



Thank you for downloading this document from the RMIT Research Repository.

The RMIT Research Repository is an open access database showcasing the research outputs of RMIT University researchers.

RMIT Research Repository: <http://researchbank.rmit.edu.au/>

Citation:

Horsfield, P 2013, 'The ecology of writing and the shaping of early Christianity' in Lundby, Knut (ed.) Religion Across Media: From Early Antiquity to Late Modernity, Peter Lang, New York, NY, USA, pp. 37-53.

See this record in the RMIT Research Repository at:

<https://researchbank.rmit.edu.au/view/rmit:21884>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Copyright Statement:

© 2013 Peter Lang Publishing

Link to Published Version:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-1085-6>

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE THIS PAGE

“The Ecology of Writing and the Shaping of Early Christianity”

Keynote presentation at the Symposium on “Religion across Media: Theoretical Perspectives and Case Studies.”

University of Oslo, February 13-15, 2012.

Professor Peter Horsfield
RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

It is a wonderful opportunity to be here and to be able to participate in a colloquium of such interest to me and with such an august body of scholars. I thank you for the invitation.

The intersection of media and religion has become a topic of quite extensive interest in the past three decades. As many of you may be aware, my earliest foray into researching media and religion was an investigation into American televangelism: a study of how particular evangelical groups in America were using the technologies of radio and television, and the early computer technologies of data base management, to communicate their religious messages to mass audiences. I came out of that study with a generally negative view of what happens to Christianity when it is adapted to the communication requirements of electronic technologies. I wrote in 1984

“The evangelical broadcasters have done significant damage both to Christianity itself and to the wider movement of religious broadcasting.... Their willingness to pay for air-time in competition with (other) religious groups has set a precedent and has given the television industry the means for exploitation of differences between religious groups for the industry’s own economic advantage. In the process, the evangelical broadcasters have reinforced and contributed substantially to the commercialization and consumerization of religious faith.” (1984, p. 166)

My thinking about media and religion in this way began to change with the shift away from looking at media and religion from a religious institutional perspective, towards the perspective of religion as a cultural phenomenon that is constructed in the processes of its mediation. The three authors most influential in this shift for me were Walter Ong, Stewart Hoover and the biblical scholar Tom Boomersine. A definitive moment in this shift for me, however, was a passing encounter outside our seminary library with a colleague of mine, the early church historian and classical scholar, Eric Osborn. I’d been thinking about the social, intellectual and religious characteristics of different media cultures and how they related to Christianity, and asked Osborn in this chance encounter if he’d given any thought to the relationship between oral and written communication cultures in the early church. Extremely disdainful of anything to do with media that wasn’t books, as most of my then theological

colleagues were, Eric Osborne, replied simply and in a very dismissive way, “Eric Osborne, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 1959.” And he walked on.

A bit puzzled by this, I went into the library and searched all the hardcopy issues of the *Journal of Theological Studies* for 1959, and there was an article by Osborne called “Teaching and writing in the first chapter of the *Stromateis* of Clement of Alexandria.” (Osborn, 1959) In the article, Osborne, the strongly anti-media classical scholar, provided an analysis of a media shift in third century Christianity – though he wouldn’t have seen it that way: a discussion of why Christian teachings had to be written down rather than simply preserved and passed on orally. The issues identified were so close to my criticisms of the adaptation of Christianity to electronic media that I was provoked to reexamine the way I was thinking about the whole issue.

The Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, wrote in 1917, “The documents and other survivals of the past are dead to us until we ask them a question, until we want to know something from them.” I find myself now on an intellectual journey to ask a very pertinent contemporary question of the past: What part has the ways in which Christianity been mediated played in the historical shaping of Christianity, and what light does that throw on the contests and transformations that are taking place in Christianity today.

I want to explore that by looking at this early contest between oral and written cultures in early Christianity, and the influence it had in the subsequent development of Christianity as we know it today.

The media culture of early Christianity

From its beginnings Christianity has been an oral-literate movement. At its inception, the relative proportions were quite marked. 95% of the first Christians were illiterate compared to 5% literate. In a social-political context where the appropriate uses of both speech and writing and how they were integrated were matters of importance, questions of communication practice were the cause of significant debate and contention. The roots of this go back to Jesus himself and the high position he holds within the religion that bears his name, if not his original concerns. Jesus was strongly oral in his communication practices, both from his own rural background but also as a political commitment. His religious message was motivated by and addressed to the plight of the exploited, largely illiterate rural poor in Palestine. Jesus was a member of this class – he identified with them, he took their side, and he spoke in a way that affirmed and enfranchised them and their outcast status.

