

**Coastal Church:  
Community through Connectivity**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

The thesis presents an ethnographic survey of the mediatization of religion at Coastal Church, a non-denominational Christian institution located in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Coastal seamlessly integrates digital media into its approach to worship, scripture dissemination as well as the proselytization of new members. Study findings suggest that digital media integration at Coastal allow for more interpersonal connections among worshippers as well as the fostering of deeper in-group solidarity in the Coastal community. Digital media integration further allows for heightened levels of hierarchical control and efficiency in message transmission by Coastal's pastoral team to its congregation. However, results also indicate that a reliance on digital media by Coastal may foster a learned distraction among worshippers, producing an arguably shallower relationship with religious materials and values.

On balance the thesis argues that mediatization of religion at Coastal is reflective of a longstanding trend in Christian religious observance to evolve in a technologically integrated manner so as to not lose relevance, an aspect of the religion hearkening back to its earliest days.

**Keywords:** Christianity; Community; Digitization; Mediatization; Banal Religion; Hierarchical Control.

## **Dedication**

To Dr. Brad Piekkola, Vancouver Island University.

For recognizing potential in a young undergraduate who had yet to see it in himself.

Thank you.

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## **Chapter 1.**

### **Preface – The Elevator**

Returning home one evening from a local café, I found myself in the elevator with an elderly couple I had run into occasionally. The elevator was slow that day and as we waited, the three of us spent a few moments making small talk. I remember asking the couple where they were coming from as they were each burdened with large, heavy suitcases. They replied in unison that they were Jehovah’s Witnesses just back from a weekend conference in Kelowna. I hurriedly explained that I was a graduate student researching religious communication and asked if either of them could offer any insight on religious organizations using digital media in sermons.

To my surprise, the elderly man stooped over his suitcase, unzipped a pocket and extracted a shiny new iPad complete with a leather book-like cover. “We use this instead of our bible now,” he said with a grin. “It makes finding passages in the scriptures much easier.” His wife then asked if I would like to come up to their condo briefly and talk some more, an offer I readily agreed to. After pressing some religious pamphlets on me they offered me their e-mail address and said that any time I had questions about Jehovah, I was welcome to come upstairs for tea.

I share this brief story for it demonstrates just how much religion has changed since the advent of digital new media. After all, if two elderly Jehovah’s Witnesses are happily engaging with the Holy Scriptures through a handheld computer, does this not signify a changed religious landscape? I believe that it does and in the pages that follow, I intend to explore the hypothesis that contemporary religions today exert less influence on society than society exerts on them. Moreover, due to a widespread use of digital media by

religious organizations, a structural change to religion results, a change that is the hallmark of a secular, digital age.

## **1.1. Introduction**

One could argue, I think, that the advent of digital media denotes a fundamentally important structural change to Western religion in the last half century. Religious worship today is no longer constrained by the traditional approach characterized by a preacher standing before and addressing a congregation. Indeed, more and more Western Christian institutions are turning to the utilization of digital media as in-sermon prayer aids and off-site learning materials. Some theorists maintain that this burgeoning use of digital media by religious organizations is often carried out in non-denominational Christian sects in order to regain a measure of social influence that has been lost over time due to secularization (Campbell, 2012; Hjarvard, 2013). Handheld digital devices for example, are used en masse as in-sermon bible substitutes and when combined with streaming audio and video recordings, serve as personal study guides for the modern Christian (Christians, 2002; Phillips, 2012; Thompson, 2007; Torma & Teusner, 2011). As such, the use of digital media by religious organizations has transformed the structure of these organizations into digitally mediated communities that observers suggest are becoming the norm rather than the exception with modern Christianity (Phillips, 2012; J. Stolow, 2005; Thompson, 2007; Torma & Teusner, 2011).

Over the past decade, communication scholars, among them Stig Hjarvard (2013) and Heidi Campbell (2010) have begun to study the effects of digital media integration<sup>1</sup> on religious worship. This research has thus far been limited to Scandinavian Europe and areas of the Southern United States. This thesis seeks to contribute to this growing area of scholarship by examining the effects of practice associated with what Stig Hjarvard terms

<sup>1</sup> Simply, the use of digital media by a religious organization.

*mediatized religion* (Hjarvard, 2013) in a case study of Christian worshippers in the region of Vancouver, British Columbia, a metropolitan area situated on the Pacific Coast of Canada near the border with the United States. The field site for this research was Coastal Church, a non-denominational Christian institution based in Vancouver B.C. that is at the cutting edge of this structurally transformed, digitally mediated religious practice. Formed in 1994 by Senior Pastor Dave Koop and his wife Cheryl, Coastal has distinguished itself as a model non-denominational Christian organization for its seamless integration of digital media into weekly sermons and the use of online supplemental materials. These include high-definition streaming video recordings, free downloadable podcasts and custom iPhone apps, each of which is designed to appeal to young, modern Christians. Coastal's use of digital media is a clear illustration of Hjarvard's (2013) concept of the *mediatization of religion*, making the organization an ideal field site for a qualitative case study of the way that religious worship in a modern Canadian city is transformed with the appropriation of digital media and social networking platforms.

Before presenting the details of my field study, I will first present the underlying and fundamental characteristics of religion and the concept of religious faith itself adopted in this study. The theoretical framework for this research draws on Emile Durkheim's classic work of religious studies, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Durkheim offers an important historical perspective on the nature of religion rooted in his ideas concerning 'sociality', which, as we will see, figure significantly in the age of social media. I will also look at Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959) a text that offers an interesting typology of the defining characteristics of religious faith, making it important in understanding the role of a modern, urban religious organization like Coastal. Finally, I will briefly consider the work of philosopher James Carse, whose text *The Religious Case Against Belief* (2008) demonstrates that what is often viewed as religion is in fact a hierarchical organized system of rigid moral authority and that religious belief, commonly called faith, exists as an entirely separate and individual phenomenon.

I must first present the reader with a brief disclaimer however: it is not the goal of this thesis to provide a wide-ranging historical analysis of Christianity in the classical sense

as the religion has from its earliest days been reliant on one form of communication or another in order for its messaging to be disseminated and received. Rather, the thesis aims to demonstrate that while the methods of worship and tools utilized by religious organizations have indeed changed as a result of secular developments in digital media (the effects of which are the focus of this thesis), Christianity's long-standing core beliefs remain unchanged. Indeed, the goal of Christianity today is as it has been throughout history – to bring a community of worshippers together into a close, intimate relationship with God. Practices of worship then, whether performed live in front of others or alone with a Wi-Fi enabled tablet computer and a digital bible enable this relationship to occur and foster it, regardless of the mode of communication utilized.

## **1.2. Religion Defined**

The world's various religions are diverse, yet certain qualitative similarities between the different world religions nevertheless exist. What is primarily shared between them are certain characteristics that transcend cross-cultural and social boundaries and it was these characteristics that French sociologist Emile Durkheim set out to discover. Writing in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim (1912) defined religion as

*“a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions -- beliefs and practices that unite its adherents into a single moral community called a church” (p.46).*

For the purpose of this thesis, my study assumes that at its core, religion is a social phenomenon that is dependent on the participation of social actors united through a set of shared beliefs. It is the assembly of these actors that forms a religion's base of worshippers, often known as a congregation or, during various historical times, a tribe or clan (Durkheim, 1912). The work of Durkheim however, while encompassing elaborative evaluations of many forms of religious life, is rather broad and covers practices outside the purview of this thesis. Explanations of animist and naturist religions for example - while useful in terms of providing historical explanations for the development of religious

thought in members of preliterate, nonindustrial societies- have little bearing on the scope of this thesis. Durkheim's work on totemism (the worshipping of spirits in idolized form) however, is relevant to my study at Coastal for the Christian religion in its various denominational and non-denomination sects can be considered in some respects as essentially totemic in structure.

### **1.3. Totemism**

Animist religions (characterized by their lack of conception of a mind-body separation) and their naturist counterparts (religions centered on deified explanations for natural phenomena and a subsequent classification of them) share, however lightly, some characteristics attributed to totemism. But as a whole however, totemic religions differ from animist and naturist religions in that they move far beyond primitive spiritual representations and categorizations of the world. Totemic religions are in fact highly specific and the totem itself, an idolized sacred representation of a spirit or animal, serves as an emblem or symbol sometimes used to consolidate kinship relations or tribal affiliations (Durkheim, 1912). For this reason the identity of a religious community is symbolically linked to its representative totem of choice for the totem is not only a physical manifestation of the spirit world but also a sacred symbol of differentiation extending from the individual worshiper to the clan, tribe or kinship group (congregation) that identifies with it. The totem therefore holds a *moral authority* over the social group organized around it and through worship, the sacred power attributed to the totem is sustained through the collective beliefs and practices of the tribe (Durkheim, 1912).

As the tribe believes that the sacred power of the gods emanates from the totem, its mere presence incites strong feelings among worshippers, feelings that intensify during collective socialization or worship (Durkheim, 1912). For this reason, the totem is in effect responsible for fostering a coming together of worshippers during ceremonial rites for it is to the totem as a manifestation of the gods that rites are directed and the feelings thought to emanate from the sacred totem are expressed in a collective phenomenon Durkheim

labels ‘*collective effervescence*’. During ritual, the experience of these feelings can reach dizzying levels of intensity and at times, produce a state of *religious ecstasy* in which worshippers *transcend* into a spiritual communion with the spirit world (Lewis, 1966). We see then that the effervescent quality of the totem experienced during collective worship is due to its perceived sacred nature since, as proposed by Durkheim (1912) and as we will see also with Eliade (1959); it is the *sacred* that is given absolute priority in religion.

#### **1.4. Sacred and Profane**

Humans have an innate desire to categorize the world around him (Durkheim, 1912, Eliade, 1957). Regarding the previously mentioned iterations of religion (animism, naturism and totemism), scholars have suggested that humans furthered this categorization by sub-dividing the world around them into two distinct constituent elements: the sacred and the profane. Both elements are crucial to religions around the world and serve to reduce the objective world into that which is indispensable to human existence (Durkheim, 1912).<sup>2</sup> The sacred and the profane are in essence dialectical modes of existence, or as Eliade (1957) states “two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history” (p. 14). Colloquially speaking, the sacred exists *because* of the profane. The two are juxtaposed against each other and through this juxtaposition religious people categorize the world around them as one of the two modes, imposing a perception of control and influence over their surroundings. This is realized through sacred rites that provide human existence with *meaning, purpose* and at times, *ecstasy*, with each centered on the presence of the totem during ritual (Durkheim, 2012; Lewis, 1971).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Scholars have suggested that early representations of human existence and the world may have been constructed as an attempt to explain the unexplainable.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of religious ecstasy in Christianity today is often associated with Evangelist revival movements characterized by speaking in tongues and an emphasis on healing through the power of faith. While there is some measure of truth to this, all forms of Christianity deal with the sacred-profane dichotomy in some manner.

The appearance of the totem during worship denotes a process which Eliade (1957) deems a *heirophany* or ‘unveiling’ of the sacred. Through this heirophany of the sacred and the tribe’s collective worship of the sacred in totemic form, the strength and influence of the religious community is reaffirmed through a process which Durkheim (1912) likens to an *effervescence* or intense social unity of collectivity. The Durkheimian concept of effervescence is effectively illustrated I think, by the ritualistic endeavor of Roman Catholic mass. During mass, the religious community or tribe gathers in its House of Worship to be together before God and to share in His love in a ritual undertaken by a priest (or shaman if one prefers a more pagan title). Over the course of ritual, the tribe collectively *transcends* into a state of unity and at times, ecstasy (Lewis, 1971). Durkheim (1912) cites this process of ritualistically transcending from a profane, physical existence into the sacred realm of spirits and Gods as a “systematic asceticism” or *transformation through ritual* (p. 232).

This ritualistic transformation from the profane to the sacred is a phenomenon that is illustrated again, I think, in totemic religions such as Christianity. For Durkheim (1912), the totem is not simply a thing “of great religious value” but also an object of such venerability that entire social groups (religions) are organized around it as a single point of origin – the god or gods incarnate (p. 97). For many Christians, the crucifix is the most sacred of sacred totems, indeed the very existence of Christianity is tied to the crucifix (often a representation of a cross with the figure of Jesus Christ attached to it) for it represents the sacred *life force* of Jesus Christ. The significance of the crucifix is such that to gaze at it is to know the sacrifice of Christ for all mankind and to know the life “that beckons beyond the horizon” of our own (McMichael, 2010, p. 2).

The significance of the totem in terms of its sacred essence is further illustrated by Durkheim (1912) in his writing that in many circumstances totems are kept hidden from view of the congregation only to be unveiled at opportune moments lest they become contaminated by the profane world that surrounds them. The Roman Catholic wine and

wafers – both totems in their own right - utilized in the Eucharist<sup>4</sup> rite are in certain sects of the religion kept under lock and key prior to and following Mass so as to ensure that they remain pure and untarnished when not in use. Similarly, the priest leading the Eucharist rite by order of liturgy<sup>5</sup> cleanses the sacred chalice, a vessel bearing the wine (blood of Christ) and platter of consecrated bread (body of Christ) prior to the ‘accident’ of transubstantiation<sup>6</sup> and the leading of the congregation (tribe) in the communion ceremony of ingesting the Host. This purposeful, ordered separation of sacred and profane occurs because physical space “is not homogenous” and that “some parts [of space] are qualitatively different than others” (Eliade 1957, p. 20). Thus only the initiated or *confirmed* may touch the sacred totems during mass while the uninitiated<sup>7</sup> or *unconfirmed* are forbidden to do so as contamination of the sacred objects utilized during ritual would be deemed sacrilegious (Durkheim, 1912).

However, not all sacred rites are alike; indeed they are separated into two dialectically opposed halves or cults: the positive and the negative. Positive rites are inherently celebratory and serve to replenish the sacred through offerings directed to the gods, often involving a sacrifice of sorts in which the life force of a being, through its

<sup>4</sup> Historically speaking, the Eucharist refers to the bread and wine that Christ distributed and ate during the Last Supper. In a broader sense, the Eucharist is consecrated and consumed during the ritual of Mass at a point known as ‘Communion’ in which the worshipper communes with the Host (spirit of Christ). However, there are countless variations and interpretations across Christianity’s many sects and denominations. Some for example, often of the Protestant order, utilize grape juice in lieu of wine while others use crumbled bread and others still use crackers. Regardless, the point I wish to illustrate is that the Crucifix and Eucharist are prime examples of totems and in a wider context of ritual, are illustrative of the dialectical opposition between the sacred and the profane for only the initiated may take Communion during Christian ritual.

<sup>5</sup> Literally, the ‘pattern of worship’ during mass. Varies greatly throughout the many forms of Christianity.

<sup>6</sup> In Roman Catholicism lore, the ‘accident’ referred to is the moment when the wine and bread used as part of the sacrament during mass is transformed into the blood and body of Christ. However, this too differs greatly throughout the religion as some sects take a much more literal interpretation to it than others.

<sup>7</sup> It is often women that provide the uninitiated and profane role in totemic religions (Durkheim, 1912).



destruction, re-affirms the power of the sacred (Durkheim, 1912). Roman Catholic mass for example, is a positive rite that re-affirms God's influence while concurrently promoting a collective effervescence amongst all those present during the ceremony. By physically ingesting a portion of the Host, a state of renunciation occurs in which the worshippers commune with God. Lewis (1971) furthers this analogy, labelling it a "spiritual intercourse" between man and God (p.51). Negative rites conversely, rather than serving as a vehicle of re-affirmation for the sacred, maintain the necessary boundaries between the sacred and the profane such as in how the Australian aborigine buries his tribe's totem in sand prior to and following religious ritual (Durkheim, 1912).

## **1.5. Digital Media & Sacred Ritual**

The world's religious landscape is changing drastically. According to a 2015 report by the Pew Research Center, a non-partisan think tank in the United States, population growth in geographical areas such as Africa correlates with a rise in identifiable Christians while an aging population and decreased birth rate in Europe and North America correlates with a decrease in numbers of those who identify with religions such as Christianity (Pew Research Center, 2015b). In America alone, for example, the Christian share of the population between 2007 and 2014 fell by nearly 10%, with Roman Catholics specifically declining by nearly 4%, marking a significant decline in numbers from previous decades (Pew Research Center, 2015a). Conversely however, North America (the United States in particular) is seeing a rise in non-denominational Evangelical Protestant organizations; indeed while the overall rate of growth of Christianity is declining, a measurable increase in numbers of those identifying as members of non-denominational churches has increased by 6% (Pew Research Center, 2015a).

Non-denominational organizations such as Coastal, while adhering to the authority of God and inerrancy of the scriptures differ from traditional religious organizations such as the Roman Catholic Church by working to maintain the interests of their community of worshippers through a variety of unique methods, several of which are the focus of my

fieldwork for this thesis. As discussed, Roman Catholic ritual is highly totemic in structure and hierarchical in approach. However, non-denominational organizations like Coastal conduct their own version of ritual in a far more technologically integrated manner that more often than not views media integration as a “tool [that] God is using to reach out to humanity” (Justice, 2014, p.89). Helland (as cited in Campbell, 2013) characterizes this digitally mediated form of worship as one with a “purposeful engagement with the sacred (*whatever the sacred may be for those involved*)” (p. 27). (Hellend’s key point of course is the notion of a changeable and highly personalized definition of the sacred which in contemporary practice may involve the presence and integration of digital media). Coastal for example, seamlessly integrates digital media into its weekly Sunday services. Upon entering the Church, one is immediately given a pamphlet, often with a printed QR<sup>8</sup> code attached. The code is easily scanned with a smartphone allowing weekly scripture selections to be downloaded and displayed on the screens of the devices of participants in possession of such a device.

As with all ritual, Coastal’s integration of digital media is contingent on the social context surrounding it. It is also dependant on a variety of very subjective notions of authenticity and community (See Chapter 4). Durkheim (1912) for example, hypothesized that “the real role and function of ritual was to maintain the [religious] society” (Hellend; as cited in Campbell, 2013, p. 26). Through this, we see the importance of the Durkheimian notion of effervescence in that through ritual, individuals collectively feel a sense of belonging to something greater than its individual components. This in turn fosters solidarity in the social organization and as well as group control by unifying all of those present during the rite. In this sense, digital media are simply mechanisms for the transmission of and the reception of ritual performance. As we will see in Chapter 4, a

<sup>8</sup> A machine-readable code consisting of an array of black and white squares, typically used for storing URLs or other information for reading by the camera on a smartphone.

variety of opinions on the participatory nature of digital ritual at Coastal are felt throughout its congregation and this was of considerable interest during my fieldwork and subsequent data analysis. For example, while some might regard the use of social media platforms and devices such as smartphones as encouraging greater passivity among worshippers – and at times at Coastal this does appear to be the case – my fieldwork also revealed a high degree of agency among worshippers who take pride in being actively ‘plugged in’ to Coastal’s network. Regardless, if the goal of religious worship is to bring individuals together as a unified social group, then for organizations like Coastal, digital media are a means to an end in that the purpose of media integration in ritual is to foster group solidarity and bring a religious audience closer to God.

However, this is far too simplistic an interpretation for it raises the issue of what in fact entails a modern religious community and, given that Christian worship has throughout its history always been mediated, what then are the effects, if any, of digital mediation? Further, if not to the media itself, then to what do non-mainstream religious organizations like Coastal owe their growth and their popularity? Lewis (1971) posits that non-mainstream religions experience growth by filling the void left by the ongoing decline of established mainstream religions such as Roman Catholicism. Born of secularization, the decline of the societal influence of mainstream Christian religious organizations in the West correlates with a rise in the popularity of non-denominational Christian organizations like Coastal which rather than simply worshipping God, look to foster a deeper relationship with spirituality in a manner that encourages active participation with the scriptures (Campbell & Pastina, 2010; Crowley, 2013; Hjarvard, 2013). Thus while religious organizations like Coastal still emphasize the value of worship above all else, the manner of their worship and the characteristics of their beliefs are entirely distinctive.

By seamlessly integrating digital new media into sermons and fostering active participation with the scriptures through a digitally mediated community, religious organizations like Coastal foster a new form of active worship that is imbedded in and takes its cue from mobile digital media (Baesler & Chen, 2013). Whether digitally mediated or not however, at the core of prayer are specific and fundamental religious beliefs. And it is

these beliefs or *faith* that sustain prayer, providing its strength and longevity, even as the secular world around it changes. This I believe, points to a widespread belief among modern Christians that they must modernize in order to remain relevant (see Chapter 4).

