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The End of Religion and the Death of the Book

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Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.

Matthew 24:35 (KJV)

The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

Isaiah 40:8 (KJV)

¹ Religion has been dying for a very long time. So too has the book. “One hundred years from today,” predicted Voltaire, that preeminent *philosophe* of the French Enlightenment, “the Bible will be a forgotten book.” At least that is what evangelical writers have been claiming for almost two hundred years. They also like to point out that, after Voltaire’s death in 1778, the very house in which he made this impious prediction was purchased by a Bible society and used as a warehouse for distributing scriptures.^[1] Although there is very little evidence to suggest that Voltaire actually made such a claim, or that any of his several houses was ever owned by a Bible society, one can almost forgive these apologists for failing to substantiate a narrative so deliciously ironic.^[2] After all, it is just the kind of thing Voltaire probably would have said had it occurred to him. And yet, fiction or fact, religion did seem to be increasingly on the defensive as the decades passed. Despite titanic proselytizing efforts on the part of churches and missionary societies throughout the nineteenth century, academics in old and new disciplines alike joined a growing chorus of voices heralding the end of religion. Chief among them was Auguste Comte, the founder of both sociology and positivism, who assured his readers that the rise of modernity would lead inevitably to the death of religion or, as he put it, the shuffling off of the “theological stage” of social evolution. This view—codified by subsequent scholars as the secularization thesis—met with almost universal assent among academics and reached a kind of zenith in the middle decades of the twentieth century when Anthony C. F. Wallace, a noted anthropologist of religion, famously remarked that “the evolutionary future of religion is extinction.”^[3]

² It seemed the book—and not the Bible only—was destined to fare little better. Calls for its technological superannuation date back at least as far as the nineteenth century when Thomas Edison introduced a machine—the phonograph—that could reproduce the human voice in 1877. Just a year later, Edison conjectured that the advantages of “phonographic books” over printed books were “too readily seen to need mention.” They would be more compact, they would be listened to with great ease and frequency, and they would preserve “more than the mental emanations of the brain” but also the author’s own living voice.^[4] Although it would take more than a century for what would later become known as the audiobook to achieve commercial viability, the death of the printed book seemed always to be just over the horizon as a remorseless cataract of new technologies—radio,

motion pictures, television, and finally the Internet—crowded the media landscape. Marshall McLuhan, prescient in so many ways, called for an end of the printed book—what George Steiner wryly referred to in a review of McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* as “a linear progression of phonetic units reproduced by movable type”—on the grounds it was “no longer to be trusted.”^[5] Jacques Derrida and countless others echoed McLuhan's entropic predictions.^[6] More recently, when Amazon introduced its dedicated Kindle e-reader in 2007, it seemed that the end of the book might at last be coming into real sight. “Nothing is forever,” opined Steven Levy in a *Newsweek* cover story on the future of reading. Levy cited Bill Hill of Microsoft who expressed profound incredulity at the “energy-wasting, resource-draining process” that continued to be devoted to producing physical books. “Do you *really* believe,” Hills asked, “that we'll be doing that in 50 years?” Probably not, Levy concluded, before adding, “that's why the Kindle matters.”^[7]

3 Yet somehow religion and the book have both survived. And that stubborn survival has meant that scholars and cultural critics have found it necessary to moderate and even abandon some of their earlier claims. “The world today,” Peter Berger wrote just before the turn of the millennium, “is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that the whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken.”^[8] Over the past two decades, Berger's view has become commonplace among most sociologists of religion. Nor is it difficult to find voices arguing that the book is and will remain a vigorous force in contemporary society. Ben Ehrenreich, writing for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, ventured in 2011 that the book would somehow—in some form—always be with us because its cultural power set it beyond narrow definition.^[9] Ehrenreich's admittedly tentative defence of the book was followed, in January 2014, by a Pew Research Center study indicating that readers—even those among the youngest cohort of adults surveyed in their twenties—continued to prefer printed books.^[10] “Americans are far more likely to read print rather than ebooks,” admitted one contributor to *Digital Publishing News* after absorbing that hard truth.^[11] “Like the bicycle,” William Giraldis recently concluded in the *New Republic*, “the book is a perfect invention, and perfection dies very, very hard. The car hasn't murdered the bike, and the Web won't murder the book.”^[12]