There are some good arguments that Jesus himself was illiterate (see for example Crossan, 1994). Whether that is the case or not, the content and style of the strong orality of his communication style and practice was integral to his message and what he modeled, and it was an influential factor in the earliest communication of his followers following his death. Once they had reconceptualised the meaning of Jesus’ death for them, the earliest Christians were active in continuing what they saw as Jesus’ mission. Their communication also followed Jesus’ communication style. They spoke in the marketplace, challenged the authorities, healed the sick, and continued Jesus’ desire to build an egalitarian community. The imperative in their communication wasn’t a written **literal** one, simply to preserve an accurate, objective account of the past; it was oral **rhetoric**. They spoke boldly, they performed miracles, they argued with the powers that be, they spoke of God coming to them in dreams

and visions, they spoke in tongues, and they adapted the sayings of Jesus - even invented new sayings of Jesus - to convince and win people over to what they saw as a new reality.

From the very beginning also, possibly even while Jesus was alive, people who could write wrote down things he said and accounts of things that happened. But writing was subordinate in what was a strongly oral speech movement.

As the Jesus movement spread and grew, and as more educated people joined the movement, the amount and use of written material grew also, so that by the end of the first century, even though the vast majority of Christians still were illiterate, there was an extensive circulation of Christian writings taking place: letters, apocalyptic writings, defences of the faith, manuals of practice, martyr stories, gospels – likely hundreds of gospels of different types, ascribed to various apostles – and even fiction (Burns, 1989).

The orthodox Christian position has been that these early, written materials were primarily written versions of the oral traditions, and the relationship between the oral and the written was a harmonious complementary one. But other scholarship suggests that there were significant conflicts between the two. Evidence of those conflicts can be seen in some of the early writings and gospels (Sawicki, 1994) and they were obviously still sufficiently strong by the start of the third century that Clement, writing in Egypt felt it important to address them by justifying why, as a Christian teacher, he was writing.

Clement and the defence of writing

Clement, or Titus Flavius Clemens, to give him his full Roman name, was born of wealthy pagan parents around 155, and had extensive philosophical training in the Hellenistic traditions before converting to Christianity. He became the head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria, a major imperial centre, where he died in 215. His major writings are significant for going beyond providing just a defence of Christianity, to developing a systematic explication of Christianity in a Christian Platonist framework. Clement was a significant figure in the development of Christian writings into what could be called Christian literature.

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

Book I Chapter I.-Preface-The Author's Object-The Utility of Written Compositions.

[Wants the beginning]....that you may read them under your hand, and may be able to preserve them. Whether written compositions are not to be left behind at all; or if they are, by whom? And if the former, what need there is for written compositions? and if the latter, is the composition of them to be assigned to earnest men, or the opposite? It were certainly ridiculous for one to disapprove of the writing of earnest men, and approve of those, who are not such, engaging in the work of composition.

A number of issues in the conflict can be identified (Fiskå Hägg, 2006; Kimber Buell, 1999; Osborn, 1959; See among others, Sawicki, 1994). There's a couple of interesting things about them. One is that the arguments being raised about the growing adoption of writing within Christianity parallel the arguments that are raised whenever there is a significant remediation of Christianity, including in the present time. This makes me think that the issue we are dealing with is not a modern one of media changing religion, but one of understanding the contribution that media and questions of mediation make to how a religion understands and expresses itself. The second interesting aspect of these issues is that the concerns being expressed about writing, in my opinion, turned out to be fairly justified. Let me identify some of them.

1. The living voice was the best medium for the communication of Christian truth

This is a question of media and the embodiment of religion. It was inconceivable to many of the early Christians that a faith that talks about a living relationship with God could be communicated in any way other than through the lives and voices of living people. How could black ink on a piece of dead skin or dried reeds be any match for the richness, modulation, passion and presence of the human voice? The Christian Papias, around the year 150, reflected this, "For I did not think that what was to be gotten from the books would profit me as much as what came from the living and abiding voice." (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, iii. 39:3,4) Surely if faith was removed from the human voice and put into a depersonalized medium like writing, it would change the character of the faith.