This brings us to the heart of this thesis for it is argued that the future and the authority of the modern Christian Church is losing resonance among its worshippers. Indeed, Carse (2008) believes that it is in fact “showing early signs of mortality.” Yet since its inception Christianity has always been mediated; indeed one can say that the one constant with Christianity throughout history is its continual adoption of new forms of communication media so as to keep pace with technological innovations stemming from the secular world as well as to continue its moral duty to evangelize. If we take this to be true, then we can argue with some measure of certainty I think, that the success of Coastal Church, rather than being indicative of a decline of established Christian denominations, is instead representative of a logical structural evolution of Christianity, one which in its current state is in the midst of reorienting itself in a digital world.

It is therefore important to recognize than in its efforts to modernize by adopting new communicational media to spread the gospel, Coastal and churches like it have to confront the fact that by taking up new technologies, unforeseen consequences, as Neil Postman (1993) famously argued, are sure to follow. Indeed the appropriation of digital media into religious practice raises questions and presents challenges for fundamental ideas about what is sacred and how to adapt observances to respect sacred spaces, texts and totems in the digital era.

## **1.6. Digital Authenticity and Community**

As with religious belief (faith), the notion of *authenticity* in a religious setting is also dependent on the shared collective beliefs of worshippers. If enough individuals believe in something, then does this not make it real? As simplistic as this rhetorical question seems, the answer is considerably more complex. Kerstin Radde-Antweiler

(2008) stresses that “[prior] to the introduction of the so-called ‘new media’, only religious experts or institutions were able to publish literature and thus had the opportunity to spread their religious ideas and beliefs to a wider audience” (p. 34). Today however, mass use of the internet has multiplied sources of information available to religious scholars and religious believers alike, creating a fragmented religious landscape that is far more individualized than ever before (Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, 2008). And it is these individual worshippers who blur the boundaries between the real and the virtual as they create their own authentic religious experience, the act of which is made possible through the secular digital media they hold in their hands (Hjarvard, 2013). This shift in religious influence from the physical to the virtual is so significant that the modern authentic Christian experience can be likened to a “panopoli of stimuli” in which the structural shift to digitally mediated worship is as influential as the historical shift from oral religion to one that was expedited by the invention of the printing press and subsequent mass dissemination of God’s word (Phillips, 2012, p. 42).

The modern Christian increasingly receives his or her religious socialization not solely from religious institutions but from various forms of media originating from the secular world, some of which may be more or less authentic than others (Lövheim, 2012). Yet the growth of religious institutions like Coastal which make ample use of digital media in both their foundational structure and approach to dissemination demonstrates that the modern worshipper is now able to construct “a virtual [religious] world” entirely of his or her own making, one that is as authentic as they believe it to be (Thompson, 2007, p. 190). Modern religion, by virtue of digital media integration then, is no longer constrained by a dependence on the boundaries of physical sacred space, for it exists in cyberspace as well (Wertheim, 2000).

We see then that religious authenticity is complex and highly changeable. Indeed Durkheim (1912) defined religious authenticity as a characteristic of religiosity in which social actors in effect ‘judge’ if certain objects or beliefs ‘fit’ into a given belief system. With digital religious practices however, establishing a level of trust between worshippers, media, and the various beliefs of contemporary Christianity presents a difficult task for

church leaders to overcome. In a virtual (digital) space for example, establishing a level of trust or faith in one's leaders "may not occur as easily as it does in the 'real' [offline] world" (Robinson-Neal, 2008, p. 232). This is because of differences in how worshippers actually *experience* authenticity in a digital setting and how individual social actors subjectively deem certain religious experiences as authentic and others as not. Worshippers at Coastal for example, need not physically attend a Sunday service and can simply download the podcast or watch the service streaming online at a later date. Thus the question remains: is this digitally mediated religious experience as authentic as being a member of a physical community? Does it have the same level of *meaning* or as Walter Benjamin (1936) hypothesized, *aura*? For some worshippers, the answer may be yes but for others, it may not.

Turner (2007) states that "new technologies have contradictory ideological effects" not seen with traditional forms of religious media such as oral transmission and physical texts (p. 118). This contradiction exists because digital religion offers unprecedented levels of instant access to sacred materials in a manner not seen before in religious circles. Digital religion also provides a ready platform for the individual worshipper to have a much larger role and voice in his or her congregation through the broadcasting capabilities inherent to networked media. However, religious media scholars urge us to take heed that digital religion, however convenient and subjectively authentic, can nevertheless foster a significant disengagement with and fragmentation from sacred materials as individuals may selectively 'tune out' and divert their focus elsewhere (Phillips, 2012). One can make the case with some confidence I think, that there is also a danger in traditional, un-mediated mass of distraction and disengagement. However, a variety of studies published in the medical industry point to significant correlations between increased digital media use and heightened levels of distraction and memory loss. Williams (2012) for example outlines a typical millennial-generation scenario in which heavy electronic media users become conditioned over time to skim over electronic text and "seldom take time to read deeply and fully and digest the meaning of what is being read" (p. 632). For religious worshippers relying on eBibles this raises significant questions for an organization like Coastal seeking

to ensure that its digitally-dependant congregation thinks and reflects critically on the meaning and authenticity of the messaging it is exposed to. For the more philosophically minded, this question may be framed as ‘how does the modern Christian find meaning in the midst of a digital maelstrom of intrapersonal beliefs and perspectives on authenticity and the sacred?’

Clifford Christians (2002) suggests a potential solution to this issue, one which involves purpose; specifically the idea that the *meaning* of technology is found in the *purpose it serves* (p. 39). Taking this analogy, we can state with some confidence that the purposeful manner in which Coastal integrates digital new media into its structure (and its acceptance among its leaders and congregation members) is what provides the approach with its authenticity. This relates to Durkheim (1912) for his essential point of religions is that they are consumed with the idea of social organization and the legitimization of the religious community at large. For the modern Christian then, even if he or she is not always physically connected to other members, they are at least electronically linked to other like-minded individuals as part of a much larger social group or community; a church of technological solidarity. Alternatively, as Howard Rheingold aptly puts it, a “grand collective project in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 73). And while Rheingold was specifically referencing primitive virtual reality, his sentiment fits rather well with digital religious organizations like Coastal.

Understanding the intended meaning of digital media integration in religious organizations is one thing; however understanding its *role* is another for in practice, media does not always serve its original intended purpose. Heidi Campbell (2013) for example, points to a shift in the manner in which modern worshippers utilize digital media, often in a role it was not originally intended for. One only has to look at Apple’s vaunted iPhone as an example, for its use in religious communities differs greatly from its intended secular purpose (Campbell & Pastina, 2010). Originally designed as an advanced communication platform with streaming video and gaming capabilities, the iPhone quickly found itself in the hands of religious pastors who welcomed its ability to immediately search for and find specific scripture passages in custom designed religious themed apps, a significant increase

in efficiency of message transmission to a religious community with a large congregation (Campbell & La Pastina, 2010). David Noble (as cited in Campbell & La Pastina, 2010) writes that technology “has become identified with the idea of transcendence, whereby it serves as a gateway to salvation and redemption from the brokenness of the world and humanity’s limitations.” One is no doubt reminded of Martin Luther’s celebration of the printing press as “god's highest act of grace,” although the printing press was designed and constructed with no theological interests in mind.

For the modern Christian, salvation is increasingly found in the accessing of religious materials through digital media, denoting a shift in focus from the real to the virtual (digital) that is, as Campbell (2013) states, “linked to a networked understanding of community rather than notions of shared geography and familial ties” (p. 57). This is significant for it points to an alteration in the Durkheimian notion of a religious community as digitally integrated churches forge communicative links that move beyond traditional cultural and geographical borders. And as we will see in Chapter 4, this factors significantly into how Coastal disseminates its messaging. This too speaks to a much larger shift in how a modern religious organization views the secular society surrounding it through its emphasis on the digital. For as the secular world is tightly ‘plugged in’ and networked, it is logical for the modern Christian to be so as well.

For this reason, Coastal’s digital media integration illustrates an entirely new concept of religious togetherness. Hjarvard (2013) points to an implicit understanding between the modern Church and society, stating that “when entering the general public sphere, the religious media are judged according to the same professional criteria as other media, including their ability to make use of media technology and genres in appropriate and interesting ways” (p. 86). Given the secular state of society at large, it is little wonder why organizations such as Coastal have welcomed digital media with more or less open arms, not simply as a method of building community but also in *retaining* it. Another way of stating this is that religious organizations like Coastal, in order to maintain the interests of congregation members as well as its moral authority over them, “consciously import traditional religious ritual into online contexts, even if these practices must be modified in



some form” in order to make them accessible, interesting, and above all, relevant to the modern worshipper (Campbell, 2013, p. 62).

This importation of traditional religious values into the digital realm brings us back yet again to Durkheim (1912) for it is clear that religion is indeed a community of like-minded individuals, sharing in a common belief: faith in a higher power (God). But as James Carse (2008) states, what is commonly thought of as a religious belief system is in fact not a belief system at all but rather a collection of similar individual beliefs or a *communitas* brought together under a hierarchical structure or *civitas*, commonly called a Church. If we were to separate the two, we would find that the *communitas* at an organization like Coastal is in fact not so much a *mediatized religion* as it is a community of believers united through the digital media they wield and organized under the authority of a much larger and distinct organizational structure.

I say this without the reader being in full possession of the findings from my study of Coastal Church’s organization and members, however. It is my hope that the details of my documentary research and fieldwork will provide some clarification on this and other points I have advanced. For as Bernard Williams (1995) writes, there are questions of which “we do not know the answers, but of which we might have hopes, if not of acquiring answers [then] of at last advancing our understanding in the coming years” (p. 28).

## **1.7. Summary**

In this chapter, I have provided the reader with a definition of what constitutes a religion and outlined my reasons for choosing Coastal Church as a field site from which to conduct an ethnographic study on the *mediatization of religion*. The following chapter will present a literature review of numerous theories and types of research centered on digital religion with the third chapter outlining my research methodology. The final chapters of this thesis detail the findings of my case study research at Coastal as well as my recommendations for further research and speculations on the future role of the Christian religion.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

Before beginning my examination of digital worship practices at Coastal Church, it is important to situate my research in the context of media studies related to the fields of communication and the social studies of religion and technology; in this case both historical and contemporary. However, while I will pay homage to the pre-electronic era of Christianity, I will primarily focus on digital media and its role in the social shaping of emerging practices in non-denominational Christian churches today

Religion in the Western world, especially Christianity, has been heavily influenced throughout history by the communication modes of the time. In a historical perspective, Christianity in Europe during the early Christian and medieval eras was controlled by theologians who functioned essentially as a knowledge monopoly. Priests functioned as intermediaries between theological authorities and parishioners, many of whom were illiterate peasants. Religious texts were circulated in the form of manuscripts (hand written documents). Access to the bible and interpretive religious texts was generally very limited for a variety of reasons, among them the cost of manuscripts and the difficulty in obtaining them as well as the limited literacy skills of the general populace of Europe. There were also some limits to the flow of written material related to the hierarchical organization of the religious orders of the time. As Harold Innis (1951) illustrates, such texts had a specific bias towards time; they were built to last, to be used inter-generationally and by a select few educated scholars. This mode of communication that held dominant for centuries yielded to a watershed event in the history of human communication, the invention of movable type for use in a printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1450. So significant was Gutenberg's groundbreaking invention that it transformed the potential for diverse social organizations of Christian believers who could appropriate this technology and develop new communicative religious practices.

The Protestant Reformation (1517 to 1648) is inexorably linked to the invention of movable type printing as this technology enabled mass production and circulation of printed religious materials such as the bible and spurred an increase in literacy. Yet we cannot mention the exponential growth of the circulation of the printed word of God (Old and New Testament) and its effect on Western thought and discourse without also taking into account the weakening of the Christian knowledge monopoly throughout pre-Renaissance Europe, initiated when Martin Luther affixed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Saxony.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the dominant technological communication mode of the time, printed text, shifted again with the appearance of the telegraph. Human communication has always been based on the need to transport information across time and space and it was the telegraph that “demanded a new form of organization” of humanity’s rather fixed conception of this time and space (Carey, 1947, p. 4). Prior to the invention of the telegraph, peer-to-peer communication outside the realm of orality was based primarily in the medium of written correspondence. Such correspondence was linked to a fixed conception of time and geographical space. And while rapid letter carriers such as the Pony Express<sup>9</sup> in North America drastically lessened the wait time for correspondence to be sent cross-country, there was nevertheless a 10 day waiting period for a letter to travel across the United States prior to widespread use of the telegraph (Bradley, 1913).

However, the telegraph soon spelled the end to the brief 19-month reign of the Pony Express. The appearance of the first intercontinental wire service in North America in 1861 ushered in a new era of rapid communication, one that in the words of James Carey (1947) was “clothed in the language of religious aspiration” due to its ability to instantly transcend

<sup>9</sup> A horse mounted mail carrier operating from 1859 to 1861. Using a relay service and a large number of way stations the Pony Express provided the fastest form of message transportation of the time, prior to the invention of the telegraph (Wikipedia).

time and space (p. 5). For the religious minded, the telegraph did not directly affect the manner in which Christians worshipped as this was still done in communal groups in fixed locations, but the technology *did* enter the consciousness of the North American and European populace as if “divinely inspired for the purposes of spreading the Christian message farther and faster” than ever before (Carey, 1947, p. 5). Further, the rapid appearance of a network of relay stations and wires which soon criss-crossed the continent created arguably the first network society in history, allowing Western Imperialism to cut a path of trade routes across the globe (Standage, 2014). The telegraph also paved the way for increasingly more advanced forms of message transmission beginning with wireless radio, or ‘Marconi’ system during the final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Following the end of the era of the telegraph (approximately 1830 – 1918), it was the radio age of the 1920’s and 30’s (pioneered by Marconi’s technology and evolving from Morse code to voice transmission) that further bridged the communication divide between audience and speaker.

During the 1920s and 30s, evangelists in the American south turned to radio broadcasting in an effort to proselytize a wider audience, signalling a Christian modernization effort that by the post-war years had become a profitable enterprise (Hangen, 2002). However, the limitations of radio laid the groundwork for the growth of televangelism in the post-war years. These limitations, according to McCleary & Saxton (1983) are due to the fact that listening to the medium is “an ancillary activity” that does not bode well for “urging listeners to call in or write” (p. 38). Television however, by combining the aural and the visual ushered in a new era of the simulated representation of sacred space with the aid of Broadway-styled lights and sound (Wagner, 2012). Televangelism was and in many ways still is the original virtual church for as with previous forms of media before it, it greatly lessened the divide between speaker and audience. By bringing evangelists into the homes of the worshipper, televangelism increased audience resonance when receiving religious messaging (Wagner, 2012).

However, while on the surface appearing to bring audience and evangelist closer through its simulation of sacred space, televangelism becomes a problem in that it

simultaneously creates distance while negating it by decreasing the need for churchgoers to physically attend worship ceremonies. Phillips (2012), lamenting the use of technology during worship, argues that undermining the need for worshippers to physically attend sermons sacrifices a “qualitative depth for quantitative scope” in terms of audience reception and understanding of sacred religious materials (p. 41). This factored significantly into my fieldwork at Coastal and, as we will see in Chapter 4, was of prime concern to both congregation members and the pastoral team.

We see then that continued advances in communication technology, while aiding religious worship by making religious materials more accessible, also present a rather difficult question: what is the authentic religious experience in relation to these changing forms of communication? Further, with each consecutive technological advancement, what is lost as a result? Prior to Gutenberg, the authentic religious experience occurred under strict interpretations of the scriptures from a dogmatic and often uneducated clergy, one which “has been a focal point in assigning blame for the shortcomings of the pre-Reformation church” (Kiermayr, 1984, p. 7). Following the Reformation years, early Protestants, while retaining their belief in the inerrancy of the scriptures, nevertheless felt that the authentic religious experience could be had without the hindrance of the rigid hierarchical structure of the Papacy (Smith, 1991). This separation of individual faith from organized religion as a belief system further illustrates the difference between what James Carse (2009) designates as the distinction between *communitas* and *civitas*. The former refers to the individual worshipper or group of worshippers who share in a similar worldview and belief, hearkening back to the days when Jesus walked the earth disseminating parables to his followers and disciples. *Civitas* conversely, refers to the organizational structure imposed on Christianity after the death of Jesus. However, the notion of what constitutes a Christian *communitas* has changed significantly over the centuries.

During the televangelist era of the post-war years for example, the perception of the Christian *communitas* was altered to such an extent that the need for worshippers to physically attend church services was significantly reduced. So much so in fact, that it can

be argued that the televangelist and the bible created sufficient conditions of religiosity for the embodied, participatory religious experience to be had directly from the comfort of one's own home. As the result of these changes to the notion of the religious *communitas*, individual perceptions of what constitute an authentic religious experience now vary greatly. Indeed the "collective effervescence" of ritual as outlined by Durkheim (1912) is ever more dependent on individual perceptions of the authenticity of religious messaging delivered in a multitude of ways from a variety of media platforms. As we will see in Chapter 4, this issue of fragmented, individualized authenticity factored significantly in the manner and format in which Coastal conducts its weekly services.

## **2.2. Varying Interpretations of Authenticity**

In reference to the notion of what in fact constitutes authenticity in the context of religion, Charles Lindholm (2008) outlines the "veneration and awe" surrounding sacred objects which function as "inspirations for the [group]'s ritual performances" (p. 14). The ability of such objects to evoke a religious experience in the group is dependent on their perceived authenticity or more specifically, their role in religious communion. Authenticity, as Lindholm (2008) defines it, exists in two distinct modes: historical and content (p. 2). Historical authenticity refers to an original object or form whose origin one can effectively trace. The crucifix for example, is deemed authentic in Christianity due to its instant recognition among worshippers the world over and its venerability as a representation of a sacred historical object.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Holy Water is deemed Holy and thus authentic when it has been physically blessed by the hand of a priest who in turn functions as a direct and earthly contact with God.

Content authenticity however, differs greatly from historical authenticity for it is not linked to any particular physical object. Rather it is considerably more abstract and as

<sup>10</sup> One might also briefly mention again Benjamin (1936) for elaboration on the significance of object aura.

such, its role in religion is fluid and far less defined. For Lindholm (2008), content authenticity can be linked to advances in communication technology in that when in digital form, a religious text in effect bypasses the historical content authenticity of the Holy Scriptures to such a degree that there is arguably less of an intrinsic value with digital text than there is in physical, printed form. As we will see in Chapter 4, varying opinions on the sacredness and authenticity of digital scripture abound at Coastal. In brief however, and for the purposes of this chapter, let it be said that the potential of digital media to “shift values and meanings related to user’s notions of [an] authentic religious experience” is a fairly recent phenomenon in Christian circles that many worshippers are still coming to grips with (Torma & Teusner, 2011).

### **2.3. Sacred Spaces**

When examining the role of digital media in religious worship, it is crucial to not overlook the significance of the setting itself as both the physical and spiritual aspects of the setting exert a strong influence on a community of worshippers. Modern science views the physical world as “the totality of reality” in which “physical space extends infinitely in all directions, taking up all available, and even conceivable, territory” (Wertheim, 2000). Religion however, views the physical world quite differently: it serves a dualistic purpose, one which provides space for both the body *and* the soul (Wertheim, 2000). Nowhere is this dualistic world-view more apparent than in physical religious settings or *houses of worship*. A church for example, is not simply a building in which worship ceremonies are performed, it is the house of God manifested in physical form. Echoing Durkheim (1912), a church is also a medium through which worshippers, by way of object ceremony, transcend into the spiritual realm. Wertheim (2000) posits physical religious space as a form of spiritual technology, citing detailed frescoes in the great chapels of the medieval,



gothic and Renaissance eras, which served as technologies of visual representation<sup>11</sup>. Visual aids, according to Wertheim (2000), are crucial to religious worship ceremonies for it is during ceremony that the body and the soul of the worshipper are ‘fed.’ In this respect, the stained glass of the towering cathedrals of the past is little different from the high-definition videos using during worship by Christian organizations such as Coastal today. Each respective medium of representation serves a similar purpose, to provide worshippers with a visual experience designed to aid in their transcendence.

Many of my study participants for example, praised Coastal’s use of in-sermon videos, elaborating that the videos ‘made it easier to connect with one another,’ although this was often viewed as coming at the cost of a deeper understanding of the scriptures when mere snippets were broadcast to the congregation rather than an in depth unpacking of them as is often done in more traditional worship ceremonies lacking Coastal’s high level of media integration. Moreover, given that I saw very few physical bibles being used during the sermons I attended as a participant-observer, this again raises the issue of what in fact is lost as a result media integration in worship.

