

## **BACK TO THE FUTURE: VIRTUAL THEOLOGISING AS RECAPITULATION**

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This paper will discuss some possible results of the developing dominance of electronically mediated communication<sup>1</sup> on the practice of theology, focusing on ways digital communications allow, or encourage, us to develop once again features of theologising that were more prominent in earlier times. Peter Horsfield suggested that in some respects digital media return features of orally mediated culture to the modern world.<sup>2</sup> I will play with three metaphors from Jewish life and history as models for changes of practice that the new forms of mediation suggest or even require.

### *The return of the Rabbi*

Characteristic features of electronic digital media, in particular ubiquity, cheapness of delivery and (at least for multimedia) high cost of production will have a profound impact on education, theological education and theology as an educative practice included.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “electronically mediated communication” is intended to link together forms of communication that are carried by electronic media (radio, TV, phone, email, web...) by contrast with communication that is mediated by paper (handwritten or print) or direct sound or visual connection (face-to-face). Its use here is a reminder that such communication is not as new as the everyday use of the Internet, but has been impacting human cultures for several generations already.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Horsfield, “The impact of electronic media on the culture we live in and some major implications for churches and Christian faith,” *Electronic Culture Research Project* (Uniting Church Commission for Mission, 1997) [<http://vic.uca.org.au/ecrp/papers/rolemedia.htm>] no longer online.

It is often argued that the move from analogue-print to digital-electronic communication media marks a quantum change in human society; it is not my purpose here to discuss this possibility. Rather, I plan to build primarily on a simpler, but equally profound, if longer term, cumulative change. As well as the dramatic “quantum leaps” from manuscript to print, and print to screen, other technologies have contributed to a fundamental change in the accessibility of information. Accessibility is a function of various components. Among these factors, speed (or time taken for access) and the cost of accessing information are two of the most significant, and most easily compared across historical periods. Barriers other than cost also restrict access. These include social structures that deny or make it difficult for some people or groups to share information and ideas from outside their own circles, e.g. the social barriers that made access to information unrelated to domestic tasks difficult for women, or lack of education which in many societies restricts information access to an elite.<sup>3</sup> Such societal factors are not insignificant, but they are difficult to assess, and changes in them have not been as uniform in direction.<sup>4</sup>

So, I will focus on speed and cost. While the invention of printing did not speed the transmission of information from place to place, the adoption of railways did. Likewise, though print considerably reduced the labour costs involved in book production, mechanisation and automation have probably reduced the cost of printed information even more dramatically.

The easiest component of accessibility to measure is cost. Here the cumulative effect on communications of new technologies has been quite striking. The cost of information can be approximately measured by calculating the cost per page of an encyclopaedia (or its equivalent before the modern genre “encyclopaedia” developed). Since the value of money, and indeed exchange rates, change with time and geography, the time worked at an average wage to earn one page of information provides a comparable measure across time. So, in the manuscript age a scribe pro-

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that the so-called “digital divide” projects into the electronic age inequities that were created and sustained by earlier, analogue, means of communication!

<sup>4</sup> Interesting initiatives are reported regularly where, outside the West, electronically mediated communications technologies are facilitating information accessibility see for example the BBC programmes Radio 4 on “E-Villages,” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/factual/evillages.shtml>; or the *Kenyan Eduvision* project site <http://www.eduvision.or.ke/home/home.html> [both downloaded 3 August 2005].

duced some 150-200 lines per day,<sup>5</sup> and information cost in the order of 8 hours per page.<sup>6</sup> In 1771, when the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was produced it contained 2689 pages of information, and cost £600 or 11?d per page.<sup>7</sup> The average wage for an English farm labourer at that time is estimated to be about 11½ d per day, so such a servant would have had to work about one day to earn a page of the new publication.<sup>8</sup> Given that farm labourers were paid significantly less than professionals like medieval scribes, and that estimates put the wage of a skilled artisan at this time at about double this,<sup>9</sup> we can suggest that the cost of information had at least halved by this time. By the close of the twentieth century, however, a print copy of the encyclopaedia cost NZ\$2,050 but contained nearly 32,000 pages, or about 6.5 cents per page.<sup>10</sup> The average hourly wage was NZ\$17.44 giving about 13 seconds per page.<sup>11</sup>

All of these figures concern the cost of information supplied as words on a real page of paper. Electronic information is cheaper still. At the turn of this century the CD-ROM edition cost NZ\$100 giving a cost per page equivalent of just over one half second. The graph of this cost is clearly asymptotic, tending towards zero - for half a second's labour is a very low cost indeed. The information will take hundreds of times longer to read, let alone process and understand. The cost will never reach zero because there is always some cost involved in accessing information, if only things like the electricity required to run the equipment.