4 While the tenacity of both religion and the book have doubtless been a cause of confusion for some and celebration for others, there would have been something undeniably poetic had the two simultaneously swooned and died in one another's arms. After all, for countless centuries it was believed that the one sprang from the other. Daniel Defoe, the father of the English novel and a contemporary of Voltaire, traced the origin of all written culture to Moses's encounter with God on Mount Sinai. “But God,” he wrote, “from Heaven giving Laws to Men, gave not an oral, but a written Law, and it was from him, that Letters were cloathed [*sic*] with Sounds. . . . It was his own doing, and from him alone it deriv'd. Here I place the true Original of Writing, and indeed of all Literature.”^[13] Although most scholars today tell a far more prosaic tale—arguing that writing was developed for accounting rather than religious ends—Defoe's view was all but universal before the modern era. For almost as long as writing has existed, there have been myths to describe its divine origins. In Mesopotamia the Sumerians believed the god Enlil, who wove the universe into being, was also the originator of writing. The Egyptians attributed writing to the god Thoth who was responsible for holding all things in existence. Similarly, early Greeks held that Hermes, the messenger of the gods, had fashioned their alphabet.^[14]

5 In all these myths, myths that embody a view that persisted at least until the nineteenth century, there is a recognition that the relationship between religion and the book—the word inscribed, written, printed, and even rendered in digital form—is a special one. Indeed, the practices that historians of the book are so keen to explore are typically exaggerated and intensified in religious contexts. As Harold Bloom notes, readers of the Bible—and here the Bible can stand for any number of canonical texts in a variety of traditions—do not merely *read* the text. Unlike most readers of manuals and guides, novels and poetry, maps and travelogues, those who pore over sacred books seek something more than information and entertainment. In what is often a conscious race against time, religious readers interrogate sacred texts with a deep sense of urgency for glimpses of the divine and, perhaps even more strikingly, a sense of their own true selves. This belief in the efficacy of sacred texts to inform readers not just about the gods, but about themselves, is of very long duration, extending from some of the earliest Jewish psalms to the weekly invocation pronounced by popular televangelist Joel Osteen and his congregation as they hold their bibles over their heads and repeat, “This is my Bible. I am what it says I am. I have what it says I have. I can do what it says I can do.”^[15] Nor is the efficacy of religious texts to help readers

fashion a sense of self limited solely to ecclesial or even sacred contexts. As David Reagles demonstrates in this issue, texts authored for the ostensible purpose of helping pious readers come to grips with the self can be appropriated—some would say subverted—by audiences to perform a similar cultural function in decidedly secular contexts. Similarly, as Jennifer Snead explains in her article, religiously-motivated editors can dramatically transform the kind of self readers are invited to appropriate for doctrinal and denominational reasons.

⁶ Such intensity, as Snead's article makes clear, extends well beyond readers to those who produce and distribute religious texts. Among the most striking examples are the nineteenth century bible societies and mission presses of the kind described by Stuart Barnard and Graham Shaw in this issue. These organizations built enormous publishing houses in order to distribute the Christian scriptures and other religious literature to the furthest corners of the globe. Unlike other publishers, they did not labour to fill the world with bibles for financial gain or even denominational supremacy, but to fulfill what they believed was a sacred duty entrusted to them by the divine will. The same urgency that animated the readers of these bibles drove those working within these philanthropic organizations to toil for little in the way of material compensation, to tame their fears of the other as they took up duties in what to them would have seemed extraordinarily remote and alien settings, to perceive technological innovations in book production as providential rather than accidental, and even to imagine that the final fulfillment of their distribution mission would have cosmological implications for the destiny of the human race: a bible in every hand meant that Christ would soon return to earth and establish his eternal kingdom. It was a remarkable conflation of the words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew—"go and make disciples of all nations"—and a bookish agenda anyone living in first century Palestine could hardly have imagined.^[16] Although the dangers to life and limb could sometimes be considerable, the stakes could hardly have been higher. Similar thoughts may have run through the mind of Jean-Baptiste Collignon, the French printer described in this issue by Jane McLeod and Renée Girard, in the moments before he was guillotined in 1794 for his work publishing illegal religious pamphlets. As the execution of Collignon demonstrates, it could be quite as dangerous to engage in the production and distribution of religious literature close to home as in a far-flung mission field. Nor, indeed, were such dangers confined to centuries past. Even Peter Gordon White, whose travails to introduce a new Sunday school curriculum in the Canadian United Church are examined in this issue by Ruth Bradley-St-Cyr, found his own pious efforts unexpectedly repaid by menacing death threats.