## **2.4. Communion and Communication**

This felt sense of a loss of a deep connection to and understanding of the scriptures because of digital media integration in worship carries within it aspects of Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation and simulacra. For Baudrillard, media and technology serve as “a central mode of social control” that “integrate through [the] solicitation” of an audience (Pawlett, 2007). As Durkheim (1912) argued, the existence of religion is dependent on the existence of community and therefore the sharing of sacred values in a worship setting is paramount. In traditional Christian circles such as Roman Catholicism,

<sup>11</sup> One could also make the case that cave drawings among primitive man also represent a form of religious visual representation however for our purposes here, let us limit our historical analysis of them to Christianity from the medieval period onward.

this sharing is known as communion, a ritualistic “spiritual intercourse” with Christ which renews the religion’s presence and authority (Pawlett, 2007). Roman Catholic mass for example, is a heavily structured event involving repetitive semantics and gestures coinciding with the heirophany (unveiling) of specific sacred objects at pre-determined moments.

However, the introduction of digital media into this traditional setting replaces physical communion with “technologically mediated social contact” in which signs rather than symbols fulfil the “role of symbolic exchange” during ritual (Pawlett, 2007, p. 25). For example a digital cross may be shone on the wall of a church behind a pastor rather than the physical object, thus creating a simulated reality for all those present; or a digital bible may serve as a worshipper’s primary point of reference to the Holy Scriptures, thus replacing symbolic ritual with technological ritual (Pawlett, 2007). We see then that when physical, sacred objects are replaced with digital signs, the signifier is absorbed into the signified, leaving only pure sign without substance as a result. For Baudrillard, this is significant as “the replacement of symbolic practices of communion by semiotic practices of communication” shift the structure of consumption during ritual into a “semiotic process” of pure simulation in which it is not the Host that is consumed in ritual but a simulation of it (Pawlett, 2007, p. 26).

This semiotic shift to simulated consumption is further linked to the post-modernist theme of hyperreality. Baudrillard writes that media are in fact ‘anti-mediatory’ in that they do not allow for a reciprocity of meaning: only simulacry responses “drawn from a pre-defined range or code” are given (Pawlett, 2007, p. 27). Reality, according to Baudrillard, exists as a mere simulation spread over three distinct orders of simulacra with each order serving as a progressively detached representation of the real. I argue that as religious ritual is an event built on social relations existing in the physical world, the addition of digital media into sacred spaces moves the audience progressively further from abstract reality and into the realm of pure, detached simulation. We may begin with simulated text but we

may yet end with virtual reality in a Second Life church<sup>12</sup>. I would now like to examine these three orders of simulacra in more detail in order to understand their significance for the present study.

#### **2.4.1. The Counterfeit**

Baudrillard posits the counterfeit as the first order of simulacra, stating that counterfeit signs exist as a “simulacrum of symbolic obligation” and have “the appearance of being bound to the world” but are in fact abstract binary representations of it (Pawlett, 2007 p. 74-75). In Christian worship for example, sacred objects such as the crucifix serve as the counterfeit in that they function as simulations of the true item; in this case the wooden cross that Christ was crucified upon. Similarly, the binary opposition between form and referent in religious signs is also exhibited in the ‘Blood and Body of Christ’ wine and bread wafers used in various Christian rituals. In the minds of the worshippers who believe in transubstantiation for example, the wafers and wine are not simply representations of Christ, they *are* Christ incarnated<sup>13</sup>. The first order of simulacra can thus be said to operate on the principle of form equivalence in that the simulation represents the real.

#### **2.4.2. Principle of Operativity**

The second order of simulacra operates on a ‘principle of operativity’ (Pawlett, 2007). It differs from the first order in that while the first deals only with equivalence in

<sup>12</sup> Second Life is an online virtual world in which game players create a ‘second life’ of their own design. This runs the gamut from pure fantasy worlds to realistic cities including churches complete with pastors and a congregation.

<sup>13</sup> Transubstantiation during the Eucharist differs from consubstantiation however in that for those that believe in the latter, the presence of the Host exists *alongside* of the bread and wine, rather than within it. The debate surrounding the two is long standing in Roman Catholic theology but bears little more than a passing mention for the purposes of this thesis.

form, the second order of simulacra operates on the principle of a Marxist exchange value. The original object (sign) bearing a Benjaminian aura is copied so many times that its aura is lost and what remains are mass-produced copies which eclipse the meaning of the original sign; so much so in fact that no historical connection to the original remains.

To use the Christian bible as an example, it is clear that mass-produced copies of the text are indicative of the second order of simulacra in that their mass production is easily said to negate the original sign value or aura of earlier forms of the Holy Scriptures. This analogy can be taken further by examining the digital or ‘eBibles’ commonly found in the hands of Coastal’s young congregation who, as we will see in Chapter 4, tend to bring their smartphones to church rather than physical religious texts. The digital text is *representative* of the original but is in fact a mere simulation and not an abstract object. Thus in the second order of simulacra, the sign has moved further away from the real and further into the realm of simulation. Thus for Baudrillard, by the time the sign reaches the third order of simulacra, a state of *hyperreality* is produced.

### **2.4.3. Hyperreality – Pure Simulation**

In contrast to Baudrillard’s first and second orders of simulacra, hyperreality denotes an entirely distinct and far more complex theme of simulation. As the sign moves through the first and second orders, it becomes increasingly less abstract and upon arrival in the third order of simulacra is transformed yet again. In its final state in hyperreality the sign no longer exists as a representation of a concrete reality at all, rather it is transformed into a pure *simulation* and loses the binary opposition found in the first and second orders (Pawlett, 2007). To take an extreme example, in purely virtual churches such as those found in Second Life, the worshipper is bombarded with “rapidly dispensed, and often disconnected, bits of information” bearing no relationship to their counterparts in the offline (real) world (Phillips, 2012, p. 42).

By taking a less extreme approach by examining digital video recordings of sermons such as those found on Coastal’s website, we see that while digital sermons (as

signs) retain some referent point to their physical counterparts, by virtue of their simulated nature as digital reproductions of the real, the worshipper experiences an arguably shallower relationship to them, similar to how one's experience with a reproduced piece of artwork is substantially less than if they experience the original. This factored significantly into how participants viewed their relationship with Coastal's increasing use of video sermons, often claiming that the sermons were somehow 'less real' than their physical counterparts (see Chapter 4). In reference to this neo-Benjaminian loss of aura, Phillips (2012) states that within this digital environment, there is also "an increasing tendency" for worshippers to "disengage form from content" (p. 43).

This disengagement of form from content is significant for in traditional worship such as transubstantiated Roman Catholic mass object form is easily distinguishable from object content. For example, physically manifested symbols utilized during the ritual such as the chalice of wine or paten of bread serve as content referent points to sacred religious values. In the digital environment of hyperreality however, the lines between form and content are seamlessly blended together in simulation; the sign no longer has a referent and the binary opposition found in the first and second orders of simulacra becomes "volatile and uncertain" as its aura is destroyed (Pawlett, 2007, p. 77).

Hyperreality is thus a pure simulation in which the "co-extensivity of real and representation is lost" (Pawlett, 2007). What once existed in a concrete reality has been absorbed through simulation. When this occurs, the meanings behind sacred symbols become disembedded from their original contextual practice (Lövheim & Lynch, 2011). As such, their meaning is altered. This is significant for the *raison d'être* of the use of sacred symbols during practices of worship is to promote in-group solidarity in the religious community and re-affirm the power of the Host. As we see with Durkheim (1912), it is unity in a religious community that gives the community and thus the religion its strength. And yet the notion of fostering unity through simulation is perhaps indicative of a sacrifice of depth for breadth in terms of the transmission and reception of core religious values. As we will see in Chapter 4, making religious materials more easily accessible through simulation does not always correlate with an increased understanding of their

significance. This factored heavily during my interviews at Coastal and is also of concern to its pastoral team.

## **2.5. Mediatization of Religion**

Researchers studying the relationship between religion and media has at their disposal numerous theoretical frameworks and approaches for examining the various socio-religious environments of the modern religious landscape. For example, there are the more ‘classic’ approaches such as - but not limited to – the work of Emile Durkheim (1912) and Mircea Eliade (1957). These I found especially useful in situating my research at Coastal in a larger socio-historical religious frame. Yet such approaches are dated and as a result, their usefulness is somewhat limited when examining digital religious practices. In addition to these classic approaches however are their modern counterparts, which, rather than emphasising historical interpersonal connections, focus instead on digital networks at the institutional level. A common feature of these institutional approaches is that each recognizes ongoing changes to the structure of organized religion as a result of secularization and modernization fuelled by mass use of digital media (Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2010).

Danish scholar Stig Hjarvard (2013) labels these secular media driven changes to the structure of Christianity the *mediatization of religion*, emphasizing a correlation between a decline in religious participation in Western society and an evolution of the forms and practices of Christian worship (p.79). Hjarvard (2013) is careful, however, to note that these changes do not necessarily point to the future disappearance of religion; rather, he states that a series of secular media driven changes to the practice of religious worship are occurring alongside the development of “more individualized religious beliefs and practices” (p. 79). These practices “used to be part of institutionalized religion [but] have now been partly taken over by the media” in a role that it continues to serve (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 80). Indeed it is no stretch of the imagination to say that to be human today is to be digitally connected to others and as I witnessed at Coastal, religious identity is

frequently becoming inseparable from the digital media relied upon to access religious materials. This is significant for it can be said that as Western society develops and becomes more media centric, so too does religion (Graham, 2002).

Jeremy Stolow (2015) emphasises the Habermasian public sphere and the predicted decline of organized religion through the breakdown of long standing social-hierarchical structures. A true public sphere of course has no hierarchies, all individuals are on equal footing and thus for Habermas, a banker may converse with a streetwalker in a public sphere and true dialogue will emerge through a fusion of horizons. Christianity in its earliest form can be considered a public sphere in every sense the word; indeed the preaching and parables of Jesus were directed to all who listened, regardless of social stature or class. Over time however, Christianity evolved into a rigid hierarchical structure that prior to the Reformation years was held in trust by a ruling class of priests answering to one individual, a Pope. The advent of democratization of access to scriptures as a result of the printing press contributed to the breakdown of this hierarchical structure and, in the opinion of some, a return of Christianity to its roots in a public sphere or community of equality.

As Stolow (2015) writes, there is an enduring attachment to the “particular conception of the secular nation-state and its presumed role in fostering the conditions of possibility for a truly universal public sphere” (p. 4). Presumably, these conditions occur in the absence of organized religion and as a result of the rise of secular democracy. We see then why the Habermasian notion of a public sphere deemphasizes the social role and value of religion in a modern society; it only hinders true equality rather than fostering it. However, rather than seeing the role of organized religion lessen over time, what we see instead is a structural transformation in Christian churches in which media, as Hjarvard (2013) emphasizes, have taken on many of the same roles previously performed by religious institutions (p.79).

Thus as a result of the mediatization of religion, individual worshippers are now able to experience the sacred in a manner not possible prior to the advent of digital media

(Shilling & Mellor, 2007). For example, whereas previous generations of worshippers had to physically attend religious services to receive the weekly reading of the Holy Scriptures, the modern worshipper need only download his or her religious leader's latest podcast to receive the same message, arguably negating their need to physically attend sermons. As we will see in Chapter 4, many of my study participants grappled with this issue and wondered whether or not a digital sermon really could or should replace traditional physical worship.

## **2.6. Criticisms of Mediatization Theory**

While mediatization theory is unable to demonstrate beyond correlation that any gradual decline of organized religion in Western society is the direct result of modernization, it does however demonstrate that the mediatization of religion is inexorably linked to it. As the *civitas* structure of traditional Christianity declines and is replaced by more individualized approaches, it is media which form the backbone to these changes. Mia Lovheim (2011) explains this as an interplay in which the increasing influence of secular media shape religion in a manner "according to the [networking] logics of those media" (p. 111).

As outlined by Castells (1996, 2000, 2007) in his ground-breaking theory of the network society, the influence of media on society is viewed often from a global perspective. It is here that a criticism of mediatization of religion is found for while the theory certainly provides a solid explanation for the manner in which media forms and institutions are linked to the secularization of society, it does not provide an individualized framework of explanation for this process (Lynch, 2011). Thus while the effects of mediatization are readily apparent at a macro level, the theory offers little in the way of a focused study of digital religion on an individualized level, nor does it account for differences in media types utilized in worship.



This is of no fault of Hjarvard (2011) for it is doubtful that any theory can ever hope to account entirely for the practices and beliefs of masses of individuals with varying degrees of religiosity and media reliance. However, several intriguing questions still remain. Specifically: what are the audience effects of the use of digital media in worship settings? In what situation might one technology aid the structure of sermons more than another? Similarly, what effects do specific contextual variables have in relation to mediatization? American scholar Heidi Campbell (2008), in a critique of mediatization theory, cites the “willingness of Christian groups to readily embrace media technology for their [own] purposes,” but also states that the manner in which these technologies actually impact individuals in religious worship groups is entirely contextually dependent and thus open to interpretation (p. 4).

For example, Hjarvard (2013) and contemporaries such as Knut Lundy (2013) have conducted mediatization research in Scandinavia where public attitudes towards religion may be vastly different than in North America; religion in Scandinavia for example is far more separated from the state. In the United States, while there is ostensibly a separation of church and state, this separation is far less rigidly defined in everyday practice. And in Canada the waters are even murkier for while the Canadian Bill of Rights emphasises freedom of religious expression, tolerance for different forms of religion (and the expression of such) varies considerably across boundaries. Because of this, applying mediatization theory to the study of developments in religious practice is far easier said than done.

A further criticism of mediatization theory is its inability to measure intra-contextual differences between religious sub-groups and the manner in which a particular group’s use of digital media impacts its reception of religious messaging (Lynch, 2011). This delves into the role of structural power in religious organizations. Ostensibly, religious worship is built upon equality between members of a worship group; both rich and poor are free to gather in sacred spaces to worship a unifying deity that links together all worshippers in a great family of humanity. In historical times, this would have denoted a true public sphere in every sense of the word. However, the addition of digital media

technologies such as tablet computers and smartphones in lieu of bound bibles creates a problem of hierarchy which mediatization is unable to account for (Lynch, 2011).

For example, what effects result when not all worshippers are able to access the same technologies in a communal religious setting? As we will see in Chapter 4, while a great number of Coastal's congregation members prefer to utilize smartphones and tablets for accessing the scriptures during a Sunday Service, some prefer to rely on printed paper handouts. This then raises the question of how one sub-group might experience sacred religious materials in relation to another. As it stands now, Hjarvard's (2013) mediatization theory does not yet answer this question.

## **2.7. Technological Deterministic Approaches**

A technologically deterministic approach to understanding the relationship between media and religion shares in some aspects of Hjarvard's (2013) mediatization theory in that both employ a global village-esque, techno-centric approach in lieu of one which accounts for religious experience differences on an individual level. A technologically deterministic framework for understanding digital religion also owes much to the work of Marshall McLuhan and Manuel Castells. Ironically, French sociologist Jacques Ellul, writing a decade prior to McLuhan, proposed a technologically determinist "large scale evolutionary" style of thinking about the manner in which technology impacts the development of civilization which he then combined with a "personal, Catholic view of how technical disease can be cured with Christian therapy" (Hepp et al., 2010, p. 228). McLuhan himself, no stranger to Catholicism, made a more concerted effort to keep

technology and faith separate; however many parallels of thought can be seen between the two approaches.<sup>14</sup>

In its simplest form, technological determinism employs a reductionist-style of thinking in which it is technology itself that provides the driving force for social change. Stemming from the witty Marxist-tinged writing of Thorstein Veblen, technological determinism's appeal lies in its straightforward, simplistic explanation of humanity's development. One can see technological determinism's influence in understanding early changes to Christianity as a result of the invention of the printing press in that its appearance seemed to have an immediate effect on the future direction of the Protestant Reformation. But while the appearance of Gutenberg's creation certainly did have a drastic influence on the development of the Christian denominations, there was far more occurring in Western society at the time than a Kuhnian paradigm shift.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, technological determinism's rather simplistic explanation of the causes of social change should not be taken into account without also allowing for the recognition of other influences stemming from non-technological entities. Put simply, technological determinism does not adequately answer the question of 'Who is shaping who?' (George, 2006)

<sup>14</sup> It is useful perhaps to also mention the strength of McLuhan's faith for he was known to pray fervently and at times, prostrate himself before effigies of the Virgin Mary to beg her for spiritual guidance in the construction of his theories.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996), a philosopher of science put forth the term 'paradigm shift' to describe evolutions in scientific knowledge and inquiry. Rather than changes occurring in a linear fashion they instead occur in periodic shifts, in which an entire worldview is inexorably altered in turn. While Kuhn's emphasises scientific paradigm shifts such as in the development of germ theory, one can see how its framework can also be applied to religion.

## 2.8. Mediation of Meaning

Originating with the work of Stewart M. Hoover from the University of Boulder in Colorado, mediation of meaning theory takes a cultural studies approach to religion that owes much to James Carey and his work on the religious-like aspects of pre-radio communication (Hepp et al., 2010, p. 229). Hoover's mediation approach differs from that of Hjarvard's (2013) mediatization theory however, in that rather than looking at social changes as a result of mediatization in society, it looks instead at social *meaning* or more specifically, the manner in which "the various media and messages that are accessible to individuals...are received, understood and potentially used in other spheres of social and cultural life" (Hoover, 2006, p. 36). The logical extension of this are personal, digital media forms such as tablet computers, smartphones and digital projection devices, each of which are found at modern Christian organizations like Coastal and heavily relied upon for the transmission of religious messaging and sacred values.

By taking an ethnographic approach (as I have in my fieldwork at Coastal), mediation of meaning allows for a deep-set understanding of not only the thoughts, feelings, and trepidations of the religious worshipper in relation to the media devices they use but also the influence of media in the construction of religious identity. This is seen in how historical practices characterized by what might be considered the hegemonic ideal of Caucasian masculinity in Christian folklore are transmitted to young worshippers today as processes of proselytization and indoctrination. In previous decades, this was accomplished through media practices of televangelism, yet today it occurs from any number of media including but not limited to podcasting and video sermons, for example. Further, such ready access to media also allows the individual worshipper to 'pick and choose media images and messages that 'fit' their...understanding of the world and their gendered place within it" (Hoover & Coats, 2011, p. 891). As we will see in Chapter 4, many of my study participants attended several other mediatized churches before joining the congregation at Coastal because its particular Christian worldview fit their own and its media-centric approach appealed to their lifestyles.

## 2.9. Mediation of Sacred Forms

A modernized outgrowth of Emile Durkheim's (1912) work on the sacred and profane, mediation of forms theory takes a philosophical approach to the study of media and religion, stressing that understanding "the interaction of [a] symbol, thought, feeling, and action" with a religious audience is only possible "through media which give sacred forms material expression" (Lynch, 2012, p. 87). Stemming from the work of Gordon Lynch (Kent University), mediation of sacred forms theory also shares similar aspects of Jeremy Stolow's (2005) treatise *Religion And/As Media*. Stolow (2005) believes that media should be viewed as "central to the terms of interaction within and among the embodied regimens and imagined worlds that constitute the sacred in the global present" (p. 123). The symbiotic relationship between media and the religious sacred has not only been inseparable since the early days of Western Civilization but has evolved in a near parallel manner to technological developments in secular society in that as society moves forward, so too does the Church. Of course, whether this is the result of technological determinism or a religious social shaping of technology (RSST) or something else entirely is a matter of significant debate in both religious and secular circles.

With mediated forms theory however, religion is viewed as being wholly dependent on media to aid in the representation of sacred forms in worship. In historical times, this dependency took the form of elaborate stained glass windows and woven tapestries; in many ways the visual 'television' of the day. Today the principle is identical, but what has changed are the tools utilized to transmit the sacred. The online world for example, presents infinite possibilities for the communication and visual expression of religious materials to an audience. With the ease of access to sacred texts and video online "at the whim of a thumb or index finger" on a computer or tablet, the sacred is made instantly accessible to a religious audience on a level not seen before in history (Phillips, 2012, p. 43). However, the principal drawback of mediation of forms theory lies in its lack of allowance for distinctions between the many forms of media used to communicate the sacred to a religious audience and, as with mediatization theory, an inability to account for cross-cultural differences in how the sacred is viewed. Lynch (2012) for example, identifies two

principal interpretations of the sacred throughout scholarly literature, ontological and cultural, stating that the failure in employing an ontological approach to interpreting the sacred is with its view of the sacred as being a universal cultural phenomenon when in fact it is not. (Woods, 2012). In fact the conception of the sacred varies greatly from institution to institution or as Durkheim (1912) writes, from tribe to tribe.

This then leaves a cultural approach to interpreting the sacred and the media used to transmit it. For Lynch (2012), even a cultural approach to interpretation cannot hope to overcome the fact that the sacred is anything but a universal phenomenon. Thus the only rational course of action is to allow a ‘moral agonism’ to take place in which “competing segments of society...peacefully contest their norms” with one another (Woods, 2012, n.p.). This occurs regularly in modern religious organizations such as Coastal as pastoral teams are faced with the decision of which media to utilize in the communication of the sacred and which to ignore as well as what their own position in relations to others will be on contentious religious issues. As we will see in Chapter 4 for example, Coastal’s decision to increase the use of pre-recorded video sermons at its satellite locations was not made lightly by the pastoral team, nor was its decision to not preach on controversial topics such as homosexuality.