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<sup>5</sup> For this estimate see Michael Gullick, "How fast did scribes write? Evidence from Romanesque manuscripts," in *Making the Medieval Book: techniques of production: proceedings of the Fourth Conference of the Seminar in the History of the Book to 1500, Oxford, July 1992* (ed. Linda L. Brownrigg, Los Altos Hills, Calif.: Anderson-Lovelace / London: Red Gull Press: 1995) 39-58.

<sup>6</sup> The pages of print encyclopedias contain many more words than a manuscript page and my estimate of 8 hours seeks to represent this fact – if one simply measures by the page the figure would be nearer three hours.

<sup>7</sup> The figures are drawn from various editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article "Encyclopaedia".

<sup>8</sup> Gregory Clark, "Farm Wages and Living Standards in the Industrial Revolution: England, 1670-1869," *The Economic History Review* 54,3 (2001) 477-505, esp. 503.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation: The Economic History of Britain* (London: Methuen, 1983) 197.

<sup>10</sup> E-mail response from us.britannica.com 16<sup>th</sup> May 2005.

<sup>11</sup> *The New Zealand Official Yearbook 102<sup>nd</sup> edition* (Wellington: Govt. Printer, 2000) 332.

**Table 1: Cost of Information in different communications periods**

<b>Date:</b>	<b>Cost:</b>	<b>Mode of delivery:</b>
Medieval	8 hours/page	Manuscript
1771	4 hours/page	Print
1999	13 seconds/page	Mechanised print
2001	0.5 seconds/page	Electronic

While the slogan, “information wants to be free”, is both problematic in its potential field of applicability,<sup>12</sup> and of doubtful origin,<sup>13</sup> it would also be difficult to demonstrate. By contrast the claim I am making, that “information *tends* to be free” is, as I have just shown, easy to illustrate (at least if we understand “tend” in a mathematical sense).

A similar picture emerges if we consider speed of transmission. Before the domestication of horses, information “travelled” on foot, the use of horses and a relay system raised this greatly. The Persian system impressed Herodotus, leading to language taken up much later by the American postal services:

There is nothing on earth faster than these couriers ... Men and horses are stationed a day’s travel apart, a man and a horse for each of the days needed to cover such a journey. These men neither snow nor heat nor gloom of night stay from the swiftest possible completion of their appointed stage.<sup>14</sup>

In the age of steam large parts of the journey could be completed at up to 150kph, though the first and last kilometres - being completed on horseback - would inevitably be much slower. Thus, in this mechanical period there were huge inequities of access with some in the large cities receiving news of important events within hours while for those far from these centres the delay might be much longer. The adoption of electronic technologies again produces something close to an asymptote, as elec-

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<sup>12</sup> See Richard T. Kaser, “If Information Wants to Be Free ... Then Who’s Going to Pay for It?” *D-Lib Magazine* 6.5 (May 2000) <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/may00/kaser/05kaser.html> [downloaded 9/05/2005].

<sup>13</sup> See for example: Roger Clarke, “Information Wants to be Free” (Version of 24 February 2000, plus a URL amended 28 August 2001) <http://www.anu.edu.au/people/Roger.Clarke/II/IWtbF.html> [downloaded 9/05/2005].

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Lionel Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994) 53-54.

tronic information travels at the speed of light, and can circle the globe in fractions of a second.

Theology, as faith seeking understanding,<sup>15</sup> is a form of scholarship and education. At first theology was primarily done in homes, particularly in the homes of religious teachers (whom I will call “rabbis”, since nascent Christianity did not have any special name for such teachers). In certain large centres, such as Alexandria and Antioch, groups of such teachers and their students gathered into larger communities that we might recognise as colleges. The emphasis of such instruction was not only passing on a body of information and ideas, but also developing the student’s capacity to understand and themselves to work with information and ideas – to do theology. While some of this learning and theologising was facilitated by books, most flowered in relationship and discussion.<sup>16</sup>

A significant development occurred in the Middle Ages with the growth of major centres of learning, universities. In an age when clerics were responsible for most education (except in military or other specialist domains or crafts) the first universities developed round theological colleges, as in Padua, Paris and Oxford.

