

# Liturgy on the Cusp of Secondary Orality: Marshall McLuhan and Messianic Judaism

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This paper starts off lightly and playfully, before suddenly plunging the reader into a never-before-considered What-If scenario regarding the ultimate allegiances of media theorist Marshall McLuhan. Arguing that McLuhan's understanding of human sense-ratios may have qualified him to be a better candidate for Messianic Judaism than Roman Catholicism, precisely to the degree that the former favors primacy of the ear over the eye in a way that is complicated by the latter's use of imagery, the author makes a first-ever claim (for McLuhan scholarship) that the Canadian media theorist may have felt equally at home, and equally a fish out of water, in a Jewish congregation than in a Catholic cathedral.

Provocative and resonant in the McLuhan rhetorical tradition off a scholarly "probe," this piece reveals its author to be both remarkably gifted at research, synthesis, and integration, and to be startlingly gifted at deriving new theses worthy of serious consideration. Marshall McLuhan once said that God was a "ceaseless invitation to wonder," and this paper's effect is precisely that: a surprisingly fresh invitation to wonder at a highly plausible "What-If" scenario that never came to pass. With a bibliographic citations page of thirty entries, the paper is sufficiently substantive in its scholarship and the author is encouraged to submit the work for publication in the appropriate journals.

I like to think I'm as much a rebel against the digital age as I am a product of it. I've started carrying around a fountain pen and notebook as a token of my quiet crusade against the culture that dictates kids my age should have their noses buried in the light of retina screens. Perhaps it's the protesting Protestant in me that wants to believe that the digital glow is somehow opposed—fixed in mortal combat—with that real Light outside of space and time that entered our space and time to redeem it. But the work of Marshall McLuhan, the practical mystic and prophet of communication theory, opens up a way to

theologically and practically reconcile these apparent contradictions, particularly when his work is cast in the light of Messianic Jewish theology. The marriage of Judaism and Jesus Christ provides the theological outlook necessary for successfully, selflessly, and productively navigating the technologically liturgical environment in which we, modern believers, find ourselves.

This paper presents less of a thesis than it does a set of tools—a lens through which to look at the theology and ideas of Marshall McLuhan. As many questions are asked as are answered, and ideally,

some of these thoughts may open doors to further explorations of McLuhan's faith and the theology of Messianic Judaism.

McLuhan was a convert to Roman Catholicism and remained a devout Catholic through his life, so casting his ideas in the light of Messianic Judaism is meant to be a "tentative probe." McLuhan considered many of his works provocative and often amplified attempts to get at the truth. "For me," he wrote, "any of these little gestures I make are all tentative probes. That's why I feel free to make them sound as outrageous or extreme as possible. Until you make it extreme, the probe is not very efficient" (McLuhan, "Media Research" 62). McLuhan understands one must be prepared to "toss them [the probes] away" if they aren't "getting you into the problem" (McLuhan, "Media Research" 62). If sufficiently substantiated, the work in this paper will hopefully be provocative enough of a "tentative probe" to *get us into the problem*.

But before exploring the grit of technological liturgy and Messianic Jewish theology, some groundwork must be laid. We will briefly touch on two cultural shifts that will set the stage for the work in this paper: the Second Vatican Council shift away from corporate worship within Catholicism, and the obverse shift *toward* corporate worship in the next generation of Christian young adults.

First, the critical shift of Vatican II—the moment when the ethos of the Catholic church changed—should be explored. In 1962, the Catholic Church underwent a subtle liturgical transformation in response—if we take McLuhan seriously—to the emerging electrification of religion. McLuhan was a devout Catholic for the same reason I advocate a form of Messianic Judaism here: Catholicism allowed him to ground his observations about media and technology in a selfless, corporate, and oral religious outlook. But Catholicism underwent a shift in McLuhan's lifetime, 23 years after his conversion. The religion that once placed such an intense emphasis on corporate faith and worship was significantly individualized by the reforms of Vatican II. The council called for a transition from the sacred Latin to the common vernacular because an electronic culture had elevated the *message* of liturgy over the medium of spoken Latin. McLuhan tied the significance of

Latin within Catholic liturgy to Yeats's concept of "auditory imagination"—"the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling invigorating every word: sinking to the most primitive and forgotten" (McLuhan, "The Medium and the Light" [ML] 143). He called it the "most ancient and civilized mentality" (ML 143).

