

'A moderate diversity of books?' The challenge of new media to the practice of Christian theology

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Biography

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What is commonly known as “theology” has been a major agent by which the meaning of Christianity has been developed and expressed, and a central means by which coherence and continuity have been constructed in Christian identities in the diverse contexts in which they have found themselves across different times and in different places.

Though theology can be embodied in a variety of expressive forms or genres, and though it is informed by a variety of affective experiences and sensory inputs, it is primarily an intellectual exercise. Macquarrie (1966) defines theology as “the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language possible” (p.1). For Tillich (1951), theology is an indispensable element in every religion:

If taken in the broadest sense of the term, theology, the logos or the reasoning about theos (God and divine things) is as old as religion. Thinking pervades all the spiritual activities of man (sic). Man would not be spiritual without words, thoughts, concepts (I.15).

Theology, as the conceptual or propositional interpretation of the contents of a religious faith, arises from, and in turn informs and shapes, the other expressive and affective forms and practices that together make up the ethos of the faith. Boomershine (Boomershine, 1991) . therefore identifies theology as a secondary language among the many forms of language that are involved with and facilitate human interaction with an Other. Primary forms of religious language are more direct in their facilitation of personal engagement, such as worship, ethical actions, images, visions, prayer, stories, songs and witness. As a secondary form of religious language, theology is a critical reflection on the religious experience encountered in the primary languages of the religion. Macquarrie (1966) identifies this distinction by drawing a difference between “faith” and “theology.”

While theology participates in a specific faith and does not speak from outside this faith, it has nevertheless taken a step back, as it were, from the immediate experiences of faith. In theology, faith has been subjected to thought (p.2).

There is a spectrum of theological opinions as to the specific nature of this theological reasoning. At one end of the spectrum is the view that sees what is done in theology as description, critical reflection and interpretation of the faith experiences of a particular religious community. At the other end, building on a strong concept of Christianity as the direct result of God’s self-revelation, theology is seen as a literal description of the nature and structure of the Divine being (s) as conceptually revealed by God. These differences in thinking about theology arise from the diversity of experiences, practices, contexts and vested interests in which the theology is developed, and the different purposes to which it is intended.

Williams (1996) attempts to bring some order to this diversity by proposing three basic models of theology based on the major functions they serve within the life of the Christian community. The first, celebratory theology, is more poetic in its language to build connections of meaning for the purpose of thanksgiving, worship and celebration. The second, communicative theology, is more rhetorical in its language and focused on interpreting the inherent meaning in the Christian faith and their implications to new contexts and practical situations. The third, critical theology, is more scientific or declarative in its language in establishing fundamentals of the faith to address situations of crisis or challenge. Each, he argues, has its strengths but also its weaknesses, and the interaction of each one’s strengths with the challenges to its weaknesses lead to a constantly moving ground of theological thought.

For both philosophical and historical reasons, Christian theology has tended to see itself as a practice that is distinct from other constructions of knowledge, with its own sources of information, foci of study and bases of reasoning. Common to most theologies are six main identified sources of information with which theology works, though different theological systems give different weight to some over others, or rank them in a different hierarchy of importance. These sources are: human experience, particularly those considered relevant by the theologian; revelation, a particular type of religious experience characterized by a particular mood of meditation leading to an in-breaking experience of a holy presence followed by a mood of self-abasement, a restorative sense of purpose, and a sense of being called or commissioned; scripture, the authorized written accounts of the selected memory about the foundations of the faith; tradition, the selective history of experiences and interpretations of the faith; culture, resources acquired or demands made by the surrounding context; and reason, the intellectual mechanisms for the calculated construction of these disparate sources into a meaningful structure of thought.

While culture is an identified factor in most theological processes, it is largely envisaged in most theological systems as a separate element with which theology needs to engage or from which it may draw resources. The idea that theology itself may be a particular cultural enterprise, symbiotically enmeshed within wider cultural processes, expectations, power relationships, values and structures, is one that, until lately, had largely been rejected. Within the Protestant traditions of Christianity, the emblematic and influential work in this area was Richard Niebuhr's work, *Christ and Culture* (1951). Niebuhr's framing of the issue posits a distinctive Christian culture (*Christ*) which has to be preserved in its interactions with the wider "worldly" culture (*Culture*).

