Internet Evangelization and the False Dilemma of Innovation and Tradition in the Analysis of Digital Religious Practice

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Beginning in 2008, a Mormon social media experiment began at the Referral Mission Center in Provo, Utah: the first online-only mission, and the official headquarters of the "Chat with a Mormon" feature on the Mormon.org website. A report in the press detailing the ongoing efforts of the program a few years later reported that one teenage convert, compelled by his close relationship with the internet missionary responsible for his conversion, flew to Salt Lake City to meet him for the first time "in real life." The boy, however, was left somewhat disappointed by the encounter: "real life may have brought them face-to-face, but in that moment it lacked the intimacy of the Internet, with its seamless harmony and easy honesty."[1] How might the evangelist, and the scholar of religion, understand this sentiment?

The question is made more acute by a variety of other manifestations of the phenomena often referred to as "internet evangelization." The Internet Evangelism Coalition (IEC), for example, a cadre of organizations brought together by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Center, instituted Internet Evangelism Day in 1999, to be held once a year on the last Sunday in April in order to inform fellow Christians about the vast potential that the Coalition sees for outreach through digital media. Members of the IEC include organizations that have historically been dedicated to Christian media production and use; executive organizations include the American Tract Society, Campus Crusade for Christ, *Christianity Today,* the Christian Broadcasting Network, and the Billy Graham Center. And so the question persists: What method or frame is best suited for the analysis of internet evangelism?

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1. Bianca Bosker, "Hook of Mormon: Inside The Church's Online-Only Missionary Army," *Huffington Post* 9 April 2014.

The Methodology of Virtual Ethnography

To conduct such research, one must first engage with the broad contemporary field of digital anthropology, a category which refers to any number of instances of the incorporation of digital technologies into "traditional" anthropological methods throughout a variety of subfields and projects: archaeology, physical, linguistic, and cultural anthropology, archival and museum collections of cultural heritage materials, ancient site maps and models, and the like.[2] Digital *ethnography*, however, functions as a more specific but also more variously employed moniker. Cultural anthropologists Natalie Underberg and Elayne Zorn, for example, understand digital ethnography as a method of cultural and narrative representation. Their work aims primarily at further developing methods for the creation, design, and improvement of expressive, interactive digital projects which allow anthropologists to "tell innovative cultural stories and re-create aspects of ethnographic methodology for a diverse audience."[3] This understanding of digital ethnography as both the process and product of "ethnographic story-telling" parallels the emergence of multimedia or multisensory ethnography, but what I consider, and employ, in this project more closely resembles what Underberg and Zorn term "cyberethnography," that is, the ethnographic examination of online and virtual worlds, resources, and cultures.[4] More commonly, however, this scholarly practice is referenced as virtual ethnography, virtual anthropology, or netnography.

A significant body of anthropological literature ascribes these labels and attends to the methodology of virtual ethnography generally speaking.[5]

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2. Natalie M. Underberg and Elayne Zorn, *Digital Ethnography: Anthropology, Narrative, and New Media* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 4–6.

3. Ibid*, 10.*

4. Ibid., 13.

5. Vide Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2000); eadem, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied, and Everyday* (Huntingdon: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015); Luciano Paccagnella, "Getting the Seats of Your Pants Dirty: Strategies for Ethnographic Research on Virtual Communities," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3, No. 1 (June 1997); Daniel Miller and Don Slater, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2010); Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Thomas R. Lindlof and Milton J. Shatzer,

These works are largely concerned with the pragmatic considerations of a traditional technique challenged by an "object of study [that] is simultaneously in multiple places, partially linked, and under continual transformation."[6] Privacy, identity, commercialism, trust, ownership, space, time, and access present complex new challenges for the field. The delineation of a community, the conduct of fieldwork, the function of anonymity, the relevance of informed consent, the observation of visual and linguistic cues, and the applicability of other key investigative and ethical principles are being reconceptualized in this light, with an emphasis on the ephemeral and mutable nature of this new context for human activity. The blurred boundaries between oral and written, between public and private, between participation and observation, provide rich fodder for an extensive reevaluation of "traditional" ethnographic practices.

Many scholars of religion have likewise forged through these complexities, often with a similar stress on innovation and novelty, to conduct analyses of online religious communities and activities.[7] In his

"Media Ethnography in Virtual Space: Strategies, Limits, and Possibilities," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 42 (1998): 170–89. R. Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (London: Sage, 2010); Venessaa Paech, "A Method for the Times: A Meditation on Virtual Ethnography Faults and Fortitudes," *Nebula* 6 (2009): 195–215.

6. Casper Bruce Jensen, "Virtual Ethnography and the Study of Partially Existing Objects: The Case of ICT4DEV" (paper presented at the Virtual Ethnography in Contemporary Social Science Workshop, Virtual Knowledge Studio, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2006).

