

Consensus

Volume 44
Issue 1 *Religious Community in a Digital World*

Article 5

1-25-2023

Christian Life in Media Culture

Jeffrey H. Mahan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mahan, Jeffrey H. (2023) "Christian Life in Media Culture," *Consensus*: Vol. 44: Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: 10.51644/GYJP9380

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol44/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Christian Life in Media Cultures

Jeffrey H. Mahan¹

I am grateful to the ecumenical partnership of the sponsoring theological schools and colleges that provide us with an opportunity to think about the implications of digital cultures, to consider why some of our religious practices and structures no longer seem to work there, and to be intentional about nurturing the spaces where the Spirit is bringing about new forms of Christian community.

In this paper, I want to do three things: first, talk about the interconnection of religion and media; second, think with you about the implications of our current digital culture; and finally, briefly say something about a theology of the church as network.

Imagine yourself in the Chauvet Cave in the south of France.² You have crawled through narrow passageways to larger subterranean chambers. There, thirty thousand years ago, our ancient ancestors sketched out soaring red ochre images—mammoth, stampeding horses, cave lions—that evoked the primordial spirits they understood to shape their lives. They are some of the earliest images ever discovered. We don't know how many ancient humans made the journey to view the paintings or how they were used. The paintings may have been intended to appease or call forth the spirits. Perhaps the ancients performed rituals before them. Certainly, they both expressed and shaped the spiritual lives of those who painted them.

Why start so far from our digital age? Because doing so challenges common misunderstandings of the relationship between religion and media that often distort today's discussion of Christian practice in digital culture. When religious practice began to move online, many church leaders were unsettled. They saw religion and media as two different things: one sacred, the other an often crass secular technology. Religion, they assumed, had until recently been a purely spiritual practice free of the influence of culture and media. Thus, they saw the media as an entirely external challenge to unchanging spiritual realities.

The images inscribed on the walls of the Chauvet Cave suggest an entirely different history of religion and its relationship to media. From its beginning, religion was intertwined with media. Further, as we shall see, people's religious practice and understanding shifts in times of significant media change.

So, here is Mahan's whirlwind tour of some highlights in the history of Christian faith in media cultures. Christianity emerged at a time when reading and writing were specialized skills, used by a few technocrats in business, law, and religion. We know that the *Torah* and other Jewish writings were preserved on scrolls, read and interpreted in the synagogue. Yet most people in Jesus' day, certainly the people he travelled among and taught, were illiterate, and his ministry was that of a traveling storyteller and healer.

¹ Jeffrey H. Mahan holds the Ralph E. and Norma E. Peck Chair in Religion and Public Communication at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, and is a resident fellow at the Center for Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado Boulder.

² Joshua Hanner, "Finally the Chauvet Caves Makes Its Grand Public Debut" *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 4, 2015. I also recommend the documentary film: Herzog, Werner, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, (2011, Washington DC: IFC Films, 2011).

Jesus' early followers continued his oral practice. They told stories about him and passed down the stories he had told them. Then, in a turn to written culture, literate faith leaders wrote letters to the emerging Christian communities which were preserved and shared. And later, the accounts that would become the four gospels were written down.

By the second century, Christians embraced a new media technology that was superseding the scroll, the *codex*. Pages were folded, wrapped in a cover, and bound on the spine creating the book as we know it today. There were efficiencies to the use of the *codex*. For instance, it was easier to find your place and to read passages in context. This new technology became part of the way the gospel spread.

The *codex* also shifted how early Christians thought about scripture. When writings were preserved on individual scrolls, different communities had different collections of scrolls. If these sacred writings were to be bound together between covers, into what we know as the Bible, the communities had to agree on a canon of what was in and what was out. The technology of the book thus encouraged a homogenization of diverse Christian understandings.

Now leap ahead 1,200 years to Protestants' favorite moment in the relationship between religion and media—Gutenberg's printing press, the first printed bibles, and the new religious understandings and practices that followed. Significant as this development was, I want to discourage a common Protestant triumphalism about print. As with every media change, there was both loss and gain when people embraced the new print medium and were shaped by it.

That print produced significant changes in how people thought about their identity and practice as Christians often surprises people. This is because we think of media as simply a delivery system and any new medium as a way delivering messages more efficiently. Understood in this way, writing simply captures and preserves oral content so it can be shared more widely. The printing press simply make more copies available. And the internet seems only a hyper-fast way for people to access what the experts are telling them.