2. Writings were public documents, and to commit Christian teachings to writing was "to cast pearls before swine."

This is a question of media and accessibility. The Christian concerns here reflect those of Socrates, with whom Clement was familiar: *"Every speech, once it is in writing, is bandied about everywhere equally among those who understand and those who have no business having it. It does not know to whom it ought to speak and to whom not."* (Phaedrus) In a way that is being recovered in modern education theory, face-to-face teaching is an interactive process. The teacher modulates the passing on of information according to the student's development and readiness to learn. Writing down Christian teachings broke the teacher-student nexus and made Christian ideas available indiscriminately. It was perceived that this ran the risk of Christian ideas being misunderstood, changed, cheapened, or even used for evil or destructive purposes.

3. To write implied that one was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and this was seen as a presumptuous claim

This is a question of media change and changes in cultural literacy. When a person was physically present before you, it was easy for an audience to read the person's body and tell whether they were inspired or not and therefore whether their message was "true" in a personal sense. But how could one tell if a writer was inspired if you couldn't see the writer? How could you judge accurately that a set of marks on one parchment were inspired but another set of marks on another parchment weren't? To adapt Christian teachings to writing therefore required different cultural literacy skills, which at that time were available only to around 5-10% of Christians.

4. The heretics were using writing to mislead and corrupt people and real faith should be kept separate from that.

This is a question of media and association, and has been repeated at various times in relation to printing, rock music, television and the internet. How would people be able to distinguish Christian truth from heretical error if they were both in the same medium? Wouldn't encouraging people to read Christian writings also run the risk of having them read heretical ones? (Won't encouraging Christians to access the Internet run the risk of exposing them to pornography?) This concern even led some to suggest that if Christian teachers were to write it would be better that they write badly, to distinguish Christian writings from the clever writings of the heretics, at least in their form.

5. Writing repositioned Christianity culturally and disenfranchised the majority of Christians, who were illiterate

This is a question of media inclusion and enfranchisement. Once Christian writings were written down, it was argued, only those who could read and write would have full participation in the formation and transmission of Christian truths. The illiterate majority of Christians could see that when teaching became written, they would be excluded from teaching roles. They could also see that those whose leadership was based on their oral communication skills or charismatic abilities would be diminished. So writing posed the threat of erecting a class barrier within a community that many still saw as inclusive and egalitarian.

6. Writing severed the links between Christianity and the character of Jesus

This is a question of tradition. One of the important characteristics of the early Christian movement was its attachment to the person of Jesus, the beloved teacher. Stories were told about his identification with the outcast, his Aramaic style of story telling, his down-to-earth parable-based theology, and his charismatic engagement with people. Jesus was possibly illiterate, he chose mostly illiterate people to be his followers, his message was accessible to everybody, he didn't write and obviously didn't need to write. Why should his followers? Doesn't changing the mediation of the faith lose its identification with the character of Jesus?

The shift in the tradition towards writing therefore potentially represents a cultural shift in the dominant class of Christianity.

Clement in his chapter responds to each of these concerns, giving what we would consider today to be very valid arguments for adopting what is a very useful medium. He acknowledges the concerns being expressed but counters them by identifying a number of distinct advantages writing brings and by positioning writing as a complement to the oral communication of faith: it preserves the tradition from being forgotten, it plants seeds in people's minds that can be brought to fruition by others, it can counter the heretics in their own medium.

It were certainly ridiculous for one to disapprove of the writing of earnest men, and approve of those, who are not such, engaging in the work of composition. (The heretics) are to be allowed to write in their

own shameful manner. But he who proclaims the truth is to be prevented from leaving behind him what is to benefit posterity.” (Strom 1:1)

Clement even suggests that writing can help Christian teachers avoid flattery, because their audience is not present before them. *“He who speaks by writings escapes the reproach of mercenary motives.”*

This particular debate from the third century illustrates an important aspect of the discussions about media and religion: that shifts in media within the wider culture do not have simply an external impact on religions. They tap into and become part of constant political and power struggles already taking place within religion about the nature of the faith and its relationship to wider contexts.

Clement did not invent this argument within Christianity, and his defence of writing was certainly not the last word on it. But as Christianity developed and spread, writing grew in importance in coordination of the movement, to the extent that it became almost essential for every Christian congregation to have someone in the congregation who could write, read and interpret the scriptures, letters and other writings. A formal position of *lector* or reader in a congregation is first mentioned by Justin Martyr around the year 160, and being a lector soon became an important step on the path to the hierarchy of leadership in Catholic churches.

The consequences of the Christian adaptation of writing

It’s my contention that the adoption of writing was a significant factor in how Christianity developed, to the extent that Catholic Christianity became synonymous with Christianity in the West. Understanding how that happened provides a valuable perspective on how media and religion interact with each other.