Universities have acted as purveyors of ideas and information, and as certifiers of the “possession” of certain information and skills in using it. Regional pride encouraged such universities in most large population centres. In an environment where the time and cost for information transmission are high, the only way to learn from particular teachers was to travel to them. So, the high cost of migration to a distant centre ensured a market for more “local” institutions even if they did not have such prominent teachers. Only the best or the richest students could obtain the funds necessary for such displacement.

Yet, even in such an environment (that put a high cost on migration relative to incomes) institutions and teachers with high reputations could be selective and turn students away, while other less sought after classes struggled to attain an economic level of enrolments.

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<sup>15</sup> The phrase is from Anselm, but has been reused by many including Barth. While it may not be a perfect definition of “theology” it does serve as an adequate pointer.

<sup>16</sup> The priority of oral over written teaching among Christians, at that time, is reflected in the much quoted remark of Papias: “For I suppose that things out of books did not profit me so much as the utterances of a voice which liveth and abideth,” quoted in Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* III.39 which in turn is reproduced in J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius* (London: SPCK, 1959) 50. On the wider cultural background to this claim see for example Paul J. Achtemeier, “*Omne Verbum Sonat*: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity,” *JBL*, 1990 (109) 3-27.

The near-instant, cheap and convenient transmission of data we now enjoy<sup>17</sup> means that students can watch, and even participate in classes by such prestigious professors without the need to migrate. The success and size of the mega-universities has shown that convenience of access can attract large numbers of students.<sup>18</sup> If entertainment industry standards of production and celebrity-scholar presenters were added to this advantage, it seems clear that local institutions could not really compete in the transmission of information or in the certification of ability to use it.

The cost of production for these quality materials will impact on the current egalitarian nature of web publication, creating once again an “unequal playing field”. Thus when Walter Brueggemann hosts a course *The Hebrew Prophets* on the Oxford Channel there is likely to be small demand for Tim Bulkeley’s University of Auckland lectures on similar topics.<sup>19</sup>

The lecture model of higher education developed in the Middle Ages as a means of speeding the transmission of information through mass delivery. However, despite the rise of the lecture theatre to become the primary locus of teaching in the modern period, Universities have always claimed to aim for goals other than mere information transmission. Beyond “understanding” (the ability to manipulate and use information), the critical faculty and research (the ability through investigation to discover new information or to improve information and understanding) and even wisdom have been claimed as the real products of education. Because these qualities are more personal and less standardised they are inculcated best in one-to-one and small group contexts.

The two models of teaching have been contrasted and epitomised in the neat opposition of the phrases “sage on the stage” (lecture) and “guide by your side”

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<sup>17</sup> Although there is a clear, evident and worrying digital divide, it is not quite the same as the old economic divide; in countries such as India access rates to the Internet can be surprisingly high if communal and familial sharing is taken into account. Another factor here is the growth of bandwidth and its falling cost, so, at the high end, last year over 50% of US households used broadband connections.

<sup>18</sup> See for example John Daniel, “Mega-universities = Mega-impact on Access, Cost and Quality,” address to *First Summit of Mega-universities*, Shanghai, China, 7-9 November 2003, [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=26277&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=26277&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) [downloaded 9 May 2005].

<sup>19</sup> This reference was timely at the colloquium where this paper was orally presented, since Brueggemann was delivering, for the University of Otago, such a course in Auckland while our meeting took place!

(tutorial).<sup>20</sup> Education has normally relied on a mixture of both components, though in the modern period often the stage was the dominant mode.<sup>21</sup>

The “lecture theatre” is well adapted to the communication of ideas, but ill-equipped to promote the other goals of education. Religious traditions that developed in the pre-modern age provide models that are in some ways better suited to this aspect of the new environment of education. The figure of the rabbi or guru provides a model of personal education, and formation in understanding and wisdom produced through relationship, that information transfer alone cannot achieve.

