

From Jesus to the Internet: A History of Christianity and Media

PETER HORSFIELD, 2015

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Peter Horsfield's history of Christianity and media provides an overview of more than two thousand years of history in which the development of the Christian religion in relation to its own mediation is chronologically examined. The result is a readable and provocative historical account that begins with Jesus, and ends with the digital era.

By starting his story with the historical Jesus, Horsfield attempts to demonstrate the way in which, over the centuries, Christianity has determined, and been determined by, media practices. Throughout, media in the modern sense is conflated with the notion of mediation in its broader sense. The letters of the Apostle Paul, for example, are presented as illustrative of the way in which one particular interpretation of the person of Jesus came to dominate in consequence of its mediation, and despite its apparent divergence from the views of the majority of the Jerusalem church of the time.

This extensible use of the term media enables Horsfield to take a decidedly modern perspective on the religious and cultural practices of previous eras. So the letters of the second century Bishop Ignatius of Antioch are presented as an exercise in 'community-building, public relations, and marketing' (p. 53); the early emergence of organized religion in the form of 'The Church' is discussed in terms of 'branding' (p. 65); the influence of the second century philosopher, Origen, is attributed to 'his effective utilization of media' comparable to a rock star going on tour to promote his latest CD (p. 73); the letters of the third century bishop, Cyprian, are equated to a 'PR, media or political campaign' (p. 72); the Crusades were promoted by 'a strategic and effective marketing campaign' (p. 165); and so on and so forth. This kind of retrospective application of the way in which we understand media practices today, according to Horsfield, provides valuable insights into the way in which Christianity was formed.

At the outset of this book, Christianity is defined as 'activities, practices, ideas, artifacts [sic], groups, and institutions that identify themselves, or may be identified with, the broad historical movement associated with the figure of Jesus' (p. 4). Nevertheless, in much of what is discussed, the implication seems to be that Christianity as construed by the author, is a generally coherent and strategic organisation with political, social and cultural agency. There is, therefore, a similar elasticity in Horsfield's use of the term 'Christianity' as in his use of the term 'media'. This is because he is making a point. Within the story being told is a critique of 'institutional Christianity' that he sees as having constructed a particular version of a faith that has 'very little connection with the character, self-understanding, and mission of the Jewish Galilean man called Jesus' (p. 290). In short, Jesus has been lost in his mediation. It is this central idea that drives this historical narrative.

The book's focus is mainly on Western religion (there is one chapter on Eastern Orthodoxy), and even then, what is presented is inevitably selective. It takes us only a dozen or so pages to travel from an early sixteenth century 'Catholic media strategy against Protestants' (p. 209), to the hymns of the eighteenth century Revivalists. In consequence there are some conspicuous absences (Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* are two cases in point). The swiftness of the storytelling, and its broad-brush approach, means that the era that will be of primary interest to readers of this journal (that of film, radio and television) is confined to just the final couple of chapters. In discussing this recent history, about which we know so much of the complexities and varieties of religion and its mediation (and Horsfield knows more than most), the account feels disappointingly thin.

From a historiographical perspective, the principal limitation of this approach is an insufficient level of attention to broader historical contexts. There is little sense here of the way in which Christian cultural and institutional formations (and their mediations) are themselves expressions of political, social, economic and cultural contexts. That said, *From Jesus to the Internet* is certainly imaginative and ambitious, and provides a stimulating, if simplified, take on one aspect of the evolution of a major world faith.

RICHARD WALLIS
Bournemouth University
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