Faithfully playing with new media: Lessons learned and questions raised in an environment of globalization

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Prepared for presentation:
APRRE annual meeting
Minneapolis, MN
November 4, 2001

Any discussion of globalization in the context of faith communities has to begin by defining the term. Thomas Friedman, journalist and author of a best-selling book entitled *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, defines it in this way:

...globalization... is the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before – in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before, and in a way that is enabling the world to reach into individuals, corporations and nation-states farther, faster, deeper, cheaper than ever before.[9, 2000 #268]

This is a definition that privileges certain kinds of entities, namely, individuals and institutions of the market and/or political sphere. There is here no mention of other kinds of institutions, understandings of human being that center on the “person” rather than the “individual.”¹ As such, it is a definition, in Friedman’s argument at least, that attempts to describe the latest “new world order”, subsequent to that of the Cold War. Questions of commodity markets, investment instruments, and the digital technologies

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¹ As in a Catholic understanding of personalism, for instance.
that can sustain and foster near instantaneous communications tend to be a driving force in this framework.

Religious communities, on the other hand, have for a long time operated with a definition of globalization that grows out of a theological commitment to human being as inherently relational, socially structured, and intimately connected to the divine. This is a definition that tends to see the primary question raised by globalization as one of contextualization: how do we find language and ritual to speak of the universal God in the local context? Lesher and Shriver suggest that “the most significant development” within this definition was Don Browning’s “four-point typology”:

For some, globalization means the church’s universal mission to evangelize the world, i.e., to take the message of the gospel to all people, all nations, all cultures, and all religious faiths. Second, there is the idea of globalization as ecumenical cooperation between the various manifestations of the Christian church throughout the world... Third, globalization sometimes refers to the dialogue between Christianity and other religions. Finally, globalization refers to the mission of the church to the world, not only to convert and to evangelize, but to improve and develop the lives of the millions of poor, starving, and politically disadvantaged people...[6, 1999 #269] (quoting Don Browning, “Globalization and the Task of Theological Education in North American, “Theological Education, 23:1 (Autumn 1986): 43-59.)

Digital technologies would appear to be, at least on the face of it, irrelevant to this definition.

Yet it is digital technologies, particularly those associated with information transfer and communication, that are fundamentally shaping the context for each of these definitions. How they do so in the first is the central argument of Friedman’s book. I am convinced that they are also central in the second definition as well. I have made that argument in other settings, so will do no more than briefly reiterate it here. Namely, digital media are rapidly becoming the primary database upon which we draw (at least in the U.S., but I think this argument could be made elsewhere, as well) to construct our understanding of ourselves – including religiously.²

The second element of Friedman’s argument, one that is not so easily grasped from his definition, but is certainly evoked in his title – namely, the “Olive tree” – is that

globalization is also and always about localization as well. Friedman actually ends his book with a compelling call for more adequate and grounded forms of religious education.

So what can religious educators do? And how should we understand our practice in a context of globalization? These are very large questions, and one essay can do no more than focus on a discrete and specific piece within them. In this case, I would like to consider what religious educators might learn about our practices in the context of, and/or in relation to, globalization by considering what one specific group of religious educators learned from engaging digital media as part of a participatory action research project.

Part One: the Workshop seminar

participatory action research

At its most basic, Whyte, et. al. (1991, p. 20) note that participatory action research (PAR) is a process wherein “some of the people in the organization or community under study participate actively with the professional researcher throughout the study process from the initial design to the final presentation of results and discussion of their action implications.”

How might religious educators engage new media in the context of globalization? To answer this question it seemed appropriate to design a process in which a group of religious educators – both those working at the pastoral level, and those working in theological education – might participate actively in “playing with” new media.

During the fall of 1999, with the support of the International Study Commission on Media, Religion, and Culture, I secured a foundation grant to bring together just such a group of people. I spent the academic year 1999-2000 working with an advisory board3 to develop an application and recruiting process for participants, as well as the initial outlines of an inquiry process.