7. Vide Gregory Grieve, "Imagining a Virtual Religious Community: Neo-Pagans on the Internet," *Chicago Anthropology Exchange* 7 (1995): 98–132; idem, "Virtually Embodying the Field: Silent Online Buddhist Meditation, Immersion, and the Cardean Ethnographic Method," *Online—Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 4 (2010): 35–62; S. Jenkins, "Rituals and Pixels: Experiments in an Online Church," *Online—Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3 (2008): 95–115; Ally Ostrowski, "Cyber Communion: Finding God in the Little Box," *Journal of Religion and Society* 8 (2006): 1–12; Helen Gerth, "Zoroastrians on the Internet, A Quiet Social Movement: Ethnography of a Virtual Community," (M.A. Thesis, University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2009); Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church of the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009); Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network* (New York: P. Lang, 2005); Randolph Kluver and Yanli Chen, "The Church of Fools: Virtual Ritual and Material Faith," *Online—Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3 (2008): 116–43; Nadja Miczek, "Online Rituals in Virtual Worlds: Christian Online Service between Dynamics and Stability," *Online—Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3 (2008): 144–73; Ralph Schroeder, Noel Heather, and R. M. Lee, "The Sacred and the Virtual: Religion in Multi-User Virtual Reality," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 4 (December 1998).

ethnographic analysis of an online Christian fundamentalist community, for example, R. G. Howard documents the emergence of what he describes as a wholly new religious movement which bears little resemblance to dominant modes of religiosity or majority traditions.[8] This characterization, however, parallels the difficult questions posed by anthropological discourses on the methodology of virtual ethnography: What is a virtual community? Where is it? "Is it micro or macro? Real or virtual? Material or discursive? Technical or political?"[9] This mode of analysis indicates the struggle of the digital medium to overcome its reputation as somehow less traditionally sacred or *real* and more innovative or, worse, more inauthentic or "partially existing"[10] than the material predecessors from which it apparently diverges.

Using the efforts at internet evangelization by theologically conservative Protestants in America as a case study, I submit a different response to those polarized questions of ethnographic method, and a rejoinder to Howard's characterization of a definitively original religious movement. An analysis of the migration of the complex desire to evangelize from offline to online contexts reveals that strands of *both* continuity with Christian mission history *and* innovation or departure from it are readily noticeable. That is, I intentionally rely on contextualization within historical patterns of American mission(s) to suggest that internet evangelism is not merely a putatively new means of reaching potential converts that encourages unprecedented strategies or behaviors, but neither is it a simple matter of mapping traditional mission methods onto internet networks. In light of this complexity, scholar of communication and religion Jeremy Stolow identifies the fruitlessness of tracing whether religious groups either "succeed" or "fail" to transmit their religious messages, pointing to the ways in which such an approach leaves unexamined "how negotiations over meaning . . . play a constitutive role in all communicative acts."[11] I similarly argue that analyzing digital activity ahistorically, seeing the format as solely determinative of its instantiations and predicating such analysis on the quality of transmission, overlooks the ways in which

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8. Robert Glenn Howard, *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 3.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Jeremy Stolow, "Religion and/as Media," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 22 (2005): 124–25.

these evangelists are both explicitly and implicitly characterizing internet evangelization as consonant with their history. Contrary to perceptions of digital media's supercession of materiality, authority, sacrality, or tradition, this characterization occurs simultaneously with their demonstration of an awareness of the vast potential of the digital medium for pioneering new mission strategies.

Sociologist Christine Hine, among others, has articulated similar cautions regarding the tendency to view online activity as "inherently threatening to the provision and consumption of authentic information, or as heralding the end of reality."[12] Furthermore, such views are misguided because they all too easily lead to a view of technology as a "killer app" that will gradually phase out or replace religion, or at the very least traditional modes of religious practice, authority, or identity. The persistence of these supersessionist predictions rests in part upon the assumptions of technological determinism, which posits the radical changes brought about by new media technologies as having a formative influence on culture and human activity.[13] Thus a significant impetus for conducting my analysis of internet evangelism as both continuous with Christian mission history *and* unique or innovative within it is to further dispel the mistaken doctrine of technological supersession, the idea that emergent media technologies "kill" older formats or threaten to replace traditional religion/religious practice in a straightforward model of elimination.[14] In doing so, it follows Stolow's suggestion that "technology . . . forms the gridwork of orientations, operations, and embedded and embodied knowledges and powers without which religious ideas, experiences, and actions could not exist," in contrast to an instrumental view which understands technology or media as a

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12. Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2000), 150.

13. The most well-known proponents of such theories are likely Walter J. Ong (*Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* [London: Methuen, 1982]) and Marshall McLuhan (*Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964]).

14. Geoffrey Nunberg ("The Places of Books in the Age of Electronic Reproduction," *Representations* 42 [1993]: 13–37), Elizabeth L. Eisenstein (*The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005] and *Divine Art, Infernal Machine: the Reception of Printing in the West from First Impressions to the Sense of an Ending* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011]), and Marilyn Deegan and Kathryn Sutherland *Text Editing, Print and the Digital World* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), among many others, have already begun the effort to counter these deterministic ideas.