We don't see it often, but McLuhan's latent discontent with post-Vatican II Catholicism sometimes breaks the surface in his writings. For him, spoken Latin was the last line of defense against the intrusions of Protestant textuality and print culture. "The reversal by which a Catholic is now supposed to develop a personal position on mysteries and doctrines that are themselves the prime means of corporate participation could only result from the belated extension of literacy to the Catholic world," he wrote in a volume of the collected doctrinal opinions of Catholic thinkers (McLuhan, "Spectrum of Catholic Attitudes" xxix). Rome, he said, had held out against the pressures of an increasingly print-based culture, "until the beginning of this [the 20th] century" (ML 58). What resulted after 1962 was an individualization and fragmentation of liturgical practice in the Catholic Church. And it was the consistency of this liturgy that had drawn McLuhan to the Catholic church in the first place. He said, "I grew up with Protestant liturgy. I only became a Catholic after taking an interest in liturgy" (ML 148). There is no question that McLuhan was a devout worshiper and practitioner of the Catholic liturgy after his conversion, but his devotion was seasoned with critique. If we push on this small rift—the rift between oral and literary forms of worship, we may be able to reveal a beautiful new way of reconciling McLuhan's discontent and exploring a fresh theological approach to our own interactions with media and technology.

A second shift really is the keystone of our investigation of the emerging technological environment, but this shift is not a widespread cultural change. It's much more subtle, but there is a sea change happening in the zeitgeist of the Christian young adults of my generation, perhaps in response to the same electrified individualism that precipitated Vatican II. Dogmatism is falling out of fashion at the same time that religious structure is

making a resurgence. Kids who have grown up in the seeker-sensitive church—in the church that places such an intense emphasis on one’s personal belief in Jesus—are craving something more historical and communally shared. My peers are craving a structure and framework that is bigger than themselves. They want a system for their belief system, and they’re finding it in liturgy. The language of tradition, repetition, meditation, and sacrament seems to be pushing to the forefront of the public consciousness within evangelical circles. In a recent article on why millennials “long for liturgy,” Anglican thinker Yet Lee Nelson writes that, in the midst of our consumer culture, young people “ache for sacramentality” (Olmstead). If value and meaning are functions of scarcity, the infinite accessibility to infinite information has stripped knowledge of its meaning. An emphasis on empathy and valuation has, in a very real sense, been replaced by an emphasis on speed and obtainability. Presbyterian-turned-Eastern Orthodox student Jesse Cone, writes that “We’re so thirsty for meaning that goes deeper, that can speak to our entire lives, ... that we’re really thirsty to be attached to the earth and to each other and to God. The liturgy is a historical way in which that happens” (Olmstead). Protestant churches aren’t blind to this fact, and many services are being infused with liturgical elements drawn from historical Christian traditions in an effort to retain their millennial congregants.

But there’s a problem. The odds are, if you’re not finding your “sacramental yearning” fulfilled by religious liturgy, you’re fulfilling it elsewhere. After all, the ability to pattern and mediate our experience through words, liturgies, and meta-narratives is what sets humans apart in the animal kingdom. So for most individuals of equal or less spiritual inclination, their subconscious craving for liturgy is manifesting itself in a religion of another sort, one with deeper rumblings: the patterned religion of technological consumption. McLuhan wrote that “we must, to use [technology] at all, serve these objects, these extensions of ourselves, as gods or minor religions” (McLuhan, “Understanding Media” 55). These little gods we serve inhabit the pantheon of technological consumerism, the belief system that is quickly becoming the one-

world religion. And there’s something unique—or rather not unique—about the liturgy of technological consumerism. It uncannily resembles the liturgy of Judaism.

