gentile world, the class **least present** was the class Jesus himself came from: the rural peasantry and slaves. Also excluded from leadership were women, who were subject to an active campaign of misogynist discreditation and were explicitly prohibited from writing.

Under the influence of this small elite group of male writers, the subversive religious vision and apocalyptic ethic that Jesus relayed in spoken parables, memorable aphoristic teachings and parabolic behaviour was replaced by a writing-based reconstruction of faith into highly complex, abstract, philosophical theology and creedal statements that took 300 years of at times vitriolic and violent argument to work out. Literate doctrinal arguments, incidentally, that didn't end until 448: not because they worked it out, but because the Emperor Theodosius, tired of the fighting between Christian leaders, declared what the truth was and threatened that anybody who expressed a contrary opinion would be exiled or executed.

Likewise, the radical, faith-integrated practical ethic that Jesus demonstrated, outlined in stories and aphorisms, and called on his followers to emulate, became a corporate structure of written canon laws that required not just the ability to read, but also privileged access to the increasingly complicated archive of books and documents in which those ethics and laws were recorded.

In this process of gentrification, the character and meaning of Jesus and his religious vision was relocated from its peasant, Aramaic context to that of the Greco-Roman aristocracy and the carpenter's son was made an aristocrat – in fact the supreme aristocrat, the Lord of the Universe. And with this elevation, his successors in the organisation ditched the bit about being servants, and gave themselves the title, not of disciple, but Lord bishop.

Hans Küng notes of the changes that were made in this period:

*“One thing cannot be ignored from the beginning in this Hellenization of the gospel: now Christianity was understood less and less as existential discipleship of Jesus Christ and more – in an intellectual narrowing – as the acceptance of a revealed doctrine about God and Jesus Christ, the world and*

*human beings. And it was to be above all the Logos Christology which increasingly forced back the Jesus of history in favour of a doctrine and finally a church dogma of the 'incarnate God.'*"

It was that writing-based, networked, male hierarchical organisation of Christianity, that made Christianity such an attractive proposition for Constantine to bring under his patronage when he became emperor. The Roman Church's cultural and political dominance in Europe in the 900 years after the fall of the Roman Empire likewise could not have occurred without its almost monopolistic control of writing and literacy. That writing-based control was only effectively broken by the next major media shift of printing in the 15<sup>th</sup> century that coalesced other social changes and challenged that writing-based dominance.

Some people may be thinking at this stage, "Ah c'mon, you're oversimplifying things a bit" - the history of Christianity is a lot more complex than that. And I agree - yes it is. But I do so to bring into focus something that's been left out of most analyses of early Christian history: that is consideration of the part played by changes in the fundamental media cultures of the movement: from the inclusive oral and personal mediation practices of Jesus and his Jewish followers, to the exclusive and distancing medium of writing used in a highly effective way by a relatively small number of educated Hellenistic converts.

Re-reading this history in the light of our understandings today of how media shape social construction and political structures prompts a number of critical theological questions: Were the religious and social vision that were activated by the sacrificial venture of Jesus fundamentally changed soon after his death by a small minority of well-intentioned followers who had the education, social standing and personal resources to promote their particular class re-interpretations of that vision in writing, addressed to their class and reflecting their class values.

The second relates to the current situation of media's challenge to Christianity. What is being challenged by digital media today? Is it Christianity per se? Or is the particular definition of the meaning of Jesus devised by a relatively small group of writers in the third and fourth centuries, who then proceeded to declare their definition as the authoritative

statement of what that message of Jesus was for all people, in all places, in all times. Are digital media providing the means and opportunity for a rethink or a revisiting, of the **original** religious and social vision activated by the sacrificial venture of Jesus – before the writers took control of it?

If so, how are we to make sense of this new media shift? I want to approach it by looking again at the media criteria we looked at earlier and ways in which digital media are different.

## **The Culture of the Digital**

### **Changes in the structures and nature of information**

One of the obvious changes is in the volume of information that is now being produced and is accessible no matter where you are. Increasingly, we no longer live in small communities or national societies from which we drew information. We are living in a global environment in which information is competitive, pushy, fast and uncontrollable. This has required us to develop new methods for surviving and prospering in this informational deluge: deciding what information is important or not, placing ourselves in the flow of information to ensure we don't miss things that might be important, and rather than considering it in depth, skimming over that information flow for relevance and importance and passing over the rest.