"container" for the dissemination of religious ideas, or as a competitive "other" to religion. In fact, it is this "and" in the pleonasm "religion and media" itself, this ontological spiritual/technological divide, that is precisely what makes technology appear to be "potentially threatening for authentic human experience."[15]

What all of this suggests is not that the ethnographic method is inherently deficient; indeed, it seems uniquely suited, in all its adaptive complexity and reflexivity, for research "within the virtual collectives of our times: nebulous, shaded and polymodal."[16] My point is, rather, that when so employed, and with one eye pointed to the past, ethnography can apprise the researcher of strands of both continuity with history *and* innovation or departure from it. As such, my undertaking here is less a traditional ethnography than it is a hermeneutic exercise that attempts to demonstrate the ways in which historical perspective can reveal the complex imbrications of both creativity and tradition at work in digital religious practice.

Applying an Ethno-Historical Hermeneutic to Internet Evangelization

Indeed, the practice of internet evangelism is alive with paradox, in that it appears to contain within it concurrent patterns of both consonance with historical methods and divergence from them. For example, many evangelicals today continue to read Jesus' "Great Commission" to his apostles to "make disciples of all nations" in the Gospel of Matthew as a call to action, inspiring their delivery of the good news to the ends of the Earth digitally. This activity participates in a legacy begun in the late eighteenth century by the "father of modern missions," author of the renowned pamphlet *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians* in 1792,

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15. Jeremy Stolow, "Introduction," in *Deus in Machina* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 5, 13, 17.

16. Venessaa Paech, "A Method for the Times: A Meditation on Virtual Ethnography Faults and Fortitudes," *Nebula* 6 (2009): 196. Vide Laura Robinson and Jeremy Schulz, "New Avenues for Sociological Inquiry: Evolving Forms of Ethnographic Practice," *Sociology* 43 (2009): 685–98; Matthew Williams, "Avatar Watching: Participant Observation in Graphical Online Environments," *Qualitative Research* 7 (2007): 5–24; Tom Boellstorff, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

and founder of what would become the Baptist Missionary Society, pastor William Carey (1761–1834). Citing the ability of other missionary groups (i.e. Catholics) to access and navigate foreign lands, Carey saw no reason to suspect that Jesus' charge to the apostles in Matthew had expired, was impracticable, or that "you were born into the religion you deserved," as did the dominant reading of the Great Commission at the time. One early episode of resistance to Carey's interpretation saw the venerable John Ryland, Sr. reportedly dismiss the young pastor, saying, "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine!"[17] Protestant missions since, however, both in Europe and in America, have quite enthusiastically taken Carey's advice. Thus in some sense internet evangelization is simply a renewed attempt at achieving a long-held imperative: the fulfillment of the Great Commission. In a broader sense, however, Carey's perspective is characterized historiographically as a particularly modern one; he is well-known precisely because his views (although predated by similar Jesuit missions) represent a "modern" departure from previous Christian thought on missions, which saw the command to evangelize as having expired once the first generation of Christians had completed the task. Internet evangelization, then, is both traditional, in that it is conceptualized as fulfilling a command as old as Christianity itself, but also innovative or modern, in that the commission has only been explicitly interpreted as a permanent directive since Carey's intervention in an age of dynamic, eschatological Messianism—and has only been taken up in digital formats within the last few decades.

A second strand which illuminates elements of both continuity and divergence is the notion of many internet evangelists, church leaders, and pastors that the internet allows unprecedented access to places that might otherwise be inaccessible—politically, financially, logistically, or otherwise. As the World Wide Web increasingly lives up (or perhaps catches up) to its global name, many laud the capability of the internet to enable contact with people in areas which are otherwise inaccessible to missionaries, especially those regions which have political or legal restrictions prohibiting them. Online Mormon missionaries, for example, appreciate unencumbered

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17. Quoted in Timothy George, "Evangelical Revival and the Missionary Awakening," in *The Great Commission: Evangelicals and the History of World Missions,* ed. Martin I. Klauber and Scott M. Manetsch (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 50.

access to neighborhoods their offline counterparts have struggled to reach, for political reasons but also due to unwelcoming or dangerous environments. Frustrations abound, however, including the unreliability or nonexistence of usable networks, the prohibitive cost of technological equipment and infrastructure, and the perception of the internet as an "upper class" phenomenon. "What kind of witness would it be," scholar of Christianity and media Quentin Schultze asked early internet users, "for rural missionaries to launch into computer communication in the midst of this type of cultural context?"[18] Recent data from the Oxford Internet Institute appears to support his case; while broadband access is available to Americans at no more than 2 to 3% of their average yearly income, there are countries in Africa and the Middle East, for example, where comparable services cost more than 100% of one's yearly wages.[19] The issue is not just logistical, then, but also political—and more specifically, postcolonial. While many practitioners see cybermission as a mode of access to such locations that is less bounded than more traditional ones, a red thread of Western advantage, for which missionaries have historically been critiqued, persists in perceptions of internet access as reserved for the upper classes of a given society. Reference to the discourse regarding a global digital divide is not meant to imply that all missionaries were, and continue to be, overt imperialists advancing the ambitions of (neo)colonial projects and attitudes of racial, religious, political, and economic superiority.[20] Rather, it points to the subjection of internet evangelism to anti-colonial,

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18. Quentin J. Schultze, *Internet for Christians: Everything You Need to Start Cruising the Net Today* (Muskegon, MI: Gospel Films, 1996), 74.