What we now call ancient Judaism was the father religion of “primary” or “tribal” orality. Orality is a term that historians use to classify the first era of communication history. Oral cultures communicated primarily person-to-person and had a strong collective group sense. And their religions were acoustic. Typified by the Shema, the injunction in Deuteronomy 6 to “Hear, oh Israel” (Deuteronomy 6:4, ESV), ancient Judaism was the *wunderkind* of acoustic religion. Catholicism too, had strong grounding within oral tradition prior to the Vatican II reforms. But Protestantism, unlike Judaism and pre-Vatican II Catholicism, was a product of the print era of communication, à la Gutenberg. McLuhan insisted that print was solely responsible for the privatization and individualization of the Christian faith. “A sense of private substantial identity—a self—is to this day utterly unknown to tribal societies,” he wrote (ML 80). McLuhan’s son Eric gave a soteriological topspin on this idea when he posited that “the private individual with a private self is also charged with private responsibility for his or her own actions and quests for private salvation. The alphabet literally paved the way for these matters. These are New Testament times. The Old Testament, for example, had declared the Jews a chosen people: group salvation” (McLuhan, “Sensus Communis and Synesthesia”). It’s this same over-individualized faith that I’m seeing backfire among my peers. We’re entering a second orality, and it’s pregnant with possibility and risk.

*Secondary orality* was a term coined by media scholar Walter Ong in his 1982 treatise *Orality and Literacy*. He describes *secondary orality* as “a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print” (Ong 136). This secondary orality isn’t going to be a perfect resurrected replica of the “primary” orality that saw the rise of Judaism. It’s going to be a cyborg blend of the written, print, and electronic traditions—a blend that may seek to restore the communal value of oral culture. This transition away from the electronic age toward secondary orality is a process that has

certainly begun, but has not yet been fully realized. McLuhan lived through the slip from oral-based to electricity-based liturgy in the Catholic church, but he didn't live to see the fulfillment of the oral revival that he had predicted. Secondary orality will be characterized by increasingly acoustic technology and a return to societies built on meta-narratives of the sort found in the tribal epoch. According to popular theorist Daniel Pink, secondary orality will be an era in which creativity, empathy, pattern recognition, and the ability to make meaning again become marketable skills in the workplace (Pink 43). As the landscape changes rapidly and millennials become more and more disillusioned with the individualization that the electronic age has forced on them, liturgical frameworks will again become desirable as systems of organization, tradition, and meaning. A generation of creative catalysts, storytellers, harmonizers, curators, empathizers, meaning-makers, and big-picture thinkers will begin to flood the marketplace, meeting a demand for synthesis, and not just analysis—beauty, and not just function. Though the move to the conceptual age is an evolution from humanity's tribal roots, it's also a *revolution* back to those same tribal roots. The emerging technological framework of secondary orality finds its historical analog in acoustic religion. Brand mythology finds its historical framework in culturally-valued religious meta-narrative. Corporate iconography finds its historical framework in religious symbology (Schuchardt). And the way we use technology finds its historical framework in religious liturgy. In a word, we're returning to the sort of acoustically meaningful culture that saw the childhood and adolescence of Judaism. If primary orality was the primordial soup that produced Jewish liturgy, secondary orality is producing a technological liturgy that's remarkably similar. The proof is in the patterns.

The verses following the Shema in Deuteronomy 6 have become the foundation for much of Jewish liturgical practice. I appreciate the way that the NIV translates verses 8 and 9: “tie them [the commandments] as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” From these verses, Judaism has derived several liturgical practices. The injunction to bind the commandments

