

# **Back to the Future: virtual theologising as recapitulation**

by Tim Bulkeley

This paper is concerned with the practical results of the developing dominance of electronically mediated communication on the practice of theology. It will focus on some ways in which digital communications allow or encourage us to develop once again features of theologising that were more prominent in earlier times. The first stimulus to explore ways in which new media allow us to take up in new ways features of earlier media was suggested by Peter Horsfield who suggested ways in which digital media return to some features of orally mediated culture.<sup>1</sup> To this end 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***

This section will argue that 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 all education and that Theology will not be different.

It is often argued, possibly correctly, 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 speed (or time taken for access) and the cost of accessing information are both two of the most significant, and most easily compared across historical periods. A third major component of accessibility is barriers other than cost that deny or make access difficult for some people or groups, e.g. the social barriers that made access to information unrelated to domestic tasks difficult for women, or lack of education except among the elite. Such factors are not insignificant, but they are difficult to assess and changes have not been as uniform in direction.

So considering speed and cost, while the invention of printing did not speed up the transmission of information from one place to another, the adoption of railways did. Likewise, though print considerably reduced the labour cost 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 (other than the revolutions of print and digitisation) has been quite striking.

The cost of information can be pictured (and perhaps almost measured) by calculating the cost per page of an encyclopaedia (or its equivalent before the modern genre

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<sup>1</sup> Peter – I ever only had informal copies of your work; can you point me to published versions? \*\*\*\*

“encyclopaedia” developed). Since the value of money, and indeed exchange rates, change with time and geography, I have chosen to measure cost as the time worked at an average wage to earn one page of information. So, in the manuscript age, when a scribe produced some 150-200 lines per day,<sup>2</sup> the measure would equate to something in the order of 8 hours per page.<sup>3</sup> In 1771 when the first edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica was produced it contained 2670 pages of information, and cost £600. The cost per page was about 54 pence, [*I have to check my estimate of average wage here and complete the calculation the current figure I have is 80 seconds per page*]. By the close of the twentieth century a print copy of the encyclopaedia cost NZ\$2050, but had nearly 32,000 pages, or about 6.5 cents per page. The average hourly wage was \$17.44 giving about 13 seconds per page.<sup>4</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 for information that will take hundreds of times this time to read, let alone process and understand. The cost can never quite reach zero because there is always some cost involved in accessing information, if only things like the electricity required to run the equipment.

[Insert Bar Chart here]

While the slogan, or catch phrase, or axiom (or whatever you choose to name it) “information wants to be free” is both problematic in its potential field of applicability,<sup>5</sup> and of doubtful origin,<sup>6</sup> it would also be difficult to demonstrate. By contrast the claim I am making that “information tends to be free” is (at least if we understand “tend” in a mathematical sense), as I have just shown, easy to illustrate.

A similar picture emerges if we consider speed of transmission. Before the domestication of horses information “travelled” on foot at perhaps 10 kph, the use of horses raised this to perhaps \*\*\*\*\* over relatively short distances, and setting up way stations where horses

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<sup>2</sup> For this estimate see Michael Gullick, "How fast did scribes write?" in Linda L. Brownrigg (ed) *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*. Los Altos Hills, Calif.: Anderson-Lovelace / London: Red Gull Press, 1995.

<sup>3</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>4</sup> Global Books in Print, and the New Zealand Official Yearbook \*\*\*\*\*

<sup>5</sup> See Richard T. Kaser, “If Information Wants to Be Free . . . Then Who's Going to Pay for It?” D-Lib Magazine May 2000, Volume 6 Number 5 [<http://www.dlib.org/dlib/may00/kaser/05kaser.html>] downloaded 2 Oct 2002 \*\*\*\*\*

<sup>6</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 2 Oct 2002.\*\*\*\*\*

could be exchanged raised also for longer routes. In the age of steam large parts of the journey could be completed at up to 150kph, though the first and few 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 electronic information travels at the speed of light, and can circle the globe in fractions of a second.

Theology, as faith seeking understanding,<sup>7</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 on passing on a body of information and ideas, but also on developing the student’s capacity to understand and themselves to work with the information and ideas – to do theology. While some of this learning and theologising was facilitated by books, most flowered in relationship and discussion.