So, in an age of “virtual education” when lectures become high budget productions with celebrity presenters, the role of more personal, higher order education will become more distinct from the transfer of information and ideas. The rabbi, as a model of such small-scale higher order teaching, may return to prominence.

So I am suggesting that while students are increasingly able (in terms of technical equipment) to view rich media<sup>22</sup> instructional materials, the high cost of production of such media will mean small numbers of such productions. Each course would need thousands of subscribers annually if it is to achieve the highest standards of both scholarship and production values. Yet such courses will be an attractive and effective way of transmitting ideas and information. (Especially if compared to a conventional lecture delivered to a class of 100 or more as is often the case in undergraduate teaching.)

Such productions alone will not serve the higher order educational goals well. These will still need to be inculcated in one-to-one or small group interactions.<sup>23</sup> The role of teachers in this context will be that of the rabbi. At the same time as the transmission of theological *ideas* becomes less personal, theological *education* can become more personal, and return to its roots. Though naturally when one returns home after a long absence, one returns to a new place!

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<sup>20</sup> The earliest reference I have found to this slogan is Alison King, “From sage on the stage to guide on the side,” *College Teaching* 41 (1993) 30-35.

<sup>21</sup> The ancient universities have tended to retain a more important, even dominant, role for the tutorial mode even in the age of mass production, which has perhaps assisted them in retaining their reputation for quality.

<sup>22</sup> By “rich media” I mean something like a TV documentary with sound, images, virtual reality reconstructions and video clips as well as the lecturer’s “talking head”.

<sup>23</sup> Whether this needs to be face-to-face, or whether it might also be “virtual” is a question I do not have space to address here.

### *Out of the Ghetto*

When language becomes communication it is transmitted in material forms. Speech is carried by “agitated layers of air”, as Marx describes the process in *The German Ideology*,<sup>24</sup> writing and print communicate by means of marks on flat sheets, while digital language is electronic. Each medium offers possibilities and limitations for communication. The materiality of language is significant for its social functions. For example, speech is social, shared by everyone in range of the speaker, while writing is normally read individually. Speech is evanescent; once the sound fades it is gone, while writing is enduring. Speech is intimately and unavoidably associated with the speaker. The link between author and writing is integral to the medium as it is with speech, though unless some trace is deliberately created, written texts are anonymous.<sup>25</sup> This potential dissociation of language from its author, inherent in the technology of writing, has led in the modern age to a wide range of conventions and practices to restore or maintain an association between words and “speaker”, attribution, title pages, copyright declaration and the like.

The move from speech to writing, and even more from manuscript to print,<sup>26</sup> was marked by increasing permanence and stasis of the text. It also increased the separation of sender from receiver. While in face-to-face encounters, speakers and hearers naturally engage in an exchange, or bi-directional communication; in print communication authors and readers engage in such discussion or debate much less often or

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<sup>24</sup> In the online edition of the Marx/Engels *Collected Works* the sentence reads: “From the start the ‘spirit’ is afflicted with the curse of being ‘burdened’ with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language.” <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#language> [downloaded 27/01/05] Interestingly Marx is also arguing that language cannot be distinguished from the material forms it takes. However, since his own language is materialized in printed writing; this is a nice example of our tendency to include the old material form in our conception of the new.

<sup>25</sup> Of course the trace presented may be pseudonymous, something which is less easy to achieve with speech!

<sup>26</sup> I use the language of supersession here, but do not really intend it in this way, for of course in the age of print people still wrote by hand, just as in the age of writing we still speak! Yet there is a sense in which a new mode of communication becomes dominant and impacts on other aspects of culture, so that one may usefully distinguish the age of print from the manuscript age – despite the fact that handwriting was still practiced and in some contexts preferred.

easily, or perhaps such “discussion” of printed communication is usually only virtual!<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, the move to electronic communication, to a striking degree, reverses both tendencies.

It is a function of digitisation and electronic media that they are impermanent. Analogue media represent directly. So an “A” is represented by the appropriate sign on the page, which does not change, an “A” is an “A”. Digitisation however breaks this analogue relationship; each feature of the text is represented by a set of zeros and ones according to an arbitrary, but agreed, code. Knowing this code, or file format, a program can manipulate this series of digits to reproduce text on screen or by means of a printer. However at another time, and using a different code, the same sequence of zeros and ones will have a different significance. The sequence of digits has no necessary relationship to a particular text, or indeed to a text at all. While an analogue text may sit unused in a library, it still remains the same text. However, when a digitised text is unused it ceases to exist as a text, only to be reconstructed (decoded) by the program when next it is accessed.