has been interpreted as the practice of tying *tefillin* during morning prayer. The *tefillin* are small boxes bound with leather to the wrist and head that contain the words of the Shema. They are symbols—physical representations of the non-physical concept of what it means to love God. The injunction to write the commandments on the doorframe has been interpreted this command as the *mezuzah*, a small box affixed to the doorpost of a house, containing the words of Deuteronomy 6. These practices have technological analogs in secondary orality. The *tefillin* is mirrored in the emerging realm of wearable technology, particularly the Apple watch and like products—small boxes bound with leather to the wrist, and eyewear like the failed first iteration of Google Glass. These technologies are used in the the same way that the Jews use *tefillin*—as tools of reminder. And already, the theological implications wax ominous. We recall the prophesy of the second beast in Revelation 13 that “causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead” (Revelation 13:17, ESV). Perhaps the contemporary technology analog for the *mezuzah* is the wifi router, a small box that every technologically “observant” household owns. It is traditional, when entering a Jewish home, to reach up and touch the *mezuzah*. Symbolically, acknowledgement of the box becomes a touchpoint of entrance, a sort of signifier of commonality with the belief of the household. Similarly, household wifi is the touchpoint that one must acknowledge as one walks through the door to the Internet.

The liturgical practice from Numbers 15 to wear “tassels on the corners of your garments” and the practice of wearing the *tallis* during prayer also have technological analogs (Numbers 15:38, ESV). You will often see orthodox Jews, even the very young children, reaching down to touch the *tzitzit* that hang from their shirts. Throughout the day, the presence and feel of the *tzitzit* act as a reminder to keep the commands of God. They are grasped in prayer as a physical touchpoint between the worshiper and the divine. In traditional Judaism, the *tzitzit* are also affixed to a four-cornered prayer shawl called a *tallis* which is worn over the head or around the neck. Though the tradition of the *tallis* doesn't have a

Biblical origin per se, its traditional function during prayer is to acknowledge the headship of God, to block out the distractions of the world, and to aid in achieving “*kavannah*” or perfect concentration in prayer. It is not unlike a pair of headphones, worn over the head or around the neck and used to block out the outside world. The smaller version of the *tallis*, the *tallis catan*, may find an analog in a pair of earbuds. In the same way that the *tzitzit* attach to the *tallis*, so too our smartphones attach to headphones and serve as both signifiers and as conduits. They label the observant and facilitate communication. We reach for the phones at the corners of our garments as touchpoint between ourselves and the global village. The compulsion with which we handle our phones is not unlike the devotion of the orthodox Jew. To them the motion is instinctive, engrained in their psyches. And to us, the smartphone is likewise. It is sheer stimulus—a vibrating drug in our pockets that keeps us high on the methadone of connectedness (Farhad).

In the same vein, the bluetooth headset worn around the ear carries a unique resemblance to Jewish *peyot*, the corners of the beard that Leviticus 19:27 commands not be cut. The most devout will even wrap their *peyot* around their ears when they grow to be too long. Both the bluetooth headset and the *peyot* are distinguishing marks of the “faith” and serve a more symbolic rather than pragmatic purpose.

Traditions of conversion and coming of age express themselves liturgically in secondary orality as well. The Jewish conversion process requires circumcision: quite literally the partial loss of that which is most private. So too, in our “conversion” to the technological religion, we must agree to the fine-print terms and regulations, and offer up the foreskin of our private information. Children now experience technological *bar* or *bat mitzvahs*—rites of passage when they become responsible for the knowledge that is only a Google search away. They become not sons and daughters of the commandment, but sons and daughters of the Internet. Clearing browser history becomes the new “*mikvah*” or ritual baptism of Levitical purity, and these rituals are being offered to increasingly younger and younger children. From an early age, children understand “brand holiness” as well as Jewish children knew not to mix wool and linen. So too, even the dietary laws of Leviticus and

Deuteronomy may be mirrored malevolently in the eating disorders pervasive among young women bombarded by mediated representations of the self.

The Levitical sacrificial system outlined in detail in Leviticus and Deuteronomy is not unlike the system of technological obsolescence that characterizes the ever-shifting software and hardware environment. In order to stay connected, old models of software and hardware must be “sacrificed” to newer models and versions. Updates are the price we pay for maintaining closeness with the brand. Each update ideally provides a better experience for the user. In a similar way, the sacrificial system functioned to temporarily “cover” the individual’s unholiness so that they could draw nearer to God’s holiness. Over and over again, individuals would bring sacrifices to the temple to renew their devotional lives. The same phenomenon resurfaces every time we purchase a newer iPhone or download the latest operating system.