By the end of the second century, Christianity was a diverse movement, with a number of identifiable streams, all of which had adapted the original Jewish prophetic message of Jesus in different cultural ways:

- Jewish Christianity, which saw Jesus within Jewish terms as the predicted Messiah but not divine;
- Gnostic Christianity, which aligned the Jesus tradition with the wider dualistic philosophical and religious movements of Gnosticism;
- Marcionism, which saw the god of the Jewish scriptures and the god of Jesus as different gods;
- Logos or Catholic-Orthodox Christianity, which aligned Jesus with Hellenistic culture through the philosophical concept of the Logos;
- Montanism, which was a largely oral, charismatic, prophetic, apocalyptic movement, lead by two women.

Out of this diversity, by the middle of the fourth century, one of those streams had become dominant: Logos Christianity or the Catholic-Orthodox Party. Though it was only one of the various cultural adaptations that had been made of the original story of Jesus, Catholic Christianity had established itself culturally to such an extent that it was adopted and politically enforced by the Roman Emperor as the official and only true version of Christianity.

The culture of Christianity as it developed within the Catholic Party is significantly different from the religious vision originally posed by Jesus. Some of the key elements were:

- There is only one correct form of organization that is truly Christian: local communities headed by a male priest linked in a hierarchical form of authority under a regional male bishop or overseer. In contrast to Jesus' example, women are excluded from positions of leadership.
- Only one set of Christian beliefs and practice are recognized as right – that defined by the bishops. The Jewishness of Jesus is downplayed and Jesus is equated with the Hellenistic philosophical Logos principle and declared to be God, requiring development over a period of several hundred years of a complex Trinitarian god-concept in which God is declared philosophically to be Three Persons in One Substance.
- The relationship with God is reconstructed as an inter-mediated relationship - salvation and forgiveness are dispensed by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, developed eventually into a formal doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*
- The large number of Christian writings in circulation are vetted and a small number that support the Party's theological positions are authorized as the canon of Christian scripture.

This Catholic-Orthodox version of Christianity was the one adopted by the Emperor Constantine, who saw in its male leadership and centralized organizational structures a means of enlisting religion in his political agenda of unifying and stabilizing the Empire. As part of this, the Emperor further stabilized the religion, calling a church council (Nicaea) to resolve some ongoing doctrinal differences, engaging in an extensive building program of a number of big new Catholic-Orthodox churches in key imperial centres and commissioning 50 elaborately produced copies of the new canon of scripture to standardize the core documents.

As part of this political program of unification, other cultural and regional adaptations of the Jesus tradition were defined as deviant (heretical), suppressed and their writings outlawed. Many Christians adhering to these alternative traditions were either exiled or executed.

The sum of reasons for the ascendancy of the Catholic Party in Christianity were, of course, extensive. As with any cultural phenomenon, there are political, sociological, economic, practical, and organizational factors that interact and converge in such an outcome. But I would argue, as Eisenstein does in her analysis of the influence of printing in early Modern Europe (Eisenstein, 1979), that mediation factors associated with the use of writing can be singled out for special attention because of their multiplying effect, acting not just as a single factor, but providing the means and setting the conditions by which other changes were able to take place, or not take place.

I'm not thinking of writing in a purely instrumentalist way. The distinctive adaptations of writing by the Catholic Party enabled it to gain dominance over other Christian views, by shaping Christianity as a particular form of religious media culture aligned to wider practices of cultural and political power.

A number of elements can be identified in this.

1. The re-positioning of Christianity culturally

Because Christians did not become involved in literacy education until well into the third century, those Christians who **were** literate in this early period tended to have received their education within the

Greco-Roman educational system **before** they became Christians. They were also therefore more likely than most other Christians to be members of the middle or upper classes, a social capital that moved them more quickly into positions of religious leadership. They brought with them into their leadership of Christianity, familiarity with and appreciation for Greco-Roman values, political processes and the cultural interests of the literate classes. In their writings they “naturally” addressed Christianity to their familiar class and culture.