19. Mark Graham and Stefano de Sabbata, "Broadband Affordability," *Internet Geographies at the Oxford Internet Institute* (2014). Online: http://geography.oii.ox.ac.uk/?page=broadband-affordability.

20. A tremendous field of literature, a comprehensive review of which cannot be conducted here, intervenes in this debate. Vide esp. Brian Stanley, The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Leicester: Apollos, 1990); Andrew N. Porter, *Religion Versus Empire?: British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989 [rev. ed. 2009]); Jean Comaroff and Joan Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South* Africa (2 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Ryan Dunch, "Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Cultural Theory, Christian Missions, and Global Modernity," *History and Theory* 41 (2003): 301–25.

anti-Western, and anti-imperial critiques as an aspect of continuity with past missionary enterprises—one which exists in constant tension with the internet's unprecedented power to connect people across time and space, but also across income level and geopolitical context.

Certainly social media, video content, and mobile technology are extraordinary in their ability to produce, disseminate, and manipulate media content. For digital missionaries, this implies a considerable amount of benefit and adaptation; in other words, it may be difficult to deny that we are in the midst of a technological, and therefore missiological, revolution. Many Christians are calling upon their Twitter followers and Facebook friends to "follow me as I follow Christ," and websites like *StickyJesus* function as "equipping hubs for online outreach," providing archives full of content to share via a number of outlets, blog posts to guide one's evangelistic work online, and a suggested tweet for each day.[21] Indeed, in some ways this is a highly revolutionary missionary moment, and has resulted in similarly pioneering shifts in praxis. The success of the aforementioned Chat-with-a-Mormon venture, for example, is in large part responsible for the recent reversal of the LDS Church's stance on digital media. The lifting of the ban on internet access and digital devices was reportedly an effort to further employ this "heaven-sent resource in the most productive way possible": for evangelization, that "holiest of Mormon duties."[22] While Mormon missionaries of the traditional style typically convert an average of six people during their one- to two-year mission assignment, online missionaries at the Provo center claim to average about thirty per year, with a 95% retention rate that is more than triple that of "offline" converts.[23]

However, many Mormon missionaries also emphasize that part of their acceptance of digital tools is fueled by their continued adherence to a fundamental dictum: go where the people are. Thus in many ways, as was the case with the Great Commission, the use of digital tools and the World Wide Web is in fact understood as a continuation of historic patterns

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21. Toni Birdsong and Tami Heim, *@stickyjesus: How to Live Out Your Faith Online* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon Press, 2012). The companion website is available at www.stickyjesus.com.

22. R. Scott Lloyd, "Members and Missionaries to Partner in Work of Salvation" *Church News* 23 (June 2013). Online: https://www.lds.org/church/news/members-and-missionaries-to-partner-in-work-of-salvation.

23. Bosker, "Hook of Mormon."

of seeking out potential converts (although the Church does point out that droves of people now seek *them* out via their website.) Additionally, the use of a supposedly secular medium for the purposes of the Church is not new by any means. The Mormon Church, for one, has embraced media as a way to utilize "secular" techniques for the benefit of mission many times throughout their history; such was the case when, 200 years ago, the Church engaged in the mass-production and distribution of its Bibles. Furthermore, planning, preparation, mass media, and publicity have been perpetual elements in American evangelicalism, pervading the efforts of preachers from George Whitefield and Charles Finney down through Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham. Moody especially attempted to employ the power and reach of modern mass media to serve the cause of mass evangelism, recognizing that "a great enemy of church life, the secular press, could be harnessed to further the purposes of the church."[24] In a paradigmatic testimony to both the historical legacy upon which they draw and the revolutionary power and novelty of the internet from which they benefit, the IEC claims that internet evangelists reach the equivalent of "an entire Billy Graham crusade" in a single day.[25]

Concerns about digital media, and the internet in particular, appear to stem from fears of the anonymity, disconnect from reality, and depersonalization often associated with their use. Online missionaries, however, make a conscious choice explicitly to identify themselves as Christian in an internet culture in which anonymity is often considered the dominant mode of being. This self-identification involves actively eschewing the "self-sealing" tendencies that some scholars have identified as common among those using the internet.[26] This insular phenomenon is variously and colloquially referred to as the "feedback loop" or "filter bubble," and signifies both the deliberate creation of "homogeneous enclaves of belief" online as well as the less agentive (and even unwitting on the part of the user) construction of a digital experience tailored to introduce like-minded people and provide personalized content by websites like Google

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24. Bruce J. Evensen, *God's Man for the Gilded Age: D.L. Moody and the Rise of Modern Mass Evangelism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 187.
25. Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "Do Digital Decisions Disciple?" *Christianity Today* 59, No. 2 (March 2015): 17.
26. Howard, *Digital Jesus,* 14–18.