A major development of this model occurred in the Middle Ages with the development 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 that those admitted to their degrees possess certain information and skills in using it. Since migrating to a distant centre was costly, and because of regional pride such universities developed in most regions. 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. However, the “pull” of prestigious institutions and of famous professors has been relatively small; the high cost of migration has largely negated it except for the best or richest students who could obtain the funds necessary.

However, even in that environment 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.

However, the near-instant, cheap and convenient transmission of data we now enjoy<sup>8</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

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<sup>7</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>8</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.

shown that convenience of access can attract large numbers of students.<sup>9</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 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!

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 testing to improve information or 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” (tutorial). Education has normally relied on a mixture of both components, though in the modern period often the stage was the dominant mode.<sup>10</sup>

Religious traditions that developed in the premodern age provide models of education, that are in some ways better suited for the delivery, in the new environment, of education that moves beyond the communication of ideas, than is the “sage on the stage” of the traditional “lecture theatre”. The figure of the rabbi or guru provides a model of personal education, and of shaping 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 what I am suggesting is that while students are increasingly able (in terms of technical equipment) to view rich media<sup>11</sup> instructional materials, the high cost of production of such media will mean small numbers of such productions. Each course would need

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<sup>10</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>11</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”.

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>12</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!

### ***Out of the Ghetto***

When language becomes communication it is transmitted in material forms. Speech is carried by what Marx in *The German Ideology*<sup>13</sup> called “agitated layers of air”; writing and print communicate by means of marks on flat sheets, while digital language is electronic. Now 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 not built in to the medium as it is with speech, unless some trace is deliberately created a written text is anonymous.<sup>14</sup> This potential dissociation of language from its author, inherent in the technology of writing, has led to a wide range of conventions and practices to restore or maintain an association between words and “speaker”, attribution, title pages, copyright and the like.

The move from speech to writing, and even more from manuscript to print,<sup>15</sup> was marked by increasing permanence and stasis of the text. It also increased the separation of sender

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<sup>12</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.

<sup>13</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 Jan 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>14</sup> Of course the trace presented may be pseudonymous, something which is less easy to achieve with speech!

<sup>15</sup> I use the language of supercession 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.

from receiver. So, while a speaker and their hearers naturally engage in an exchange or bi-directional communication, authors and readers engage in such discussion or debate much less often or easily. Interestingly, the move to electronic communication, to a quite striking degree, reverses both tendencies.

It is a function of the digitization of 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”. Digitization however breaks this analogue relationship, each feature of the text is represented by 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 the 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 digitized 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 comes to light, 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.

Thus several electronic genres have been developed which take advantage of these differences of digital writing. A blog,<sup>16</sup> for example, usually permits 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>17</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 some form of editor or editorial team, and the capacity to “roll back” changes that are made maliciously or for reasons that do not fit with the ethos and aims of the particular

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<sup>16</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 Jan 05.

<sup>17</sup> The *Wikipedia* entry for the term “wiki” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki> is both a good description and an example of a wiki in action.

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>18</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.

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>19</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 the introduction of personal computers enabled authors to perform much of the typesetting function themselves!) while on the other hand it offers low unit costs (the marginal cost of printing one more copy of a book is small). These two features combined to both democratise and to professionalise theology.

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<sup>18</sup> Eric S. Raymond “The Cathedral and the Bazaar” *First Monday* 3:3 March 2nd. 1998  
[[http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/raymond/index.html](http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/raymond/index.html)]

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

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>20</sup> The recorded figures for numbers of books published in Germany shows a striking spike at this time.<sup>21</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 who situate authority at a local or even personal level. Such groups claimed also that the Bible was the ultimate authority, rather than the magisterium of a centralised church. Such 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>22</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>23</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>24</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

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<sup>20</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>21</sup> These figures come from A.G. Dickens, *The German Nation and Martin Luther* London: Edward Arnold, 1974, 113.

<sup>22</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>23</sup> Dickens, 110.

<sup>24</sup> Dickens, 20-21.

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 programme 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>25</sup> At the same time once “religion” became an activity of the private rather than the public sphere theology as public discussion largely ceased.