This re-positioning of Christianity involved not just administrative uses of writing, but the creation of a Christian literate culture, designed to pitch Christianity to this powerful political class (Mitchell, 2006). Part of the address to this literate culture, where antiquity was a valued quality, was the construction of Christianity as an “old” religion. The recasting of Jesus as the eternal Logos principle (“In the beginning was the Word”) downplayed his recent Jewish existence and recreated him as eternal. Arguing that Christianity was the fulfillment of the old religion of Judaism appropriated the antiquity of Judaism and is part of the reason for Christian polemics against Judaism.¹

2. Enlistment of the literate-educated into Catholic leadership

The centralized, empire-wide organizational and theological structures of Christianity as it was defined by the Catholic-Orthodox Party required literate, experienced people to lead it. Though the other streams of Christianity also had literate people within their leadership, the Catholic Party leaders actively promoted the literate leadership class into church leadership. Two examples can be given:

- ❖ Cyprian was a wealthy, aristocratic property owner in Carthage during the first half of the third century, with experience in politics, the law and civil administration. He was made bishop of Carthage and the overseer of the whole North African Church two years after he became a Christian. He played a key role in shaping the Catholic Church as a religious empire.
- ❖ Ambrose was the son of a Praetorian prefect in Gaul. Educated in Rome for a civil career, he became governor of Northern Italy in Milan. As governor he was called in to resolve a church dispute about the election of a new bishop and in the process was elected as bishop himself, even though he wasn't baptized. He went on to become an influential theological writer.

3. Effective utilization of the systems and political advantages of writing

The Roman Empire had in place a strong, fast and effective Empire-wide infrastructure of communication to support political, military, cultural and trade activities. The Catholic Party of Christianity attracted and enlisted individuals and groups who understood these systems and were experienced in utilizing them. These were people who had the resources to translate Christianity into cultural forms and directions that could be strategically placed and promoted upon the media systems of their time. Some of these factors were:

¹ It is significant therefore that Eusebius begins his *Ecclesiastical History* not with Jesus but with the beginning of time. One of the reasons Marcion's theological ideas on the God of Judaism and the God of Jesus as different gods were rejected as heretical was because they coloured Christianity as a new religion, not an ancient one. This desire to portray Christianity as fulfilling and therefore supplanting Judaism also laid the foundations for Christianity's anti-Semitism.

- ❖ Skills and familiarity with literate practices and protocols;
- ❖ Knowledge of how the media systems worked and how to use those systems;
- ❖ The leisure time to write;
- ❖ The financial resources to build their own media institutions to acquire a regular supply of writing materials, to purchase other people's writings, to establish and maintain effective libraries and archives, to employ people to reproduce what they'd written, and to organize and pay for distribution.
- ❖ The adoption of the codex as the dominant media form for written materials.
- ❖ This is more than just an instrumental use of media. Having the social and financial capital to locate oneself within such a wider communication system made possible a range of social and political outcomes that weren't available to those whose power and activities were oral and local. It made possible the wider spread and influence of the opinions of literate Christians over others, even though they were a distinct minority within the religion.
- ❖ Writing made it possible for this small minority within Christianity to network and organize on a regional and empire-wide basis a common opinion against alternatives.
- ❖ The ideas of Christianity that were preserved for later access and reference were almost exclusively the ideas of the minority who wrote;

It is not accidental that the people now recognized as the "Fathers of the Church" were all writers.

Two figures serve as good examples of this, and it's good to go into a little detail with each in order to get a sense of the extent to which Catholic Christians at this time practiced their religion as a media exercise.

Example - Origen c. 182-251

Origen was a pupil of Clement. He was born into a Christian family in Alexandria but educated fully within a Hellenistic cultural framework. Küng describes Origen as "the only real genius among the church fathers, a man with an insatiable thirst for knowledge, a wide-ranging education and tremendous creative power" (Küng, 1994). The focus of Origen's intellectual attention was to arrive at a definitive reconciliation between Christianity and the Hellenistic world, and to this end he taught and wrote prodigiously.

Only a fragment of his works remain today, partly because he was a controversial theologian and many of his books were destroyed. Eusebius lists more than 2,000 written works, though Miller suggests there may be as many as 6,000 (Miller, 1994) - an average of 4 a week - on a vast range of topics: a scientific doctrine of the Trinity and the first known systematic theology, writings on the Christian life, writings against pagan criticisms, a theology of asceticism, extensive biblical works and commentaries.

Origen's biblical works included the *Hexapla*, a manuscript of six parallel columns setting out side by side six versions of the Hebrew scriptures. Laying out these versions side by side exposed differences in the

literal forms of the text, leading Origen to develop a system of biblical interpretation that recognized three levels of textual meaning: the somatic or literal sense, the psychic or moral sense, and the allegorical or spiritual sense.