"The fact remains that the Christ who exercises authority over Christians or whom Christians accept as authority is the Jesus Christ of the New Testament; and that this is a person with definite teachings, a definitive character, and a definite fate. the Jesus Christ of the New Testament is in our actual history, in history as we remember and live it, as it shapes our present faith and action." (pp.12-13)

Within Catholic scholarship, culture is most actively engaged in the area of the so-called "inculturation" of faith. Here also, the engagement with culture reflects the view that there is an unconditioned, a-cultural truth within Christianity that cannot be amended and must be protected:

"The liturgy has replaceable elements, but not everything may be replaced. In order to know what may be changed and what must stay, it is important to make a distinction, insofar as this is possible, between the theological content and the liturgical form of a rite... The theological content is the meaning of the liturgical text or rite..... The liturgical form, which consists of ritual acts and formularies, gives visible expression to the theological content....With this distinction in mind we need to observe a rather rigid principle. If the theological content or the liturgical form is of divine institution, it may not be replaced with another content or form that will modify the meaning originally intended by Christ" (Chupungo, 1992, pp. 41-42)

What is presumed in statements such as these is that particular theological content or liturgical forms can be considered as divine in institution or as "the meaning originally intended by Christ" and therefore unconditioned, culturally unspecific and unmediated, and free of any form of political, ideological or institutional influence or interest.

This view, that the theologian's personal cultural position or intellectual approach is of no relevance to the theological enterprise, began to be challenged in the last third of the twentieth century, particularly from more marginalized cultural contexts of race and gender (Hood, 1990; Reuther, 1993; Song, 1984; Tanner, 1997).

While these different aspects of theology's cultural positioning have been challenged in recent decades, the significant influence of the media-culture of theology has been largely unaddressed. To a large extent this is because most theologians and their critics, from their own media cultural position as literate elites, have considered "media" primarily as instruments for carrying ideas, once the theologians and their educated critics, using their esoteric theological sources and methods, have divined what the ideas are to be.

From within this view, any question of what impact changes in media or the implementation of new media technologies may have on the theological enterprise, are addressed as primarily technical questions of adaptation and implementation, rather than questions of substance. The extensive work now done on seeing media, not just as instruments, but as technological and cultural phenomena that have social and ideological implications within the context of the complexity and interactivity of cultures, have largely been ignored in theological thinking, even though substantial work has now been done in the area of media and religion (eg. Edwards, 1994; E. L. Eisenstein, 1983; Goizueta, 2004; Hoover & Lundby, 1997; Horsfield, 2003; Morgan, 1998; Ong, 1982).

An entry into thinking about how the mediation of theology may contribute to the shape of theology can be found in Ong's identification of three main characteristics of media that contribute to different media constructions and communication of human reality. One is the senses that are addressed and activated through the physical characteristics of the medium being used, and the way in which those activated senses shape the selection and experience of reality and the construction of meaning through their different processes of denotation and connotation. Important in this also is the way in which individual media sensory characteristics are extended more widely into cultural practice, industries and structures. A second is the way in which different media handle and facilitate the storage, retrieval and reproduction of cultural knowledge. The capacities and limitations of different media for managing and reproducing information become a significant factor in that medium's construction and reproduction of reality, influencing how much information can be handled, what sort of information is selected, how it is organized, the conditions under which it is reproduced, and the ways it becomes available for audience use and adaptation. The third is how each medium positions people in relation to each other and the social relationships and social organizational structures that develop as a result of these requirements. This social positioning requirement influences the construction of social realities not only by specifying how people need to be positioned in order for the medium to work, but also by creating new potentials, new liberties of action, as the scope inherent within the medium is developed.

Bourdieu identifies a fourth relevant characteristic in the relationship between media and theology, that is the relationship of media and power (Bourdieu, 1977). He draws attention to the role of symbolic systems and mediated constructions of reality as instruments of knowledge and domination. Symbolic systems are created and maintained, not just to provide a usable picture of the world, but to construct a particular order of the world that serves the purpose of establishing a dominance of one particular group over another. Media become a significant site of conflict in this everyday contest of attempted dominance and resistance. By establishing particular

forms of mediation as more legitimate or correct than others, those groups whose expertise lies in that form of mediation gain an advantage through the establishment of greater status, prestige and legitimacy. As will be seen in what follows, establishing what was to be the “proper” medium for theological construction to benefit particular groups has been a significant site of contest throughout Christianity (Horsfield, 2009). One of the major challenges of digital media to theology today lies in a fundamental challenge to the dominant media within which Christian theology has been developed and preserved.