or Facebook.[27] That is to say, online missionaries in fact actively avoid the supposedly common tendency of "deploy[ing] even the most powerful communication media to limit . . . exposure to the diversity of ideas those media have made available."[28] The world outside the feedback loop, however, can be a harsh and unreceptive environment for the missionary message. Everything from humorous quips or rants to outright antagonism and anger confront the missionary as they work to make connections with those lost and looking for salvation. This is compounded by widespread perceptions that the atheist community is particularly active, vocal, and dominant on the web, so much so that news reports often identify "the internet as church for atheists,"[29] and acerbic social media content derides the faithful as "the punching bags" of the internet. Christian self-identification and the challenges that arise as a result, however, can hardly be seen as new, despite their manifestation in these new forums. Missionaries have encountered resistance and disparagement since the earliest apostles in the first centuries of the Common Era. Anti-missionary impulses pervaded Chinese discourse before, during, and after the Boxer Rebellion of 1898, for example, and continued resistance to missionizing today pervades both popular sentiment in America and official legislation in some European countries.[30]

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27. Ibid, 17.

28. Ibid, 4.

29. Dan Gilgoff, "'Where was God in Aurora?' Comments show Internet as Church for Atheists," *CNN.com*, 1 August 2012.

30. For example, the Swiss government in 2010 implemented a ban which would, by 2012, phase out and effectively ban all religious missionaries coming from the United States and other countries not part of the European Union or European Free Trade Association. This especially affected the Mormon Church (LDS), which has sent its representatives to Switzerland since 1850, and was criticized by a small, vocal group of US lawmakers. The official policy (in 2012) required that missionaries to Switzerland obtain a religious visa, the requirements of which include "proof the foreigner does not displace a citizen from a job, has formally completed theological training . . . will be financially supported by the host organization . . . have sufficient knowledge of, respect for, and understanding of Swiss customs and culture; be conversant in at least one of the three main national languages; and hold a degree in theology." LDS missionaries, it states explicitly, are ineligible for visas because they do not possess theology degrees, as are those with ties to groups deemed "radicalized" or who have formerly engaged in "hate preaching" or "fundamentalism." ("Switzerland 2013 International Religious Freedom Report," United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, online: http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/222487.pdf)

Other instances of the simultaneity of innovation and tradition abound in internet-based proselytizing activity; one might look at the fascinating testimonials provided by many internet evangelists and their respective organizations,[31] and discuss these testimonials as a continuation of a long-standing evangelical tradition of public recitation of conversion or born-again narratives. Indeed, the role of digital media in both maintaining and innovating "the perceived effectiveness" of group interaction, "the permissible familiarity of exchange, the frequency and intensity of contact, and the efficacy of customary tests for truth and deception"[32] represents a significant new avenue of potential inquiry.

Conclusion

My suggestion is not only that, as others have argued, "conventional techniques must innovate and transform to accommodate a polysemous eco-system and population."[33] Part of my purpose is also an affirmation of the notion that researchers should avoid the treatment of cyberspace as "disembedded" or "placeless," and would do better to focus on the uses and shaping of the internet by real users in a variety of "real"-world contexts. This corresponds, in many ways, to predictions regarding the effects of "cyberspace," namely a problematization of perceived dualisms like real/virtual, true/fictional, authentic/fabricated, technology/nature, and representation/reality.[34] Virtuality must be analyzed in refutation of those arguments which cast it as a disembodied and thus "less real" version of reality; studies of digital religious communities or activity should likewise not be viewed through the binary oppositions of the virtual to the real, the religious to the mediated, or the innovative to the historical.

The mere recognition of the complication of these binaries, however, must be proceeded by its manifestation in contemporary research methods. Such work is being conducted to some degree, as in Timothy Hutchings' ethnographic study of online Christian communities which rightly

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31. See, for example, "Does Digital Evangelism Work?" *Internet Evangelism Day* (accessed July 2015). Online: http://www.internetevangelismday.com/results.php.

32. Paech, "A Method for the Times," 209.

33. Ibid, 195.

34. Rob Kitchin, *Cyberspace: The World in the Wires* (Chichester: J. Wiley, 1998).

recognizes the significance of four layers of digital activity: "online churches deliberately replicate familiar elements of everyday activity, become part of the everyday, remain carefully distinct from the everyday, and become distinctively digital."[35] I suggest that an additional, although certainly not contradictory, frame through which to view such complex activity is to couple these contemporary perspectives and accounts with historical perspective and data. Proper attention must be devoted to the ethno-historical subtleties of digital media use, an attempt I have made by trying briefly to unpack the ways in which internet evangelism simultaneously is seen as maintaining tradition as well as radically enhancing, altering, or improving upon it. This is something akin, although not identical, to Hine's description of her analysis of the role of the internet in scientific research databases, one which was "ethnographic in spirit, but expanded its scope to embrace the historical and the autobiographical in an eclectic mix of methodological strategies intended to work out why, and for whom, particular technological solutions made sense at particular times."[36]

The Christian community, or any religious community for that matter, perhaps has a vested interest in characterizing their online activity as an extension of traditional methods; as Jeffrey Shandler observes, "new communications media can instigate innovations and possibilities in religious practice, including when their use is characterized as extending or maintaining traditions, rather than diverging from precedent."[37] This is only reiterated by the resistance from some church leaders on the subject of internet evangelism specifically because they do *not* see it as consonant with the traditional Christian culture or message.[38] But it is these and

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35. Timothy Hutchings, "Creating Church Online: An Ethnographic Study of Five Internet-Based Christian Communities" (Ph.D. diss., Durham University, 2010), 2.

36. Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied, and Everyday* (Huntingdon, GBR: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 31, 125. Gabriella Coleman also notes, albeit briefly, that "to grasp more fully the broader significance of digital media, its study must involve . . . attention to history" ("Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 [2010]: 488).

37. Jeffrey Shandler, *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 4.

38. These perspectives are evident in the proposal for a new World Council of Churches affirmation on mission and evangelism released in 2012, for example, which explicitly describes internet ministry as a phenomenon directed at and suited for youth or, as another example, in the LDS' initial instructions to its first cadre of Internet missionaries to simply funnel potential converts to

other characterizations themselves which I suggest should constitute the crux of our analytic interest. My argument thus takes cues from a more constructionist approach in focusing on Christian characterizations of digital mission as part of the ongoing construction of the virtual world, and therefore, it is a case for taking those characterizations seriously (although not uncritically), through both the lens of history and the critical discourse of the present.

If, as Stolow argues, religion cannot be accessed and understood apart from the mediations in which it is embedded, we cannot see these practices as divorced from history (or reality) simply because they are instantiated in an emerging media format. Furthermore, doing so would ignore a model of analysis not unfamiliar to students of the study of the book, in which users of a newer technology will often use it to perform older functions, only more quickly, with more efficiency, or in greater quantity, before developing unique and innovative functions exclusive to that format.[39] Such is the case with the Mormons, whose self-reported retention data claims that their offline methods actually function more efficiently in a digital context. As the opening anecdote featured in the press surrounding the opening of the Referral Mission Center in Utah intimated, vulnerability and self-disclosure are facilitated discursively through digital media. We might see internet evangelization, then, as both immaterial and real, both innovative and deeply connected to historical (physical) patterns of mission and conversion, both a field for traditional ethnography in its study of human communities and relationships but also a new challenge to its methods.

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local physical missions. Vide Gavin Feller, "To Any (Body) Who Will Listen: The Evolving Role of Media Technology in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' Missionary Communication Strategy," (Ph.D. diss., Florida Atlantic University, 2013).

39. This traditional model appears similar to the one Hutchings employs, with greater nuance, in his attention to the four "layers" of online church creation.

Book Reviews

The Letter: Law, State, Society and the Epistolary Format in the Ancient World.
Uri Yiftach-Firanko (ed.). Legal Documents in Ancient Societies 1. Philippika,
Marburger altertumskundliche Abhandlungen 55,1. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz
Verlag, 2013. Pp. 310.
Reviewed by Aaron Ricker, *McGill University*

The conventions of letters are such a common, automatic part of our lives, it feels
like they must always have been around. Most of us are as likely on any given day
to wonder about the evolution of the letter as we are to wonder about the previous
life stages of our sun. Of course letters, like stars, do in fact have evolutionary
histories, constituting both an important part of our own human story and the subject
of ongoing, interesting investigative scholarly work. Yiftach-Firanko's *The Letter*
contributes to this cumulative scholarly project of understanding by collecting
thirteen papers from the first international colloquium of the Legal Documents
in Ancient Societies group, held in 2008 at the American Academy in Rome. The
resulting book naturally bears the positive and negative earmarks of an ambitious
international collaboration. On the negative side, the English sections suffer from
grammar issues and typos, especially in the Foreword and Introduction. It's also
a shame that almost none of the many manuscript types and details discussed in
the papers are represented visually. It seems doubtful that the inclusion of a few
carefully selected images would have been too costly an addition to this already
somewhat expensive volume (56€). On the positive side, *The Letter* clearly does
the work that the widely international LDAS group exists to do (as described on p.
11), which is "to enhance collaboration among students of everyday communication
in the Ancient Near East, the Ancient Egypt, the Greek and Hellenistic world, and
the Roman State down to late Antiquity." The span of time and space covered in
The Letter's review ranges from the first real (royal) "letters" of the Ancient Near
East (stretching as far back as the twenty-first century BCE), through the Classical
and Hellenistic environments of Greek oratory and *poleis* politics, to the long-lived
Egyptian and/or Roman "contracts in epistolary form" (p. 155) of Late Antiquity.
Before weighing in on the character and value of the volume as a whole, I shall very
briefly summarize the foci of the 12 papers, since there are no chapters and since
they appear in *The Letter* in roughly chronological order according to empire.