## **2.10. Religious Social Shaping of Technology**

While many of the previously mentioned theoretical approaches to understanding the relationship between religion and media are technologically deterministic in scope, religious social shaping of technology (RSST) argues that rather than technology providing the zenith for religious change, it is in fact religion which shapes media instead. An RSST approach thus focuses on what Heidi Campbell (2012) labels “moral economies” or more specifically, religious communities that are culturally and socially unique in their “negotiations with media” (p. 233).

The religious shaping of technology occurs in four distinct ways: first, the governance of acceptable use of media by religious organizations; second, the manner in which core religious beliefs intersect with the perceived usefulness of said media for the purposes of both worship and audience accessibility; third, the negotiation process between media and religion in which a religious organization resolves the question of whether or not it should allow a particular media into its sphere of influence and sacred spaces; and finally, the manner in which a religious community frames the media and surrounds it with discourse (Campbell, 2012, p. 233). To illustrate these concepts in operational terms, when debating the usefulness of a particular media such as substituting a bible with an iPad as a prayer aid during sermons or Life Groups, a religious organization must first decide how and where the media will be used.

For example, if an iPad is indeed deemed acceptable as a substitute for the bible, should its presence in sermons only be allowed if the entire worship group is in possession of one? Secondly, how does the organization decide if the perceived benefits of the media (digital devices) outweigh any potential drawbacks such as heightened possibilities for distraction? Thirdly, in what manner does the adoption of the media take place? Does the church itself pay for the media? Or do congregation members make their own investment? How does a preacher attend to those in his or her worship group that are opposed to the use of new media in sacred spaces? Is the process to be democratic? Lastly, what is the nature of the inevitable discourse surrounding the introduction of new media in a church environment?

Each of the above approaches to the study of new media in a religious setting are organized into two distinct camps: philosophical and institutional. The more technologically deterministic approaches of Ellul and McLuhan intersect with Campbell's (2012) religious social shaping of technology by taking an institutionalized, global approach to the relationship between technological innovation and its varying effects on religion. Mediation of meaning and mediation of sacred forms theories however, take a far more philosophical approach in which individual expression and meaning related to technology is given higher precedence over its capacity for innovation and change.

Hjarvard's (2013) mediatization theory bridges the two in an umbrella approach which, while not entirely individual or cross cultural in perspective, nevertheless aims to present a thorough examination into the effects of media in their various forms on a religious worship audience. I will now briefly elaborate on three other theoretical approaches to the study of religion and media. These, while they did not factor as heavily into my research at Coastal were nevertheless still useful during my fieldwork and thus are relevant to my research and the development of my understanding of the theoretical framework for my work.

## **2.11. Functionalist Approaches to Mediatized Religion**

A functionalist approach to mediatization views media in its various forms as mere tools in their relationship to religion. According to Hosseini (2008), media lack an independent cultural identity and as such, should be employed by religious organizations "purely for the dissemination of [sacred] messages" (p. 58). However, as a functionalist approach to mediatization purports a fixed and stable relation between religion and media it does not make allowances for any unpredictability with regards to digitally mediated religious communication. Hosseini (2008) furthers this critique of functionalism by citing Neil Postman's claim that "tools and devices, irrespective of their limited frameworks and initial applications, have the power to free themselves from initial restrictions, spreading their domination throughout new and unpredictable boundaries" (p. 58). For this reason, Hosseini (2008) believes that religious themed media are best utilized "for benevolent purposes, such as the transmission of the holy book, religious stories and traditions" so as to minimize the possibility of interference (p. 59). However, interference as a result of digital media integration in worship is inevitable and for this reason viewing media integration at Coastal as completely neutral did not provide the requisite depth of understanding and critical distance that I required when conducting ethnographic research.



## 2.12. Essentialist Approaches to Mediatized Religion

In deference to a functionalist approach to mediatization, media essentialism as a framework for the study of digital religion views media as having an identity that is entirely independent from humanity. As such, media are viewed as fostering a mutually beneficial and interactive relationship between audience and religious ritual (Hosseini, 2008). This interactivity between media and religious audience falls under two separate camps, *ontological essentialism* and *media essentialism*.

An ontological essentialist approach owes much to the work of Heidegger who rejects functionalist paradigms in favor of viewing technology as “an ontological phenomenon” that has become “fully integrated into the structure of man’s existence” (Hosseini, 2008, p. 59). It views technology not as a tool but an essential aspect of human nature, one which has shaped religion throughout history. In this regard, media and religion are inseparable from one another (Stolow, 2005). Thus by taking an ontological essentialist approach to the examination of digital religious practices, one views the relationship between religion and technology as a linear historical narrative. The result I have found is a very useful theoretical framework that I have also made considerable use of in my research at Coastal Church.

Neil Postman (1993), paying tribute to Marshall McLuhan, “emphasizes that any new medium or tool is capable of imposing its essential form and content on public opinion” and consequently “determines the ideas, ways of thinking and the sentiments” of individuals (Hosseini, 2008, p. 61). A media essentialist approach to religion owes much to this analogy in that it views technology as having replaced God and thus forcing humanity to validate itself through the technology it yields (Hosseini, 2008). And while such an approach does seem rather technologically determinist, it is in fact far more humanistic in character and reflects, I believe, a long-standing Christian tradition of allowing worship practices to evolve in a manner similar to evolving communication practices in secular circles.

## 2.13. Interactionist Approaches

As stated, each of the previously mentioned theories regarding the relationship between religion and media fall into one of two camps; they are either institutional in origin or philosophical in approach and each attempts to close what the church sees as a cultural divide between the two (Hosseini, 2008). However, an interactionist approach does not sit within these specific institutional or philosophical schools of thought because it views religion and media as an inseparable part of human behaviour. Given that the goal of religion is to bring greater meaning to human life, an interactionist approach enhances our understanding of religion by accepting the integration of media into worship and studying ways members develop and reach consensus about the meaning of religious experience within a religious community. Stewart Hoover (1995) presents an interactionist approach to religion and suggests that the use of media for the promotion of religious ideals is in fact a social necessity that is expressed “in the symbolic production of [a] mediated public sphere” (p. 143). This mediated public sphere exists; or rather, it should, without the overarching structure of an institutionalized *civitas*. However, what Hoover’s (1995) approach fails to provide is a functional mechanism for the interaction of religion with media (Hosseini, 2008). This is necessary because if the transmission (dissemination) of religious ideals are better suited to a mediated public sphere rather than an institutionalized hierarchy, then an explanation for such an approach must be found.

Such a mechanism may be found in Hjarvard’s (2013) mediatization theory which views media as an integrated aspect of religion providing “conduits of communication” in order to provide “moral and spiritual guidance and a sense of community” through audience interaction in a digitally mediated religious setting (*Digital Religion*, 2012, p. 229). In a mediated public sphere, the role of media is to ensure a uniform message transmission and small group leaders provide the necessary moral and spiritual guidance. Thus the need for a traditional hierarchical *civitas* diminishes as control over a congregation body can be accomplished holistically instead.

## 2.14. Summary

In this chapter I have outlined several theoretical frameworks, each of which attempts to explain the role and effects of digital media in religious worship. I began this chapter by situating my research at Coastal Church in a historical context. I did this in order to demonstrate that Coastal is representative of a long-standing tradition in Western religion, a tradition of adopting the dominant communication mode of the time in order to stay relevant and transmit its core values and beliefs to an increasingly media-aware audience. I then examined the role of authenticity in religious worship and posed the question of “What is authentic today?” This is something that I asked each of my study participants during interviews. I then looked at the role of physical time and space in worship and how digital media allow worshippers to in effect bypass or negate the restrictions of time and space. Finally, by providing the reader with a variety of approaches to theorizing the complex relationship between religion and media, it is my hope that I have demonstrated how I have positioned my research with respect to the growing area of scholarship on digital religion as well as the potential of my research to contribute original insights.

Writing in the introduction to her 2013 text *Digital Religion*, Heidi Campbell elaborates on the need for a ‘scholarly apologetic’ highlighting the importance of researching the growing field of digital religion because the impact that it has on society is too great to misrepresent or ignore. Stuart M. Hoover echoes this sentiment in the concluding chapter of the text, stating that:

*[We] have to keep in mind that at some fundamental level digital religion is essentially about religion and spirituality. It is not about changing the world and politics, it is about people using technologies to live out the spiritual. We must see digital religion as being about the generation of models of practice and the ability to produce meaning in the world that relates to the religious. (page 268)*

With that in mind, what is truly needed is a perspective on digital religion that does not gloss over the societal effects of media technology on even the smallest of worship

groups, one with which religious worshippers across the globe can be studied as a cohesive whole of many parts, each serving a greater purpose: to engage with the divine presence of a higher being. Such is the true essence of religion and such is the manner in which it should be studied. It is here I believe that my research fits into a much larger socio-political perspective. And as we will see in Chapter 4, the struggles faced by Coastal to not only remain relevant but also to grow are in fact representative of the struggles of Christians the world over.

## **Chapter 3. Research Methodology**

During my analysis of digital media integration at Coastal Church, I was faced with a proverbial ‘fork in the road’ decision quite early on: qualitative or quantitative analysis? Both clearly have considerable merit and I knew that had I chosen to go the quantitative route and distribute, say, a comprehensive survey to a random sample culled from Coastal’s congregation, I would no doubt have amassed a considerable amount of useful data which I could use as a lens to peer into the workings of a modern day Christian organization and shed light on my research questions. However, what I really wanted to accomplish with my study was to go deeper, to understand not only the ‘how’ of Coastal’s media integration but also the ‘why’. To do this I knew I wanted to focus on the human aspect of the church for Coastal is, like all other churches, a church of and for the people. It was for this reason that I chose the qualitative route as my primary method of analysis. I felt strongly that an ethnographic study would not only yield considerable data but also allow me to truly understand the thoughts, feelings and opinions of the modern ‘digital Christian’ at Coastal Church, an organization I chose based on its medium size in comparison to other such churches in the area, as well as its ease of accessibility and popularity. However, I also conducted documentary research, notably by studying the archives and other material produced by the church posted on Coastal’s website.

### **3.1. Coastal’s Website: Insights and Experiences**

I began my study of Coastal by examining its comprehensive, user-friendly website ([www.coastalchurch.org](http://www.coastalchurch.org)). The website is structured in an easily navigable format with numerous drop menus, app-downloads for smartphones as well as advertisements for church-related courses and announcements, all of which provide a substantial amount of useful, background information. Descriptions of key website sections are as follows:

### **3.1.1. Ministries**

As an evangelical, non-denominational Christian organization, Coastal offers numerous courses for its congregation centred on themes of personal growth, all aimed at helping individual worshippers enhance their relationship with God. Courses (ministries) are typically led by volunteers and run during the evenings as catered affairs. The most popular of Coastal's ministries is the ALPHA course held weekly on Mondays at 6.30pm and is typically the first course that new members at Coastal are expected to take. The ALPHA course serves as an introduction to Christianity and according to its website has become a "worldwide phenomenon<sup>16</sup>" running in 164 countries with "over 16 million" participants. In addition to the ALPHA course, Coastal's ministries offer community outreach programs, a baptism FAQ section, as well as signups for various other courses geared towards children and young adults. Ministry courses at Coastal are designed with a tiered approach in that one begins their church membership with ALPHA before moving consecutively through more advanced courses culminating in regular participation in a Life Group.

### **3.1.2. Life Groups**

Coastal's Life Groups are, by way of website description, "an effective way for everyone to feel personally connected to the church community and to learn and grow [their] faith in an intimate and supportive environment." Unlike ALPHA, Life Groups are directed less toward bible study and more toward the unpacking of Coastal's weekly sermons and the fostering of in-group participation through dissemination of the Holy Scriptures. The participatory, communal mandate of Coastal's Life Groups is supported by a particular sentence in the description in which it is made clear that participation in a Life

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.coastalchurch.org/ministries/the-alpha-course/>

Group “is NOT [about] the group leader teaching or preaching to the group. It is a time where [members] read the bible together and...share their thoughts or ask questions.”

I personally attended a Life Group on January 15, 2015 at the invitation of Coastal’s pastoral team. Life Groups are held during the evening at a host/group leader’s residence and at times, inside the basement of Coastal’s primary location downtown. Evenings typically begin with a meal or snack and light conversation. Immediately following group member introductions, all those present gather together in a semi-circle and a pre-recorded video message is played on a large, flat screen monitor connected to the Group Leader’s laptop computer. Video messages are typically of the subscription format and are organized thematically on a week-to-week basis. Following viewing of the video the Group Leader opens up the floor to questions centered on the video message. Life Group evenings run for approximately two hours and play a crucial role in Coastal’s organizational structure as they allow for a topographical system of control that ensures congregation members receive and understand Coastal’s messaging in a unified manner. (See Chapter 4).

### **3.1.3. Giving**

Charitable giving is a foundational principle of Christianity and Coastal is no different from other religious organizations around the world in this regard. However, what separates Coastal from other less mediatized religious institutions is the *manner* in which congregation members give. The Giving section of Coastal’s website is unique in that it allows for online donations through electronic payment methods typically reserved for online marketplace transactions such as those found on websites like Amazon.com and eBay. Congregation members are thus able to donate to Coastal through either online debit (PayPal) or credit card payment systems in addition to more traditional funding methods such as the stereotypical ‘passing of the basket’. Similarly, the primary downtown location also has a POS (point of sale) machine located in the bookstore. And while not mandatory, Coastal congregation members are encouraged to tithe a percentage of their income,

generally around 10%<sup>17</sup>. This ensures upkeep of the premises at all locations as well as the salaries of the pastoral team and support and administrative staff.

### **3.1.4. Digital Sermons**

By far the largest and most media-integrated section of Coastal's website is its 'Watch and Listen' page in which digital recordings of weekly sermons are uploaded and made available in streaming video and downloadable audio formats. At the time of writing this chapter (February 2014), the earliest archived footage dates back to January 2011. Placing the cursor on the 'Watch and Listen' page releases a four-tiered drop down menu with fixed links to 'Latest Message from Pastor Dave',<sup>18</sup> 'Series Archive', 'Healing Scriptures Audio' also narrated by Pastor Dave which pairs soothing scripture recitation with relaxing piano music, and 'Our Podcast' which contains audio recordings of sermons downloadable directly to a smartphone.<sup>19</sup> New video footage is uploaded each week following Coastal's Sunday service in its primary downtown location and arranged in a monthly thematic format. Descriptions of monthly themes are paired with appealing, branded colored graphics. Each month is given a specific key theme related to the Holy Scriptures with each weekly service serving as a sub-section of the overall theme. For example, the theme of the month of February 2014, is listed as 'Stay Strong.' The section header of the month is composed of boldfaced words paired with an animated drawing of a boxer ready to begin a bout. As an example, the thematic description for the 'Stay Strong' month of February, 2014 is as follows:

<sup>17</sup> As dictated to me in private electronic correspondence with Coastal's administrative team.

<sup>18</sup> Pastor Dave Koop – Coastal's founder and senior pastor.

<sup>19</sup> Podcasts and video sermons do not contain the musical worship component, which begins and ends each sermon.



*"This month we're looking at the spiritual battle we fight, and how we can stand against the attacks of the enemy. We do have a real enemy, however God has equipped us to fight and given us the strength to walk in victory."<sup>20</sup>*

Fixed links for streaming video of each week's sermon are available on the right hand side of the page in addition to a 'Notes' link which provides a link to a downloadable file of each week's sermon scripture selections given out by ushers when entering the church. When compared to the rest of Coastal's webpage, the 'Notes' are rather plain and uninformative. Presumably, this is because they are designed as pure information that is easily understood.

I viewed eight separate digital sermon recordings for the purposes of initial descriptive analysis. The first three recordings (October 20, 2013, November 24, 2013 and January 12, 2014) were selected with no method whatsoever with the final five of the sample drawn with the aid of a simple coding scheme coupled with a random number generator. The purpose of this brief exercise was to provide me with a sense of familiarity with how Coastal conducts its weekly sermons before I began physically attending them.

Each of the five randomly sampled recordings were selected by coding each week of the years 2011, 2012 and 2013 with a number. Thus the first week of January 2011 was given a value of 1 (one) with the second week given a value of 2 (two) and the third week a value of 3 (three). In total over the three-year period, 149 separate video recordings were assigned numerical values and arranged in a linear fashion (1, 2, 3, etc...). An online random number generator was then used to select five recordings for thematic analysis (February 17 2013, December 8 2013, February 24 2013, March 13 2011 and August 4 2013). Recordings from 2014 were not included in this random sampling process as when I began the analysis in late January 2014, a complete month of recordings had yet to be compiled and posted. As stated, the viewing of the three initial recordings was intended

<sup>20</sup> Presumably the 'enemy' referred to in the description is Sin or Satan.

simply to familiarize myself with the structure of Coastal's sermons while the five randomly selected recordings were used for a thematic analysis.

### **3.2. Fieldwork and Interviews with Members of the Congregation**

In an ethnographic study, the decision of how to gather relevant data involves decisions on part of the researcher about their strategies and role with respect to the community under study. Some prefer a 'fly on the wall' approach in which they remain hidden and simply observe their surroundings, whereas others prefer to take a far more participatory approach. I chose a distanced approach for my fieldwork at Coastal and combined observational research with in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Given that the overarching goal of my study was to peer into the life-world of the Coastal community while keeping my own *a priori* beliefs regarding organized religion in check, I felt a deep-seated need to gather my data in the most meaningful but unobtrusive way possible. At times this seemed almost impossible in that this research strategy raises the issue of 'How do I gather meaningful data while at the same time not allow my own biases to influence my research?' And of course, being a non-believer meant that no matter how hard I tried, I would never really become part of the Coastal community as I simply wasn't 'one of them.'

This purposeful distance between myself and my participants is in stark contrast to Laura Clawson's (2004) ethnographic study entitled 'Part of the Community' which focused on Southern Baptist sacred harp singing in rural Alabama (Hargittai, 2009). Clawson (2004) made it a point of honor to not only interview her subjects but to fully participate in their day-to-day lives, helping them in shopping, cleaning and household repairs. This approach, Clawson (2004) felt, enabled her to become a part of the community on which she was focusing and gain a deeper appreciation for her subjects. However, Clawson (2004) later observed that her adoption of the role of a full participant in the community she studied meant that the community took her knowledge of their practices for granted. When Clawson introduced another researcher to the community who was an

outsider, the community members shared much information that they had not told Clawson because she was considered part of the community and therefore already knowledgeable about their beliefs and practices. Owing to my decision to remain at arms-length from my participants, as an outsider and observer, I struggled at times to be understood by those I spoke to. I say this for my presence at church events often initially made congregation members apprehensive as I was publically introduced by members of the pastoral team as a researcher. This, coupled with my conscious desire to remain objective by maintaining a certain level of distance from my participants, often meant that I had to reassure those present that I had only the best of intentions with my research and simply desired to understand how Coastal worked and what it meant in their lives.

For example, when I attended a Life Group during the evening of January 15, 2015, group members were quite hesitant to discuss their personal opinions on the weekly topic (in this case the opening pages of Genesis) openly while I sat to the back of the room with pen and paper in hand. Further, when pressed to explain my research (as I often was) I found that I had to simplify certain aspects of my research such as when attempting to explain Hjarvard's (2013) mediatization of religion theory. This caused me some level of discomfort and guilt; however, such moral dilemmas, as outlined in Gary Fine's (1993) article *Ten Lies of Ethnography*, are at best, par-for-the-course with ethnography.

### **3.2.1. Background to Sample Selection for Interviews**

My initial foray into selecting my sample at Coastal began in early February 2014 when I reached out to Coastal's pastoral team through its website. I did this not only because they are in some respects the 'gatekeepers' of Coastal, but also because I felt a need, out of respect, to be given the approval of the pastoral team before I began my fieldwork rather than simply beginning sampling on my own without meeting

representatives of the pastoral team beforehand.<sup>21</sup> Within a matter of days of sending my initial e-mail I received a phone call from an associate pastor who agreed to meet me for coffee. During this meeting I attempted to explain to the associate pastor what exactly it was that I was hoping to accomplish (investigate the experiences of Coastal's congregation members with using digital media in worship) and how important it was to me to receive permission to do so. He expressed considerable interest in my work and promised to get in touch with me as soon as possible. Several days later I received an e-mail from the head pastor's assistant, my principal point of contact at Coastal from then on, informing me that Pastor Dave had decided that he would not grant me permission to conduct my study. I responded to this decision with a carefully worded e-mail reply in which I again outlined the necessity of my doing a study of this nature, the originality of my research and the need for Coastal's pastoral team to sign off on it. I also requested a meeting with Pastor Dave as I felt that meeting him face-to-face would allow me to better explain what it is that I was hoping to accomplish and how it might have the potential to benefit Coastal in turn.