MEDIA CONTESTS OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

The basic medium of theology is language, but the means by which language may be produced are various, and include oral, written, printed, visualized, sung, or screened expression. Within those variations are the various differences identified above: changes in sensory patterns, changes in the storage, organisation and reproduction of information, changes in social organization and relationships, and changes in the power structures of status, legitimization and authority of different language expressions. While the different mediations of theology within Christianity may be seen as complementary and mutually enriching, they have also been the cause of significant conflicts.

Contests over the construction of the meaning of Jesus, particularly between oral and written expression, were a part of the early shaping of the Christian tradition following the death of Jesus. Theology constructed and performed orally is influenced significantly by its production and reception as a live performance before a living, present and known audience. The process of oral theological construction is influenced by the characteristics of its construction in performance: the visual and verbal feedback that comes from the audience being present, the limitations of the audience to remember detail of what is said rather than general impression, and the immediate transformation by the audience in their own recounting of what has been said and seen as soon as the performance is over. Power in the production of oral theology was a distributed one, developed in the interaction between the speaker/performer and the audience.

The earliest constructions and mediation of Christian theology were oral. As Jesus and most of his first followers were from the lower classes, and most likely illiterate, the earliest working out and public pronouncement of this new revelation were primarily in oral form, following the patterns of oral performance modelled by Jesus.

Following the death of Jesus, the first Christians communicated their new insights in the streets, market places and temple through public speeches, declaring prophecies, recounting dreams and visions and integrating their new ideas with re-interpretations of old scripture passages and beliefs. And, in the pattern of Jesus, along with their public oratory and personal conversations, they demonstrated the power and truth of what they were saying by performing acts of healing, casting out demons, challenging public authorities and other acts of seemingly spiritual power. These events in turn were passed on, discussed and retold by eyewitnesses, bystanders and other interested people.

As is common in oral-based cultural perceptions of time, there was immediacy in this form of prophetic speech that removed barriers between what had happened in the past and what was happening now. Jesus was spoken of not as a past figure who was dead and gone, but as a continuing presence alive in those who were speaking and performing. Through his re-energised followers, the public ministry of Jesus that seemed to have ended with his arrest and execution was resurrected. In effect, in the

oral speech and performance of his followers, Jesus came alive again. Though not physically present, speaking dramatically about Jesus served to embody Jesus in the speaker. Through these oral devices of speech, performed actions of healing, exorcism and miracles, and channelling devices of prophecies, dreams and visions, all linked to the presence of a living Jesus, the distance between the past Jesus and the present speaker became erased.

From the very beginnings, there was significant adaptation of the sayings and events of Jesus' life in the process of bringing them to life for the people to whom it was being told. In the process of retelling and adaptation, therefore, whatever was the original message of Jesus gained new meaning and new material, as the original Jesus was imaginatively recreated in the process of oral performance in new settings. The Rabbinic and prophetic traditions within Judaism provided a model for this process of change through adaptation and application to different contexts and circumstances. This process of adaptation in different places and in response to different needs lead to the development of different oral theological traditions within Christianity, often associated with particular charismatic leaders. So while there were common themes and practices across these different traditions of Christianity, there was also a significant diversity of opinion, understanding and practice.

This oral theologising from the beginning was challenged by the practice of writing and those Christians who were literate. Theology constructed and performed in writing is a more measured construction of theological thought by an individual, written over a period of time, with likely access to resources of human memory and archived written memory. Though initially read out loud to groups, the earliest written Christian materials were received by the audience as a completed treatise, not as a living "performance in process" to which the audience contributes. Power in the production of written theology lay with that small minority of Christians who had the literary and practical resources to produce documents and get them distributed.