Ancient Near Eastern Contexts. Sophie Démare-Lafont (after helpfully and colorfully sketching the third-millenium BCE legendary origins and "written-speech" character of the Ancient Near Eastern royal letter form) reviews the development of Neo-Sumerian, royal Mari, and Neo-Assyrian royal administrative correspondence beginning in the twenty-first century BCE, tying the permutations of what she admits to be very dry and artificial epistolary formal habits to the very unique (and sometimes precarious) lives of courtly professionals. Dominique Charpin reviews the form and function of Mesopotamian judicial letters as living "voices" and "witnesses," at a time (in the early second millenium BCE) when the letter was blossoming in variety of length, form, purpose, and social stratum. Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum reviews the form of the Middle-Assyrian legal summons, situating the seemingly abstract and exaggerated "orality" of its conventional written language within its reconstructed real-world function in legal and courtly settings.

Greek and Persian Contexts. Paola Ceccarelli reviews conceptions of the letter as preserved in the rhetoric of Attic orators, concluding that letter-writing was seen as a private convenience that "has to be kept under control" when it touches government and the public domain (p. 104), party due to questions of secrecy and authenticity, and party due to the frequency with which barbarian monarchs were expected to interfere with *polis* business by means of personal autocratic letters. Edward Harris argues against the scholarly conclusion (based on the language of business letters) that "business agent" was a recognized profession in ancient Greece. James Sickinger, in addressing the evolving relationship between official letters and Greek epigraphy in stone, expands and nuances Ceccarelli's point about the traditional cultural association of government business by letter with "autocratic" foreign monarchs (as opposed to the more public processes and decrees of the "democratic" Greek *poleis*). Ingo Kottsieper's paper treats an example of government business by letter that would surely have been seen by such "free Greeks" as an Oriental case in point: the Aramaic correspondence of the Persian satrap Aršames. Kottsieper's review illuminates the ways in which the collection's formal idiosyncrasies serve the kinds of hierarchy and security appropriate to a system of autocracy at a distance.

Greco-Roman Egyptian and later Roman Contexts. The remaining six papers all deal with the history of the *cheirographon* (a debt contract taking the form of a letter, innovatively bypassing the need for witnesses by virtue of being written in the debtor's own hand), so I will be even more brief: Mark Depauw, Katelijn Vandorpe, Sophie Kovarik, and Andrea Jördens focus on the appearance, codification, and significant local permutations of the cheirographic form, within the religious, social, and legal contexts of Egypt's Ptolemaic and post-Ptolemaic centuries (from the second century BCE through to the eighth century CE). The shift of focus to include non-Egyptian territories that begins with the papers of Kovarik and Jördens is extended by Éva Jakab and Johannes Platschek. Jakab moves the focus to Pueoli

and the *tabulae* of the bank of the Suplicii. Jakab uses these archives to show that in Roman law the *cheirographon* lost its epistolary character and to argue against the common habit of treating *cheirographon* as a synonym for the *epistula* legal document form (which does maintain a letter form, and which carries weight only as legal documentary evidence, not as a personal declaration of obligation). Platschek outlines the Roman procedural means used by debtors and creditors to settle questions of debt repayment involving the Roman act of question-and-answer *stipulatio* (an agreement often recorded in the form of a *cheirographon*, and the settling of which could include the legal use of informal letters).

In closing, I offer my evaluation of the volume as a whole. The stated goal of the colloquium (and thus the collection) was to "pinpoint evolution in the position of the letter as a legal document" (p. 11), and in this, the project succeeded admirably. As a legal tool, "the letter" as investigated and presented here shows a remarkable power and elasticity, in terms of time, place, and use. As such, Yiftach-Firanko's *The Letter* is potentially a valuable resource for anyone studying the history of law or legal theory. From a Religious Studies point of view, this collection could also add some welcome perspective and depth (in terms of theory, approach, and historical detail) to scholars working with epistolary questions and contexts like those addressed in John L. White's *Light from Ancient Letters* (1986), Stanley K. Stowers's *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (1986), or Luther M. Stirewalt's *Studies in Ancient Greek Epistolography* (2001). In terms of general topical orientation and even general interest, the "Introduction" alone (provided by Sophie Démare-Lafont, Michele Faraguna and Uri Yiftach-Firanko) offers a great deal of interesting and strangely affecting information; for example, the fact that Sumerian letter tablets were spoken of as having "mouths" and as being "killed" by destruction and "resurrected" by rewriting, or the fact that early Mesopotamian security measures included writing the same message twice—once on the legally binding tablet and once on its breakable clay "envelope." Such details show a good editorial eye for the curious human and technological dimensions of what the deceivingly familiar letter form has been expected to look like—and been trusted to do—in some of the less familiar real-world contexts of antiquity.

Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness. Richard B. Hays. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014. Pp. xxii, 155.
Reviewed by Daniel A. Giorgio, *McGill University*

In *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness*, Richard Hays provides us with a kind of "progress report" of his more wide-ranging study still in germination. This work focuses on the canonical Gospels and is a sequel to his earlier book on Paul, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (1989). Here, Hays' specific topic is to offer an account of the narrative representation of Jesus according to the rereading of Israel's Scripture by the four Evangelists; an exercise in intertextual close reading.