This misunderstands how media work. A medium encourages particular ways of thinking and being. It is not simply a carrier of some external reality; it shapes the way we see the world. Further, it often has unexpected consequences. Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan famously argued that writing taught linear thinking. A comes before B, and B before C. In books like *The Medium Is the Massage*,³ he claimed that electronic media like television taught a different way of thinking and being. Where writing is linear, in the image everything happens at once. McLuhan saw that electronic media was teaching a new way of organizing and experiencing information. We had to make sense of multiple things happening at once. Certainly, the digital extends this.

So, back to the printing press. It was easy to see that printing was going to produce many cheaper copies of texts. It was harder to imagine the implication of having lots of things to read. Literacy became worthwhile, so we might say that the printing press not only produced texts but readers. Literacy gave readers a new sense of themselves as interpreters, especially—as Protestants point out—of the Bible. To be an interpreter is to be an individual applying his or her insight and conscience. This new understanding of the self was crucial to both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation.

³ Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore, and Jerome Angel, *The Medium Is the Massage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).

But the embrace of print was not without cost. Shaped by the insights of literacy, the early Protestant movement came to especially value reading and the internal life of the mind and to distrust the other senses. Chanting, images, incense, liturgy, the veneration of relics—all designed to evoke feeling and teach religious attitudes and practices—were suspect. One cost of this focus on reading and interpretation has been a Protestant sense that Christianity is primarily about having the right ideas about God.

Catholicism was well established before the rise of print. Catholics adapted to print cultures as a community with a bodily memory of other ways of being faithful. This preserved an understanding of the Christian life as a matter of practice.

We are each imprinted by the media culture we were born into. We adapt to change, but the forms and practices we first learned are deeply ingrained. They seem “natural,” and it is hard to remember that people once imagined the world in different ways.

The culture of the book was organized around a linear logic that moved toward fixed conclusions. Once something is written down and published inside the cover of a book it is not easy to change. Print cultures came to think about identity and community in a similar way. The goal is to arrive at a fairly unchanging understanding of who we are and where we belong. This impact of print and literacy has been so powerful and long-lasting that it seems natural and inevitable.

Today we are living into a media culture shaped by computers and the internet. The change in worldview is as profound as that produced by print, and the rate of change is unbelievably faster. It can be deeply unsettling to realize that people shaped by digital culture may think about their identity and relationships in quite different ways.

You may be asking, “what do you mean by *digital*?” To say that a literary text, an image, or a piece of music is digital simply means that it is made out of bits. A “bit” is the smallest piece of information that can be processed and arranged by a computer. This happens so quickly that it is easy to revise and reuse the things you digitally construct. I didn’t have a personal computer until I was working on my doctoral dissertation. My teachers were not sure they entirely approved of this new technology. They remembered literally cutting and pasting paragraphs as they rethought their work and laboriously retyping whole drafts each time that they edited a chapter and worried that their students were missing something, or perhaps getting away with something.

When computers are linked by the internet, the process becomes more complex. It is easy to find and integrate material from multiple sources and use them in new places. This happens when a rapper samples and mashes up existing pieces of music, or when a pastor copies a section of her sermon and reworks it as a blog post.

Nothing is final in digital culture. Everything is available for review, sampling, and revision. *Wikipedia* is a great illustration of this. No *Wiki* is every finished. Every reader is a potential editor who can delete, expand, and revise the text. Soon it is impossible to say who is the author. Knowledge is the product of an ongoing conversation.

Because change and adaptation are inherent in “the digital,” it has become a powerful metaphor for the ongoing work of creation. This digital metaphor influences the human imagination. It is not just texts, images, and music that are constantly being reworked in digital cultures. When everything is easily edited, transformed, and put to new uses, we come to see our identity and community as digital projects. British practical theologian Pete Ward

calls ours a fluid culture and calls for the rise of a fluid church in place of the fixed church we inherited from print culture.⁴

In print culture information primarily flows one way. Some people are authors—think of politicians, teachers, or pastors—and information flows out from them to the community of listeners. These communities are organized around the leader. They have clear structures and expectations; you know who belongs and who is an outsider. But in digital cultures information flows every which way in loosely organized expanding conversations. The leader is not the center and can't control who is in the conversation. Each person is the center of a circle of overlapping conversations. My *Facebook* page is an example of this. My family circle, folks from my congregation, professional colleagues, former students, and people with whom I ride bicycles all overlap. I was trained in theological school to keep these circles rigorously separate. But on *Facebook* they see and hear each other. I am a center, but each of my *FB* friends is also a center. And all of this is very fluid. People come and go. It makes little sense to people shaped by this digital culture to treat the congregation as the central location of their religious life and the sole source of religious information.