To my great surprise, I received a phone call the next morning from him and he invited me down to the church for coffee. The two of us met in his office for over an hour and discussed my family's Eastern European Catholic background, my interest in Coastal as well as previous research conducted in the field of digital religion by scholars such as Drs. Heidi Campbell and Stig Hjarvard. The meeting culminated in Pastor Dave not only granting me permission to conduct my fieldwork at Coastal, but also a commitment that he and the entire pastoral team would do their utmost to help me in any way possible. Having received the blessings of Coastal's pastoral team as well as its promise to aid me in my research, I set off to find my study participants. Recruiting my participants however, was, at first at least, a rather difficult process.

<sup>21</sup> That said; there was no ethical reason why I could not sample on my own. But as we will see, my decision to reach out to the pastoral proved highly beneficial.

### 3.2.2. Sampling

Initially, I had intended to use a technique known as *snowball sampling* in my study. Given that I already had a contact at the church (a business associate) I intended to interview her first, and then ask her to recommend further participants, stopping when I reached my desired quota of 25.<sup>22</sup> However, soon after interviewing my first two participants in early August, I received an e-mail from Pastor Dave's assistant informing me that I would no longer be permitted to conduct my own sampling and that Coastal would only allow me to interview congregation members of their choosing. Crestfallen, I met with my supervisor, wondering if this decision by Coastal's pastoral team meant not only that my study would not be representative of the full range of members in the congregation, but might also spell the end of my fieldwork. However, after discussing the situation with two senior departmental faculty members, my supervisor informed me that the situation was not nearly as dire as I initially feared. Indeed, given that the goal of my fieldwork was to interview individuals who attended Coastal on a regular basis, then regardless of the decision of the pastoral team to bar me from sampling on my own, I could still be able to accomplish my goal of interviewing members of the community. To this end, I did not draw a snowball sample of my study participants, but instead the selection process for the sample was more akin to a purposive sampling technique, with representatives chosen by the pastoral team that the team considered members 'in good standing'. I received regular e-mails from Pastor Dave's assistant with the names and contact information of those congregation members willing to be interviewed.

In retrospect, this became a double-edged sword. One on hand, regularly receiving lists of names from Pastor Dave's assistant made the interview process considerably easier for me. On the other hand, this created a situation in which I had no way of knowing if the responses to my interview questions had previously been discussed and agreed upon by the participant and Coastal's pastoral team. In short, I simply had no way of knowing if my

<sup>22</sup> 25 being an arbitrary number agreed upon in conjunction with my supervisor.

participants had been prepared in advance or not. As we will see in Chapter 4, there was considerable overlap between the responses of participants, causing me to continually question if this demonstrated the solidarity of Coastal's congregation or if participants were simply giving 'canned' responses to questions already known. But while I did fear this at first, over time and after speaking with several interviewees, I came to believe that this was not the case at all and that in fact the consensus I was witnessing was a manifestation of the solidarity of a close-knit religious community.

### **3.2.3. Sermon Participation**

In the early weeks of data collection I attended a total of three weekly sermons at Coastal over a two month period of time; an 11am Sunday Service at the primary downtown location, a 9am Sunday Service at the Strathcona location in the downtown East Side and a 5pm Saturday evening service at the downtown location. I did not attend any services at the Pitt Meadows satellite campus but was fully versed in its operation by Coastal's pastoral team. By the conclusion of my fieldwork in March 2015, Coastal had opened up a fourth location on Commercial Drive, a Vancouver neighbourhood outside of the commercial downtown location of the main site. As in the case of the Pitt Meadows location, I did not attend a sermon at this location but was duly informed of its operation by the pastoral team.

Regardless of location, all services follow an identical format. Before the service, Coastal 'greeters' wearing red branded t-shirts and hooded sweatshirts stand at the location doors shaking hands and hugging congregation members as they enter. As one enters the location, they are directed to either a basement or an anteroom where a selection of coffee, cookies, muffins and fruits are set up. Congregation members mingle and converse quietly with one another. In the downtown location, a wall mounted flat screen monitor displays a countdown clock until the hour of the sermon. Shortly before the sermon begins, 'ushers' escort congregation members into the church itself and hand out pamphlets containing the weekly scripture selections as well as Coastal branded promotional materials for upcoming courses and weekend retreats. These materials are designed and produced by Coastal's in-

house production team that includes a social media expert, graphic designer and an audio-visual department.

After being escorted to a seat in the pews Coastal's worship team (band)<sup>23</sup> takes the stage and kicks off a four to five song set list. This portion of the service is deemed 'worship time' and the music is entirely Christian themed, upbeat and pleasant to listen to. Large hanging wall monitors distributed around the location display lyrics for the songs being played on a multi-coloured, soothing graphic background designed by Coastal's in-house audio and visual department. Directly to the back of each church location is an Audio Visual control booth for regulating lighting, volume, and display. During the worship component of the service, some congregation members dance and sway or clap their hands while others stand in silence seemingly allowing the music to wash over them.

After the conclusion of the worship period, an assistant pastor takes the stage and delivers a short 'warm up' speech, thanking the audience for attending. The audience is then asked if any of them are new and if they are, to raise their hand. Ushers run amongst the pews distributing branded gift bags containing gift certificates, pens, chewing gum, a bookmark, an envelope for tithing as well as branded promotional materials for the ALPHA course and the monthly theme of the sermon. When this is concluded the assistant pastor leaves the stage and a more senior pastor, typically Pastor Dave or his wife Cheryl takes their place. Thus begins the sermon component of the service, typically 30 to 35 minutes in length. The sermon is centered on the monthly theme with each week building upon the next. Following the sermon, the congregation is again thanked for attending and a version of the Eucharist is performed.

Growing up in a Catholic family, I attended many Sunday services at my local church with my Grandparents. As a result, my expectation of a religious service was tinged with memories of incense, wine and bread wafers. As Coastal is decidedly Protestant in

<sup>23</sup> The worship team includes a vocalist, drummer, guitarist, bassist, and keyboardist.

approach however, (preferring to identify as non-denominational Christian) the Eucharist is quite different. Rather than having congregation members line up with arms crossed before a priest who distributes wine and bread, Coastal's ushers serve the congregation with multi-tiered platters containing crumbled wheat crackers and plastic thimbles of grape juice. The disposable cups are plain, resembling those used to administer medication to patients in hospitals. I initially found this approach shocking due to my early memories of attending Catholic mass with opulent accoutrements but as we will see in Chapter 4, Coastal's approach is not based on tradition or luxury but rather, sheer efficiency. Indeed Coastal's version of the Eucharist could be interpreted as a rejection of the symbolism of material wealth, however given the openly wealthy appearance of its pastoral team, congregation members, and content of sermons I believe this is not the case.

Following the Eucharist, the senior pastor in attendance (typically Pastor Dave) takes the stage again and delivers a closing address to the audience. Announcements are then given, often in advertorial format for upcoming courses, retreats and opportunities for volunteering. The worship team then rejoins the stage and plays a closing set of two or three songs. At this point, the sermon is concluded and the audience files out of the church and into the basement or ante room for more refreshments. This format does not typically change across Coastal's locations; the only alteration occurs when a live sermon is substituted with a pre-recorded video sermon. Video sermons are typically recorded during the Saturday evening service at Coastal's downtown location and are then broadcast to Strathcona, Pitt Meadows and Commercial Drive, generally on a monthly basis, although the frequency of this is increasing (See Chapter 4). As well, the pastoral team rotates speaking engagements at each of the locations. As we will see in Chapter 4, this is done to ensure a uniformity of message transmission and reception in all of the four venues.

#### **3.2.4. Interview Process**

After receiving regularly updated lists of names and contact info of new participants from Pastor Dave's assistant, I sent a brief e-mail to each one containing a formal letter of invitation as well as a note of biographical information on myself and my study (Appendix



C). Upon receiving confirmation from participants, I immediately set to scheduling interviews. I gave participants complete freedom in deciding when and where to hold interviews, believing in the necessity in their being as comfortable as possible. The only caveat of course, was that as interviews were to be voice recorded, the location had to have as little ambient noise as possible. Some participants invited me into their homes, other interviews were held at Coastal Church itself and others still were held in small coffee shops and community centers throughout Vancouver. Upon formally meeting participants and asking that they sign a consent form (Appendix D) I then offered to let them view the interview questions. Most declined. I began each interview by making it clear that the questions were really just meant to be a guide and that the goal of the interview was to “just have a conversation.” Generally speaking, I sat back and allowed participants to speak as freely as possible and for as long as possible. Most interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour in length, although some were in the 30 to 35 minute range. Interruptions on my part were kept to a minimum and I did my utmost to bracket my own preconceived notions of religion and media when conducting interviews. All participants were assigned a number which corresponded to the file name of the audio recording. This was done not only for organizational purposes but also as a way to prepare for the information collection that would help me keep their identities confidential.

During interviews, I kept field notes in which I noted what I deemed to be ‘key points’ of interest such as repeated statements, emerging themes and, as the number of interviews increased, repeated themes which I felt I could use during my analysis. I did not record the location of interviews as they were simply too random and varied to be of any significance nor did I record the time of day or weather as I did not deem such information relevant. However, by requesting that participants choose a location that was as quiet and comfortable as possible, I ensured that participants felt confident in their ability to speak unhindered. By granting the interviewees this level of control, I attempted to establish a rapport that would allow them to feel comfortable to share their views openly with me. Toward the end of each interview, I would ask each participant if they had anything that they would like to ask me. I found this to be a highly effective interview tool as it almost

inevitably led to a spontaneous change in direction in the interview and often yielded considerable and unexpected data. To this end, I would interject with this question if I felt the interview was growing stale, a tactic that worked remarkably well. For example, when interviewing participant 801-0037, a female from an impoverished background, the responses I received seemed deliberately vague and I sensed that the participant had something on her mind that she was unsure she should share. After several minutes, I asked if there was anything she would like to ask me. She asked me what troubles I had had with doing my research and once I had answered this to her liking, she fully opened herself up to me, sharing a great many personal things including her family's battles with drug and alcohol addiction and her finding of Salvation in Christ.

I also made every effort to transcribe interviews as soon as possible, often beginning them the following day when the conversation was still 'fresh' in my mind. However, due to the size of my sample (25 participants) and the time constraints of my teaching duties as a graduate student, transcription was occasionally delayed several days. However, I do not feel that these short delays had any significant impact on my data collection or subsequent analysis, as the audio recordings were generally clear with very few unintelligible comments. This, when paired with my field notes, allowed me to 'step back' into the interview during transcription and in effect re-live the individual experiences. I also ensured that transcriptions were kept as accurate as possible, noting significant pauses and the emphasizing of certain statements. During moments of uncertainty, I would check participant responses against my field notes for clarification. By keeping to this schedule fairly consistently, the process of transcription enhanced my grasp of the material I had gathered during the interviews and became an important stage

for analysis. In brief, I was able to essentially re-experience each interview during transcription. The result, I feel, was a comprehensive and highly useful data set.<sup>24</sup>

### **3.3. Data Analysis**

The analysis of my interview data was, during the early stages at least, a daunting task. Each transcription file was between twelve and fifteen pages of single spaced text and when multiplied 25 times over, the result was a considerable data set. For purposes of simplicity, I chose a holistic method of data analysis which I was able to streamline into an efficient process. Following the completion of each individual transcription file, I would read over the entire transcript, looking for emerging themes. This was a crucial first step for I often found myself discovering new and interesting responses to questions that I had not noticed during the initial interview or transcription process. Relevant passages of text were highlighted for quick access at a future date. At first, I was not entirely sure *what* I was looking for but I knew that in time repetitive key themes would emerge; themes such as community, accessibility and connectivity, individual choice, control, and continuity eventually did emerge (See Chapter 4). Once I had identified these themes (this did not occur until I had interviewed and transcribed several interviews) I knew what to look for.<sup>25</sup> This was an ongoing process throughout the interview and transcription period of my study and it changed very little throughout the eight months that I dedicated to data collection and analysis.

<sup>24</sup> I had originally envisioned analyzing my data through a qualitative research program known as NVivo. NVivo software would have allowed me to organize my data into 'nodes' which I could then run basic statistics on. However after much deliberation, I decided against using the program as I felt that analyzing my data set manually would give me a greater 'feel' for participant responses. In addition, as my interviews were largely free flowing I felt that the rigidity of NVivo would not permit for the freedom of analysis that my chosen holistic method did.

<sup>25</sup> A recurring issue during data analysis was found in which I was constantly concerned that repetitive themes in participant responses was due to the possibility of their being primed beforehand during sample selection by Coastal's pastoral team.

What did change, however, was my understanding of these themes. I must admit that although I did my utmost to bracket my preconceived notions of religion and digital media, I nevertheless anticipated the emergence of at least some of them. And when they did emerge, they became my stereotypical ‘lightbulb’ moments in which I knew that my research design was sound for it reflected the work of other scholars working in similar fields. Once these themes had emerged and been repeated several times, I was able to organize them in large chunks and draw lines of continuity between participant responses and scholarly literature on digital religion. This allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the nuances of digital religion at Coastal Church and understand its role in society. As well, the holistic method I utilized for my data analysis, as it was not constrained by a pre-established classification scheme (as it might have been had I used a pre-established coding scheme ), allowed me to react quickly to new and emerging themes as they appeared in the testimony of the study participants during transcription of the interviews.

### **3.4. Summary**

In this chapter, I have described my research methodology for my fieldwork at Coastal Church. Beginning with documentary research and an analysis of Coastal’s online materials, I transitioned into semi-structured interviews with 25 of Coastal’s congregation including members of the pastoral team and organizing committee. I then transcribed each interview, allowing key themes to emerge. Once I had identified these themes, I grouped them into thematic categories, allowing participant responses to guide my analysis of interview data and build on my understanding of digital religion at Coastal. Analysis of my data set will be elaborated in detail in Chapter 4, while in Chapter 5 I present the reader with my final thoughts regarding the future of organized digital religion.

## Chapter 4. Data Analysis

In this chapter, I discuss my analysis of the ethnographic data I compiled over an eight-month period beginning in August 2014 and ending in March 2015. During this time I sought to isolate and identify key themes related to the *mediatization of religion* (Hjarvard, 2013). These include insights related to the themes of *community and interconnectedness, hierarchical control, banal religion, isolation and distraction* and the *textual authenticity* of digital scriptures. Each of these themes, both on their own and together, serve as supporting pillars in my analysis of mediatization at Coastal Church and appear throughout each of the 25 qualitative interviews that I conducted.

My aim in this chapter is to present the reader with a number of snapshots of how a contemporary non-denominational Christian organization conducts itself in terms of religious worship and maintains solidarity in a community of worshippers in an increasingly secular world. This chapter presents my findings through a combination of thematic interview quotes culled from the transcriptions of the interviews I conducted and a discussion of the significance of these quotes in the context of my research objectives.<sup>26</sup> It is my desire for the reader to utilize these themes and my analysis as a way to gain insights into the life world of Coastal Church and to understand not only its inner workings and struggles to remain relevant, but also its efforts to keep pace with a multitude of technological innovations.

In order not to distract the reader or muddy the waters of analysis, I will unpack these themes separately, but let it be known that each lies under the overarching umbrella of a neo-Durkheimian community of faith, one which not only exists but thrives in an increasingly secular world that is more often than not at odds with religious practice. Over

<sup>26</sup> I have made every effort to retain the original voice and ‘feel’ of the quotes that I transcribed. Thus, I have chosen to include many of the pauses, hesitations and speech inconsistencies of participants such as “uhm’s” and “uhh’s. However, some of these inconsistencies are been removed in order to make select quotes more readable.

the course of conducting these interviews, my own views and opinions of Christianity were considerably altered as a result. I began my fieldwork at Coastal with a deep bias against the necessity of Christianity in this modern, secular-driven age. Yet I willingly admit that I underwent a tremendous personal transformation as a result of my fieldwork, one which by its conclusion saw me not only understand the need for an organization like Coastal to exist today, but also to appreciate it for what it truly is: a group of like-minded individuals, united under a common set of beliefs, with each individual a part of something much greater: an inclusive, highly supportive and interconnected community supported by faith and linked through a seamless use of digital networking media.

#### **4.1. Community**

The legacy of Durkheim (1912) was constantly present during my fieldwork at Coastal. As I chose to utilize Durkheim's (1912) definition of religion as a 'unified system of collective beliefs and practices' for my research purposes, it became clear to me almost immediately after beginning my interviews that it is community above all else that binds Coastal's congregation members together; a community of members linked through their adoption of networked digital media technologies. Yet as important as these digitally mediated community practices are in their lives, individual reasons for joining Coastal varied greatly.

I admit that my initial assumption for why individuals became members of Coastal was based on my own experiences growing up in a deeply observant Catholic family, and my sense that family traditions are influential factors in decisions about religious practices. For example, I grew up with the impression that one attended the same church as their parents and extended family. The local priest baptized you and watched you grow. He gave you your first communion and perhaps even presided over your wedding ceremony years later. At Coastal however, given the very young age of the congregation, individual reasons for attending were quite different, and not determined by the family traditions of the

members I interviewed. As I soon learned, becoming a member of Coastal is not so much based on tradition as it is on proximity and convenience.

For example, as the majority of interviewees I met with were quite young, generally under the age of 30, they had not yet developed close ties to a religious organization. These would come later as they married and started their adult lives as Christian families with Christian children. Older interviewees, such as those in their mid-40s and early-50s generally already had families and thus their ties to Coastal ran considerably deeper for they routinely attended with their children. Younger participants however, often settled on Coastal as their church of choice purely out of geographical convenience or better still, through a Google search. I found this very surprising at first however after completing several interviews I found that I was able to gain a much better understanding of their reasons for doing so.

For example, participant 801-0027, a 25-year-old immigrant newly transplanted from South America, chose Coastal purely through a search engine selection as she felt that using the Internet was the most efficient way to find a new church. Coming from a graphic arts background, she settled on Coastal soon after being exposed to its in-house produced promotional materials:

*“I actually googled churches in Vancouver downtown and the first one that appeared was Coastal Church<sup>27</sup>. ... When I stepped into Coastal and saw all the bulletins, the pamphlets, and all the visual communication I knew it was the church for me. Because my mentality is that if an organization or a business is willing to pay for better visual communication then it means it’s going somewhere.”*

This is significant for it outlines the effectiveness of Coastal’s branding in building community. In addition to Coastal, countless other Christian churches in Europe and North

<sup>27</sup> Coastal’s website is designed for SEO (Search Engine Optimization) and has a high page ranking in Google.

America are relying on social media platforms to craft “strategies to combat the cognitive dissonances created by today’s highly mediatized life” (Justice, 2014, p. 93). Essentially, churches like Coastal rely on popular secular media to entice and engage young Christians, a highly effective and rather novel approach to proselytization. And as participant 801-0027 elaborated, once she had discovered Coastal and given it a chance, it was community that made her stay:

*“Coastal is a family. The senior pastors and their sons and daughters. But more than, it’s just every volunteer, every leader. They come to be a part of the big family. And that comes to be in downtown Vancouver. It’s in the community, they’re a family to a community.”*

This thread of family-like togetherness at Coastal ran throughout my interviews and it was evident that many of Coastal’s congregation members, especially those that are young, chose Coastal as they were seeking a certain style of communal connection. Indeed many essentially ‘shopped around’ at other local churches before settling on Coastal as their church of choice. Participant 801-0033, a 28-year-old male, briefly attended four Christian churches scattered through the lower mainland before finally finding and settling on Coastal:

*“I’d been to Westside Church. I went to the Village Church. I went to 10<sup>th</sup> Street Church. And I went to one out in Cloverdale...I actually kind of liked another church more, initially. But it was the people at Coastal that got me to stay there. I ended up making some really good friends, like my best friend, he was planted there and he had kind of laid his claim on Coastal and said ‘that’s where I’m going to be going.’ And I was like ‘okay, I’ll check it out. I’ll see what it has.’ And then the more I went and the more people I met I found it was where I wanted to be. The pastors are amazing. The ministry team is really good and I really enjoy their message.”*

This notion of church selection based on close friendships and proximity was especially evident with my youngest participant, 801-0036, an eighteen-year-old female. While her immigrant family originally took her to Coastal, it was Coastal’s emphasis on youth engagement that piqued her curiosity and caused her to feel that Coastal is in many ways, a second home:



*“Me and my mother came to Coastal. We tried it out, we liked it. Since then we’ve been members of Coastal. The people, the pastors, the group leaders, and like...just how it was filled with like, the younger generation. That really got my attention... When I think of Coastal, uhm, it’s definitely like a second home for me. It’s a place that I’ve found solid relationships through friends and pastors and...it’s just...a place that I really found God.”*

When asked to elaborate on the role of Coastal’s Life Groups in forging these relationships as the Life Groups form a key component of Coastal’s approach to worship and dissemination, the participant expounded on their virtues, stating that:

*“Life Groups definitely make you stronger in your faith. I feel like I definitely found solid, good friends in my Life Group. And it’s just a place that because it’s small, like if you have any questions about anything, you can trust those people to just go and answer your questions and they’ll be there to support you.”*

Clearly, in-group engagement and communal ties are key in selecting Coastal as one’s church of choice. Yet it is the overarching message put forth by Coastal combined with its close-knit communal atmosphere that keeps its congregation members returning. At its core, this message is simply one of having a close, intimate relationship with God.<sup>28</sup> This is achieved through a supportive, nurturing community of solidarity facilitated and supported by a media-driven interconnectedness. This media centric approach to dissemination enables Coastal’s messaging to be communicated in a uniform manner from its pastoral team down to its group leaders and finally, to its ever growing congregation. For once they have settled on Coastal as their church of choice, individual congregation members essentially ‘plug in’ to Coastal’s network through a variety of devices and platforms. And once plugged in, they are highly receptive to Coastal’s core message which is transmitted through this digitally mediated community of interconnectedness.

