

Book Review

Horsfield, Peter (2015). Jesus to the Internet. A History of Christianity and Media. UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 322 + xii pages

The excellent attempt by Horsfield to add an historical perspective to current scholarly discussion and wider public interest in what is happening in religion and Christianity today, and the place of new and legacy media is not only unique and valuable but also ambitious given the author's approach in marking out the influence and implications of the adoption of new media technologies into Christian forms of communication among believers and with the divine over a period of 2000 years. Written in a clear, lucid and accessible manner the author has succeeded in charting a course through a complexity of a wide variety of mediated communication: the numerous styles and uses of oral communication; written text such as scriptures, different genres of religious writing, correspondence, signage, and archival libraries; visual media such as painted images, statues, decorations, symbols, illustrations photographs, and moving pictures, material forms of communication such as prayer beads, bread and wine, buildings, and landscapes; tactile forms of communication such as physical greetings, kissing, the use of water or smell and the feel of artefacts; sounds such as chanting, singing, intoning, bell ringing; as well as technologically based media such as print, television, radio, telephone and computer-based digital technologies of communication.

Within such a rich tapestry of modes of communication employed by Christendom over a period of 2000 years, the author draws on a number of perspectives on media to give some focus to the analysis. The fruitfulness of adopting such an approach as convincingly demonstrated by the author is, studying Christianity through the lens of cultural practices of media opens up a number of avenues for rethinking Christianity. Rather than accepting the hegemonic and so-called orthodox view that Christianity is a relatively coherent, structured, harmonious singular phenomenon, it suggests that Christianity needs to be looked at as a diversity of different cultural groups that are continually contending with each other in the process of making sense of and living out their particular religious identity. It also opens the scope to investigate how the different ways in which Christian groups communicate have shaped their identity and inform their sense of difference" (page 7).

Thematically, the 322-page book is structured into 13 sections. Section one is themed "In the Beginning" and focuses among others on the social and media context, and remaking Jesus in speech and performance. Other sections of the book, which are well crafted and masterfully interwoven delved deep into the nature of Gentile Christian Communities, Christianity and Empire, The Latin Translation, Christianity in the East, Senses of the Middle Ages, The New Millennium, Reformation and Islam. The author's handling of the theme of Islam (pages 130 – 132) is not only fascinating but well balanced and objective. The author enumerated a number of reasons why the early spread of Islam was so rapid and extensive

and why Christian rule, even in regions that had been so central to the early development of Christianity, collapsed so quickly. One aspect of it was the superior military power, drive, and organization of Islam, but the lack of resistance from dominantly Christian countries reflect deeper aspects to this spread. The rise of Islam had a number of major consequences for global Christianity. Islam had the effect in requiring Christianity to define itself again, politically and theologically, this time against the major competing global religious power of Islam. Doctrinally, from an original position of seeing Islam as a Christian or Jewish heresy, Christianity came to see Islam as a separate religion and a foil against which Christianity had to define itself.

Section 12 themed: “The Modern World,” particularly highlights among others The Legacy of Reformation, Catholic Mission, The Impact of Print, Evangelical Revivalism and Protestant Mission.

The last section of the book: “The Digital Era” and its influence on Christianity is exhaustively analysed. One interesting and controversial issue the author portrayed in this section is: *Media and Christian Sexual Abuse*. It is very revealing and intriguing that controversies and secrecy surrounding Christian sexual abuse are not new phenomenon. Horsfield notes: “Its occurrence was sufficiently widespread to justify explicit attention being given to it on numerous occasions, beginning with the synod of Elvira, held in 306 CE, which prohibited clergy and other men from having sex with boys” (page 276). The *Economist* reports that the New York bishops, the US Catholic Conference of Bishops, and the California Catholic Conference are spending between \$100,000 and \$1,000,000 a year lobbying different legislatures to avoid changing the statute of limitations on child molestation cases to avoid increasing the number of cases to be dealt with. In Australia, the Roman Catholic Church has vested all its assets in a Property Trust that is immune from suit.

The question is: To what extent do such questionable practices as exposed in the media affect the credibility of institutional Christianity? The author observes: “The public exposure by support groups, news, and social media not just of the extent of abuse, but also of priority being given by Christian leaders to protect their colleagues, church wealth, and reputation rather than hold offenders accountable and use their wealth to restore the damage that’s been done, has been a contributing factor in the decline in the standing of Christian organisations and perception of the safety and trustworthiness of institutional Christianity in the public mind” (page 279).

While appreciating the author’s in-depth analysis of the roots of Pentecotalism and its mode of communication characterized by strong oral features (page 256), perhaps enabling the movement to spread fairly quickly around the world, the author fails to give space and focus on the growth and development of Pentecotalism in Africa, which is seen as a deeply religious continent. A 19-country survey of Islam and Christianity by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life concludes that:

Indeed, sub-Saharan Africa is clearly among the most religious places in the world. In many countries across the continent, roughly nine-in-ten people or more say religion is very important in their lives. By this key measure, even the least religiously inclined nation in the region score higher than the United States, which is among the most religious of the advanced industrial countries (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, April 2010).

On page 286 the author makes a controversial observation that Christianity is a diversified phenomenon, and needs to be understood and studied in this diversity. This is germane because a constantly recurring dynamic within Christianity has been individuals or groups trying to deny that diversity and impose a narrow understanding of Christianity that serves particular interests, beliefs, or power. Sometimes that narrowing process has been done by persuasion, but many times by force. It is curious to note that the author has made such strong political statements without clearly elaborating them with empirical evidence. The author could have served the reader better by naming those “individuals or groups trying to deny that diversity...” and the implications of their actions.

The statement that: “One of the problems that many Christians leaders have in dealing with this shift (that is shift in the media structures and practices that have supported its historic organization and authority) constructively is that they are unable to see the media-specific nature of their religious authority and therefore unable to facilitate, if they were inclined to do so, the transfer of their authority to something more appropriate for the new situation” (page 288). However, from the perspective of the belief of all Catholics there can be no other thing more appropriate and central at all time and in every situation than the Eucharist (“heart and summit of Christianity”) in dealing with current dynamics in Christianity. The sacramental dimension of the Eucharist is pre-eminent, and the media may be applied as a strategy in facilitating the expression of faith as seen in the models of Church elaborated by late Jesuit Cardinal Avery Dulles. The Cardinal argues that the Church is communion and communication is what builds her up to be communion.

There is a spelling mistake on page 276, paragraph two, line six; “esponsibility” should have been correctly spelt as “responsibility.” These minor criticisms aside, Horsfield’s all-encompassing, detailed, informative and well researched and chronicled study of history of Christianity and media is a yeoman’s’ job deserving to be included in seminary, public and private libraries.

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