Origen's extensive influence on the philosophical development of Christianity was facilitated by the establishment of what was in effect a media production centre, funded by a wealthy patron. Eusebius describes the arrangement in the following way:

"Ambrose urged him not only by countless verbal exhortations and incentives but also by furnishing abundant means. For, as he dictated, he had at hand more than seven shorthand writers, who relieved one another at appointed times, and copyists no fewer in number, as well as girls trained in beautiful penmanship. For all these Ambrose provided the necessary means in abundance. (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History VI.23)

Origen also traveled extensively, visiting Christian communities on invitation as a speaker or to mediate in church disputes, and like a rock star on tour to promote his latest CD or an author on a signing tour, he took with him copies of his writing to supplement and reinforce his personal presence. Origen did not invent re-interpretation of Christianity out of its illiterate Aramaic origins in Palestine into the sophisticated literate Greek culture of Hellenistic philosophy, but he contributed to it significantly.

Example - Cyprian of Carthage c.200-258.

Cyprian was bishop of Carthage in North Africa from 248-258, a crucial time of empire-wide persecution of Christians. Prior to becoming a Christian, Cyprian was an educated, wealthy, aristocratic Carthaginian property owner, probably of senatorial rank. He was trained within the Greco-Roman education system as a rhetorician, was a skilled debater with likely experience in politics, the law, and civil administration. He became a Christian when he was 46. Two years later, when he was 48, he was made bishop of Carthage and overseer of the whole North African Church.

Cyprian's conversion to Christianity was partly a result of disillusionment with the political instability of the Empire and the decline in standards of civil society. When he became a bishop, he drew on his legal and civil administration experience to further the development of the church as the new Roman Empire, divided into a curial class of clergy and lay people, parallel to the Roman division of citizens into property owners and ordinary citizens. In this structure, the bishop was the central authority of the regional church, the Bishop of Rome the first bishop, and just to tidy it all up the College of Bishops acting together was declared to be incapable of error. In Cyprian's world, the Catholic institutional church became the civil service of salvation, replacing the personal relationship with God that Jesus advocated with a church-directed system of penances dispensing salvation.

Cyprian exercised this substantial influence from his North African diocese by drawing on his knowledge and experience of the imperial culture and systems of writing. In the last eight years of his life, Cyprian wrote around a dozen treatises, some of them several volumes long. He also wrote at least 82 letters, many in multiple copies with multiple attachments that were intended to be read aloud publicly. He wrote frequently to other bishops and church officials around the Empire - Spain, Gaul, Cappadocia,

Rome, Italy - encouraging them, giving them his opinion of things, urging them to desist from behaviour he considered to be destructive or damaging. One letter is cc'd to 18 different recipients, another has 13 attachments, another includes with the letter a long attachment with a 2,500 word critique of the attachment. All of these were written and copied by hand, requiring resources which one can assume were brought into Christianity by Cyprian from his privileged background.

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

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

Letter 49 reports to Rome the outcome of a church council that had just finished in Carthage. The letter ends with a good example of the powerful liberties of action of writing at the time: "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."

Further illustrative of the political advantages of writing and those who had command of it, Augustine at his base in Hippo North Africa in the 4th and 5th centuries had so many copyists at his disposal that "new books were distributed quickly and easily" and he was able to make a gift of the 13 volumes of his *Confessions* in short time to a literary enthusiast who asked for it. The convent in Hippo (c.412) had its own library with a staffed lending desk.

4. Constructing the brand "Catholic"

The dominance of the Catholic Party was also achieved through a hegemony-building strategy of identifying the Catholic stream with "true" Christianity – what we would readily identify today as a media strategy of brand creation. This involved a number of elements.

- ❖ Appropriation of the name Catholic.
The word "catholic" or "katholikos" means universal. Though meaning literally all Christian communities, it was appropriated early by Catholic Party male bishops for their stream of Christianity, churches headed by male bishops.

"Wherever the bishops shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful without the bishop to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast; but whatsoever the bishop shall approve of, that is pleasing to God."
(Ignatius, c.106)

- ❖ Construction of an official history

Eusebius' ten volume Ecclesiastical History, which appeared in a number of editions between 313 and 325, is a good example of this. In what is basically a PR-style historical recreation, Eusebius gave legitimation to the Catholic Party as the only embodiment of the apostolic tradition, and successful defender of the true faith against all other contenders, who are described as deviant or heretical. His history locates the beginning of Christianity not with the birth of Jesus but the beginning of time. His history supports male Episcopal leadership by constructing a genealogy that located every bishop in an uninterrupted historical, physically-transmitted chain of command directly to Jesus' original disciples.