⁷ Perhaps the surprising durability of religion and the book, together with the unyielding commitment these religious figures and organizations brought to the task of production and distribution, also has something to do with the remarkable way in which the two seem to become so powerfully and yet so easily reinforcing in one another's company—a dynamic that in turn gestures in the direction of the critical role each plays in human culture as bulwarks against forgetfulness and contingency. Religion is, after all, fundamentally oriented towards the past. Its liturgies and rituals, its calendars and cults, its stories and traditions, are all ways of remembering. Maurice Halbwachs, a figure whose writings helped give rise to the sociology of knowledge, places religion at the centre of his principal argument that human memory can exist only within social contexts. "Every religion," he writes, "reproduces in more or less symbolic forms the history of migrations and fusions of races and tribes, of great events, wars, establishments, discoveries, and reforms that we can find at the origin of the societies that practice them."^[17] It is a striking claim that points not only towards the beginnings of religion, but at the religious origins of collective memory itself in wider yet irretrievably remote settings. Jann Assmann extends Halbwachs's argument by pushing the notion of cultural memory beyond social interactions and into the realms of material culture when he writes that everything from the knot in a handkerchief to a national monument can function as "memory sites in which the memory of entire national or religious communities is concentrated . . . a system of markers that enables the individual who lives in this tradition to belong."^[18] Unlike Halbwachs, Assmann is also attentive to the vital connection between the histories of religion and the history of writing and printing, proposing that the advent of the alphabet, and later the printing press, changed the means by which religion perpetuated cultural memory so that "where, previously, the text was embedded in the ritual and subordinated to it, now the text, in the shape of a body of canonic writings, becomes the pivotal factor, and ritual is left with only a framing and accompanying function."^[19]

⁸ James Watts's essay in this issue elaborates on this connection—but in terms that are more sweeping than Halbwachs and even Assmann seem to have imagined. Books are more than just texts. They are also part of the

wider material culture that informs the practice of religion. So while sacred books contain texts that have power to impact religious cultural practices directly, they can also function as memory sites in their own right much like Assmann's knot in a handkerchief. As Watts clearly demonstrates, books can possess status as icons "through the ritual production, display and manipulation of material texts." Watts goes even further than this, however, to argue that the iconic display of sacred texts does not merely follow the influence these texts gain semantically, but can precede and inform that influence as well. "It is the combination of textuality and materiality," Leslie Howsam reminds us, "perhaps unique among human-made artefacts, that gives the book its power to convey a sense of its past."^[20] Both books themselves, then, and the narratives they contain—like religion itself—are oriented toward the past, in chronological spaces remote from the immediate reader. But because books transport "ideas across physical, cultural, social and psychological boundaries," as well as across time, they carry with them an implied trustworthiness. Often their readers cannot directly interrogate the authors who wrote them or inspect the contexts in which they came to be. Sacred books in particular make claims on the reader that require a degree of intellectual assent that outsiders would no doubt regard as exaggerated, excessive, even dangerous. Such assent requires more than just faith in the truthfulness of religion and the character of its sacred canon. It also requires an assurance of something that might be referred to as continuity, stability, or even fixity.

⁹ Most of the world's major religions today are organized around canons or fixed texts that are closed in every way except the interpretive. The religious truths those texts convey, moreover, are intended to be timeless and universal. "Canonical texts cannot be changed—this marks the crucial difference between them and the stream of tradition. They are sacrosanct, and must be handed down word for word."^[21] Indeed, the idea of textual fixity is imbedded in many sacred texts including the Bible. "For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book," warns the concluding verses of the Book of Revelation, "If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book."^[22] That admonitions and warnings of this kind to safeguard texts are so common in religious contexts is hardly surprising since religion itself is a kind of safeguard against change and instability. The very problem of evil is a problem of instability. Job's travails are not in his sufferings alone, but in the apparent randomness of his sufferings. His friends refuse to believe his protestations that he has lived a righteous life not because they have evidence to the contrary, but because they cannot accept that he suffers for no purpose. In other words, Job's friends insist that the universe must be ordered. Job, however, knows it is not.^[23] "It came to me suddenly," observes one character in Agatha Christie's supernatural mystery *The Pale Horse*, "that evil was, perhaps, necessarily always more impressive than good. It *had* to make a show! It had to startle and challenge! It was instability attacking stability. And in the end, I thought, stability will always win."^[24] Although one might easily take this as a kind of theological consolation, the character in Christie's novel speaks with reference not to life but to literature—the last preserve of order for the agnostic and the atheist.