Participants were chosen based on their proposals, which had to include a concrete project they were either already working on, or would begin that summer, as well as clear evidence of support from people and organizations (usually faith communities) in the context in which they were working. We were also searching for diversity, both in terms of cultural context, age, etc. and in terms of primary practice (eg. artist, teacher, author, etc.). The foundation provided full funding for travel and lodging during the seminar, and Boston College provided facilities and technical support.

The participant roster of fourteen people (one of the initial participants had to withdraw shortly before the seminar began, due to the death of his father) was

3 Dr. Bruce Morrill, Dr. Addie Lorraine Walker, and Adán Medrano generously gave of their time and expertise for this board.
drawn from a primary pool of 32 very strong applications which the Advisory Board had to winnow after lengthy deliberations. They included:

Allana Joy Bourne  
Newspapers in Education Program Specialist, *The Seattle Times*  
Adjunct faculty, Seattle Pacific University  
Her project focused on media education in the Buddhist community.

John Baker Brown  
Principal writer and editor/J. Baker Brown Editorial Services  
His clients include Coca-Cola, AT&T, Morehouse College, Georgia Institute of Technology, and he is a writer/editor who has worked with hundreds of publications, both corporate and press.  
His project focused on young people and the mass media, and was developed for a seminary course at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, GA.

Mario D’Souza  
Assistant Professor  
Faculty of Theology  
St. Michael’s College, Toronto, Canada  
His project focused on music videos and their integration into theological reflection.

Elizabeth Duggan  
Religion teacher at Saint Thomas Academy, Mendota Heights, MN  
Previously assistant director of University Ministry at Marquette University.  
Her project focused on technology integration in the sophomore religion course.

Wayne Dunkley  
Photographer  
Adjunct faculty at Humber College, Toronto, Ontario  
His project was the “sharemyworld.net” web site.

Peter Gilmour  
Associate Professor of Pastoral Studies  
Institute of Pastoral Studies  
Loyola University  
Chicago, IL  
Author of numerous books and articles on narrative theology.  
His project focused on strategies for enlivening prayer through engagement of media.

Alan McCormack  
Lecturer in Christian Liturgics  
Trinity College  
Dublin, Ireland  
Secretary, Church of Ireland Broadcasting Committee  
His project focused on integrating media texts into liturgical contexts.
Kathy McNair
Chaplain at Rush North Shore Medical Center, Chicago area
TV Producer/Director of various faith-based television programs
Her project focused on developing videos for reflection and pastoral care within health care settings.

Suzanne Nelson
Pastoral Administrator, Holy Name of Jesus Catholic Community, Florida
Formerly director of the Notre Dame College Center for Pastoral Theology and Ministry
 Writes a monthly column for Parish Works on communication and theology
Her project focused on sharing new ways to engage media in providing scripture study for adults

Amy O’Hair
Webmistress of St. Gregory of Nyssa Church, San Francisco
Producer of multiple faith-based web sites, as well as custom dressmaking and church banner design and production
Her project centered on the development of liturgical resources for the St. Gregory of Nyssa web site.

Gaye Ortiz
Senior Lecturer in Theology, Religious and Cultural Studies
College of Ripon and York St. John
North Yorkshire, UK
President, European branch of the International Catholic Organization for Cinema and Audiovisual (OCIC)
TV Producer/Director of numerous programs
Her project focused on exploring internet-based spirituality for an undergraduate level religion course.

Ted Reeve
Project Coordinator of the Churches’ Council on Theological Education in Canada
Research Associate at the Centre for Research in Religion, Emmanuel College, Toronto
His project focused on a web-based locus for engaging people of faith in a communal quest for the common good around issues of economic justice.

Fred Smith
Associate Director of the Interfaith Health Program
Carter Presidential Center, Emory University
Adjunct Professor at Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University [He has just moved to become a Professor of Youth Ministry at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary]
His project focused on work on hip hop culture and evangelization, primarily to be used in theological courses in a seminary setting.
Sheila Winborne  
Doctoral Student at Harvard University  
Formerly involved in television and video production at WCVB-TV  
Her project involved the creation and production of a CD-ROM version of her dissertation resources having to do with the work and life of fine art photographer F. Holland Day.