There is also another, more pragmatic, sense in which digital texts are impermanent. Once printed an analogue text can only be changed with difficulty, and then only one copy is altered – the corrigenda slips that sometimes accompany print documents reflect an *inconvenience* of this permanence. Digital texts however can be altered with ease, and each new copy will reflect the change. A wordprocessed document or a webpage may be corrected whenever a mistake is noticed, or new information discovered, and unless some form of tracking of these changes is installed there may be no record of the earlier version.

Because digital texts are created, copied and displayed on computers, and because now many or most computers can be linked in one huge, global network, communication between author and reader is potentially easy. If the author has given their address, one click and a few keystrokes suffice to return a message. Many electronic publishing systems are constructed to facilitate such communication. Equally, because of the electronic medium of the text, collaborative writing is easy. It simply requires that two people have access to, and permission to write to, the same file.

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<sup>27</sup> That is, while writing the author may have imagined their readers’ reactions, and engaged with these virtual interlocutors, and also the readers – while reading – may imagine a discussion with the author, but in print communication such “discussion” seldom eventuates in a real exchange of ideas (the letters to the editor in periodicals are an exception to this virtuality of print).

Thus several electronic genres have developed which use these differences of digital writing. Blogs,<sup>28</sup> for example, usually permit readers to “comment” thus sharing their message with other subsequent readers, as well as to email the author (a private one-to-one communication). Wikis<sup>29</sup> take the capacity to open digital texts for writing, to an extreme. A wiki is a text that anyone may write; usually they have an editor or editorial team, and the capacity to “roll back” malicious changes or those that do not fit with the ethos and aims of the particular wiki. However, usually there is no selection process for authors; anyone may contribute, though the same software could be used with login access to enable some defined group to collaborate on the project.

Thus the move from print to digital media, both produces and enables changes of communication, that in some ways reverse those enshrined in the move from speech to writing. Text is again ephemeral and no longer unidirectional. These changes of medium, and therefore of communications paradigm, are producing changes in the mode of production of intellectual work.

Software engineers have been creating their works in digital media for longer than theologians, so it is instructive to explore how they have experienced working with digital text.

Eric S. Raymond in 1997-8 introduced the metaphors of “cathedral” and “bazaar” into discussion of software development. He pictured the world in which Unix and its tools were developed as like that of early modernity: “...the most important software... needed to be built like cathedrals, carefully crafted by individual wizards or small bands of mages working in splendid isolation, with no beta to be released before its time.”<sup>30</sup>

This picture fits well with characterisations of the modernity conjured up by the medium of print, where the author (or small team who author) work away in their studies, till the time comes to publish (release) the work. No work would be published (at least unless the author supported the costs) unless it was finished and polished and deemed worthy of public consumption.

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<sup>28</sup> On blogs and blogging see the collection of articles Laura Gurak, Smiljana Antonijevic, Laurie Johnson, Clancy Ratliff and Jessica Reyman (eds) *Into the Blogosphere* <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/> (downloaded 27/01/05).

<sup>29</sup> The *Wikipedia* entry for the term “wiki” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki> [downloaded 25/8/2005] is both a good description and an example of a wiki in action.

<sup>30</sup> Eric S. Raymond, “The Cathedral and the Bazaar,” *First Monday* 3.3 (2 March, 1998) [http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/raymond/index.html](http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/raymond/index.html) [downloaded 25/8/2005].

Raymond contrasted this approach with that which produces Linux:

Linus Torvalds's style of development - release early and often, delegate everything you can, be open to the point of promiscuity - came as a surprise. No quiet, reverent cathedral-building here - rather, the Linux community seemed to resemble a great babbling bazaar of differing agendas and approaches (aptly symbolized by the Linux archive sites, who'd take submissions from *anyone*) out of which a coherent and stable system could seemingly emerge only by a succession of miracles.<sup>31</sup>

Before asking how such a "bazaar" approach might work in theology, it is instructive to explore how features of the print medium impacted the doing of theology.