¹⁰ "The book always aims at installing an order," writes Roger Chartier, "whether it is the order in which it is deciphered, the order in which it is to be understood, or the order intended by the authority, who commanded or permitted the work." Chartier acknowledges, however, that "this multifaceted order is not all-powerful . . . when it comes to annulling the reader's liberty." As the essays by Candy Brown and Andrew Winckles eloquently argue, moreover, agents other than readers also appropriate and subvert texts—religious and even canonical—as they refashion narrative and practice for secular audiences in their roles as authors, publishers, and educators. And yet, even so, there are limits to interpretation. A text can be stretched only so far before it becomes unrecognizable—a fact that only reinforces the importance of order as Chartier describes it.^[25] Order is more than comforting. It is also required for progress. Elizabeth Eisenstein is chiefly, and perhaps not always fairly, remembered for proposing the enormously bold and now controverted idea that the invention of the printing press introduced to European readers texts (and images) that were sufficiently stable or fixed—"exactly uniform" to use Marshall McLuhan's phrase—that they enabled the intellectual developments and scientific discoveries that followed in the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment. The printing press, in a word, created the modern world.^[26] Eisenstein's view gained considerable traction until Adrian Johns memorably challenged it by proposing that early printed texts fell far short of the kind of stability Eisenstein, McLuhan, and early printers themselves attributed to them. Johns proposed, instead, that textual fixity was largely a cultural construction manufactured by early printers and booksellers in order to make their products more attractive in the market.^[27]

- 11 Although this more nuanced view has come to dominate the field, what is important when considering the survival of religion and the book is not so much the extent to which genuine fixity was ever achieved by printers—or by priests for that matter—but the enormous human longing for stability in both religious and textual contexts. That longing—the very thing that made an appeal to typographical fixity such a successful and enduring marketing strategy for these printers—remains as intense today as it was in early modern Europe. What the contemporary reader of digital texts finds so frighteningly relevant about George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* is not the poverty and isolation suffered by its protagonist, but rather the fact that the story is organized around a man who has the job of changing history by altering old newspaper records to suit the exigencies of the present.^[28] That complete loss of both memory and fixity not only cuts off all possibility of scientific progress: it destroys all meaning and all hope. This profound and unyielding human fear of instability may help account for not only the survival of the printed book and religion as agents of memory and fixity, but also the enduring attachment journalists and other popular writers continue to have to the *idea* that the printing press did indeed stabilize texts in the West.^[29] It may also help account for why the intersection of religion and the book is so remarkably rich.
- 12 The essays in this issue of *Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture* explore this special relationship between religion and the book across time and in a wide variety of geopolitical contexts. In one way or another, they all demonstrate how textual practices become easily exaggerated in religious contexts as they impinge on the perpetuation of memory and the formation of cultural identity in a profound yet often implicit quest for stability. Texts can function in the place of the missionary, the preacher, even divine revelation itself. They can take the place of church and even community. The enormous cultural power religious texts possess is precisely what motivated figures like Jean-Baptiste Collignon to risk printing religious pamphlets in revolutionary France, drove James Thomson to travel to the Canadas on behalf of the British and Foreign Bible Society at the time of the rebellions, and even what inspired Peter Gordon White to press on with his new Sunday school textbooks despite finding himself on the receiving end of death threats. Perhaps, in the final analysis, people are willing to shoulder these risks, to cling tenaciously to their faith in the face of the challenges of modernity, and to continue holding up their physical bibles on public television when Joel Osteen urges them to do so, because there is no substitute for the kind of stability religion and the book offer. The timelessness of religious truths is predicated on the time-worn nature of religious canons. The immortality of the author is inevitably predicated on the immortality of the text. If religion and the book ever do die, the concomitant loss of memory and order will mean both a past and a future decidedly less sure.