Most of the first Christians were illiterate (some figures suggest only 5% of the first Christians could read or write (Crossan, 1994)) though most, if not all, of the early Christian communities included someone who could read. As Christianity spread beyond its Jewish context, however, writing became an increasingly important skill and mode of communication. Those who were literate, therefore, acquired an exaggerated importance and power in proportion to their number. Since little attention was given to developing literacy within Christianity itself, these people were those whose schooling was in the classical rhetorical tradition of Greco-Roman education. Their adaptation of Christianity was to the cultural systems they saw as dominant within the Roman world, particularly Platonic idealism and systems of abstract thought. This included the adoption of presumptions and laws of argument common in that cultural rhetorical-dialectical system.

The widespread adaptation of writing within Christianity and integration of Christianity into the writing culture of the Empire was a major factor in the fairly rapid development of Christianity from being just a sectarian religious movement to an Empire-wide or "global" religion. The communication, organisation and political advantages that literacy gave to Christianity, along with the deliberate cultivation of their own kind by early Christian leaders who were literate, lead to Christianity steadily becoming a textualised religion. As Mitchell (2006) notes, "The earliest Christians did not just produce texts, they created a literary culture" (p.191).

In a relatively short time, therefore, the process of theological construction within Christianity had become a strongly literate activity. Significant theologizing was still done in the interpretation of faith in the face to face oral activities of churches. But

increasingly the outworking of faith in such things as worship, catechesis, mission and ethical behaviour became subject to the regulatory doctrines defined in writing-based theology. In difference from the diversity that was possible in oral theology, in which truth was developed and assessed in relation to its relevance and usefulness to specific situations, Christian theology that was written became more fixed in character. It also became more abstract, separated from the changing and diverse practical concerns of daily living in different contexts, in order to be "true" and non-contradictory to a variety of potential audiences and cultural contexts.

In time, therefore, the measure of theological truth shifted from its relevance and usefulness for daily living to the elevation and consistency of its philosophical propositions. As this theological development progressed, and reflecting the philosophical interests of its literate advocates, theology became increasing complex. The earliest confession asked of those who were to be baptized was that Jesus was Lord. By the end of the second century, the baptismal confession had grown to a Trinitarian one involving at least sixteen different philosophical and doctrinal affirmations¹. Gradually these questions changed to declaratory statements, "I believe," used no longer as an affirmation of faith but as a measure of orthodoxy.

The downside of this was that interpreting the meaning of Christian faith, the theology of the faith, was appropriated by the writing class of Christianity out of the hands of the wider Christian population. As a result, written theology became a reflection of the interests of that class - larger, abstract philosophical questions rather than a focus on the practical issues of living out the consequences of one's faith on a daily basis: a shift, as Kung notes, from "an apocalyptic temporal scheme of salvation" of the early Jewish movement to a cosmic-spatial scheme "explained in the essential-ontological concepts of contemporary Hellenistic metaphysics" (Küng, 1994, p. 172).

Even though the parameters of the Christian story were roughly defined and understood, working out how to integrate the elements of the story of Jesus into the details of the adopted Greek philosophical concepts was not an easy task and continually raised philosophical conundrums. It is hard to know how much or what the everyday Christian thought about these things, but as the third and fourth centuries progressed resolving these philosophical conundrums and boiling down the diversity of Christianity into a short, single philosophical creedal summaries became the preoccupation of the educated bishops and Christian intellectuals and the primary focus of Christian theology. The disagreements were protracted, the conflicts torrid, vicious and at times lethal, and the resolution came finally not through consensual agreement but through imperial edicts that were enforced militarily.

The result was a significantly changed Christianity, one that Küng identifies as a quite different paradigm. Instead of being explained in the everyday concrete language used by Jesus, theology became a philosophical exercise. The relationship of Jesus to God was recast in the essential-ontological concepts of contemporary Hellenistic metaphysics. Instead of continuing reflections on God's dynamic activity of revelation, the focal point of reflection shifted to a more static consideration of God's self within eternity and God's innermost nature. The exaltation of Christ with an original Jewish stamp, beginning from below and centered in the death and resurrection, was increasingly suppressed by a Hellenistic incarnation Christology beginning above. And reflecting a fascination with mathematical, magical, religious and metaphysical numerology, theology took up a fascination with the number three in its endless

¹ From the *Apostolic Tradition*, a church manual from the later second century attributed to Hippolytus.

arguments around Trinitarian thinking. Küng (1994) comments on the consequences of this particular literate framing of theology:

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 favor of a doctrine and finally a church dogma of the ‘incarnate God. (p.171)

The invention of printing in the 15th century marked another significant media influence on the shape of Christian theology. In the West, the enforced dominant Catholic theological monopoly was broken with the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation. As Eisenstein (1979) and Edwards (1994) both make clear, printing provided an alternative centre of power by which the individual Martin Luther could mount his significant and sustained theological challenge to the distributed institutional and political power of the Roman Catholic Church.