Print technology demands high setup costs (especially before personal computers enabled authors to perform much of the typesetting function themselves). On the other hand, print offers low unit costs (the marginal cost of printing another copy of a book is small). These two features combined paradoxically to both democratise and professionalise theology.

The relative cheapness of print books (the low unit cost) enabled classes of society previously denied access to engage in theological reflection. This finds expression in many religious movements, and it has even been suggested that print technology drove the reformation.<sup>32</sup> The recorded figures for numbers of books published in Germany shows a striking spike at this time.<sup>33</sup>

1518	c.150
1520	570
1522	680
1523	935
1524	990

Luther's theses, whether they were ever nailed to the cathedral door at Wittenberg, were printed and circulated from centres including Nuremberg, Leipzig and Basle from 1517. The conjunction of that period of intense theological creativity and debate with the beginning of the age of print is not merely a coincidence.

In the centuries following the first print book a number of religious communities were founded which situate authority at a local or even personal level. Such groups claimed the Bible as ultimate authority, rather than the magisterium of a centralised

<sup>31</sup> Eric S. Raymond, "The Cathedral and the Bazaar".

<sup>32</sup> So e.g. Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform (1250-1550): an intellectual and religious history of late medieval and reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale, 1980) 203.

<sup>33</sup> These figures come from A. G. Dickens, *The German Nation and Martin Luther* (London: Edward Arnold: 1974) 113.

church. These movements were facilitated by the availability of Bibles and tracts that print made possible, indeed they could hardly have existed without such a communications technology.<sup>34</sup> This development was foreshadowed by Luther's own practice; according to Dickens "during the four years 1517-20 he published some thirty popular writings."<sup>35</sup> Texts were not the only medium used to address the masses; woodcuts (even before the use of moveable type revolutionized text reproduction) were a popular form of mass communication. Scribner suggests that the use of a "woodcut ... combined with [a] brief printed text, often in rhyme, which could easily be read out and memorised" was targeted at the illiterate or semi-literate. At that time only perhaps 5-10% of the population was literate.<sup>36</sup>

Yet on the other hand while print permits large runs and so low unit costs, set-up costs were high. This is particularly so for complex works. Setting the type for a biblical commentary needing Hebrew and Greek fonts and consequent careful checking for errors was not a small undertaking. Thus publishers of scholarly works needed to be convinced of significant markets, or receive a sufficient subsidy, to undertake such work. This meant that relatively few scholarly theological works would be printed. This in turn drove the development of a "guild" of professional scholars, those licensed by their degrees and recognised by their peers as capable and worthy to engage in the exercise of "theology".

Such market forces have polarised the doing of theology into two distinct ghettos; the church and the academy. At a centralised level particularly there is overlap, but during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries theology as practiced in the academy and the local community of faith lost touch with one another to a surprising degree. The "issues" that academic theology addressed in its search for understanding of faith are no longer the issues addressed by cell or home groups. As a consequence such groups are resourced not by thinking that filters and explains the historic tradition, but by the latest popular leader with a program to sell.

Both loci of theological thinking have been marginalised by the processes often described as "secularisation". Theology as a religiously committed discipline was felt out of place in a secular University.<sup>37</sup> At the same time once "religion" became an activity of the private rather than the public sphere, theology as public discussion largely ceased.

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<sup>34</sup> First the Anabaptists, then movements like the Presbyterians and even perhaps later revival movements like the Wesleyans were all in different ways facilitated by print.

<sup>35</sup> Dickens, *German Nation*, 110.

<sup>36</sup> Dickens, *German Nation*, 20-21.

<sup>37</sup> The initial difficulties faced by proposals to associate theological teaching with the University of Auckland are an illustration of this.

Two authors in the recent issue of *Stimulus* devoted to “IT Church and Culture” addressed this ghettoisation of theology. Steve Taylor compared the co-authoring made convenient in the online world with the production of Biblical texts.<sup>38</sup> Tim Bednar began by reviewing the experience of Christians blogging and arrives at the question: “How does the church present the gospel to participative producers rather than consumers?”<sup>39</sup>

It might seem that extreme forms of collaboration such as the Wiki, or even the Blog, can hardly produce solid or scholarly results. Such concerns parallel in most respects those of Raymond when he expresses the belief that out of the “great babbling bazaar” of Linux development “a coherent and stable system could seemingly emerge only by a succession of miracles”<sup>40</sup> though theologians might be felt to have more grounds for trusting in such “miracles”.

