

Book Review

From Jesus to the internet: a history of Christianity and media.

Peter Horsfield (2015).

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This book shows how communication media have transformed Christianity over two millennia and continue to transform it, to the extent that medium and message are inextricably intertwined. Whether or not to embrace particular media (writing, icons, TV, pop music) has long been a source of debate and conflict among Christians. Horsfield argues that to understand the history of Christianity you have to understand the politics of its many and varied communication media. I am stimulated by controversial broad-brush books offering new light on old topics, so I loved this book; I will describe a few things I found particularly stimulating. I am not, however, a church historian, so can judge neither the book's historical accuracy nor how its thesis fits current understandings of church history.

Like other world religions, Christianity is usually seen as a religion of the sacred book. So Horsfield wastes no time in going for the jugular: Jesus was probably illiterate. He was a working class member of a rural society in which few could read and in which communication was overwhelmingly oral. His personal charisma was based on his oral teaching which was open and unsystematic, addressing the concrete situations he encountered. Turning his teaching into systematic written doctrine a few decades after his death entailed much effort and conflict, not to mention fundamental transformation of meaning—for example, from “son of man” (meaning “human” or “I’m one of you”) to the Hellenistic concept of “Son of God”. In translating Jesus into Hellenistic culture, St Paul's letters relocated him into a different class and cultural position, from a rural Jewish peasant to a Gentile aristocrat, “the Lord Jesus Christ”. So yes, Christianity became a *world* religion through writing, but in the process fundamentally changed its meaning and appeal.

This did not come about without resistance. In the second century, Clement of Alexandria warned that (in Horsfield's words, p.59):

Jesus didn't write, and his message was accessible to everybody whether they could read or not; why should his followers do something different? Would adopting a medium of communication accessible only to a small minority exclude from leadership and teaching those whose leadership, like Jesus', was rooted in oral communication?

Clement's warning proved prophetic; in time the hierarchies of prestige and power associated with literacy, not least the downgrading of women, were reproduced within Christianity.

Fast forward to the Reformation of the 16th century. Horsfield follows Cottret in arguing that "it was not the Reformation that created a need to read Scripture, but the reading of Scripture that brought about, partially at least, the Reformation" (p.190). Bibles, pamphlets and cheap vernacular publications were being printed in several languages before Martin Luther came on the scene, but the volume of Luther's publications was unprecedented. This left the Catholic Church in a quandary: competing with Luther on his own ground would undermine traditional Catholic teaching that authority rests in church leaders, not laypeople; in Latin, not the vernacular; in debate in church, not in the market square or the publishing market. Subsequent religious competition arguably led to a wider search for more impartial bases for knowledge, and hence the rise of rationality and science.

In the 19th century, communication with unseen people far away through telegraph wires—"psychical connection in spite of physical separation" (Sconce, cited by Horsfield p.239)—prompted interest in spiritualism where a medium channels invisible waves of spiritual energy. In the twentieth century, commercial television's reliance on advertising undermined the communication of a specific message in favour of inventing content that would attract audiences and hence advertisers. Highly literate leaders of the established denominations decried American tele-religion, but a new breed of evangelists and Pentecostals effectively used it to revive evangelical religion.

And so to the digital age. Instead of reading sequentially as dictated by the author, hypertext links enable readers to create their own reading trail—a challenge to Christian leaders who, since St Paul, have relied on authoritative texts. Online authority is earned through interacting on specific issues, more like oral communities than "the aloof, institution-based authority [of] most churches" (p.266). Hypertext's destabilising of meaning has much in common with Jesus' style of oral communication: fluid, variable, polysemic, without clear beginning or ending.

Throughout, Horsfield sees St Paul's use of writing to translate Jesus into a Hellenised mythological figure as when everything went wrong. Jesus got lost, even though many people

today still follow Jesus and his teachings, whether or not they call themselves Christians. Horsfield says “there were other possible ways in which the significance of Jesus could have been applied to non-Jewish contexts” (p.291), but doesn’t tell us what they were or could have been. His fascinating chapter on Christianity’s non-Pauline expansion East to India describes a different kind of Christianity, but there too it became a formal, written, theological religion. So I ended the book still wondering whether there were other ways Christianity could have become a world religion, without getting turned into a religion for the literate.

Reviewer

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