<sup>28</sup> While Coastal is labeled strictly as a Christian institution, its approach is actually quite Protestant in that it emphasizes the importance and immediacy of having a direct and intimate relationship with God above all else without any overarching hierarchical structure such as with Roman Catholicism.

## 4.2. Interconnectedness

The notion of being plugged in to Coastal's network of integrated media bears a striking resemblance to Manuel Castells (1996) theory of the *network society*. I say this as the notion of being 'plugged in' to Coastal was a repetitive theme which emerged quite early on throughout my fieldwork as I met with and interviewed a sample of its congregation members. At its most basic level, Castells (1996) theory of the network society posits that worldwide mass use of the microprocessor in personal computing devices led to the emergence of a "new technological system" of interconnectedness which he coined a *network society*.

In this network society, essentially an integrated digital network of online capable devices, human beings serve as individual 'nodes' that are part of a much greater web of connectivity. Groups of nodes are linked together in the form of network sub-systems which Castells (1996) labels as *small worlds*. When applied to Coastal, these small worlds are exemplified in the handheld devices wielded by its congregation members in both sermons and Life Groups. Essentially, by 'plugging in' to Coastal's online network, individual congregation members become linked to a greater nodal web of interconnectivity or as I label it, a *religious network society*.

The notion of a *religious network society* at Coastal Church, while not explicitly stated, was nevertheless a recurring underlying theme among participants. For example, participant 801-0027, a 26-year-old female, when asked about the notion of being 'plugged in' at Coastal as a way of accessing religious materials, stated that:

*"...for people to be plugged in, I think it's so important for people that are followers of Jesus. Because when you walk away, you get distracted. And so the closer you are to a sermon, the closer you are to a community, the closer you are to a church, to God, you continue on with your beliefs. And podcasts, websites, video sermons [are all] a way of allowing you to continue to be plugged in."*

This is significant for it points to not only the presence of a religious network society at Coastal but also the necessity for one in terms of staying connected to the Coastal community. This necessity I discovered, comes as a result of the size of Coastal's congregation, which the pastoral team estimates to be over 2000 individuals.<sup>29</sup> Participant 801-0029, a 22-year-old female, stated that plugging in to Coastal's network is important due to its size. When pressed to elaborate, she stated that:

*“In smaller churches it's more feasible to have less media and get messages across and to keep people connected without using media. But I think in big churches it's hard to do that.”*

Given that Life Groups only meet one night a week, typically on Monday evening, this means that there is a significant five-day gap in which congregation members are away from each other and the church at large. Yet it is the power and connectivity of a network society that enables Coastal's congregation members to stay in contact with one another, even when away from the church for days at a time. Echoing this sentiment, participant 801-0037 stated that:

*“We'll use media and we'll all be connected on something like WhatsApp.<sup>30</sup> So instead of just meeting once a week we'll be in touch with each other daily with prayer requests or prayer reports. So if something comes up like 'oh, somebody's Dad just passed away', then you can get on the phone and communicate with them.”*

These are not at all atypical responses. Many participants espoused their reliance on smartphones and tablets to connect to Coastal's community at large. This is significant for with such large audience numbers during sermons, many participants reported feeling somewhat isolated and alone. However, sharing scripture passages via text message or social media or organizing a post-sermon lunch or coffee via text message gave them the

<sup>29</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>30</sup> Smartphone messaging app.

feeling of still being intimately connected to their friends, family and loved ones. Such interconnectivity would not be possible without the existence of Coastal's religious network society and the seamless integration of the devices utilized within it.

### **4.3. Hierarchical Control**

In addition to the necessity of a religious network society in maintaining a web of interconnectivity between Coastal's congregation members, it also serves another purpose: one of hierarchical control between the pastoral team, Life Group leaders and individual worshippers. For while Coastal is not a so-called 'mega church<sup>31</sup>' in the sense of Burnaby's Willingdon,<sup>32</sup> it nevertheless boasts a very large congregation body. As stated, due to the large numbers of weekly worshippers at Coastal across its several locations, the pastoral team is often limited in its ability to ensure a consistency of transmission and reception of its weekly message. However, the interconnectivity of Coastal's religious network society allows the pastoral team to implement a measure of hierarchical control over its members in order to ensure that its messaging is as uniformly distributed and understood as possible. This occurs through a combination of centralized planning organized through social media and smart phone applications as well as a physical pastoral presence during weekly Life Group meetings.

As participant 801-0039, a member of Coastal's organizing committee states, apps serve as shared electronic planners that all of Coastal's front office staff utilize on a daily basis. The participant elaborates on the usefulness of such apps, stating that because of them he can:

<sup>31</sup> By way of definition, a 'mega church' refers to a Protestant organization with an average weekly attendance of at least 2000 congregation members (Wikipedia).

<sup>32</sup> Located in Burnaby, British Columbia Willingdon is Canada's second largest Protestant church. <http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/12/27/protestant-megachurches-surgin-in-canada-even-as-secularism-grows-and-most-sunday-attendance-plummets/>

*“...see that I’m on the worship team this week. I’m doing some lunch stuff at a leadership summit, I can click on it and see my order of service, the songs we’re playing, I can go and see who’s on the team, in the band, you know, all these different components. I can see everything.”*

This virtual panopticon of networked planning by Coastal’s administrative staff allows for a consistency of organization and preaching amongst the pastoral team in that digital networking media ensures a uniform message transmission throughout Coastal’s various locations and sermon times. This is especially important with Coastal’s increasing use of video only sermons. Currently, the pastoral team rotates between each of Coastal’s locations on Sundays (downtown Vancouver, Strathcona, and Pitt Meadows) so as to ensure as consistent a message delivery as possible, with timings and scripture selections shared among the pastoral team via the app. The use of pre-recorded video sermons, generally filmed at the downtown location on Saturday nights with Pastor Dave Koop, is increasing dramatically. This is a purposeful decision on part of the pastoral team for reasons of pure efficiency. For example, participant 801-0041, a 57-year-old male, states that the use of video sermons *increases* the consistency of message reception:

*“We’re moving to doing more and more video [sermons] and less of a campus pastor speaking...to keep a consistency of the message. For that person on site we’re more interested in him building relations, more interested in him caring for the people. We’d rather you put your energy, instead of prepping for a message and presenting, we’d be more interested in your seeing how a troubled family is doing. Making sure that everyone there has been cared for.”*

Here we see that Coastal’s increasing use of video sermons is viewed as being highly efficient in terms of message transmission in addition to providing a safeguard against any differences in transmission by individual pastors with varying presenting styles. It also has the benefit of freeing up the pastoral team for other duties. But while Coastal’s hierarchical control begins at the level of initial message transmission during sermons, it is soon filtered down through a second level: Life Groups.

Given that the rationale of Life Groups is to unpack Coastal’s weekly message and provide attendees with the opportunity to ask questions and learn through the process of

small group interaction, it is crucial that senior group leaders and assistant pastors maintain the consistency of message transmission that begins in the sermon. As stated in Chapter 3, I attended a Life Group during the evening of January 15, 2015 and was struck by the seamless use of media during the pre-discussion presentation. The group leader, immediately following the screening of a subscription based streaming HDTV video, sat down with the attendees and facilitated a lively discussion, all the while being careful not to allow the group dialogue to sway too far from the topic of the weekly sermon, in this case the opening verses of Genesis.

When asked to elaborate on the significance of Coastal's Life Groups and their role in the strategic hierarchical communication of religious materials, participant 801-0028, a 38-year-old female from an educated background, stated that:

*“[Coastal’s] like a corporation. It’s run like a corporation. Rational. Strategic. And still it doesn’t become too foreign. It doesn’t become too bureaucratic. And the key to that is Life Groups. Small groups. Because there’s no way the pastors can remember all the names.”*

Echoing this sentiment, many other participants stated that they felt almost anonymous on a Sunday and that they had no idea how many people around them were listening to the sermon or focused on something other than worship on their smartphones. As stated, Coastal is hampered by its size and many participants expressed concern over the pastoral team's ability to maintain a consistency of message transmission as its congregation body continues to grow. Yet it is the Life Groups that combat the potential problems brought about by an expanding congregation by breaking down the congregation into small cells facilitated and moderated by a senior group leader or assistant pastor. Following this approach, Coastal ensures that its interpretation of the scriptures remains as consistent as possible. Participant 801-0033, a 28-year-old male, supported this notion, stating that Coastal's media integration allows messages to be communicated consistently from the pastoral team directly to its congregation body:

*“There’s your sermon notes from the Sunday service, you can get them on your phone, you can get them on your iPad but you can also take that one*

*step further in Life Group by making sure that each individual group gets the same message.”*

By ensuring that each individual Life Group participant receives the same message and discusses its significance under the watchful eye of a senior group member or assistant pastor, a deep-set group solidarity results in which Coastal’s congregation members are unified in a neo-Durkheimian community of faith and shared worldview.

#### **4.4. Banal Religion**

As powerful and effective as digital media is in terms of community building and fostering group solidarity, Coastal’s reliance on media also fosters distraction and ambivalence toward scripture retention in its congregation members. This is in and of itself both a characteristic of digital media and a symptom of our mediatized post-modern age (Hassan, 2011). The theory of *mediatization of religion*, as outlined by Hjarvard (2011), begins with the work of Michael Billig’s (1995) *banal nationalism*. According to Billig (1995), the modern incarnation of nationalism is the result of arbitrary, superficial connections between individuals and society. These connections are largely the result of the repeated ‘flagging’ of symbols of national identity through the media, which has in effect largely supplanted historical notions of nationhood and national identity in the general populace and replaced them with shallow, superficial notions of national identity and belonging (Billig, 1995). Hjarvard (2011) applies this analogy to religion, stating that media have become the primary distributor of religious discourse in society rather than religious organizations themselves, thus creating a *banal religion* through the broadcasting of religious-like symbolism such as seen with Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* or the mythical world of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*. Such discourse reduces the influence of religious institutions in society, arguably replacing previously significant and institutionalised religious messaging with fragmented, often disconnected ‘clips’ of religiosity (Hjarvard, 2011).

But while Hjarvard's (2011) concept of banal religion focuses largely on media on a secular level - no doubt in order to maintain the spirit of Billig's (1995) theory of banal nationalism - I interpret banal religion on a much more focused and individualized level. And in so doing I find that Coastal's integration of digital media is also indicative of a banal religion, one in which a reliance on media for the dissemination of religious messaging has created a congregation body with an arguably shallow relationship to religious materials as the result of distraction fostered through ambivalence and convenience.

For example, many participants spoke of a widespread lack of effort in scripture memorization and the learning of significant parables as a result of an over-reliance on media at Coastal. Participant 801-0026, a 42-year-old female stated that:

*"I think...you can be lazy. We really need to know how to flip through a bible and how to find everything. And I think that [media] inhibits us from learning the bible. Especially if we're new to Christianity. To actually be able to go to a physical bible and find what we're supposed to. You know, same as with your phone. You don't know anyone's phone number because you've got them programmed into your phone...we're supposed to be doing our devotions every day. We're supposed to know the bible."*

It is possible that the participant's age, well above the average age of Coastal's target demographic,<sup>33</sup> provides her with a mature perspective that younger congregation members may have not yet developed. However, responses such as this were in fact the norm rather than the exception during my fieldwork. Participant 801-0033 for example, spoke of having an almost 'ADD'<sup>34</sup> attention span which they feel is quickly becoming a learned behavior in society, one which is exacerbated by the increased presence of media in worship and a subsequent over-reliance on it. By becoming accustomed to and dependent on the ease of message transmission and accessibility afforded by digital media

<sup>33</sup> 18 to 25 (approximately).

<sup>34</sup> Attention Deficit Disorder.



integration at Coastal, the media's initial purpose as a functional tool to enable learning is soon forgotten. As a result, the participant (801-0033) feels that an over-reliance on digital media at Coastal promotes a shallower relationship with religious materials and therefore a shallower overall religious experience. For the theologically minded scholar such as Phillips (2012), this loss of a deeper relationship with the scriptures is significant, for with scriptures in digital form, "it is not merely the hermeneutics that become subjectivized, but the ontology of the [bible] itself" (p. 43).

However, this sense of loss in terms of depth of understanding of religious materials as a result of media integration at Coastal is essentially a double-edged sword. The majority of participants I interviewed stated that they feel that digital media enabled them to be closer to God due to the instant scripture access that smartphone apps and podcasts provide. Yet when queried on their consumption habits, many participants admitted that they do not bother to memorize parables or even take the time out of their day to read the bible outside of weekly sermons and Life Groups, thus re-iterating the existence of a banal religion at Coastal. And yet the notion that a Christian must make a conscious effort to pray to God and read the bible on a regular basis is not lost on Coastal's congregation members; indeed this is a mandate that is pushed by the pastoral team. It is also however, a mandate that often goes unheeded. Participant 801-0023 for example, stated that the motivation for Coastal's media integrated approach to worship is for its congregation members to have God in their lives not just on Sundays but on the other six days of the week as well. Indeed the pastoral team sees this as a balance that needs to be achieved, but one that is much easier said than done. During interviews, I felt that Coastal's push to utilize media in this regard was frequently lost on participants who, rather than rising to the challenge of using media to gain a deeper appreciation for religious messaging, instead chose to rely on media as a tool of haste and convenience, rather than using it effectively to form close community ties and intimate, meaningful relationships. This could of course, simply be my own biases about a loss of tradition coming to light!

Participant 801-0030, a 32-year-old male, utilizes Coastal's available digital resources on a regular basis and is involved in its ministry programs in an organizational

role. Yet he feels that while digital media are certainly effective at sparking initial connections and aiding in task management, the media provides very little added value to his overall religious experience or relationship building:

*“...in terms of actually developing relationships I don’t know if technology...from my standpoint I haven’t found technology to be as helpful. It helps to make the initial connection and remember names and to start the process. But to go from being an acquaintance to a friend that you feel comfortable with...that part is a lot harder to do over technology.”*

Clearly, the participant views Coastal’s media integration as a catalyst for making initial connections with Coastal’s community, but not in terms of fostering a deep, meaningful connection with fellow worshippers or religious materials. This line of thinking was a common thread throughout interviews. Participant 801-0034, when asked how Coastal’s reliance on digital media might change particular aspects of worship or aid in community building, stated that media integration in worship and study can reinforce a point in a message but if the overall message or relationship is shallow, media cannot provide either with substance. This is again a clear demonstration of a banal religion at Coastal for while congregation members may feel a deep-set connection with one another and to God; this connection is in fact quite shallow and impersonal rather than close and personal.

For example, in smaller churches, should a congregation member have difficulty with understanding a particular message it is common practice to simply speak to his or her pastor. Personally, I grew up in a religious family who attended a small community church in which the Croatian priest knew the names of nearly all of his small congregation and was readily available to provide guidance and support. At Coastal however, the sheer size of its congregation limits the availability of its pastoral team, leading to a stark disconnect between speaker and audience. When such an issue was raised during interviews, many participants simply stated that in the absence of being able to meet and speak with their or senior group leader for guidance and clarification of teachings, they

would simply use a search engine or bible app. As an example, participant 801-0019 stated that:

*“You know sometimes I get a little bit stumped [with a parable] and I’ll go to Bible Gateway Keyword Search. Remember three words in the verse, type it in, and get the whole verse and all the verses I want that follow it...any translation that I want.”*

The participant then praised the virtues of having multiple bible translations available through smartphone apps, but did so in a way that demonstrated a lack of a deeper understanding of their significance:

*“This is more...uhh...easily understood and expressed in a way that’s...in a way that someone that doesn’t have an education can understand...If God didn’t want people to be able to read the bible on their cell phone or an iPad or a computer he wouldn’t have invented them, now would he?”*

This statement, while it may simply indicate a poor education on part of the participant, may further indicate an indication of banal religion at Coastal. Indeed as the church expands beyond the supervisory scope of its pastoral team, congregation members are increasingly forced to rely on supplementary media aids for clarifying the content of religious materials. Due to Coastal’s increasing size, this often occurs in isolation, arguably causing individual relationships with religious materials to suffer as the result of a lack of pastoral supervision. Thus while Coastal’s Life Groups are heavily utilized in an effort to combat this issue, the effectiveness of the groups in rectifying it is not clear.

Similarly, just as we see with a reliance on eBibles as biblical learning aids, video sermons at Coastal, while certainly beneficial in terms of maintaining message consistency, also indicate a shallower message transmission. This does not go unnoticed by Coastal’s congregation or its pastoral team for although many interviewees agreed that like podcasts, video sermons are an essential aspect to a growing church looking to tend to its flock in the most efficient way possible, a substantial number felt that something significant is ‘missing’ in the video sermons. Participant 801-0025 for example, a 35-year-old male and father of two stated that:

*“I have no problem with podcasts at all. What I don’t like is one of the churches we checked out in Seattle. [It] was a satellite church. And it was done on a movie screen. I’m not a huge fan of that, personally...like I kind of feel that if I wanted to do that I’d just sit on my couch with a bowl of popcorn.”*

Echoing this response, participant 801-0026 stated that:

*“You don’t want it [media integration] to be construed as entertainment. I don’t think that Coastal has gotten carried with it but I do think you can get carried away with it. Like it almost becomes something fun to watch.”*

Participant 801-0026’s response was quite revealing and also a common response whenever I posed the question of whether or not a video sermon could or should completely replace the physical presence of a pastor on stage. The responses I received were extremely insightful as many participants admitted that it was only a small step from watching a video sermon to sitting at home in isolation and ‘plugging in’ to the sermon via their personal media devices. The key component of a sermon, which many participants felt needed to be maintained at all costs, was the presence of a community of worshippers, essentially bestowing on worshippers the quality of *transcendence* in a manner that can only result from the physical presence of other human beings. Participant 801-0022 summed this up quite eloquently, stating that:

*“Part of the Christian philosophy is that the church is almost an analogy that individuals in the church are seen to comprise a body collectivity. [Each] person has a role and contributes and is a cell, like a cell in a human body would be. That’s the philosophy. And so that carries through where an individual doesn’t get involved in the church environment, it really becomes a spectator sport. And that individual doesn’t end up benefitting from everything that goes along with being involved. Connectedness, rubbing shoulders with someone. The regularity of seeing people.”*

Participant 801-0025 further stated that as high quality as Coastal’s video sermons are, there is a distinct feeling of disconnectedness when the physical presence of a pastor on stage is removed:

*“...where the authenticity comes in for me is that I really believe that there’s a different level of connectedness when the person is there. Like they’re in it. They’re in the room there [with you].”*

What we see here is a widespread understanding among Coastal’s congregation that while video sermons are an important aspect of scripture dissemination and efficiency of message transmission, they risk losing the transcendent quality of human contact and thus run the risk of transforming communal ritual into a passive, spectator-like sport. The notion of religion becoming a spectator sport is echoed by Hjarvard's (2013) notion of banal religion in that today, “individual faith and collective religious imaginations are created and maintained by a series of experiences and representations that have no, or only a limited relationship with the institutionalized religions” (p. 91). This sentiment is further echoed by Heidi Campbell’s (2011) work on the religious social shaping of technology (RSST) in that independent religious organizations utilizing secular media in worship have created a shallow, spectacle-like religious experience, which sacrifices a depth of understanding of religious materials in favor of a worship experience based on convenience and entertainment.