Three criteria in particular have become important in this process of fast information management: relevance, attractiveness, and accessibility. What isn't seen as being relevant, attractive or readily accessible is quickly passed over. And in this fast information flow, information that comes from the immediate physical environment we are in no longer has precedence: we overlay information consumption. We all depart from these practices for different reasons at different times, but they're the rule of thumb.

A second difference is that digital text is readily changeable – the foundations of our cognitive structuring become fluid as the **content** of text gives way to the **process** of text. Changing the text was also done with writing, of course – there are numerous scribal curses found in ancient documents warning people against what God will do to them if they change

the text. Digital text not only allows texts to be readily changed, it **invites** that sort of reader participation. It can be quickly cut and pasted by the receiver to give it new words, hash-tagged to give it new social meaning, new visuals may be added that change the meaning even if the words don't change, all in ways that can easily reduce serious matters to trivia or magnify trivia into something more serious than what it is.

A third difference is that everything that enters the digital domain can be difficult to remove and can be searched and discovered. Political, social and religious reputations and authority that are built on controlling information to present a particular public persona are becoming difficult to maintain, and this is changing the nature and perceptions of social authority.

These changes in the nature of information are having significant impacts on religious organisations that are built on the stability and control of text. Let me give two quick examples.

The Papal decree *Crimens Sollicitationis*, maintained a centralized, enforced secrecy around sexual abuse by priests for more than 50 years last century. Not only were documents tightly controlled and locked away, but the existence of the decree itself was secret to the select aristocracy of the Roman Catholic Church. That secrecy was broken, not because the church decided it was the right thing to do, but because the digital platforms of Google, Facebook, Twitter and journalism gave the subjects of that abuse a means to challenge the media power of the institution and put their case directly to the public. That genie will not be put back in the bottle - and thank God for that!

Digital media are also changing the practice of theology, or the making and control of Christian meaning. What theologians and other church leaders have not been prepared to acknowledge, in my experience, is that theology as we know it is a specific media practice that was born in writing and in the modern period has been symbiotically integrated with the commercial printing industry and its book-based institutions. Digital-based publication in all its forms are having major implications for the printing industry and print-based practices, including theology. The highly respected American church historian, Martin Marty, made a prophetic observation in

1989, the year incidentally that the Internet first became available commercially. He wrote:

*“It is time to say that theological expression was reliant upon the stable, purchasable, book-length literary products of theologians in community within free societies. Those were books written by people whose vocation climaxed in reading and writing them. Now they present a fragile, endangered species...Technologically, economically, politically, religiously, and in respect of status, conception and the use of time, the concept of theology expressed through a moderate diversity of books is called into question by hyper-modern and counter-modern tendencies.”*

That does not mean that theology has become irrelevant. But how theology is done, who does it, the criteria by which theological ideas are evaluated, and how they may be best communicated, is changing dramatically.

### **Changes in the nature of mediated relationships**

A further way in which religions are being challenged by digital technologies is in their transformation of social relationships and, by extension, the structures and practices of social institutions, social authority, and political order.

I don't need to make you aware of this - we are dealing with it already. The people most people have most interaction with, and seek recognition and advice from, are not people they meet face-to-face, but their Facebook, Twitter or Instagram friends – friends, incidentally, who are made or dispensed with by a tap of your finger. It is largely accepted, though also challenged, that it is okay to interrupt personal conversations to answer your phone or check your texts, emails, or Facebook posts. Relationships and the concept of community have become more functional and transitory, built on creating and renewing one's individual persona and presence within networked global collectives.

This is having major impacts on religions such as Christianity, that have been built on an infrastructure of geographical communities that met a variety of practical needs for their followers. Most of those functions are now being provided for in other ways and attendance at geographically local churches has been in decline as a consequence.