Already it should be obvious that this group of people is “international” only in fairly narrow terms, and all of them come from within a predominately Western context. With the exception of four African-American participants, they are also primarily situated within white, middle class locations. The speed with which the recruiting process was put together, and the short span of time in which the process unfolded is in part to blame. But it is also true that few people have the time and resources available to spend an entire week away from income-producing activities, or sufficient family support to cover child care and other daily necessities.

All of this description should help to contextualize this project and suggest that it is, at best, only one attempt to explore these questions and is intended to be evocative rather than prescriptive.

The Advisory Board, in addition to selecting participants from the applicant pool, also helped me, as project director, to put together an initial “syllabus” for the workshop. We focused, in particular, on the various projects that participants had proposed and sought to develop a process that would create a common ground for in-depth discussion, as well as sufficient time and technical support for participants to further their individual projects.

We structured the seminar around early morning worship in a variety of styles, planned and implemented by participants; morning “input” sessions that provided the group an opportunity to raise and discuss pressing issues; afternoon sessions that were geared towards playing with specific kinds of media (working with audio MP3 files, for instance, digitizing video, burning cd-roms, and so on); and evening sessions that showcased various provocative examples of new media and religion projects.

The input sessions began on Monday with an overview of the emerging landscape, looking particularly at academic discussions that exist at the intersection of media, religion and culture. Emerging metaphors for communicative praxis, particularly the cultural reception studies of the UC-Boulder project, framed most of the discussion. The creative artists among the group were especially eloquent about the “in-betweenness” of media, of the ways in which as cultural producers they sought to set the stage for a conversation to begin via their artwork. They were also clear about their deep sense that they could not control that conversation, only begin to shape it. During the afternoon participants could choose to participate in a skills workshop focused on web page design, and a tour of web sites that explored some of the ways in which communities of faith are using the World Wide Web to share their ministries. That evening the group laughed their way through several *VeggieTales* (a digitally animated children’s television show that seeks to
explore various bible texts) episodes, and talked about the nature of commercially produced electronic media.\(^4\)

On Tuesday the group began their work together by thinking about the interwoven nature of ritual and narrative, particularly the rhythm of movement between the mythic (or ideal) pole of God’s reconciling presence, and the parabolic (or broken, sinful) pole of human behavior. Anderson and Foley’s work on these issues was particularly compelling to seminar participants, and participants walked away from the session continuing to engage in a compelling discussion of the ways in which digital media could enhance a “responsible” imagination. That afternoon the skills workshop focused on MP3 and other emerging audio formats, and several people spoke of how excited they were by the new possibilities such technologies imply. Tuesday evening’s session was facilitated by Grove Harris of the Pluralism Project, a Harvard University project that for many years has sought to enhance understanding of the diversity of religious practice across traditions in the U.S. They have produced an award-winning CD-ROM that documents the project and educates people about this diversity (Common Ground)\(^5\).

On Wednesday morning the input session was focused on new media production in digital cultural spaces. The group engaged in a passionate discussion of one participant’s project, the “sharemyworld.net” web site of Wayne Dunkley. Wayne began his career as a photographer, and in moving some of his work to the web began to think about the third and fourth dimensionality of that medium. That morning’s session was in many ways a new high for the group, because it was the first time that artists’ voices dominated and structured the discussion. Many of the academically trained theologians found themselves captivated by “ah ha” moments that they could recognize but not yet voice; while the creative artists began to find their voices in the midst of morning input sessions that had until that point been fairly academic. That afternoon some participants worked on digital video editing, and in the evening the group attended a screening and discussion of the film The Matrix.

Thursday morning was going to be devoted to theological voices (the seminar had originally invited Drs. Morrill and Goizueta from the BC faculty and Dr. Plude from Notre Dame College to meet with them), but the energy from the previous morning was still very high, and the group decided instead to spend their time exploring the web site of yet another participant, Ted Reeve. Ted’s work focusses on supporting public engagement in issues involving the common good. He had been struggling throughout his individual work time during the seminar to engage issues of globalization, particularly the “new economies” and their effect on communities around the world. His web site provoked enormous

\(^4\) It is important to note that all of the sessions were completely voluntary in nature, an important aspect of the desire to ensure that a participatory action research strategy was used – ie. If it was truly participatory, then people would participate!