Podcasting, however, differs from video sermons in that there seems to be an almost universal understanding among congregation members that while video sermons can serve as a replacement for in-person sermons, albeit with a significant loss of authenticity and connectedness, podcasts add much to the overall message reception of a sermon and take away very little. By virtue of their audio only format which does not include the worship component of a sermon, podcasts are designed to be utilized as a quick reference to re-iterate key points during Coastal’s weekly sermons. As such, their convenience factor is high. Participants 801-0019 and 801-0031 for example, both emphasized the usefulness of Coastal’s podcasts in staying connected to the church when travelling:

*“...if my wife and I go camping or we’re gone for the weekend, you know, we listen. The only music we listen to is Christian music. So whether it be on the radio or on CD or other stuff she’s downloaded onto her iPod. So even for like, for instance tonight when we do our Life Group, we always have one worship song. We use the TV; run the computer off the TV, and*

*sing a song and then we get into our notes. So media is a good thing, not only in the church but [also] as we do stuff outside.” (801-0019)*

And similarly:

*“We did a road trip last year for two weeks down to Palm Springs and back and we drove and skied and did all kinds of stuff. We at nights we’d stop and download the sermons and sit down and listen to it in the car on the way, that kind of thing.” (801-0031)*

The almost universal recognition amongst participants is that while Coastal’s podcasts do not aid in one’s spiritual growth they do however emphasize a purposeful engagement with religious materials when one is outside of the church environment. For this reason, there was a deep-set feeling amongst participants that Coastal’s podcasts are, from a supplementary perspective at least, crucial in maintaining one’s walk with God. This is important, as it is a stated mandate by Coastal’s pastoral team to ensure that its congregation members have God in their lives on a daily basis. As an example, participant 801-0032 elaborated on the virtues of podcasting, stating that:

*“You can worship God anywhere at any time...So it’s kind of like a reminder. Because when you’re in the church on Sunday and you listen sometimes you don’t get everything.”*

Participant 801-0021 echoed this sentiment, stating that:

*“[When] you’re there, you can like, actually get the teaching from Pastor Dave. I really like that. God is a gift from Pastor Dave. I’m a person who learns that way too...and obviously the podcasts are really great because you can listen to them. But it’s not the same [as being there in person].”*

This is a clear indication of the utilization of Coastal’s podcasts as supplementary worship materials. They are not designed as sermon replacements, nor are they to be relied on as such. Rather, Coastal’s podcasts serve as quick reference reminders to key points in sermons, much like how one might listen to a radio podcast in order to get clarification on key points from a news program. Yet the podcasts are nevertheless symptomatic of banal religion in that their high convenience factor and ease of accessibility leads to a passive

engagement with religious materials. Again, this passive engagement leads to shallow understanding of the significance of the materials, which can be a detriment to the authenticity of one's overall religious experience. Podcasting and video sermons then, are useful quick reference tools but cannot and should not replace the presence of a physical speaker on stage delivering a sermon.

#### **4.5. Textual Authenticity of Digital Scriptures**

As with many Christian organizations, Coastal believes in the absolute inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures. As I was frequently told during interviews, ‘the bible contains God’s word. God’s word is the bible.’ Yet as strong as this sentiment is among Coastal’s pastoral team and congregation, it is in fact far more complex than meets the eye. In the sermons that I attended as a participant-observer researcher (as well as the Life Group I sat in on), it seemed that the majority of congregation members relied almost entirely on their smartphones as bible reference aids. Those that I did not observe with smartphones tended to rely upon the single page folded pamphlet, which Coastal’s greeters handed out at the door prior to the commencement of the service. Coming from a Catholic background, I initially found this shocking, as my own experiences with church as a young child involved walking into a Roman Catholic mass in which bibles lined the backs of the pews. And, considering the value that my Croatian Grandmother places on a small, battered leather bound bible that she has had since a child, I must admit that I had to work to understand the thoughts, feelings and opinions of Coastal’s congregation members who chose to leave their bibles at home on a Sunday and rely instead purely on digital media.

Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) stresses the necessity of examining media not simply through their content but through their form. A deeply committed Christian known for prostrating himself before the cross to seek guidance in his theories from the Virgin Mary, McLuhan (1964) writes that “the medium, or process of our time, (electronic technology), is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to

reconsider and re-evaluate every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted” (p.9).

The shadow of McLuhan’s insights was cast across my fieldwork and his firm statement that “societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication” was exhibited in nearly each interview that I conducted (p.9). Following McLuhan, it seemed clear that the medium truly *is* the message at Coastal, and the fact that the majority of its congregation members rely on digital scriptures rather than physical bibles during sermons serves as ample proof for the medium’s influence on modern Christianity. Understanding this influence however, is another matter entirely, one which I initially struggled to come to terms with during my fieldwork.

In his *Confessions* St. Augustine describes an experience in which he stumbled upon Ambrose, bishop of Milan, reading silently to himself with the aid of a word-separated codex (Phillips, 2012). Word separation, an entirely new form of media in its day, had a significant influence on the church in that it signaled the beginning of the negation of the need for oral transmission of the scriptures to an audience. As St. Augustine writes, witnessing Ambrose read to himself in silence had the twofold effect of not only freeing Ambrose from the confines of a set piece mass but also allowing him to isolate from the religious community if he so desired:

*“When he read, his eyes scanned the page and his heart sought out the meaning, but his voice was silent and his tongue was still. Anyone could approach him freely and guests were not commonly announced, so that often, when we came to visit him, we found him reading like this in silence, for he never read aloud”* (Phillips, 2012).

Clearly, it was not the content of the text that Ambrose read that produced change but the fact that the text itself existed; and thus as McLuhan (1964) wrote, the medium is the message. At Coastal, I witnessed similar circumstances and I made a conscious effort to press my participants to elaborate on it for me during interviews. Essentially, I wished to know two things: firstly, if they felt that a digital bible was perhaps less authentic than



a physical text and second, whether or not digital text fostered higher levels of isolation and distraction during sermons. My rationale for inquiring on the palpable authenticity of a digital text was motivated by my desire to demonstrate that the changes brought forth to a Christian sermon by the integration of these texts was indicative of a widespread change to the structure of Christianity, one which is as significant if not more so than the changes brought forth by the invention of the printing press in 1440.

I would begin this particular line of questioning on the significance of digital scriptures by inquiring as to whether or not the participant being interviewed used a bible during Coastal's weekly sermon or if they instead relied upon their smartphones and paper pamphlets. Many participants relied exclusively on their smartphones and only one, 801-0025, relied exclusively on the pamphlets, leaving his bible at home. His rationale for this was that:

*“They [greeters] always have the stuff [pamphlets] there. Why do I need it? I walk in, they hand me a piece of paper and I don't need to take out my bible. I don't take a bible. I have my bible on my phone but I don't even open up the scriptures”*

Not only is this again symptomatic of banal religion in that it points to the participants' shallow relationship with religious materials, but it is also indicative of a general feeling of laissez faire at Coastal in which the scriptures are valued purely for their content and not their form. This is significant for throughout the history of Christianity, the physical bible was valued to such a high degree that Christians have been routinely executed for being found in possession of the printed word of God. Thus as a result of digitization of Scriptures, historical notions of its sacredness or authenticity are seemingly lost or at best ignored at Coastal. What remains is an emphasis on convenience and accessibility to the inerrant Word of God and little else.

This sentiment however, was not shared equally throughout my interviews. Participant 801-0032 for example, mentioned earlier due to their elaboration on the virtues of the quick reference of the podcasts, stated that while there is certainly a deeper

connection to God with a physical bible – perhaps due to its mythic connection to the past – the convenience of a digital bible gives it a quality which usurps any historical value in a physical text. This was echoed in turn by participant 801-0033 who, while retaining a physical bible purely for occasional solemn prayer, relies almost exclusively on an eBible for its portability and ease of access:

*“The way I use it [eBible] is as a supplementary material. When I sit and dedicate time to reading the bible I read the physical bible. When I’m in, you know, when I’m referencing something when I’m at church, when I want to look up something in the scripture, that’s why I would do, use it as more of a reference material.”*

Ideally, congregation members put aside a period each day to do their daily devotions in the form of one-on-one prayers with God and they do this by meditating with the scriptures. This is done in order to retain the Word of God in their hearts and the media form with which the worshipper accomplishes this task is irrelevant. Participant 801-0022 went into considerable detail on the notion of a sacred essence with the scriptures, stating that:

*“To me, the technology really is just an enabler. Whether it’s ink on papyrus or printed with an HP laser jet or bound in a codex, personally I really don’t care. I mean if somebody burns a bible, I mean that’s making more of a political and a religious statement but do I think they’ll be cursed for burning a bible? No, it’s a medium. And I think the life is in the message. I do think that the written form, whether it’s spoken, read, or believed, I think there’s an incredible amount of power in that. But it’s not the ink on the paper it’s the meaning in the words.”*

Participant 801-0024 has a strikingly similar opinion on digital scripture, stating that:

*“It’s just a medium. You’re putting the bible into so many more people’s hands when ordinarily they would never carry a bible, right? You’re at school, you’re on a bus. I think technology has broadened the bible and made it so it’s more relevant to people. You know sometimes I’ll just Google what the bible specifically asks. You know, if you have a question about that, you type it directly in. What does the bible say about this? And it will pop out all the scripture for you. And you can sit there and read all the scriptures. I do my daily devotion online.”*

We see clearly here McLuhan's notion of the medium being the message reflected in these interview quotes. Clearly, what matters most at Coastal is that the bible exists and is easily accessed through a variety of media. We see also a differentiation between content and form in that there seems to be very little understanding of the value of a bible beyond it being a vehicle for accessing the Word of God, an aspect of Christianity that is fundamentally Protestant in approach.

#### **4.6. Isolation and Distraction**

Jeremy Stolow (2005), in reference to the expansion of the Christian religion as a result of increased use of secular media, states that a metanarrative exists in that there is "the assumption that the mere expansion of modern communication technology is somehow commensurate with a dissolution of religious authority and a fragmentation of its markers of affiliation and identity" (p. 122). However, I believe that rather than signalling the destruction of the religion, the mediatization of the religion instead indicates an evolution toward modernity. Thus what we see at Coastal is not so much a negation of authority and religious affiliation but a negation of *traditional* church authority and affiliation. A contributing factor to this I believe, is the isolation and distraction inherent to the digitally mediated religious experience as the result of technological innovations stemming from the secular world, a fundamental aspect of mediatization which members of Coastal's congregation discussed. Indeed the recognition of Christianity's need to change alongside of the secular world is aptly demonstrated in Coastal's push to form physical, interpersonal connections in order to minimize the isolated religious experience:

*"Sure, it's a church and there's a message and there's faith and the gospels being preached but all that's created this platform for a community to grow. Sure we have a digital world but I think people are still craving physical contact. Looking somebody in the eye and shaking their hand, giving them a hug, seeing them in person. And so Coastal I think has been a huge enabler of that. That's what we need in society. I mean you can stay at home and search social media sites all day but you wouldn't get that physical connection that you get from a physical interaction." (801-0022).*

Yet even once the isolation inherent to digital media is rectified or at least reduced by physical contact before and after sermons and during Life Groups, the possibility of distraction remains a significant problem at Coastal. Certainly there is freedom involved with tailoring one's personal religious experience through the religious-themed media one chooses to wield and any number of worshippers present during a sermon may be following along with any number of apps and eBooks. As a result, a highly individualistic frame of experience is created and within this frame, these same worshippers may not be following along to a sermon at all and may instead be devoting their attention to something completely different. For example, participant 801-0017, when asked about the possibility of distraction in sermon stated that:

*“I think we’re in an age where technology is essential in everyday life... [But] you are engaged and disengaged at the same time because you can be doing multiple things that distract you from the message. You might miss something and you wouldn’t even know it because you’re too busy texting your friend.”*

In the first sermon I attended at Coastal as a participant-observer, during the message component a mobile phone rang which immediately drew away my focus from the sermon. Pastor Dave chose to make a joke of it rather than humiliate the individual responsible; however, I did indeed notice myself struggling to not be distracted. Several interviewees, including participant 801-0020 who stated that, supported this sentiment:

*“I think it’s just a matter of adapting to the now. And learning how to not physically separate myself from distractions, to mentally shut some doors and learn to cope. So it’s like a mental exercise that you have to do. And yeah, with digital media, everything happens so quickly and it’s hard to understand it all at once. So it’s a learning process.”*

This recognition of distraction and the need for worshippers to adapt themselves to it is well supported by participant 801-0041 who stated that the goal of a modern Christian church should be to communicate with its tribe in its own language. Moreover, given Coastal's young demographic, this language is digital social media. But while this need to adapt is certainly felt by Coastal's pastoral team, there was an almost universal recognition

among participants of the need to unplug and build a physical community rather than simply remain isolated by an over reliance on digital media:

*“I think you have to have unplugged moments in order to be healthy. If a church doesn’t have a website, how do I find it? I think if you’re going to exist, you need that media integration. But if you want to be salt and light then you have to be mixing with other people. Our Lord wanted us to be in the community. He didn’t want us to isolate.” (801-0041)*

This felt need to unplug from Coastal’s religious network society and make a conscious effort to connect physically with others was a point that came up frequently during interviews. As I concluded my participant interviews and read over the transcription data I compiled, one particular point emerged above the rest and it owes much to Marshall McLuhan (1964): *we shape our tools and our tools shape us*. Stripped to their core, the media utilized by Coastal are simply that, tools of a functional nature. These tools foster community building and in-group solidarity and aid the pastoral team in ensuring that Coastal’s message is transmitted to its congregation members efficiently and universally. This in turn creates a larger networked community at Coastal, one that not be possible without media integration. Yet as with all tools, if they are utilized improperly, any benefits accrued are negated or at the very least, significantly reduced.

## 4.7. Summary

The 25 interviews that I conducted for this study presented me with an enormous amount of qualitative data. So much so in fact – approximately 400 pages of written transcription – that I was at first at a loss of exactly *how* to begin. Yet I soon discovered that the luxury of having such a wealth of data was that, in a sense, I was able to let it speak for itself. And speak it did, for I believe that the interview quotes that I selected for this chapter guide the reader through the doors of Coastal Church and into the life world of its pastoral team and congregation. The thoughts, feelings and trepidations of the participants I met and spoke with are well documented in the preceding pages, and through them, it is the heart of a community that shines through. In this digitally mediated community, Coastal as an organization endeavors to accomplish two distinct goals: to maintain the interests of its community members by keeping them engaged with religious materials and to enact a measure of control over its community in order to ensure as consistent a message transmission as possible.

In this regard, Coastal's seamless media integration functions as a foundation upon which the community rests. Without it, it is doubtful that Coastal would be as efficient an organization as it is and with it, the community not only thrives but also grows. In this regard, Coastal differs hardly from the Christianity of old; it exists as a community of solidarity, one that utilizes the dominant communication mode of the day to its benefit. In addition, while the current dominant communication mode is secular in origin, Coastal has adopted and shaped it to its benefit in a highly practical manner. The result is an efficient and highly functional organization whose flexibility is the result of the digital media utilized within. Yet such efficiency and flexibility is not without cost, however. As Manuel Castells (2000) writes, "churches have to enter the new media world in order to promote their gospel. So doing, they survive, and even prosper, but they open themselves up to constant challenges to their authority. In a sense, they are secularized by their co-existence with profanity" (p. 19). Hence, churches must constantly reinvent themselves in order to survive today. Coastal's relevance as a religious organization thus is inexorably linked to the secular dominated world that it inhabits. For as the world evolves, so too must Coastal.

## **Chapter 5. Coda**

I laid the groundwork for my thesis two years ago when I first Google searched Coastal Church. In a sense then, I am hardly different from many of Coastal's congregation members who turned to the information superhighway in order to find a church of their liking. And no doubt I asked many of the same questions that they did, questions such as: What role does Coastal play in an increasingly secular world? How do its congregation members keep abreast of technological changes to the world around them while retaining their piety? How relevant is Christianity today? And above all, do people still need God in their lives?

The fieldwork I conducted at Coastal was an immensely rewarding and informative experience. Each of the participants that I sat down with opened up to me and enabled me to peer into their life world, helping me to understand not only their own reasons for attending Coastal but also the role that Coastal plays in their lives and in the city of Vancouver. Many invited me into their homes and introduced me to their families. Some spoke of their children, some spoke of the children they hadn't yet had. All expressed perspectives on the importance of Christianity today and without their input, it is doubtful that my fieldwork could have been as informative as it was. As I analyzed the transcription data I compiled a number of key themes emerged which I unpacked and elaborated on during the previous chapter. Across these themes, a number of overarching areas of interest emerged and it is these that I would like to present to the reader as a conclusion to this thesis. Let it be known that while these overarching areas of interest were not necessarily universally expressed by study participants, they nevertheless emerged in sufficient quantity to be identified as critical points of reflection that I would hope, will be utilized for further research into the mediatization of religion.

## 5.1. Relevancy Matters

The notion of Christianity existing as an unyielding monolithic entity, refusing to give way to changing times is at best a poorly constructed stereotype. As described in Chapter 2, the religion has from its earliest days existed as a highly flexible organization that has reacted remarkably well to secular based technological innovations. In this regard, Coastal Church and its media centric approach to community, dissemination and proselytization is representative of a long-standing Christian tradition of maintaining relevancy through innovation and evolution. Yet this novel approach to religious practice however, often clashes with more theological views on the most effective method for maintaining relevancy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For many of my study participants, Coastal's efforts to remain relevant through modernization is the result of an *adapt or perish* mentality. Yet this in and of itself a highly simplistic response and the deeper issue that I believe must be examined should not be focused on a fear of falling behind but instead a concern with staying ahead. This sentiment was expressed to me many times throughout my interviews, almost as if there was a universal belief among Coastal's participants that if their church was remain relevant, it needed to do so by looking ahead to the future rather than to the past. Relevance at Coastal begins with digital media integration. And while media integration is not without its drawbacks, it *does* provide the foundation for something much greater, sparking human relationships (Justice, 2014). In this regard, Coastal's stated mission to build intimate relationships between congregation members and God is no different from that of early Christianity. The principle difference being the manner in which this is accomplished.

From an academic standpoint, each of the theories which I have utilized as a framework in understanding Coastal including RSST and technological determinism, stand on their own as effective methods of analysis. Yet together they point to one discernible fact: Christianity is evolving, and what occurs at Coastal and countless other churches the world over is hardly different from what occurred in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Johannes Gutenberg unveiled his creation that would change the world. I believe that digital media



presents Christianity with the largest technological leap forward since the invention of the printing press and while correlative changes to the religion are occurring, it is simply too early and too soon to know for sure how far these changes will go. But one thing is known for certain: change is constant and relevancy matters. For the Church must live on and to do so it must evolve. Yet by doing so, it reveals itself to the secular world and is left vulnerable. Where this vulnerability will take it is not yet known, but I believe I would not be prudent to state that what we see at Coastal is representative of changes to Christianity as a whole, changes that reflect a long-standing history of structural evolution. We may not know the future but we can bear witness to the past.

## **5.2. Banality and Hapticity**

Touch lies at the epicentre of religiosity, indeed the healing power of the hand sits at the very foundation of Christian folklore. Jesus is said to have cured the sick by placing his hands on their bodies, and canonized Saints throughout history performed various miracles on the sick and the dying, taking away their pain and replacing it with the warmth of God. Today, the healing power of touch is a core principle in evangelical Christianity, one which is much maligned and parodied in the media. And while Coastal is not by definition entirely evangelical in approach, one can still see the importance of being in the close proximity of others during worship. We must also remember here that as outlined by Durkheim (1912), it is through this proximity that a transcendence occurs and it is through this transcendence that worshipper's commune with God.<sup>35</sup>

McLuhan (1964), in his writing on the sensorial stimulation of the media, elaborated on what he called a 'haptic' or sixth sense in which all of our sensory experiences are joined as one. Overstimulation in one sense brings about an imbalance in

<sup>35</sup> That said of course, an individual's 'one-on-one time with God' as so many of my participants mentioned is crucial also, but for Coastal, this is meant to be more of a time for reflection than a time of growth.

our sensorium and thus the mind auto-amputates or ‘numbs’ the overextended sense, bringing it back into balance with the others. While McLuhan (1964) is heavily criticized for his theological ponderings and technological determinist theories, his notion of hapticity may have been influenced by the work of German psychologist Max Dessoir. Dessoir (1926) for example, emphasized the importance of touch and feeling in understanding significant works of art and no doubt McLuhan’s own notion of hapticity as a total sensory experience as the result of media stimulation owes much to Dessoir in return.

In the hyperreal environment of modern churches such as Coastal however, digital stimulation from the touch of a hand increasingly gives way to digital in the electronic sense. As a result, the indescribable feeling that arises from the close proximity of others is reduced significantly as congregation members increasingly rely on a simulated church experience in lieu of physical contact with others. Gere (2012) elaborates on the importance of the physical in Christian ritual, writing that the “emphasis on sight as touching as in keeping with the medieval conception of touch as ‘the common term or proportion of all the others’ which were all species of touch. To see the Host was to see Christ and thus ultimately to touch Him and be touched by Him” (p. 24). Digital ritual then, by removing the physical presence of the Host<sup>36</sup> in effect removes the presence of God and I believe that Coastal is in danger of this by increasing the number of video sermons.

