

A Sketch of Christianity in Ancient and Modern Media

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The purpose of this paper is to set our work in Christianity in television in the context of earlier media changes in the history of Christianity. I will only attempt to sketch the rough outlines of a picture which can be filled out in more detail later.

I have become involved in research on the history of Christianity and media through my work on Biblical storytelling. As I sought to understand the transformation of the stories from their form in oral culture to their form in writing culture, it became clear that a media change of enormous magnitude was involved. It was more than a minor transition; it was a change of worlds. The work of Fr. Walter Ong helped me to see the radicality of that change more clearly than anything else.

Periods of media change require a reinterpretation of Christianity. Furthermore, media changes take a long time. The full adaptation of writing in the religion of Israel took over 1000 years; and the adaptation of print in Christianity took several hundred years. So we can relax. Whatever we accomplish in this conference will only be another presumably positive step in a long journey.

The Christian Church in our time is in the midst of a major change in communications media. The development and increasing power of electronic media in general (and television in particular with its so-called electronic church) are transforming the relationship between Christ and culture. We often act as if this is a new and unprecedented situation. Media experts wholly embrace the new medium and talk in apocalyptic tones about "the electronic age" as if writing and reading will cease to exist. And scholars, the preservers of the traditions of writing who continue to write books as if nothing has happened in the culture, put televisions in the closet and joke about those who work in television as faddish. But Christianity has been through media transitions before.

First, an analysis of earlier media changes and the patterns of response to those changes in the Christian community: I will concentrate on the history of the Bible as a way of focusing the story more Sharply.

The religion of Israel was formed in an oral culture. The stories and songs of the acts of God, both in Israel's history and in Jesus Christ, were told and sung. They were transmitted by memory and interpreted in relation to new situations by being retold. The stories were probably chanted in a highly expressive manner in which gestures were fully appropriate and in which the audience was invited to hum or play along. The characteristic forms of community organization were the tribe and later the combination of tribes. God was experienced as a person who had passionate feelings of wrath and love and who did things on behalf of the people of Israel.

The first media change was the development and appropriation of writing, a process which took over 1000 years. In the Biblical tradition, Yahweh was the first writer, inscribing the ten commandments in stone tables with his finger. The first recorded public reading of a manuscript was Josiah's reading of the Deuteronomy scroll in 622

BC (1 Kings 22). Shortly thereafter, in 605 BC, the first explicit action of media resistance occurred when Jehoiakim fed Jeremiah's scroll into a brazier, piece by piece. In 444 BC, Ezra, the first master of the new medium to lead Israel, read the Torah at the Water Gate one morning as the central action of covenant renewal. And, according to Nehemiah 9:8, Levites interpreted the Law as he read. Thus was established the so-called oral law and first media mix: oral commentary or midrash on written tradition. In this context, a new pattern of community organization was established - the congregation. In a synagogue, the sacred texts were read aloud and the oral interpretation of the tradition given.

With the development of Hellenism as the dominant culture of writing in Athens and its dissemination by Alexander, a major decision was at hand for Israel. After the Jewish war in 66-70 AD, Pharisaic Judaism decided to resist the new medium and its culture. What has since been called Judaism organized itself as a militantly oral tradition in which the oral law was maintained as the dominant form of thinking. Christian Judaism (which has since been called Christianity) embraced and appropriated both the new medium and its culture. Thus, Christians reformed their communication system and adopted a new way of thinking, theology, as their dominant form of thought and communication. This form was compatible with the new medium and its culture. As a result, Judaism became a small, largely separate community; Christianity grew at an enormous rate and became the dominant religion.

In the age of manuscript, the Bible became a book. The traditions were primarily heard in public reading of the manuscripts. The process of interpretation involved the identification of the ideas that were implicit in the reading, which then were discussed in the categories of theology and in the styles of Greco-Roman rhetoric. God in turn was experienced and known by God's being, God's essence. God was now described as one who was omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent.