Printing as a medium changed the practice of theology in a number of significant ways that unfolded progressively through the Modern period. The same ideals of the Hellenistic system to integrate knowledge into a single system of propositions that were non-contradictory continued to guide the theological enterprise. But the integration and standardization of knowledge that printing favored, that found expression in new authoritative print genres as the encyclopedia, scientific tables and dictionary, made more apparent and problematic theological differences between different Christian viewpoints. These lead to the fracturing of Christianity into numerous confessional denominations, each affirming their own absolute, unified, and non-contradictory theological world view. Print's capacity to handle greatly expanded knowledge, that stimulated the sub-division of knowledge into various disciplines of thought, influenced the shape of theology as well, leading eventually to the subdivision of theology according to dominant disciplines.²

Another influence of printing on Christian theology was the symbiotic relationship formed between the practices and institutions of Christian theology and the practices and institutions of the publishing and printing industries. This symbiosis began with Martin Luther's close working relationship with the printers and their commercial interests, which influenced among other things the format in which he wrote, the language and pitch of his theological writings to the emerging German bourgeoisie and the distribution of his writings. The printers were also instrumental in Luther's shift from writing in Latin – the language of the church and an already saturated commercial market – to vernacular German – the language of the marketplace, business and public administration and publishing market of expanding commercial potential (Edwards, 1994; E. Eisenstein, 1979).

That symbiotic relationship between modern theology and the publishing industries has continued to the present. Christian theology in the modern period, even to today, has been dominantly a book-based enterprise, sustained by wider cultural literate practices. Theological education takes place primarily within tertiary institutions in which the library is one of the largest and most expensive resources. Learning takes place primarily through the presentation and discussion of written lectures read by teachers, students' being assigned reading lists of books and journals that they are

² That is, historical theology (biblical disciplines, church history and history of religion), systematic theology (natural theology, apologetics, ethics and dogmatics) and practical theology, the more technical application of the other “pure” forms of theology to the life and activities of the church.

required to reference and discuss, and finally being assessed on their knowledge by writing essays or writing answers to exam questions. Even students who are preparing for what will be a largely local, oral-based ministry are prepared and finally accredited for that ministry, not on the basis of their oral competence or their competence in interpersonal relationships, but by their competence in reading, absorbing, and reproducing printed material.

Theologians and teachers of theology are authorized as theologians likewise by demonstrating their competency in absorbing and producing printed materials. After writing a book-length PhD which is approved by colleagues who have themselves successfully completed a book-length PhD, theologians progress through the ranks, secure a paying job and advance into higher-paying jobs, by furthering the interests of commercial publishers in writing new theological ideas that are accepted for publication in commercial journals or as commercial books.

This has been the literate-based industry of Christian theology in the late modern period. In direct application of Bourdieu's concept of legitimization through symbolic authorization (Bourdieu, 1977), whatever the religious issue, the religious practice or the ethical situation to be addressed, within most Christian churches one was not seen as qualified to speak authoritatively unless one had been through and was authorized by the media system of theological education.

It is this literate-based industry of Christian theology that Martin Marty (1989) in his prescient statement of more than two decades ago, identified as being in a process of change:

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 (pp. 186-187).

This building of a theology or theological opinion in which one was presuming to describe or account for a universe of knowledge, organized logically in the sequential grammar, ordered divisions and sub-divisions of a written work, that incorporates and engages existing published knowledge on the subject, was possible when there was limited information to process. That literate-based character of theology is now challenged by the development and advances in digital media. Or as Marty expressed it, even before the impact of the Internet was known:

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 (p.186).

THEOLOGY IN DIGITAL MEDIA?

I am proposing that, from a media-technological and media-cultural perspective, the characteristics of digital media – their information processing and textual construction characteristics, their technological mediation of reality, their patterns of usage practices, and the economics of their industrial organization - represent a paradigmatically different means of mediated communication than that of print publishing, upon which until recently most social practices, including the practices of theology, have been built. Exploring some of the key elements of new media will make some of these differences and their challenge to theology more evident.