In fact Linux, Moodle and other open source software projects have thrived in this bazaar atmosphere. The potential for such an approach to theological scholarship (or more particularly biblical scholarship) was given a broad airing on a number of blogs in May 2004; the conversation was started by a post from Paul Nikkel<sup>41</sup> concerning the Open Scrolls Project<sup>42</sup> an attempt to engage scholars and amateurs in producing an online English translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls corpus.<sup>43</sup> This discussion of such “open scholarship,<sup>44</sup> or better wider ongoing work of the informal collection of those who classify each other as “bibliobloggers”<sup>45</sup> illustrates the possibility of scholarly theology worked on by a mixed group of professionals and

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<sup>38</sup> Steve Taylor, “Co-authoring Christianity,” *Stimulus* 12.3 (2004) 10-15.

<sup>39</sup> Tim Bednar, “Blogging: Report from a Grassroots Revival,” *Stimulus* 12.3 (2004) 24-30.

<sup>40</sup> Bednar, “Blogging”.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Nikkel, “Why is open source scholarship so threatening?”, <http://www.deinde.org/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=29> [downloaded 14/07/05].

<sup>42</sup> “Open Scrolls Project” <http://www.openscrolls.org/> [downloaded 16/08/05].

<sup>43</sup> There will be further face to face discussion of Open Biblical Studies at a gathering following a CARG session at SBL this November: see e.g. <http://www.bigbible.org/blog/2005/08/yes-more-open-source-reflections-mark.htm> [downloaded 25/8/2005].

<sup>44</sup> The term itself was the subject of some discussion, see *inter alia* A. K. M. Adam, “Openness, Publication, and Scholarship” <http://akma.disseminary.org/archives/001356.html> [downloaded 27/01/05] in AKMA’s terms what is being discussed in this section of the paper is Open Entry Scholarship.

<sup>45</sup> Itself a term subject to much debate, see *inter alia* *The Coding Humanist* <http://thecodinghumanist.blogspot.com/2004/12/another-proposal-for-what-we-should.html> [downloaded 25/8/2005]

amateurs. These lively discussions have fed into both academic papers (several of us have “posted” ideas, which have then been worked into subsequent papers) and the production of tools for everyday Bible study (see for example Zack Hubert’s magnificent online Greek Bible with its pop-up parsing and frequency graphs,<sup>46</sup> which is still being developed with input via blog and e-mail from this loose global community of scholarship).

So, blogging is a tool that permits the development of an informal (staff room style) atmosphere of discussion. This conversation (unlike a physical staff room) is not limited or restricted in entry to professionals, but welcomes anyone with interesting and useful thoughts, and happily ignores the others!

Jordon Cooper in his plea for more relational church websites quotes the *Cluetrain Manifesto*.<sup>47</sup>

What if the real attraction of the Internet is not its cutting-edge bells and whistles, its jazzy interface or any of the advanced technology that underlies it pipes and wires? What if, instead, the attraction is an atavistic throwback to the prehistoric human fascination with telling tales? Five thousand years ago, the marketplace was the hub of civilization, a place to which traders returned from remote lands with exotic spices, silks, monkeys, parrots, jewels- and fabulous stories.

The image of the bazaar resonates with life online and I am suggesting here that features of the functioning and tools which networked electronic communication makes possible may mean that in an electronically mediated world theology can leave its (self-imposed) ghettos and return to the market place.

### ***But Back to “Shul”***

The locus of theology is a community. If theology is “faith seeking understanding”, in the Christian tradition “faith” is understood as something that is normally worked out in community; on the other hand if theology is “God-talk”, the Christian Godhead is social, a trinity. However, in the modern period theologising was increasingly understood as an activity of individual authors, and its typical expression was in books and journal articles, or at a more popular level in sermons. Ironically, such expressions of theologising are almost totally abstracted from community in any

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<sup>46</sup> Zack Hubert, *The Greek New Testament/LXX* <http://zhubert.com/> [downloaded 27/01/05].