❖ Defending the brand

The monopoly ownership of the brand "Catholic" was finally enforced politically by Emperor Theodosius I in 380:

"We desire that all people under the rule of our clemency should live by that religion which divine Peter the apostle is said to have given to the Romans... as for the others, since in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics, and shall not presume to give their conventicles the name of churches."

5. Media censorship and control

As well as actively promoting their own opinions through their writings, and recognizing that writing was a significant source of their religious power, Catholic-Orthodox Party male leaders acted to control what was written and who could write. This also involved a variety of strategic actions:

❖ Media censorship. Oppositional texts were burned or doctored and those possessing them were condemned. This censorship was so effective that until just recently, what was known about many of the alternative movements of Christianity was known only through what is said about them in Catholic condemnations of them.

❖ Media control. As much as possible, what was written in Christianity was brought under the control of the bishops. This was a significant strategy in subverting alternative views, including the leadership influences of women. Women's nature and leadership was denigrated in male writings. Writings by women were branded as fanciful and dangerous. Women's access to writing was progressively denied:

"A woman may not write to other lay Christians without her husband's consent. A woman may not receive letters of friendship addressed to her only and not to her husband as well." (Synod of Elvira, early 4th C).

❖ Control of prophecy. One of the major challenges to the writing, office-based authority of the bishop was the persistence of oral-based, charismatic authority, embodied particularly in the performance of the oral prophet, which in both style and substance challenged the ordered approach to religion that the Catholic Church was building. To consolidate power in the stability of the writing-based episcopal office, the unpredictable and challenging oral charismatic style (that has nevertheless persisted in Christianity to this day) had to be brought under control. As the Catholic Party consolidated its organizational structures, the unpredictable prophetic impulse was routinised and brought under the control of the hierarchy. At first the gift of prophecy was seen as strengthening the authority of the local bishop, then the gift of prophet was declared to be a gift of the bishops,

until in later centuries, only the official hierarchy could claim to speak with God's own voice.

Though close to the Catholic Party in its theological beliefs, part of the reason for declaration of Montanist Christianity as a heresy was because it was strongly oral and charismatic in its style and shared authority among its members rather than follow a hierarchical authority model. The other major threat posed by the Montanists was that its two key leaders were women.

6. The power of writing – the case of Latin

This censorship and control of writing became entrenched in the West by the installation of classical Latin as the universal language of church writing within the Western Catholic Church. Begun in the time of Constantine, it developed to the extent that classical Latin conveyed in its written form became the language of imperial commerce, politics and religion. The power of language in religion is illustrated by the number of contests that were fought over language control, ranging from the imposition of particular written scripts and attempts to oppose this political power by the subversive use of alternative scripts, occasional contests between the Latin Western Church and the Greek, Syriac, Coptic and other regional languages used in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Conflicts emerged in the Balkans region, for example, between Latin speaking German missionaries and Orthodox missionaries who were creating written forms of spoken languages in order to make the liturgy and scriptures available in the local tongue.

Classical Latin preserved unchanging in writing was decreed in the West as the proper and only appropriate language for Christianity – one Christian leader even described classical Latin as “the language of the angels.” As vulgar Latin mutated over time, as spoken languages do, it changed into the regional Latinate dialects of French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese, and taken up in different ways also in German and English.

The consequence of this was to gradually make the Latin of Christianity into a foreign language, accessible only to those who were approved by the Catholic Church as trustworthy enough to be taught it. This was a major source of Catholic Christianity’s power during the Middle Ages. Controlling literacy education, production and interpretation gave it a monopoly over every aspect of religious practice - liturgy, biblical interpretation, law, and theology - as well as a strong advantage in politics, public administration and commerce. Maintaining tight control was achieved through controlling who was taught to read, and by making all services and regulations available in written Latin manuals that were to be followed by every functionary.

Understanding the importance of writing in the maintenance of religious and political power is important in understanding the impact that printing had in the transformation of Christianity – should one say re-mediation of Christianity, or mediatization of Christianity – that occurred in the 16th century. It is often argued by Protestant theologians that the major turning point for Christianity in the Reformation was the criticisms and alternative theological views penned by Martin Luther and nailed to the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg. But the cathedral door was a common place for scholars to post theses in Latin to stimulate scholarly debate. And many Catholic scholars and theologians provided strong rebuttals of Luther’s theses – in Latin. The pivotal point of the Reformation, however, wasn’t the

posting of the theses, but the translation and distribution of these in German. This was extended by Luther's subsequent writings in German, and his production of a New Testament in the German language. By doing this, Luther broke the control over the mediation of Christianity that had been held by the Catholic Party for a thousand years. When he broke their control over mediation, he posed the first real challenge to their political control as well.