Varia

- 13 In “Varia,” Mélodie Simard-Houde traces the fascinating history of report publishing in France between 1870 and 1930. In so doing, she demonstrates how the journalistic report, once published as a book, gains the necessary autonomy to be considered as a genre in its own right. Thus, between the wars, it becomes a hybrid object that caters to a variety of readers (well read or general public), at the intersection of journalism and literature.

Note biographique

Scott McLaren earned his PhD in the Collaborative Program in Book History and Print Culture at the University of Toronto. He is an associate librarian and member of the graduate faculty in Humanities and History at York University in Toronto, Canada. He is also President of the Canadian Society of Church History. Scott is currently working on a monograph for the University of Toronto Press that explores the role books and periodicals played as material status objects in the formation of North American religious identity throughout the early nineteenth century.

Notes

- [1] The most prominent evangelical to cite this anecdote recently is Rick Warren, senior pastor of one of the largest megachurches in California and author of the 2002 bestseller *The Purpose Driven Life*. See Rick Warren, "The Bible Will Always Survive," *Daily Hope with Rick Warren*, <http://rickwarren.org/devotional/english/the-bible-will-always-survive> 306.
- [2] The story may have its origin in an 1849 annual report of the American Bible Society. See *Thirty-Third Annual Report of the American Bible Society, Presented May 11, 1849* (New York: American Bible Society, 1849), 98.
- [3] James Byrne, *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 124–49; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, "The Dynamics of Religious Economies," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 97.
- [4] Thomas Edison, "The Phonograph and Its Future," *The North American Review* 126, no. 262 (1878): 534; Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 63–65. I would like to thank Peter Unwin for bringing this to my attention.
- [5] George Steiner, "Battle of the Senses," *Times Literary Supplement*, March 1, 1963, 156; Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).
- [6] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2013), 8.
- [7] Steven Levy, "Amazon: Reinventing the Book," *Newsweek*, November 17, 2007, <http://www.newsweek.com/amazon-reinventing-book-96909>.
- [8] Peter Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter Berger (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 2.
- [9] Ben Ehrenreich, "The Death of the Book," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 18, 2011, <http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/the-death-of-the-book>. See also Leah Price, "Dead Again," *The New York Times Sunday Review of Books*, August 10, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/12/books/review/the-death-of-the-book-through-the-ages.html>.
- [10] Pew Research Center, "E-Reading Rises and Device Ownership Jumps," Pew Research Center, January 16, 2014, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/01/16/e-reading-rises-as-device-ownership-jumps/e-readers1/>.
- [11] Dana Beth Weinberg, "Why Authors and Readers Still Want Print," *Digital Publishing News*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.digitalbookworld.com/2015/why-authors-and-readers-still-want-print/>.
- [12] William Giraldi, "Object Lesson: Why we need physical books," *New Republic*, April 19, 2015, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/121560/bibliophiles-defense-physical-books>.
- [13] Valentine Cunningham, "Daniel Defoe," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature*, eds. Rebecca Lemon, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts, and Christopher Roland (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 346; Exodus 31:18.
- [14] Henri-Jean Martin, *The History and Power of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 8, 11–12, 32–33, 74–75, 107ff.; Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007), 33, 46; Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007), 4–7.
- [15] Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 21; Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 133; Jill Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First Century America* (Michigan: University Michigan Press, 2013), 213–14.
- [16] Matthew 28:19.
- [17] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 84.
- [18] Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 8–9.
- [19] Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 122; Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 70ff.
- [20] Leslie Howsam, "The Study of Book History," in *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Leslie Howsam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4.
- [21] Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 78.
- [22] Revelation 22:18.
- [23] Job 4:7–8, 8:20, 11:14–15.
- [24] Agatha Christie, *The Pale Horse* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2011), 3.

- [25] Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), viii; Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), passim; Brian Stock, *The Implication of Literacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 90, 522.
- [26] Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), passim; Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1994), 70; David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, *An Introduction to Book History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 17–19;
- [27] Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 11, 19.
- [28] George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Signet Classics, 1961).
- [29] Leslie Howsam, "Book History in the Classroom," in *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Leslie Howsam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 256.

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