\(^5\) More information on this CD-ROM is available at the project web site: http://www.pluralism.org/index.php.
dialogue around questions of “the new world order” and what role communities of faith could and should attempt to play in it. He also brought with him some of the videos that his project, which is jointly sponsored by a number of national denominations in the Canadian context, has produced. The skills workshop that afternoon focused on turning “html” sites into CD-ROMs, and the evening session explored the American Bible Society’s new media translations.6

The seminar’s final full day together began with an open discussion of themes that had emerged as compelling during the week. The group spent time in particular discussing the ways in which so many communities of faith cling to an instrumental model of media, and thus either shun digital media as inappropriate bearers of meaning and message, or assume that they can use such media with no thought to the instability and “in-betweenness” of meaning-making. There was energetic consensus on the richness of the seminar time, and the workshop’s support of individual projects. That afternoon many people headed into downtown Boston to go to galleries together, others spent quiet time in the libraries and computer lab, and that evening the group all went out for a last celebration together.

On Saturday morning we gathered in a final work session to make specific commitments to our projects and to each other, and then joined in a closing liturgy that was shaped by a series of Wayne’s landscape photographs, Alan’s voice raised in chant, and Amy’s liturgical dance.

It should be apparent from this cursory description that the seminar itself was an evocative and rich learning environment. But what kinds of responses did it offer to the presenting question of this essay: namely, how might religious educators engage globalization through new media technologies? I would like to answer that question in two stages. First, I think it’s important to take note of the questions that arose in the context of this seminar, for participant projects and the input sessions themselves suggested what might be construed as central problematics to which we need to attend. Second, I would like to provide one framework in which to consider how these questions unfold. The first piece is clearly a “finding,” if you will, of the PAR project. The latter, however, is solely my own attempt to come to terms with some of what the group explored.

questions raised…

The preceding description of the seminar input sessions begins to note the major themes or problematics that the group was interested in exploring. Three in particular were recurring themes: an expressive or reception oriented understanding of how new media function, the necessity of balancing the “mythic” and “parabolic” aspects of religious education in this forum, and the complicated fashion in which new media contribute to what some have called “glocalization.”

6 More information on these resources is available at:
http://www.researchcenter.org/homeframe.htm
Let me begin with the notion that we need to move to an “expressive” or “reception-oriented” understanding of how new media function. I have written in many other contexts about this shift in the basic paradigm for understanding mass media.\(^7\) To summarize it briefly, the shift is from an “instrumentalist” model which understands mass media as pipelines through which produced materials flow, to be received on the other end by passive consumers; to a more complex and even dialogical model that understands producers of content as having an important influence on the materials drawn into meaning-making, but very little influence on the actual shape of that meaning-making; and which understands mass media “pipelines” as having more than a “flow-through” effect on the meaning created. The meaning-making, instead, is shaped by a complex array of contextual factors, including but not limited to the ways in which “receivers” of mass media engage those media in the course of their daily practices.

An exercise that we completed early in the week made the descriptive strength of this latter model evident. Each participant was asked to draw a horizontal line for themselves with “Real” on one end of it. A similar line was drawn on the presentation board, and participants were asked to view it as a spectrum upon which they would “place” various video clips. Seven three minute clips were aired (one at a time), and each participant marked where they would put the clip on the continuum. In addition, one person volunteered prior to each clip showing to do the same on the presentation board.

After viewing all the clips, we asked the workshop group to talk about the ways in which their own spectrums differed from the one outlined on the presentation board. We also talked about the various criteria they used as they were marking clips, and their labelling of the opposite end of the continuum (we had labelled one end “real,” but left the other one unnamed). I have completed this exercise in a large variety of institutions, and with participants who ranged in age from ten years to beyond 70 years. In each case the groups had a lot of fun with it, but also generated serious discussion about what is “real” in our world, and the criteria we employ to evaluate reality. In the case of this workshop, the participants had quite sophisticated definitions of “real” – and a fascinating assortment of names of the other end of the spectrum, including “fake” “unreal” “hyperreal” and “surreal.”