The next major media change was print. Gutenberg invented the press in the 1440s and printed the first Bible no later than 1455. The conflict about this media change was much more immediate. The Roman Catholic Church bitterly opposed the printing and distribution of the Scriptures, particularly of vernacular translations. Protestants appropriated the new medium and used it aggressively as a means for the reinterpretation of the Scriptures. This led to a major reformation of the Church. With the leadership of the Jesuits, the counter-Reformation appropriated print aggressively and developed methods of Biblical interpretation which were both compatible with the new medium and preserved the Catholic tradition. Nevertheless, Roman Catholic resistance to the new medium and its culture continued in some forms into this century. But gradually the Roman Catholic community has appropriated the new medium, and it now prints Bibles and publishes lay Biblical commentaries.

In this media world, the Scriptures were read in a more prosaic manner. The Bible became a book that was available to every family to read aloud. The patterns of community organization were fractured and the characteristic patterns of Protestantism emerged. The traditions were heard now both in public reading in

small congregations and in private readings as families and even alone as individuals. Allegorical interpretation in the medieval pattern was modified, and a literal interpretation became central. The characteristic experience of God in this period within both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism was a personal experience of God's grace.

The final media change was the evolution of silent reading, which took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America. The sign of this change can be identified in the patterns of address. Throughout medieval literature and well into the sixteenth century, a typical form of literary address was "Listen, lordings," an address characteristic of oral recitation of manuscripts. In the fiction of Fielding and Sterne, a new form of address appears: "Dear reader." This is one sign of a media revolution, the silencing of print. In this period, writing began to be perceived with only the eyes and not the ears.

In the context of the study of the Bible as a document, a new approach to Biblical interpretation was developed: historical criticism. In the age of silent reading, therefore, the Bible ceased to be sound and became a silent document. The Bible was black marks on a page. The system of interpretation was derived from a historical criticism in which the Biblical text was examined as a reference source for evidence of historical and theological meanings. On the basis of this evidence, two histories have been constructed: the history of events in Israel and early Christianity, and the history of the theology of the Old and New Testaments. It has produced two new stories, Biblical history and Biblical theology.

Today, the transmission of the Bible and the network of Biblical interpretation happens primarily in the media world of silent print. We study ancient documents in silence using tools such as lexicons, concordances, commentaries, and monographs which are read in silence. We produce books and papers of interpretation which are also read in silence. The only exception to this process is the reading of the Scriptures in public worship and the oral interpretation of the tradition in preaching.

This is then a sketch of the media history of the Bible. In order to understand the pattern of response to the present change to electronic media, it will be helpful to analyze briefly the patterns of response to earlier media changes. H. Richard Niebuhr's analysis of the relationship between Christ and culture provides a helpful framework for describing this pattern of response to media change. As this chart [page 9] indicates, three basic responses to media change can be identified in the tradition: resistance, capitulation, and appropriation.

The conservative response is resistance to the new medium and conservation of the old medium's basic patterns of organization and thinking. The stream of conservative response to earlier media changes has been characteristic of Rabbinic Judaism, Roman Catholicism and conservative Protestantism. And interestingly, the tradition formed during the period of media resistance has become authoritative for each of these movements. Thus, the Mishnah and Talmud, the writings of Aquinas, and the Scriptures literally interpreted are still the primary authoritative sources for

these movements that have adopted a conservative response to earlier media changes. In each instance, these movements have at a later time appropriated the medium which was previously resisted and integrated it into the religion, but in a position of inferiority to the authoritative tradition of the previous age.

The capitulation response is characteristic of culture Christianity. The Gnostic stream of response to media change continues in the movements of the Protestant scholastics, most graphically in the Deist/Unitarians, and in the radical liberalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this response, the culture generated by the new medium becomes the primary authority, and Christian tradition is reduced to those cultural molds. Christianity is merged with the culture and becomes virtually indistinguishable from the more general tenor of the culture.

The tradition of those movements which have appropriated the new medium and reinterpreted the Christian tradition in that new medium has been the Christian Protestant neo-orthodox tradition. That is, during each of the periods of media change, these movements have aggressively appropriated the new medium and reformed their patterns of thought and organization in that world view.