An important characteristic of digital media is the vastly increased amount of information that they make possible. This comes from the technological capacities of digital media to facilitate the production of information from an almost unlimited number of producers, to store that information and make it accessible through an almost unlimited number of databases, to transform that information into an almost unlimited number of auditory, visual and tactile expressions, and to distribute that information through an almost unlimited number of distribution and access channels. The practical need to contend with almost unlimited information has lead to quite different criteria and social practices for engaging with information. With the greatly expanded orders of categorization, segmentation and flow of information, new cultural literacies have had to be developed. There has grown a widespread recognition that one cannot know or keep track of everything, even in specific areas of personal interest. What becomes important in engaging with information is to know how to place oneself within the flow of information to keep in touch with what is happening in your areas of interest, to avoid becoming bogged down in the processing of unnecessary or irrelevant detail that is thrust upon us (the “push” of information), and to know how and where to find information when it is needed (the “pull” of information). Crucial in communicating within this system therefore is the development of practical and grammatical skills that enable one to contribute one’s meaning into the matrix and have it heard.

For the systematic theologian, whose concept of theology has been the building of a universal framework of meaning within which all experiences can be subsumed or at least made sense of, the limitless expansion of information that is to be taken into account poses a significant practical as well as intellectual challenge. The cosmos that is emerging from a global system of constantly expanding, changing and circulating information filtered through the meaning-making of the Google algorithm, requires a quite different process of theological construction and communication than that which has been practiced within elite institutions working with “a moderate diversity of books.”

A further challenge to the practice of theology has been the changed nature of text provoked by the characteristics of digital technology. The flexibility and mutability of digital language and audio-visual texts has lead to changes in how the producer of the text conceives what they’re doing, and how the user of the text receives it. Printed text is a more permanent and less flexible mode of reproduction. When writing something that is to be made available in print, particularly within a culture that has traditions of printed books and journals, one is more conscious of the permanence of the activity and of the ideas being expressed. While the reader may disagree with what is written and may even write something in reply, the disagreement and reply does not change the text itself. A digital text, on the other hand, is infinitely mutable, able in an instant to be processed and republished as a different document or media form. The technologies of new media provide the opportunity and the encouragement for the audience not only to engage with the text, but to transform it. This is producing a changed attitude to information, as something not simply to be received but to be worked with. This is reflected in the concept of the audience changing from being receivers, the old mass media concept, to *prod-users*, active participants in the creation of textual meaning.

Theologians have commonly understood their task as working in an educated, deliberate and authoritative way with the sources of revelation and tradition “to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language possible” (Macquarrie, 1966, p. 1). For many, this is a sacred duty as guardians of the faith. The previous means of media production supported this particular conceptualization of the theological task, with the theologian’s printed words remaining discreet and identifiable in the printed text. To have the theologian’s considered words capable of being

reworked and re-expressed in an instant by someone with no theological education and perhaps little deliberation presents a marked challenge to the concept of theology and the status of theologians. While theologians' ideas have frequently been challenged, prior to the development of digital technologies those challenges were generally expressed in media that were limited in their circulation. Digital media provide the ready means for equal distribution and circulation of theological ideas developed by the theologically uneducated as for the theologically educated.

This changed media situation raises a related question of how theological authority is judged. Throughout the modern period, authority in religious matters was strongly institutional in its ascription. This was supported significantly by the centralised production characteristics of print and its offspring of print-based education, institutions and industries. Theological authority, which reflected and supported particular patterns of power within Christianity, was created and supported by institutional processes of recognition, including declaring particular positions as authoritative and appointing approved people to those positions, or offices. Processes of censorship and reward (such as status, promotions, titles and privileges) reinforced those arrangements.

New media structures and processes have significantly undermined these institutional hegemonies, extending further the subversion or containment of religious authority in the processes of modern secularization. Media changes, which have been fundamental in wider cultural changes in the nature of communities are challenging the dominance of centralised institutional structures in favour of constantly changing functional or online associations and network. The distributed and decentralized patterns of new media communication have increased the potential for a diversity of voices rather than an authorized few to project themselves and their opinions into the marketplace. As a result the social process of declaring what is authoritative or not is shifting from social institutions to media audiences. While traditional religious authorities are increasingly adapting to the demands and possibilities of the Internet, in doing so they are recognizing that they must contend with a wider stable of competitors and a new environment in which their previously recognized criteria of religious authority such as formal qualifications or institutional position are giving way to more fluid characteristics applied by audiences, such as a person's charisma, accessibility and perceived cultural competence.