The criteria they used to place video clips varied. One that often emerged was the genre of the clip – with a news clip closer to the “real” end of the spectrum, and an animated cartoon close to the other end. Another criteria concerned the extent to which a participant felt some kind of experiential or emotional resonance with the clip. Participants tended to share examples from their own experience that coincided – or did not, and hence the clips were marked lower – with the video clips, thus using resonance as the judging criteria. A third criteria had to do with the integrity of the “message” of the clip and its presentation. In this latter instance, while a clip of a soap opera was seen as being possibly “real,” its presentation seriously damaged its credibility.

In all of these discussions, however, the primary criteria used were drawn from the participants’ own experiences and/or their emotional resonances. It was clear that people had sophisticated frames for discerning “reality,” and that even our most “print-oriented” people used frames that had a significant degree of sympathetic identification associated with them. This exercise in some ways sustains Tom Boomershine’s argument that in our contemporary contexts “we reason more by means of sympathetic identification than by philosophical argumentation.”

It also sustains what was a growing feeling amongst the group that purely instrumentalist models of mass media operation missed important components of the meaning people were making using mass mediated materials.

As the week continued, and participants became more familiar with each other’s projects, it was also clear that this newer model was more difficult to use in educational contexts. Many of the workshop members had projects that involved some substantial teaching/learning component to them. An instrumentalist model of how mass media function has one highly appealing element to it – the producer of the message is understood to control the message’s reception. The creative artists among us were already clear about the misleading nature of that model. The teachers among our pastoral agents quickly began to recognize this problem as well. How does one go about creating something within new media, particularly mass mediated new media, that supports the kind of learning you are trying to draw out? Many people spoke of how this question reminded them of much earlier struggles in communities of faith around the question of images, and teaching through images.

As the group struggled with this question, a variety of resources began to emerge, among them the work on hypertext that some educators are employing, as well as the frameworks developed to support self-initiating and collaborative inquiry. In both of these instances, educators talk about creating multiple paths to meaning-creation, and they speak of finding ways to build evaluation into ongoing learning. Educators also speak in these fields about the importance of attending to the feelings and actions that are part of any learning event, not simply the ideas; or of engaging the implicit and null curricula, not simply the explicit curriculum presented.

If new media contexts provoke these questions, it might also be that they provide new ways of answering them. One of the artists among us, Wayne Dunkley, was particularly eloquent about his desire to move people from a two-dimensional engagement with the

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8 Thomas Boomershine made this comment in a presentation given in a conference entitled “Witnessing to the faith: An activity of the media,” in Ottawa, Ontario, May of 1999.
9 An interesting example is Henrik Boes’ masters’ thesis
web to a three-dimensional one. Clearly one of the continuing questions this research suggests is how to support just this kind of dimensional evolution in meaning-making.

Ritual and narrative

The second full day of the workshop we began to focus on narrative, and to ask what the implications are of the highly narrative nature of much of mediated culture. Adán Medrano’s insight that our ritual resources may be our most pertinent in such a narrative-permeated environment, at least from within communities of faith, prompted us to consider an argument that H. Anderson and E. Foley are advancing, about the interconnected – yet still distinct – natures of ritual and narrative. One of the concepts central to their argument that creative tension exists at the heart of Christian witness between the “parabolic” and the “mythic.”\(^{11}\) They identify a rhythm of movement between the mythic (or ideal) pole of God’s reconciling presence, and the parabolic (or broken, sinful) pole of human behavior. Even the Buddhist in our group – who found language of “attachment and of detachment” more clear than that of “sin” – affirmed this central tension.