Our present situation can be examined within this context. A major media revolution has taken place in this century. The telephone-telegraph, radio/ television, and computers have replaced print as the dominant medium of mass communication. And electronic media have generated a new culture: rock and roll bands, television and film stars, computer "nuts." The most powerful of these mass media in terms of culture change has been television.

The same patterns of response to media change can be identified in the Church today. The basic response of orthodox Christianity to this new media world and its culture has been resistance. The so-called "mainline churches," both Protestant and Roman Catholic, have taken a posture of Christ against electronic culture. This resistance has been led by the intellectual leaders of the churches, who have continued to write books as if nothing has changed in the culture. Efforts to launch television ministries in the major denominations or within the National Council of Churches have been poorly funded and have had very low priority. One sign of this is financial investment: the budgets of "media" programs are miniscule in comparison to the budgets of the presses.

The situation is changing because of the courageous and innovative leadership of the reactionaries of the previous media age, conservative and fundamentalist Protestants. First Billy Graham and Oral Roberts, and now Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson have transformed the shape of American Christianity by the launching of the electronic church. The enormous religious and political power which these evangelists have developed within the past fifteen to twenty years is incredible and demonstrates the power of the new medium. As a direct result of this new found power, a right wing President is energetically reestablishing institutional racism, the power of the rich, and militarism as a response to international tensions. This is happening with the explicit support of many of the

most powerful leaders of Christianity in this country: namely, those who are on television.

How is the electronic church to be evaluated in the categories of Christ and culture? I would argue that it is basically a capitulation response and a merging of Christ and culture. We are witnessing the power of American civil religion, our unique form of American culture/Christianity in the medium of the age. In distinctive ways, each of the major television figures is preaching a form of American civil religion that is at odds on basic points with the Gospel. The primary authority in these movements is not the Bible or the tradition of a church. Rather, it is what Americans will support as an easy equation of American values with a highly selective interpretation of Christianity.

My concern is the huge void in the development of an appropriate response. Where are those who will reinterpret the tradition of the Christian religion in the medium of the age and courageously take the risks associated with that effort? At this point, the churches are still resisting while the independent television religion corporations are flourishing. If the present patterns continue, we will see a retrenchment and further decline of the major denominations while the power of the electronic church and the parts of the Church it represents will grow exponentially.

What is needed is the development of a mediating response to the new media in which the medium is appropriated as a means for the faithful interpretation of Christianity. The task is the appropriation of a new media system and its ways of thinking for the transmission of the traditions of the Christian religion. The dimensions of the task when seen in relation to previous media transitions are truly awesome. The only media shift that compares in its magnitude with this change is the development of writing. The development at print was only a more efficient and effective method for the distribution of writing; and the age of silent print developed out of a change in the way of perceiving writing. Thus, a media analysis would suggest that the present age is the age of greatest media change since the formation of Christianity as a distinctive religion apart from Judaism in the late first and second centuries.

The reason why media shifts cause such major changes is an important subject for research. My hunch is that media changes are revolutionary because a change in the medium of the Word of God changes the system of communication within the religious community as well as the system of communication with God. God's Word itself changes and is experienced in new ways. A media change also changes the meaning of the Word in its previous media. Suddenly what was authoritative seems somewhat stuffy and can only be understood by an imaginative leap into an earlier age. Thus, the task before us is the appropriation of a new medium for the proclamation of the Gospel.

This has always required a reformation and reinterpretation of the primary traditions of Christianity. The temptation is to think that it will involve only doing the same things in the new medium. But previous experience does not support the viability of this strategy. Thus, the transmission and interpretation of the Bible and

the teaching of the dogmatic traditions of the Churches are the two foundation stones for the development of Christianity in electronic media. But these traditions will have to be radically rethought in order to be transmitted meaningfully by the modern media.

A new paradigm must be developed in which the previous forms of Christian tradition will be reorganized into a new media mix. However, it is also clear that new media do not cancel out previous media. Rather, new media establish a new center for a reconstellation of earlier media worlds. The task is, then, to build new patterns of relationship among materials in oral, written, and electronic media. The evolution of these new constellations will form the order of this new age in the ongoing journey of the Christian community.