What is frequently missed as well is the important role that the printers in Wittenberg and Mainz played in this shift. Luther's first arguments were published in Latin and were taken up in debate for several years in Latin. Printers may have published material out of conviction, but they still had to make a living or go out of business. The Latin market was saturated but they saw a new market for publications in vernacular German – it was the printers who encouraged Luther to write in German, to write for the market, and to write in a genre form that suited their production needs.

“The Reformation perfected the use of the small booklet or pamphlet as a tool of propaganda and agitation. Most common was a quarto format, soft cover, with an average length of 16 pages. They were relatively cheap, readily concealed and transported and well suited for delivering a message to a large popular audience. Most were simply unadorned text. The small size allowed printers to fit them in between larger jobs, so commercially they were popular with the printers. Printers competed with each other to see who could quickly rush to market a new work by ‘Martin Luther, Augustinian’ or, as his fame grew, simply ‘M.L.A.’” (Edwards, 1994, p. 164)

Shipping or transport of material was more expensive than reprinting in a new centre, so printers in different towns tended to print their own editions of pamphlets. So effective was Luther as a commercial asset that in 1524 the Leipzig City Council petitioned its duke on behalf of printers in the town to lift his (catholic) ban on printing evangelical material because printers were going broke. There was a huge demand for ‘anything new that is made in Wittenberg or elsewhere’, but Catholic writing ‘is desired by no one and cannot even be given away.’ (Edwards, pp.8,14)²

² One cannot underestimate also the important of the commercial interests of the printers in the other marked influence on the reformation, and that is the rash of vernacular translations of the scriptures.

- 1522 Luther's New Testament in German
- 1522-32 Luther's Old Testament
- 1523 First New Testament In French.
- 1525 Tyndale's New Testament, followed by parts of the Old Testament
- 1528 The Old Testament and Apocrypha in French
- 1530 Antwerp Bible – combined OT, Apocrypha, NT in French
- 1534 the first Luther Bible, revised until its last edition in 1545.
- 1535 First edition of Neuchatel Bible in French
- 1535 Coverdale's Bible in English
- 1537 Matthew Bible
- 1539 The Great Bible in English, Matthew Bible revised by Coverdale

References

- Burns, A. (1989). *The power of the written word: the role of literacy in the history of western civilization*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers.
- Crossan, J. D. (1994). *Jesus: A revolutionary biography*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Edwards, M. U., Jr. (1994). *Printing, propaganda and Martin Luther*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Eisenstein, E. (1979). *The printing press as an agent of change: Communications and cultural transformations in early modern Europe. In two volumes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fiskå Hägg, H. (2006). *Clement of Alexandria and the beginnings of Christian apophaticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Horsfield, P. (1984). *Religious television : the American experience*. New York: Longman.
- Innis, H. A. (1950). *Empire and communications*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Kimber Buell, D. (1999). *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the rhetoric of legitimacy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Küng, H. (1994). *Christianity: the religious situation of our time*. London: SCM.
- Miller, S. M. (1994). Mavericks and misfits. *Christian History*, XIII(3), 18-21.
- Mitchell, M. (2006). The emergence of the written record. In M. Mitchell & F. Young (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity* (Vol. 1: Origins to Constantine, pp. 177-194). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Osborn, E. (1959). Teaching and writing in the first chapter of the Stromateis of Clement of Alexandria. *Journal of Theological Studies*, 10, 335-343.
- Sawicki, M. (1994). *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and early Christian practice*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

-
- 1541 Yppsala Bible in Swedish
 - 1550 Christian II Bible in Danish
 - 1558 The Mennonite Bible in Dutch, following earlier translations.
 - 1562 First Protestant Italian Bible, following earlier versions.
 - 1569 The first complete Spanish Bible, following earlier parts.
 - 1582 The Rheims-Douai Bible, Roman Catholic English translation from the Vulgate
 - 1588 Geneva Bible in French, revisions of the 1535 first edition of Neuchatel Bible
 - 1578 Louvain Bible, end of process of revisions of the 1550 translation by Lefevre
 - 1611 The King James or Authorised Version in English