In many of my interviewees, participants expressed a significant struggle to connect with others at Coastal. As outlined in Chapter 4, much of this has to do with the sheer size of Coastal’s congregation. And while digital media certainly helps to facilitate initial connections either through social media ‘adding of friends’ or communicating via text message during the week, there was a distinct tendency among study participants to rely too much on media for maintaining these connections and accessing Coastal’s messaging. As a result, their religious experience was significantly dampened by the banality of digital

<sup>36</sup> Priest or pastor who, when conducting the Eucharist ritual (or non-denominational equivalent), functions as the earthly presence of God.

media. Coastal's pastoral team is of course well aware of this and works to combat it by focusing on forging and maintaining interpersonal connections through Life Groups. However, these too are at a risk of banality. Clearly, learning through the self-imposed isolation inherent to digital media is not without its drawbacks for to lose the presence and the touch of others is to lose touch with God.

### **5.3. Accessibility**

Another key theme that emerged during my interviews and transcription was that of accessibility. On a surface level, this should not appear as a surprise to the reader as the logic behind the use of media by a religious community like Coastal is clear: media makes religious materials easy accessible by placing them in the hands of many. In this regard, Coastal's reliance on media should be seen as a blessing and not a burden. After all, if the goal of Christianity the world over is to spread the Good News, then why not do so in the most efficient manner possible, in this case the dominant communication mode of the day?

However, if one peels back the surface layer of digital accessibility then a long-standing theological question emerges, one that has plagued Christianity since the 15<sup>th</sup> century: by making religious materials more accessible, how does one control for differences in interpretation? Luther saw an opportunity in Gutenberg's invention beyond the spread of the Good News, he saw an opportunity to compile the first uniformly printed religious text, a 1534 German translation known today as the Luther Bible. Here we see the printing press serving a moral need of the church: control of interpretation. However, this also came at a cost by sparking the Protestant Reformation, arguably the most significant split in the history of Christianity. Through my analysis of transcription data compiled over the course of the 25 extended interviews I conducted, I noticed a similar trend at Coastal. While media integration in places like sermons and Life Groups<sup>37</sup> certainly

aids the pastoral team in uniformly transmitting a message, media integration on part of the individual and his or her digital device of choice often does not.

For just as the Luther bible resulted in a breakdown of Church authority by lessening the need for individual worshippers to rely on the fixed interpretation of the Holy Scriptures by priests of a hierarchical order, digital media integration on part of the individual arguably removes the need for Coastal's pastoral team to do the same. In effect then, Coastal's media integration is a double-edged sword, one that both helps and hinders. And in this regard, it is little different from the situation capitalized on by Luther. For this reason, I see modern Coastal's use of digital media as simply the current iteration of a long-standing issue in Christianity: evolve or lose relevancy. But as stated and explored throughout this thesis, evolution is not without its limitations.

#### **5.4. Community through Connectivity**

Although digital media integration at Coastal produces some undesirable effects such as a degradation of authority, loss of authenticity, isolation and distraction to name but a few, at its core it accomplishes exactly what it is supposed to – building a community. Whether this community can be quantified as 'real' or simply 'virtual' as a result of Coastal's congregation members being plugged in to a religious network society is a moot point. A community exists and it would not exist in its current form without the integration digital media. As stated, whether a religious social shaping of technology (RSST) is responsible for the creation of this community or technological determinism or any number of competing theories, the fact remains that a digitally inclusive community at Coastal exists and is thriving.

As with the secular world, humanity faces an uphill struggle to stay on top of and keep abreast of technological changes. The same sentiment holds true in the digital community at Coastal. During its 20-year operation, Coastal has significantly altered its approach to worship and dissemination of the scriptures in order to match the secular driven

technological changes occurring outside of it. Video sermons have become high definition (HD) in format, podcasts have replaced CD's for audio reference and smartphone apps have largely replaced physical bibles. When away from the church Coastal's congregation members and pastoral team communicate with one another through social media apps and peer-to-peer text messaging. This step for step matching with the secular world is, I believe, representative of changes to Christianity at large in that how Coastal operates is hardly different than numerous other churches in Vancouver British Columbia, nor is it different than its historical brethren who turned to mass printed bibles as a reaction to technological advancements in the secular world.

Yet these changes, while they are reflective of identical ones occurring in society as a whole, do not drastically alter a core principle of Christianity: the need for a supportive community of like-minded individuals with like-minded world-views. This is the calling card of Durkheim (1912), for a religious organization, when stripped bare of its trappings and structure is but a community of individuals, bound together with a common cause. Today, these individuals connect to one another not only by their beliefs but also in the manner that they communicate. This too is no different than it was in historical times and, as quoted by participant 801-0041,

*“What language does this tribe speak? This tribe used these tools to communicate. So we're not doing anything exceptional. What language do they speak? How do they speak it? It's our job to find that language, those tools, to learn to use them.”*

Media integration at Coastal Church then, for all of its drawbacks of which there are many, is simply about communicating to its congregation in the manner they are accustomed. Historically, this was accomplished through direct oral transmission as Jesus wandered amongst the market stalls of the ancient world. In time, this transitioned to sermons with the aid of voice amplifying cavernous churches. This held fast for several centuries before giving way to the printed word, inked on paper with the iron hand of the Gutenberg printing press. Print transitioned back to the secondary orality of the radio, which transitioned again to televised appearances of evangelical pastors. Today, it is the

internet that reigns supreme and allows the Christian worldview to be communicated instantaneously through the touch of a button or flick of the thumb across a touch sensitive digital screen. Yet through all of this, it is a community that shines through, a community of many voices linked together in a tribe of digital interconnectivity.

## **5.5. Final Thoughts**

Throughout this thesis I have demonstrated to the reader how a modern day Christian organization operates and orients itself in relation to the secular world. I have outlined the struggles faced by Coastal Church to remain relevant and maintain the interests of its congregation members while at the same time bringing new members into the fold, accomplishing this task through the integrated use of numerous digital media platforms. Yet as with all organizations, religious and otherwise, its future cannot be predicted. The changes to the structure of Christianity brought forth through worldwide secular growth in digital media are undeniable, but what is not yet known is what is still to come.

It is doubtful that Luther could have predicted the impact that his ninety-five theses would have after nailing them to the door of Wittenberg Church, just as no Christian could have fully predicted the impact that digital media would have on their religious experience. What is known however is that what began as a ripple in the waters of Christianity with the rise of digital media use in the secular world has reached into its most sanctimonious places; the countless churches worldwide who now rely heavily on digital media for their voice to be heard. Coastal is one such organization, one whose voice is a voice of many. These voices, often digital in format, represent the next step forward in the history of Christianity, a step which as always, is into the great unknown.

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# Appendix A

## Study Detail

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

#2014S0267

#### Title of Study/ Project:

Mediatization of Religion: Coastal Church

#### Principal Investigator:

Adam Bajan  
MA Candidate  
Email: [xxx@sfu.ca](mailto:xxx@sfu.ca)  
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx

#### Senior Supervisor

Gary McCarron  
SFU School of Communication  
Email: [xxx@sfu.ca](mailto:xxx@sfu.ca)  
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxx

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

#### PURPOSE

This project involves a *qualitative ethnographic study* of the effects of the *mediatization of religion* at Coastal Church, a Vancouver, BC based non-denominational Christian institution. Permission to conduct this study and recruit interviewees from Coastal's congregation has been granted by the pastoring team at Coastal Church.

#### PROCEDURES

- I will be conducting ethnographic research at Coastal by sitting in on a number of weekly Sunday sermons.
- I will also be conducting semi-structured interviews with a sample 30 to 35 members of Coastal's congregation selected through snowball sampling.
- Participant-observer research will occur prior to sampling and conducting interviews.
- The purpose of the interviews is to gain qualitative insight into how the integration of digital media into a religious worship setting affects the manner in which congregation members receive and disseminate religious messaging.
- The purpose of sitting in on weekly sermons prior to conducting interviews is to familiarize myself with how Coastal's team of pastors integrate digital technologies into their messaging.
- Interview and ethnographic data will be transcribed and subjected to a hermeneutic (meaning making) content analysis in which emerging themes related to mediatization of religion will be isolated and disseminated. Reoccurring themes between interview subjects will also be disseminated. Strands of pertinent information will also be juxtaposed with the results of similar studies conducted in Scandinavia and the United States in order to demonstrate the similarities or differences of mediatization of religion in different geographic areas.

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- Ethnographic research will be conducted at Coastal's primary location at 1160 West Georgia Street, Vancouver BC.
- Interviews will be conducted at a mutually agreed upon location and will run approximately one hour in length.
- Results of this research will be included as part of my MA thesis.

#### **FOLLOW UP INTERVIEW**

- Depending on the amount of data culled, participants may be contacted for a further interview.
- Follow up interviews, if deemed necessary by the principal investigator will be conducted in order to probe deeper into the effects of mediatization at Coastal.
- All participants will be given the option of opting out of follow up interviews as well as refusing future contact by the researcher on the consent form.

#### **SAMPLE SELECTION**

- Snowball sampling is an effecting qualitative method for gathering detailed descriptions of particular experiences or phenomenon. For this reason, snowball sampling will be applied to this study in that participants will intentionally be sought out by the principal investigator, specifically for their involvement at Coastal Church as congregation members.
- Within the boundaries of this study, I will be conducting interviews with between 30 and 35 Coastal members living in the Greater Vancouver area. A sample of this size is consistent with qualitative ethnographic analysis.
- Each study participant will be an adult and no children will be contacted for interviews. This is due to the ethical constraints of conducting research on children as well as the fact that some level of technical knowledge is required on part of interviewees in order for the study to be a success.
- Participant selection will occur as follows:
  - 1) I will utilize my personal connection to the pastoring team Coastal Church as a method of recommendation for recruiting interviewees as well as my friendship with a particular congregation member, a business contact of mine from my work as a Public Relations consultant.
  - 2) Following initial recommendations by my personal contacts as outlined above, *snowball sampling* will be utilized. Snowball sampling involves the principal investigator asking the participant to recommend further potential participants for the particular study. Following the conclusion of my initial interviews I will ask the participant if he/she can think of anyone else that may also be interested in participating in this study. If the interviewee is in fact able to suggest a potential new participant, I will then ask what the most suitable contact method would be. (*IE: Would it be preferential if I contacted them myself? Or should I allow the participant to contact them instead?*)
  - 3) Participants will not provide the researcher with contact information or other personal details with regards to other study participants without first obtaining permission from those potential participants.

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- Aboriginals are not the primary intended participants of this study. However, should the snowball sampling technique utilized in the study present circumstances in which the primary investigator will be interviewing an Aboriginal, approval from the member's band will be sought. If permission is not granted, the primary investigator will seek a replacement participant.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

- Research participants will not be identified by name in the course of this study, unless they ask to be.
- Participant's names will be removed from all transcription data and replaced by a substitute name. Substitute names will be utilized in lieu of a simple alphabet scheme as the number of participants required for this study will outnumber the individual letters of the alphabet. Every possible effort will be given to ensure that substitute names do not reflect participant's actual names and that they do not provide identifying cues as to the participant's identity.
- No interviews will be conducted during the study's initial ethnographic research stage.

#### **DATA STORAGE**

- Ethnographic field notes will be typed and all interviews will be *audio recorded* and *transcribed* by the principal investigator. Audio recordings and transcription data will be stored on a USB key kept in a locked filing cabinet at the university in order to protect the identities of study participants.
- Only the principal investigator and his academic supervisor will have access to the locked filing cabinet.
- Audio recordings and field notes will be transported to and from the site of research by the principal investigator in a briefcase.
- Audio recordings will be securely kept on file at the university until transcription is complete. Following completion of transcription, audio recordings will be deleted and the USB key wiped clean. At the study's conclusion, field notes and transcription data will be retained by the principal investigator and securely stored in his home for potential future use in a similar study.

#### **BENEFITS AND/OR RISKS TO PARTICIPANTS**

- A study of this nature provides participants with an opportunity to describe in detail a subject that is meaningful to them; religion. Further, the study allows participants to contribute to a growing body of scholarly research by making known their own perspectives and experiences with mediatization of religion.
- This study holds a low risk to its participants. Religion is a sensitive topic for many but given that this study focuses only on the effects of digital technologies in sermons and not faith based politics, it is unlikely that any adverse reactions to interviews or ethnography will occur. In the event that this should happen however, the primary investigator will notify the university's ORE immediately.

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- Participation in this study is strictly voluntary and participants will not receive any sort of financial reimbursement or gift giving in any way.

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# Appendix B

## Consent Form



CONSENT FORM

#2014S0267

**Title of Study/ Project:**

Mediatization of Religion at Coastal Church

**Principal Investigator:**

Adam Bajan  
MA Candidate  
Email: [xxx@sfu.ca](mailto:xxx@sfu.ca)  
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx

**Senior Supervisor**

Gary McCarron  
SFU School of Communication  
Email: [xxx@sfu.ca](mailto:xxx@sfu.ca)  
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx

The researcher is a graduate student in the Communication program at Simon Fraser University. He is conducting research for his Master's thesis on the use of digital technologies in religious worship settings. The research project involves one on one interviews designed to probe your thoughts and feelings on the use of digital technologies during religious worship. Interviews are strictly voluntary and are expected to run approximately one hour in length. Permission to conduct these interviews has been granted by both the university's Office of Research Ethics (ORE) as well as the pastoring team at Coastal Church.

While interviews are expected to run approximately for one hour in length you are free to expand on this time and talk about any related thoughts or ideas that you may have. A second interview, should circumstances present the opportunity, may also be warranted. However, as your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you are free to opt out at any time, the interviews can be stopped at any time and you are under no obligation to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable with. There are no known risks associated with your voluntary participation in this study and data compiled during your participation can be withdrawn at your request should you choose to remove yourself from the study.

Your identity as a participant in this interview will be kept confidential. You will be assigned a substitute name in the write up of the interview and only the researcher and his academic supervisor will have access to this information. Audio recordings of interviews and interview write ups will be stored on a USB key and kept in a locked filing cabinet at Simon Fraser University. Only the researcher and his academic supervisor will have access to the cabinet. Audio recordings will be securely stored until completion of the study at which point they will be destroyed. Field notes and interview write ups will be retained by the researcher for possible use in a future study.

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Should you have any questions or require additional information related to this study, you may contact the principal investigator, Adam Bajan, by phone: [REDACTED] or through e-mail: [REDACTED]

If you have any concerns or complaints about the study or your participation in it, you may contact Dr. Jeff Toward, Director of the SFU Office of Research Ethics, by phone: [REDACTED], or through e-mail: [REDACTED]

<b>Participant's Agreement</b>	<b>Please Circle</b>	
I confirm that I have read and understand the above mentioned information and have had the opportunity to ask questions	Yes	No
I understand that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that I may opt out at any time without reason or penalty	Yes	No
I give my consent to participate in this study	Yes	No
I give my consent for the interview to be audio recorded	Yes	No
I give my consent for the use of substitute names in publications for the purposes of de-identifying data and protecting the confidentiality of my participation	Yes	No
I give my consent for Adam Bajan to retain all interview data for the purposes of this study and to use my identifying information in addition to the content of the interview	Yes	No
I understand that information compiled in this interview may include a published paper(s), a Master's thesis as well as the possibility of inclusion in a Doctoral dissertation or book at a future date.	Yes	No
<b>CONSENT TO FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW</b>		
I give my consent for the researcher to contact me in the future to clarify items and ask for additional information, by phone or e-mail	Yes	No
<i>I give my consent to a potential follow-up interview</i>	Yes	No

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I have been offered a copy of this consent form to retain for personal reference **Yes** **No**

I give my consent for the use of my personal information as agreed upon in the above mentioned conditions. I therefore authorize the principal investigator of this study, Adam Bajan, to use this interview, audio recordings and interview write ups for the purposes of research which may be published.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

# Appendix C

## Letter of Invitation

#2014S0267

### LETTER OF INVITATION

Dear [...],

[...] suggested that I contact you because they believe that you may be interested in participating in my research project.

I am a graduate student at Simon Fraser University in the Communication program and my research interests involve religious communication. I am particularly interested in the use and effects of digital technologies (iPods, iPads, and supplementary online materials) in religious sermons and I think that the manner in which Coastal Church uses these technologies is stands as perhaps the best example of this in the Lower Mainland.


I am hoping to interview between 30 and 35 community members from Coastal about their experiences using these technologies in Coastal's weekly sermons. Specifically, I would like to know how members feel about digital technologies being used in worship settings and how they feel the technologies might impact how they receive and understand God's word. The interview process involves a conversation between myself and a member of Coastal's community of about one (1) hour in length during which I ask them to explore the influence of digital technology on sermons. A potential second meeting to supplement the initial interview may also be needed, but this would be strictly optional. Essentially, the purpose of these interviews is for myself and a member of Coastal's community to engage in a dialogue centered on their relationship with digital technologies and worship. It is my intention to schedule interviews to begin within the next two weeks.

If you are interested in being interviewed about your ideas and experiences with digital technologies and worship, please contact me at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Adam Bajan

xxx@sfu.ca



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### ABOUT THE PROJECT

For my Master's thesis, I will be conducting *qualitative ethnographic research* on the effects of the *mediatization of religion*. I am interested in how the use of digital technologies during religious sermons impacts how worshippers receive and disseminate religious messaging. Specifically, I am interested in the following:

- Individual reasons for attending a modern Church like Coastal
- Experiences with substitute sermons, i.e: viewing sermons online rather than attending in person

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- Use of digital technologies as a prayer aids during and outside of sermons
- Thoughts on how digital technologies affect how worshippers receive God's word

Mediatization of religion is a term for the structural changes to Western Christian religion brought upon by secularization and the adoption of digital media technologies as prayer aids, generally by non-denominational Churches. Mediatization of religion is a growing research field in academic circles however the majority of mediatization research conducted to date has been relegated to Scandinavia and the United States. Thus while the effects of digital technologies on religion in other countries such as Canada can be hypothesized to be similar to that of Scandinavia and the United States, very little research from this perspective has been conducted. It is because of this that I intend to contribute to the academic discourse surrounding mediatization of religion by researching it at Coastal Church.

#### **INTERVIEW PROCESS**

- The interview process for this research project will involve interviews of approximately one (1) hour in length with a sample of 30 to 35 members of Coastal's community. A second optional interview may be conducted with particular sample participants should more in depth qualitative information be required.
- All interviews will take place in a location mutually agreed upon by both the principal investigator and participants. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed for the purposes of conducting content analysis of key themes related to mediatization of religion.
- Simon Fraser University's Research Ethics Board (REB) mandates that the identity of all participants in a research study be protected in all publications using interview data and thus participant identities will be kept confidential.
- Each participant will therefore be required to sign an explanatory consent form prior to conducting any interviews.

#### **TIME FRAME**

It is my intention to complete all interviews over a three to four month period beginning in September, 2014. Transcription of interview audio recordings is a time consuming process and I would hope to have completed all transcription by the end of March 2015.

Should you have any questions regarding this research project, kindly contact me by e-mail or phone.

xxx@sfu.ca  
xxx-xxx-xxxx

Sincerely,

**Adam Bajan**

# Appendix D

## Interview Questions

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#2014S0267

#### Title of Study/ Project:

Mediatization of Religion: Coastal Church

#### **Principal Investigator:**

Adam Bajan  
MA Candidate  
Email: [xxx@sfu.ca](mailto:xxx@sfu.ca)  
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx

#### **Senior Supervisor**

Gary McCarron  
SFU School of Communication  
Email: [xxx@sfu.ca](mailto:xxx@sfu.ca)  
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx

- 1) Tell me a little about yourself. / How did you first come to attend Coastal Church?  
(PROMPT: How long have you been attending Coastal? / Do you attend regularly?)
- 2) Can you tell me about what draws you / attracts you to Coastal?
- 3) What does being part of the Coastal community mean to you?
- 4) What would you do if you were to miss one of Coastal's sermons?  
(PROMPT: Would you catch up by watching the sermon online or downloading the audio podcast?)
- 5) Can you describe your approach to Coastal's website and participation with the materials on it?
- 6) What are your thoughts on how Coastal uses digital technologies such as iPads and iPods in its sermons?
- 7) When you attend a sermon, do you read scripture from the bible or do you use [something like] an iPhone or iPad?
- 8) How do you think these technologies affect how you receive God's word?
- 9) How do you feel about the technologies perhaps distracting you from being physically in touch with the scriptures like when you hold a bible?
- 10) Do you feel that using technologies in sermons changes certain aspects of worship? / Would you feel different if you did not use them when you worship?  
(PROMPT: Can you describe how this is different?)