Likewise, religious authority that was built on being the primary source of information for these local communities is losing its wider credibility, undermined further by exposure of hypocrisy in religious leaders, political lobbying and even hidden criminal behaviour, so that churches are widely perceived as acting primarily out of self-interest rather than for the common good.

Religious authority again has to be earned, not appointed and enforced; and new criteria for being recognised as a person of authority now apply - again. Interestingly, I see that the form of authority that is emerging is one with its roots in an old media culture – an authority that is oral, embodied, and functionally effective.

### **Changes in sensory experience**

The third major change being brought by digital media is in their sensory qualities. Digital media bring a sensory experience that is more visual, more auditory, more physically interactive and sensorily immersive.

This engagement of the senses is a crucial factor in the development of digital technologies, and the rapidly expanding industries of design are all built on this realisation. Technology companies such as Apple or Samsung put vast amounts of money into design of their products, because they know that the sensory experience of a mobile phone – what it looks and feels like, the sounds of its ringtones and music quality, the visual quality of its photos and video reproduction - are as important as its functionality.

Significant work is now being done on the importance of sensory experience in the creation of religious meaning and practice. Change the sensory nature of the religious environment people live in, or keep the sensory experience the same while the sensory culture people live in changes and you change the religious meaning people draw – or don't draw - from that religious environment.

If you want a Christian experience of what I'm talking about, next Sunday go to an 8.30 typical Lutheran or Catholic service and then at 10.00am go to a Pentecostal service, and feel the difference - and compare the different age groups of both environments.

## **Changes in the political structures of media**

I have noted that the development and practice of Christianity took place and continues to take place within structured media environments that carry with them political, economic and social meaning -to the extent that those social meanings have become part of Christian meaning. What is happening is that the social environment that Christianity was adapted to has changed - yet again - under the impact of digital transformation.

Just as a small group of early Christians adapted and aligned Christianity with the writing and military based political empire of the Romans and the Reformation adapted and realigned Christianity with the emerging printing-based bourgeoisie and nation states of Europe, Christianity finds itself today with a communication environment that is set up and controlled by a relatively small number of global, capitalist corporations.

## **What lies in the future?**

From an institutional perspective, the digital age is bringing a pluralization of religious options. Traditional Christian institutions are in decline and decreasingly seen as being necessary for information about religion, for social networking, or for the experience and practice of spirituality. The sensory experiences that were offered by traditional Christian institutions are not competitive with the alternative sensory experiences available within the wider culture. The freer circulation of information has also increased a perception among many that religions are primarily self-interested organisations and, not incidentally, the cause of much of the violence in the world.

Those Christian movements or institutions that are doing well or growing at the moment are those that have adapted their religious message and style to the ethos, culture, and economic opportunities of the digital age and digital-based global capitalism. They generally reflect a charismatic rather than formal style of leadership, they create and continually massage an image of being dynamic and successful, they link the communication of religious meaning with strongly audio, visual and kinetic stimulation, and present themselves as being relevant to the practical issues of people's lives



– including getting ahead financially. If your interest is in preserving Christian institutions, there are plenty of models of this sort of movement you can draw on and imitate. And there are also plenty of PR and marketing consultants who will readily sell you their services to help you do it.

What is becoming apparent also, though, in the digital age, is that while people are questioning and abandoning religion, they are not rejecting the concept that we are part of a reality that is bigger than ourselves – in fact many are actively exploring this bigger than us reality. That does not necessarily mean the traditional religious ideology of a supernatural being. Rather, the openness and affordances of the Internet are giving greater freedom for people to explore other ways of giving expression to these transcendent dimensions of being human, and the ethical implications they have for living together as a shared humanity – dimensions of being human that in many ways have been denied, suppressed or simply ignored in the competitions of consumerism, rigid empiricism, self-absorption, and the constraints of dogmatic religion.

Many religious organisations and people see this exploration as a fertile ground for institutional recruitment. I see rather that the digital age has opened up new opportunities and a new inclination for people to explore their full humanity and how we might live ethically and compassionately together on the earth, not necessarily by becoming religious or becoming Christian, but by seeking to be more fully human. I think there are opportunities for those who are genuinely altruistic – religious or not and without sectarian-ideological vested interests - to contribute to this new sort of exploration.