<sup>47</sup> Jordon Cooper, “Blogging: Advice for Church Websites,” *next-wave magazine*, April 2002, <http://www.next-wave.org/apr02/blogging.htm> [downloaded 28/01/05].

broad real sense. The book or article is prepared by an individual scholar to be read (almost) exclusively by other scholars and only rarely discussed face-to-face. The sermon (though informed by pastoral relationships) is prepared in a quiet study, and again (though received in public) seldom discussed.

Yet in religious tradition before the modern period, theology was hammered out in community and in discussion. The epistles of the New Testament suggest communities of debate where the apostles' teaching was discussed and argued. Luther, a figure standing at and marking the turn from manuscript to print ages, was skilful in communicating in the new medium. The emperor and the pope were largely outflanked by a movement which addressed the population directly and engaged them in doing theology. Chrisman provided an interesting glimpse of this in her figures for the publication in Strasbourg of works in Latin and German; until 1520 the number of works in Latin (and so addressed at an educated or professional audience) easily outstrips those in German. In the 1520s those in German predominate.<sup>48</sup>

The new print technology facilitated and perhaps stimulated this direct address to lay readers, which in turn fuelled a ferment of theological reflection, debate and creativity. A couple of centuries later increasing urbanisation (leading to increased literacy) and cheaper print (thanks to increasing mechanisation) are associated with the development of newspapers,<sup>49</sup> but also of educational works;<sup>50</sup> at this same period figures like Wesley and Whitfield introduced another period of theological ferment. Again their movement bypassed hierarchies and addressed people directly. Indeed central to the early Methodist movement was the "class meeting", a weekly occasion for religious discussion and instruction.

As I have argued above, technologies of electronic communication lend themselves to bi-directional communication and to community "conversation". It is strik-

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<sup>48</sup> Miriam U. Chrisman, "Printing and the evolution of Lay Culture in Strasbourg 1480-1599," in *The German people and the Reformation* (ed. R. Po-chia Hsia; Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1988) 74-100, see especially the graphs on pp. 76-77.

<sup>49</sup> The first regularly published newsheet *The Weekly Newes* began in 1622 and the *London Gazette* (perhaps a true newspaper) in 1666, see Phil Barber, "A Brief History of Newspapers," *Historic Newspapers and Early Imprints* <http://www.historicpages.com/nprhist.htm> [downloaded 28/01/2005].

<sup>50</sup> As an example the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was first published in 1771.

ing that in a recent survey<sup>51</sup> 57% of time online is spent communicating, and about a fifth of users report communicating with people they have never met in person.

Jewish experience offers a word that can sum up the combination of the social and educational possibilities that electronic media open for theologizing. There are a number of terms in different Jewish communities that equate (approximately) to the Christian “church” to describe a local assembly. Among them the Yiddish word “*shul*” (preferred by Orthodox and Hassidic Jews) refers to the meeting house as both a place of worship and of study (its etymology probably involves the German word for “school”). At “*shul*” the community meets to worship, study and theologise. Such communities are (self)selected as sharing a common approach and heritage, and are open to learning and to discovering truth together.

So again my heading has a “back to the future” feel to it. And, adding to the inversions, contrasts or paradoxes, at the same time the possibility of creating in new ways communities of theologising that share common culture, assumptions and heritage. Instead of a “*shul*” that is local – because of the need to be within a Sabbath’s walk from all its members’ homes – one can have a community producing theology that is not localised.

I have not been arguing either that virtual theology involves a complete break with the past, even less that it permits modern practice to continue in more and better ways. Though in some senses both of these options are true! My claim has been that in some respects virtual (digital) communication permits us to return to earlier patterns, and that religious tradition already contains some features that can serve as metaphors for such new ways of conducting both academic and “popular” theology.

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<sup>51</sup> Norman H. Nie, Alberto Simpsen, Irena Stepanikova, and Lu Zheng, “Ten Years After The Birth Of The Internet, How Do Americans Use The Internet In Their Daily Lives?” *Draft report by the Stanford Center For The Quantitative Study Of Society*, (2004) available at [http://www.stanford.edu/group/siqss/SIQSS\\_Time\\_Study\\_04.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/group/siqss/SIQSS_Time_Study_04.pdf) [downloaded 14/07/05] and cited by permission.