Another aspect of digital culture that is particularly challenging for faith communities is that people have limited interest in the past. Certainly they don't give it much authority. Because digital culture is so focused on the ongoing construction of knowledge and identity, it wants to look forward rather than backward. I will talk a bit in the next lecture about this as well as ways that faith leaders can help people think about whether and how tradition remains useful.

There is no one model of this emerging religious sensibility. People are experimenting with lots of forms of Christian community. But I will describe one attempt to reimagine church in contemporary culture. AfterHours Denver⁵ doesn't look like a conventional congregation. They don't meet Sunday morning, they don't organize programs for children and youth, their membership is unclear, and they don't want to own a building. They do two things: During the week, a group gathers in a bar to talk about God, support each other, and make PB&Js. The next day some of them are in a city park serving the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at a lunch for the homeless where they also offer communion. Out of this modeling of compassion and community, AfterHours has built a network. It includes individuals and church and seemingly secular groups: a law firm, a mom's group, a mergers and acquisitions company, and more. The level of commitment and involvement varies: some volunteer once, others once a month, some are active for a while and then drift away. Yet the AfterHours network has grown to the point that someone is in the park offering communion and a PB&J every day of the week.

Whether in bars or in the park, this community consists of those who show up. There are regulars and folks who wander in. Further complicating the description of AfterHours Denver is their rich online life. A wider network of folks follows the pastor and AfterHours online. They join the conversation, pray for the ministry, and provide human and material resources to support AfterHours' "friends without homes."

AfterHours Denver is a series of overlapping communities that are never all in the same space: the folks who meet in bars; the friends without homes in the park; the online participants; and the bartenders, servers, and other patrons who are touched by their

⁴ Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002).

⁵ <https://afterhoursdenver.org>

presence. These circles of occasional and regular participants soften the boundaries between who is and isn't part of the congregation. Their interaction illustrates the way social media complicates how we understand community and raises questions about what it means to belong. I don't hold them up as *the* model of what the church is becoming; they are an illustration of how people come together to imagine the faith community in new ways. I am sure many of you have other examples.

I want to close today with some brief, unsystematic hints at a theology of the church as network. I begin with the expectation that when the Holy Spirit is active within an emerging culture, Christian practice changes. This is necessary if those who follow Jesus are to practice love and justice in a changing world. Thus, the church is an incubator of Christian practices of relationship, care, service, and justice-making. Its fluid practice reveals new understandings of God's activity in the world. What remains unchanged is God's invitation to live into new possibilities.

If we assume the Holy Spirit is doing a new thing in this flexible and forward focused digital culture, then Ward's suggestion of a fluid church that exists online and in occasional gatherings and borrowed spaces helps us pay attention to that work. Such a church would be a big loose network. It would welcome people on their own terms. It could flow into new online and offline spaces that conform to the contours of emerging digital cultures.

This seems to propose a radical new understanding of the body of Christ. Professor Thompson's lectures will help us think further about the possibility of a virtual body of Christ. For now, let me suggest that from its beginnings the body of Christ has been an ongoing conversation about what God is doing among us. Theologian, poet, and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams says that, in early Christianity, authority was not in Rome or Jerusalem; it was not located in a single authoritative figure, but in what he calls the churches' "obsessive" network of communication.⁶ He describes a unity forged by a steady flow of conversation, a connection established in letters that articulated genuine theological and experiential differences. Williams suggests that "authority is made in the churches' ceaseless speaking to, with, and for each other." This process of speaking and listening draws our attention to the movement of the Spirit among us. It also suggests that the churches' long desire to solidify, to build institutions, and finalize credal statements comes at a cost: that it masks the Spirit's fluid movement.

Understood in this way, the church is not an accomplishment—some project that was or will ever be finished—but rather a process. As did those early followers of Jesus, people today live in a time when a way forward is being found through what seems like "ceaseless speaking." In conversation with the traditions of practice and belief we have inherited, our contemporary context, and the future that is yet being constructed, God's people speak, and experiment, and speak some more, about what the Holy One is doing among us.

⁶ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).