

Reading religiously: The witness of a community of readers

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The alarm has been sounded over the future of reading. We are rapidly becoming a culture of the image, not the word, we are told. Those who have been saturated in the hyperkinetic visual stimulus of electronic media are losing patience with the page and the more linear habits of thought needed to follow communication structured by printed words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters.

If the popularity of the Harry Potter books and the Oprah Winfrey book club is any indication, it's a bit premature to announce the death of print culture. But the changes in how we communicate are profound enough to prompt religious people to consider the place of reading in their personal lives, communities and traditions.

Clearly, reading has always played a pivotal role in establishing and sustaining the people of God. "Have you never read . . . ?" It's a line Jesus uttered repeatedly before he cited scripture to those who questioned his actions, as though they were at least minimally remiss in not doing their homework. Before Jesus there was that remarkable moment when the Book of the Law was rediscovered during the reign of Josiah. The king read the book aloud to the gathered people, and that reading sparked a religious renewal in Judah. The apostle Paul thought enough about reading to rely on letters to stay in touch with churches he had founded. And the sacramentally charged words "Take, read" moved Augustine to a religious conversion that has echoed through the church's history.

Reading, of a particular kind, is no less important for Christians in a cyber age. Reading religiously is not about being entertained or absorbing data. It is an act of piety through which the human heart is nurtured and shaped. Those who read religiously assume God's ever-present reality, and expect that through their engagement with the written word they will be changed—their understanding deepened, their feelings enriched, their consciences touched, their decisions clarified.

And it's not only scripture that should be read religiously. Reading secular literature—a novel, a memoir, a work of history—with religious seriousness will effect significant conversions of mind and attitude. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* fired the imaginations of abolitionists, even as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* stirred social gospel advocates. Martin Luther King cited his reading of Gandhi as seminal to his own nonviolent civil rights work. Even a reading of the arch-atheist Friedrich Nietzsche has corrected and deepened the faith of more than a few believers.

What is true of individuals is also true for communities that read religiously. Congregations that read together—the Bible surely, but also the kinds of books that are reviewed in each issue of the *Christian Century*—will find the reading of all enriched by the reading of each. In adult education classes and informal groups the varied readings of a common text offered by individual members more fully illuminate the text, the readers and the world that encompasses both. The witness of the word is also the witness of a community of readers.