

ABSTRACT

**MEDIA LITERACY IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION:
ENGAGING POPULAR CULTURE TO ENHANCE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

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This dissertation details the experiences of a group of primarily Christian religious educators in the United States who collaborated in a participatory action research project that explored the implications of media literacy for religious education. Using the Center for Media Literacy's *Catholic Connections to Media Literacy* curriculum as a starting point, we explored five genres of mass-mediated popular culture (film, television commercials, the WorldWideWeb, broadcast news, and music video) in a six session workshop. That engagement was audiotaped, transcribed, and then scrutinized for relevant themes.

Analysis of the process suggested that popular culture can be a very useful resource in religious education. The pleasure and intense emotionality popular culture evokes, for instance, is a useful entry point into religious formation and education. Critically probing mass-mediated texts can overcome the perception that there is a dichotomy between secular and religious experience. Finally, approaching popular culture from the standpoint of media literacy clearly enhances the development of critical thinking skills which are crucial for people of faith living amidst contemporary US culture.

Using mass-mediated popular culture in religious education also raises a number of difficulties. Mass-mediated popular culture texts often provide representations that contribute to systemic forms of oppression such as racism, classism and gender discrimination. Mass-mediated representations of religious experience often trivialize or deny the full

range of religious forms of knowing. Finally, while communities of faith often point to problematic aspects of the *content* of the mass media, it is actually the epistemological frames embedded in such media, their processes of providing *context*, that are most problematic.

To confront this process of epistemological embeddedness, and to promote transformation of epistemological framework, Robert Kegan's insights into adult education, particularly his three-pronged educational approach of "confirmation, contradiction, and continuity" are explored in concert with feminist revisions of Karl Rahner's theological anthropology. This two-fold standpoint, both theological and psychological, provides a constructive theoretical underpinning for supporting media literacy within religious education.