In a similar way, this growth of diversity of voices in the market has changed the criteria by which the value of what may be seen as theology is judged. There is a move away from formal characteristics such as the consistency, rationality, universality or institutional authorization of what is said to be theology, towards more pragmatic characteristics such as its usefulness and relevance to the issues people are dealing with, its imaginative content, its aesthetic appeal, or the perceived integrity or charisma of the person promoting it.

In what has become an openly competitive media marketplace, part of the judgment of whether theological ideas are valid or not is their perceived ability to be competitive in that marketplace. I have argued elsewhere (Horsfield, 2005) that in an age where digital virtual realities command a good deal of people's attention and resources, theological reflection may productively be understood also as a virtual reality. Far from being just distractions or escapes from real life, virtual realities are conceptual and experiential spaces free from the constraints of fixed time and space in which people explore alternative meanings, possibilities, hopes and aspirations in a way that allows them to make sense of and transform the practical realities with which they deal on a day to day basis. Christian virtual realities constructed in such practices as liturgy,

meditation, prayer, preaching and theological systems, have been significant ways by which Christianity in the past has engaged its audiences and offered the means of personal and social transformation. Digital virtual realities now pose a significant competition to what has been offered by Christianity (and by other religious traditions) in terms of their attractiveness, appeal, multi-sensory engagement and practicality.

If theology has been a primary means of constructing coherence and integration within the diversity of Christian experience, identity, practice and tradition, what do these changes in media mean for the practice of theology? Will there still be theology? I believe there will be, on the grounds that reasoning about meaning and ultimate questions, and working to formulate that reasoning in connected concepts and conceptual systems have been part of human civilizations since their beginning. This has been the case in all media systems, from the earliest sophisticated cultures of orality to today's sophisticated globally networked cultures of electronics.

I believe also that as long as there are social institutions of churches, with their structural power rooted in the significant social wealth and resources at their command, the practice of theology as an authorized and authorizing institutional process of religion will continue. Because as a practice it is intertwined with the strongly entrenched symbiotic industries of tertiary education, publishing and religious institutions, I expect that academic theology will also continue for some time yet.

However these traditional practices of theology are being significantly changed by the new practices of theology that are developing within new media. The purpose of this historical survey has been to indicate that though the practice of theological reasoning continues, the specific ways in which this reasoning takes place, the forms that reflection takes, and the practices or reasoning that are communally recognized, are conditioned by the cultural conditions within which they take place. These cultural conditions include particular media characteristics by which they are formed - technologies, textual practices, industries, and social structures. When those characteristics change significantly, the practices that have been formed within them also change. I consider that we are in one of those periods of significant change, provoked by a constellation of cultural changes, of which the development of new media is a significant condition. If the practice of theology is changing, what might be some of the new characteristics of theology?

One is changes to the nature of authority in theology. With changes taking place in the nature and function of social institutions, authority in theology is shifting from that based primarily on institutional authorization, towards that which provides imaginative, attractive and useful resources to help the human community progress in their human aims and spiritual journeys. Without the captive audience of church attendance, theology that is influential will need to establish itself in the marketplace by being noticed, easily accessible and by being attractive - in the root sense of drawing people to it - by its aesthetic appeal, imagination, humour and practical relevance.

Theology that is influential will be more fluid and flexible, more characteristic of oral theology than written, easily accessed, easily carried, and adaptable as the market changes.

Theology that is influential will be open for the audience to participate, to adapt to their own situations, and make their own contribution. Like the oral parables of Jesus that invited the audience to imagine the meaning, theology in new media will be constructed in the interaction between the performer and the audience. The aim will not be to get it right, but to participate in a particular type of relationship and to engage in a conversation of mutual exploration. As Tanner (1997) suggests, in this new

environment coherence in Christianity may be found not so much in trying to identify a distinctive theological essence of Christianity, but in participating in a particular type of conversation or search.

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