In his introductory chapter, Hays argues that the canonical Gospels embody and enact *figural Christological interpretation*, and clarifies that this figural reading does not need to presume that Old Testament authors were conscious of predicting or anticipating (prefiguration) Christ. Hence, figural correspondences are retrospective rather than prospective; the death and resurrection of Jesus makes Israel's Scripture "to be comprehensively construed as a witness to the gospel" (p. 16).

The second chapter focuses on the Gospel of Mark, that is, on the Evangelist's "mysterious story enveloped in apocalyptic urgency" (p. 17). Richard Hays insists on both: the citation of Isaiah 40 in the opening lines of this Gospel suggesting that, in Jesus, Isaiah's promised new exodus is being enacted. He stresses the importance of Mark 4:21–25 as a hermeneutical directive for the Gospel, since it would be drawing the readers' attention to a hidden Christological signification that may be discerned by attentive listeners. The narrative style involves hints and allusions that project Jesus' story onto the background of Israel's story; and this superimposition of the two stories on one another creates extraordinary new patterns that lead us into acknowledging Jesus as the embodiment of the God of Israel.

In the next chapter, on Matthew's reading of Scripture, Hays elaborates on how Matthew provides explicit explanations of Mark's hints and allusions, especially on how Matthew presents Jesus as the embodied presence of God. The Evangelist's identification of Jesus as *Emmanuel* (God's presence) "establishes the structural framework on which the story is built" (p. 38), as it appears in the beginning, middle, and end of the story (Matt 1:23; 18:20; 28:20). In short, the prophecies in the infancy narrative and throughout the entire Gospel connect both the history and future restored destiny of Israel to the figure of Jesus through figural correspondences.

According to Hays' understanding of Luke's narrative, the words spoken on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 point out to the deepest truth about Jesus: he is the Redeemer of Israel. The Gospel of Luke contains intertextual references that are implicit correspondences, allusions and echoes that do not function as direct typological prefigurations of events in the life of Jesus. Instead, "they create a

narrative world thick with scriptural memory" (p. 59), where Luke regularly weaves together different strands of material.

Hays' chapter on the Gospel of John studies some of the Evangelist's *images* and *figures* evoked from Israel's Scripture. Richard Hays' understanding of the way that Scripture functions in John is that of the identity of Jesus as being "deeply imbedded in Israel's texts and traditions—especially the traditions centered on the Temple and Israel's annual feasts," e.g., Passover and *Sukkoth* (p. 82). Crucial to the Fourth Gospel is its prologue situating Jesus in relation to Jewish scriptural traditions about *creation* and *wisdom* while also transforming these traditions through the claim that the *Logos* was made flesh in Jesus.

In his last chapter, Hays turns to the task of highlighting what we can learn from reading the Gospel's common fourfold witness. He insists on the importance and benefits of reading Scripture along with the Evangelists, for whom "to produce richly intertextual narrative accounts of the significance of Jesus" was "Their way of pursuing what we call 'doing theology'" (p. 103).

As for the weaknesses of this book, I would point out first, with most reviewers, Hays' apparent ranking of the Synoptic Gospels with regards to their way of narrating the divine identity of Jesus: with Luke offering the most adequate one, followed by Mark, and lastly Matthew. It is difficult to know whether that conclusion (possibly Hays' own preference) and its arguments will succeed in convincing the majority of New Testament scholars—perhaps mainly because of Hays' approach to the Synoptic issues, which shares the Markan priority consensus and Matthew and Luke's dependence on Mark, but places no weight on the hypothetical Q source (p. xiv). Second, again with most reviewers, one can also highlight Hays' lack of attention to Second Temple Jewish interpretive traditions that may have influenced the Evangelists in their understanding of Israel's Scripture, although Hays provides a few extra-canonical references (e.g., to Philo and *1 Enoch*) in his chapter on the Gospel of John.

Hays' successful effort, it seems to me, to validate and encourage figural reading of the Old Testament will be greatly welcomed among many laic readers, scholars, and the clergy. Indeed, Hays' last chapter focusing on retrospective readings of the Old Testament—where he suggests ten ways (based on the Evangelists' hermeneutic) that might teach us how to read Scripture (e.g., conversation of the imagination; importance of "story," reader competence to discern the *metaleptic* character in references and allusions)—provides readers with fresh and helpful insights. Another great contribution found in Richard Hays' work is his convincing suggestion and understanding—against conventional views of modern New Testament criticism—that "we should stop talking about 'high' and 'low] Christologies in the canonical Gospels" (p. xxi), since through drawing on Old Testament images, "all four Gospels portray the identity of Jesus as mysteriously fused with the identity of God" (p. 108).

Readers will also most certainly appreciate Richard Hays' impeccable literary style, his exploring creativity in reading both the Old Testament and New Testament, and what appears to be a touch of sarcasm/humour here and there (e.g., pp. 4, 5, 60, 97).