Finally, the physical places that are associated with the technological religion are also somehow vaguely familiar. Consider the flagship Apple store in New York is a glass cube, stalely lit from the center by the light of a floating Apple logo. It uncannily resembles the glass cube of the New Jerusalem which descends out of heaven in Revelation 21—a city illuminated from the center by the light of the glory of God (Robinson 94).

But again, as much as I’d love to believe these two lights—the light of the bitten apple and the light of the glory of God—are fixed in opposition, there’s a better way to understand the theological implications of these patterns. McLuhan refused to “theologize on the basis of my understanding of technology” because he “lacked scholastic terminology and concepts” (Stearn 98). I don’t pretend to have the grasp of scholastic terminology and concepts that McLuhan lacked, but the time is ripe for the first tentative steps toward a theologizing of media.

It’s important to recognize that, though their orality-anchored liturgies are remarkably similar, there are two different gods operating behind the technological religion of consumption and the religion of Judaism. Behind the latter is the one, true, God—the I Am. But behind the former is Mammon, the god of consumption, wealth, and

self-aggrandizement who slowly takes more and more, giving less and less in return. Technological consumption may soothe alienation for a time, but before long, we'll be more alienated than we ever were before, from God and from our fellow man. The Master's words ring in our ears: "no servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Matthew 6:24, ESV). Mammon reaches his icy fingers into all realms of the heart that are concerned with status, wealth, privilege, social standing, security, and the self.

But the liturgy itself is not to blame. During his ministry, Jesus didn't abolish the liturgical expressions of Jewish praxis any more than he abolished the Law itself. What he did was rebuke the individuals who were using the Jewish liturgy to serve Mammon's desire for status. It was the corrupt and hypocritical among the Pharisees and Saducees—the "blind guides"—who had most fatally fallen prey to Mammon's clutches. They were the ones who made "their phylacteries broad and their fringes long" (Matthew 23:5, ESV).

Within the technological religion of secondary orality, this twisted, self-serving, liturgical use of technology is, of course, all too rampant. Mammon has been the object of worship for far too many individuals who use their technology in seemingly benign ways, neglecting to see how much of a hold it has on their lives. It's hard to see where this slippery slope begins, but it's not hard to see where it ends. It ends with the destruction of the soul for the sake of the body. It ends with the perfect inversion of the work of Jesus, who sacrificed his body for the sake of the souls of billions. It ends with man attempting to become his own messiah.

I spoke with Jacob Fronczak, a Messianic Jewish writer, theologian, and pastor about the theological stakes of this religion of technological consumption. I asked him, given all of the parallels between Judaism and emerging technology, if there was a messiah figure hiding in our technology like the messiah figure that hides in the pages of the Hebrew scriptures. Without missing a beat, he replied, "biotechnology" (Fronczak). Futurists like Ray Kurzweil of Google have predicted that we're only 50

years away from biotechnology that, when integrated with the human body, will be able to prevent death (Kurzweil 43). Kurzweil calls this coming future the "next step in human evolution" (46), the exact phrase that C.S. Lewis used in his terrifying novel

*That Hideous Strength* to describe the antagonists' own attempts to create "the man who will not die, the artificial man, free from Nature (174). Far from being another rung in an evolutionary ladder, bio-technical enhancement of the human body smacks too much of man playing God or worse, trying to become his own redemption.

This is the self-serving idolatry of Mammon taken to its logical extreme. When we believe we can turn up our bio-technical noses at the curse of death, it's in that moment that we have truly died. It's in that moment that we have lost our souls. It comes as no surprise that the most debated ethical problem surrounding this "next step in human evolution" is whether or not the soul can be technologically codified. I think the obvious answer coming from a position of faith is a frank 'no.' Defeating death is something only the true Messiah can do. Attempting to become our own messiah will only lead to ruin of the eternal sort. McLuhan was right when he speculated that "this [the electronic age] could be the time for the Antichrist." For, he said, "Lucifer is the greatest electrical engineer" (ML 209).