Two authors in the recent issue of *Stimulus* devoted to IT Church and Culture in different ways addressed such ghettoisation of theology. Steve Taylor explored the element of co-authoring in Biblical texts with that made convenient in the online world.<sup>26</sup> [*I am still developing this section \*\*\*\**] While Tim Bednar began from a review of the experience of Christians blogging and near the end of his article arrives at the question: “How does the church present the gospel to participative producers rather than consumers?”<sup>27</sup>

It might seem that extreme forms of collaboration 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>28</sup> though theologians might be felt to have more grounds for trusting in such “miracles”.

In fact Linux, Mozilla 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>29</sup> concerning the Open Scrolls Project<sup>30</sup> an attempt to engage scholars and amateurs in producing an online

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<sup>25</sup> The initial difficulties faced by proposals to associate theological teaching with the University of Auckland are an illustration of this.

<sup>26</sup> Steve Taylor, “Co-authoring Christianity” *Stimulus* 12,3, 2004, 10-15.

<sup>27</sup> Tim Bednar, “Blogging: Report from a Grassroots Revival” *Stimulus* 12,3, 2004, 24-30.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

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

<sup>30</sup> “Open Scrolls Project” <http://www.openscrolls.org/>

English translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls corpus. This discussion of such “open scholarship”,<sup>31</sup> or better wider ongoing work of the informal collection of those who classify each other as “bibliobloggers”<sup>32</sup> illustrates the very possibility of scholarly theology worked on by a mixed group of professionals and 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 popup parsing and frequency graphs<sup>33</sup>, which is still being developed with input via blog and e-mail from this loose global community of scholarship).

So, blogs are a tool that permits the development of an informal (staff room style) atmosphere of discussion, that 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 church websites to become more relational quotes the *Cluetrain Manifesto*:<sup>34</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 its 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.

Steve Taylor’s initial posting<sup>35</sup> suggests that he intends to explore such possibilities and I am assuming also ways in which such tools may begin to open the theological bazaar to a wider community. What I am suggesting here is that features of the functioning and tools made possible by networked electronic communication may mean that in an electronically mediated world theology can leave its (self-imposed) ghettos and return to the market place.

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<sup>31</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 Jan 05 in AKMA’s terms what is being discussed in this section of the paper is Open Entry Scholarship.

<sup>32</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>

<sup>33</sup> Zack Hubert, *The Greek New Testament/LXX* <http://zhubert.com/> downloaded 27 Jan 05.

<sup>34</sup> Jordon Cooper, “Blogging: Advice for Church Websites” *next-wave magazine*, April 2002, <http://www.next-wave.org/apr02/blogging.htm> downloaded 28 Jan 05.

<sup>35</sup> Steve Taylor “P2P theology” <http://hypertextbible.org/virtual/blog/2005/01/p2p-theology.php> downloaded 25 Jan 2004.

## ***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 theologizing has come to be understood increasingly as an activity of individual authors, and its typical expression is in books and journal articles, or on a more popular level in a sermon. Ironically, such expressions of theologizing are almost totally abstracted from community in any 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 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, especially those from Paul, suggest communities of debate where the apostle’s teaching was discussed and argued. Luther, a figure who in many ways stands at and marks the turn from manuscript to print ages, as we have seen, 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 the doing of theology. Chrisman provided an interesting glimpse of this in her figures for the publication of works in Latin and in German in Strasbourg, 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>36</sup>

With the invention of print a new 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>37</sup> but also of educational works,<sup>38</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 striking that in a recent survey<sup>39</sup> 57% of time online is spent communicating, and about a fifth of users report

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<sup>36</sup> Miriam U. Chrisman, “Printing and the evolution of Lay Culture in Strasbourg 1480-1599” in R. Po-chia Hsia (ed) *The German people and the Reformation* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988, 74-100, see especially the graphs on pages 76-7.

<sup>37</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 Jan 2005.

<sup>38</sup> As an example the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was first published in 1771.

<sup>39</sup> Which I am currently applying for permission to cite the draft report!

communicating with people they have never met in person. This fits with more subjective impressions,

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:

- בית כנסת sometimes transcribed into roman characters “beit Kneset”,
- “synagogue” which is a transcription of the Greek translation of this,
- “temple” the term often preferred by Reform Jews.

However, a Yiddish word "shul" 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. The term “shul” is preferred by Orthodox and Hassidic Jews. 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 communities of education that share common culture assumptions and heritage can occur in new ways. 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.

So, 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.