As we began to consider this heuristic, it grew increasingly evident that most of the people in the workshop thought that media materials produced explicitly by religious organizations tended to fall too far on the end of the mythic, and not engage the parabolic sufficiently. It was more difficult to classify the tendencies of “secular” productions, since in many ways the genre of media production (a 30 minute sitcom, a 60 minute melodrama, investigative newsmagazines, etc.) creates a kind of “mythic” reality by coming to a conclusion in a set space of time. On the other hand, so-called “secular” productions more often raised troubling issues about the brokenness of our world, particularly within religious organizations. Again and again we came back to the need to find ways to hold these two ends of the spectrum in creative tension.\(^{12}\)

Glocalization…

This creative tension was nowhere more evident than in our discussions of the ways in which new media contribute to what some are calling “glocalization.” On the one hand, as the comments from Friedman with which I began this paper make clear, digital technologies are at the heart of the increasingly interconnected and global context in which we live. Yet we have deep concern for the ways in which people are “making sense” of this inter-connectedness. Are we finding ourselves more aware of our differences, and more drawn to engaging them respectfully – hence we are more “local”? This would be the kind of globalization that the theological voices I used at the beginning of this paper might support. Or are we more prone to a “McWorld” kind of standardized consumerism that increasingly strains the environment we all must share

\(^{11}\) H. Anderson and E. Foley, Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

\(^{12}\) I even found a way to use my favorite image in this context, R. Buckminster Fuller’s notion of “tensegrity.” That is, that when you hold opposing forces together while yet respecting their individual integrities you create incredibly stable structures. “Tension” + “integrity” = “tensegrity.”
– hence a more generic “global”? This latter tendency has shaped the emerging activism against the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the other primarily Western institutions that seek to put us all in the “golden straitjacket” of Friedman’s naming. Merging the two words results in “glocalization.”

Our discussion was most heated on these topics the morning that we worked specifically with the project that Ted Reeves was developing, a web site meant to engage people around issues of economic justice and the common good. Some of the passion arose around a disagreement over the description of economic injustice. Is it at heart a problem arising from market structures? Is it, for instance, a structural injustice that demands a new economic system to rectify? In particular, is economic globalization always and everywhere a problem? Or are there ways in which digital technologies and market structures might provide new avenues for collaboration and new venues for dispelling poverty? These questions are clearly huge, and there was no way that we could come to any kind of resolution of them, but at the same time it was edifying to discover the ways in which digital technologies themselves helped us to think about these questions, and made their presence more clear and compelling. It was also striking the extent to which we wanted our own religious communities to engage the issues, and provide theological reflection on the questions involved. Ted’s site is an excellent beginning on this task, and the questions we raised ought to be at the heart of reflection in communities around the country.

As I work on this paper, the United States is living through the aftermath of 9/11/01. I am struck by how many of the questions people have raised in the last few days were part of our discussion during the FNM workshop: Why would anyone hate the US? Where is God in the middle of this experience? How can communities of faith respond to this situation? While our workshop had in no way the same kind of intensity of experience from which to work, these questions arose for us, too, particularly as we struggled to come to grips with Ted’s patient outlining of the economic and environmental consequences of a global economy, particularly for the peoples of the world who endure ever deepening poverty and yet have even more access to images of the affluence present here in the US.

As I have noted previously in this paper, we raised more questions than we answered. Yet at the same time, each individual project began to develop resources for approaching some piece of the puzzle. To summarize, the workshop raised three primary questions for further reflection: how do we engage new media with an expressive rather than instrumentalist orientation?, how do we develop a deeper recognition of and support for the creative tension involved in presenting both mythic and parabolic representations of reality?; and finally, how can we develop a framework for understanding the increasingly global nature of our economic frameworks without resorting to instrumentalist understandings there, too?

Thus far I have not described participants’ projects in much detail, and that is in part because I was trying to remain focussed on the collaborative aspects of the workshop in this part of my paper. As I move on, the second half of this essay will move beyond a participatory action analysis – at least, this analysis has not yet been presented to the workshop participants, and thus can only be said to be mine – and present a framework in which to understand the various individual projects that arose.
Part Two:

*religious education as cultural intervention*

Recently I have found Richard Shweder’s typology for understanding cultural psychology particularly helpful in thinking about the various kinds of projects people undertook within this seminar. In part this is because I have come to think about religious education in a new media culture as being more about cultural intervention, than about linear instruction. In part it is because his framework offers a way to characterize a diverse array of digital projects, without too strongly privileging one mode above another. In what follows I will use his framework to consider the projects our participants developed. Please be conscious, however, that this is just one attempt and it is purely my own, to categorize them. A participatory action research methodology requires that this analysis be available to participants for critique, a process which I have not yet been able to complete.