Because Jesus is the only hope for true salvation and the only person who can properly orient our liturgical focus, we need to be looking for places of intersection between Jewish models of liturgy and the redeeming work of Christ. Messianic Judaism is an umbrella term for a host of religious outlooks. For years, the label has been primarily identified with missionary organizations like "Jews for Jesus" who make it their goal to convert the Jewish people to Christianity. But this effort—this facet of Messianic Judaism—has ignored the unique space the Jewish people own as God's chosen people—joined with specific liturgical practices that were not abolished by Jesus's inbreaking. A burgeoning branch of Messianic Judaism called post-missionary Messianic Judaism, holds that God did not break his covenant with the Jewish people, that, in some mysterious way, the Jews retain their status as God's chosen people and should continue to express that identity liturgically in the

manner prescribed in the Torah.

With respect to our technology, we're living in a Jewish world. And, given the natural danger of liturgy to become a self-aggrandizing force, McLuhan would have been the first to argue for the centrality of Jesus Christ in such a technological society. After all, In Christ alone are the group and the individual truly brought together. In Christ alone are the medium and the message perfectly the same (ML 103). In Christ alone are the oral and the literary united. In Christ alone can Catholicism and Judaism be reconciled. The marriage of Judaism and Jesus Christ is the theological outlook we need to successfully, selflessly, and productively navigate the liturgical domain of secondary orality.

This is why I believe that McLuhan, had he been of a mind, could have participated in a form of Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism. Instead, McLuhan chose the next best option: pre-Vatican II Catholicism: a religion with a deep-seated understanding of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and a grounding in the orality of Latin liturgy. Unfortunately, that grounding in orality didn't last.

Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism is the theological perspective that I believe most closely aligns with McLuhan's respect for acoustic community, the figure of Christ, and the world of secondary orality that he knew was just around the corner. I want to stress the tentative nature of this probe, but I think that theologically casting McLuhan's ideas in this way places the emphasis on the form of religion as opposed to the content of religion. It's a helpful probe to "get us into the problem." Perhaps McLuhan would have disagreed doctrinally with the content— with some of the tenets of Messianic Judaism, but his theories of communication align closely with the religion's form. An exploration of McLuhan's works will benefit from an understanding of this niche theology. Messianic Judaism redeems liturgy, transforming it from something individual and dangerous to something corporate and empathetic. And it has the potential to do the same for technology. It is said that empathy rarely extends beyond our line of sight. But our technological liturgies are vastly extending our line of sight (Silva). It becomes our responsibility to extend

that same selflessness even further than we have before, to be the light to the nations in an acoustically meaningful way.

Regardless of how dark the future may get as we forge deeper into the wilderness of secondary orality, the community of believers should not be left without a lamp to light our way. If we take Jesus' simultaneous acceptance and critique of Jewish praxis as our guide, we have a brighter path forward as we seek to bring the light of Jesus to the light of our retina screens. Jesus returned the true God to expressions of worship corrupted by Mammon. Jesus made liturgy a matter of the heart, as it was meant to be. He set an example of humility and privacy within praxis, going "up on the mountain by himself to pray" (Matthew 14:23, ESV). Like the liturgical practices of Judaism, technology is empowering. But it's a power that cannot be used to promote the self at the expense of others' dignity. It's a power that must be used to build up the community—to create meaning in ways that promote human flourishing. It's a power that gives healing, abundance, and teeming. It's a power that excels at empathy, storytelling, and exploration—just the sort of virtues that secondary orality values.

As we await the return of the Messiah, the call is to live incarnationally, using technology to extend empathy beyond our line of sight. When we overlay the Messiah's reconciling acceptance and critique of Jewish liturgy on the complex liturgical environment of secondary orality, believers will be better prepared to recognize dangerous patterns of technological self-aggrandizement. Recognizing these patterns gives us power over them. When we realize, like McLuhan did, that history is repeating itself, that the liturgical practices of primary orality are experiencing a resurgence within technological patterns, and that the Antichrist may indeed be a "great electrical engineer," we will be all the more aware of how easy it is to fall into the self-serving traps of Mammon. Empowered, we are able to better reflect the light of Jesus for the restoration of the world.

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