If we take seriously this understanding of religious education in the context of globalization as being about cultural intervention, then it becomes crucial to ask of what such intervention consists. We are still in the beginning stages of this process, so it is difficult to offer any kind of definitive prescription. On the other hand, frames of analysis that provide a perspective from which to compare and contrast can often be helpful. One of the strongest recurring themes within our workshop was that of the distinctions between “religious culture” and “secular culture.” I am not at all convinced that there is such a clear demarcation point between the two, but for the purposes of the following analysis, let us assume that there are relevant and observable distinctions between the two.

We can then use Shweder’s analysis for considering a variety of ways in which to approach what it means to “think through others” from either the religious standpoint considering “secular” culture, or from a pop culture standpoint considering new media in religious contexts. Shweder has identified four ways in which anthropologists have typically approached the study of other cultures. His framework suggests that people “think through others” by: thinking by means of the other, getting the other straight, deconstructing and going beyond the other, and witnessing in the context of engagement with the other. Each of these strategies follows upon the other, and so it is worth taking them each in turn.

“Thinking by means of the other” has to do with engaging some aspect of the “other” as a means to learn more about ourselves:

Thinking through others’ in the first sense is to recognize the other as a specialist or expert on some aspect of human experience, whose reflective consciousness and systems of representations and discourse can be used to reveal hidden dimensions of our selves.
This first mode requires an honest acknowledgement of the ways in which the “other” – here I am suggesting religious culture, and mass mediated popular culture as “other” in relation – can indeed be expert in some way. Pastoral agents are familiar with thinking of ourselves as “experts” in various kinds of religious discourse and practice that can reveal hidden dimensions of thought and reality. Part of the reason why we may be so keen on continuing draw a line between “religious” culture and “secular” culture is precisely so that we can maintain authority on matters of religious language and practice. But how often do we allow ourselves to consider the ways in which mass mediated popular culture might also hold resources reveal hidden dimensions of ourselves? It would seem to me that the previous few weeks make clear that digital media hold relevant kinds of expertise for facing large, common experiences. The divide between religious culture and mass mediated popular culture was perhaps no more evident than in the two major rituals of grief and healing after 9/11/01 – the service in the U.S. national cathedral, and the multi-channel televised fundraising event put together by Tom Hanks and other Hollywood superstars. For many, if not most, Americans it was the latter event that was watched, talked about, and emotionally resonant.

How might we engage this kind of expertise in the development and support of teaching and learning within religious communities? Several workshop participant projects engaged digital media from this standpoint. Suzanne Nelson, for example, developed an online, interactive, dialogic introductory course in Catechetical Leadership. This course used the ability of digital media to transcend certain kinds of geographic and temporal distance to make available learning materials geared to the support of local catechetical leaders. Kathy McNair worked on the storyboarding process for a set of theological reflection videos for use in health care settings. She reasoned that video’s ability to invoke emotional resonance was precisely what she needed to support deeper reflection and peace for people living through life-threatening situations. Amy O’Hair developed a set of web pages that provided liturgical resources for her local congregation, which is deeply engaged in rich liturgical improvisation. In this case she demonstrated the necessity of building a hyper-textual resource base that could be accessed in many different ways depending on the specific questions for which parishioners sought answers. Each of these participants utilized specific capabilities of digital media to enhance their design of learning environments.

As I noted earlier, the workshop enjoyed evening demonstrations of various kinds of professionally produced media. The professional media that fits most appropriately within this first category would be that of VeggieTales, an animated children’s cartoon that picks up on a variety of modes of digital expression to embed biblical themes in the daily practices of 3-5 year olds.

Shweder’s second mode is something he terms “getting the other straight,” by which he means “providing a systematic account of the internal logic of the intentional world constructed by the other. The aim is a rational reconstruction of indigenous belief, desire, and practice.” This mode of inquiry is perhaps most
familiar within religious communities who work with historical-critical biblical tools for engaging sacred text, or who “read their context” as a way to refine and focus their congregational mission.

One of our participants, Allana Bourne, developed a media education curriculum for young people in her Buddhist community. She worked specifically on creating a set of tools with which they could learn more about how media shaped their understandings of Buddhism, and consequently offered a way to deepen their understanding of and commitment to their Buddhist faith. In this way she was simultaneously working on helping them “get” the internal logic of media systems, as well as the internal logics of Buddhist practices. Elizabeth Duggan did something quite similar, when she worked on integrating digital technologies into the sophomore level religion course at the high school at which she taught. She was interested in helping students “get straight” the ways in which media shaped their perceptions of reality at the same time as she supported a deeper grasp of the internal logics of Catholic faith. Another participant, Gaye Ortiz, was interested in helping her undergraduate students broaden their understanding of religious sociology, and so developed a component of one of her courses that allowed them to bring their newly-acquired sociological skills to a still-emerging form of spiritual practice. In this case she quite specifically asked them to “get the other straight” by describing the internal logic of internet-based spiritualities.

The Pluralism Project’s *On Common Ground* Cd-ROM that we previewed one evening of the workshop is perhaps the best example of a professionally produced “text” working in this mode. It uses the capability of the CD-ROM medium to store a vast array of images, text and music to provide rich descriptions of the myriad religious communities practicing their faith in the United States.

Shweder’s third mode, at least from the point of view of anthropology, involves “going beyond the other.” Many educators would identify this mode as “critical reflection,” and indeed that mode shares a lot in common with Shweder’s description:

> It is a third sense, for it properly comes later, after we have already appreciated what the intentional world of the other powerfully reveals and illuminates, from its special point of view. ‘Thinking through others’ is, in its totality, an act of criticism and liberation, as well as discovery.

It is this third mode that I believe we as teachers are most anxious to support our students in “getting.” Yet it is Shweder’s assertion — and mine as well — that this is properly achieved only after first moving through “thinking by means of the other” and “getting the other straight.” Perhaps because of this developmental progression, it was workshop participants’ whose primary context is higher education who most focused on this aspect of “thinking through others.” John Baker Brown, for instance, worked to develop a course on young people and the mass media for the youth leadership curriculum at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta. He was specifically interested in helping his seminary students grasp the ways in which media and religion shape realities for young people, but then in helping those same students — and eventually the young people they would lead — in coming to a more reflective and integrated
experience within both media culture and religious culture. Peter Gilmour, who is a significant voice within narrative theology and who has worked in recent years on utilizing films in his graduate level classes, sought specifically to consider ways in which engaging media might reshape prayer. In a similar vein, Mario D’Souza used music videos as an entry point into theological reflection for his college students. Fred Smith also worked on this kind of project, using elements of hip hop culture as a matrix for theological reflection.

Earlier in this paper I wrote about the conversations sparked by Ted Reeve’s efforts to develop a website that could focus theological reflection on economic injustice, and build efforts on behalf of the common good. His work took this tack of trying to “deconstruct and go beyond” the cultural worlds of either media or communities of faith. One final project that I believe fits within this category, although it is harder to exemplify here, is Sheila Winborne’s effort to transform elements of her dissertation research on photographer F. Holland Day into a CD-Rom that could demonstrate a different kind of analysis of his work, and deepen the argument she made within her doctoral studies.

In terms of professionally produced media, I believe that the ABS CD-ROMs that we previewed would best fit this mode. In each case they are “trans-mediations” of biblical texts that are provided in a variety of multi-media genres (as country music video, as rock video, and so on) with accompanying resources. They provide a learning environment in which people are encouraged not only to experience a biblical text in a manner that might have more experiential resonance than they are accustomed to, but also a rich array of exegetical and information tools that provide support for learners who wish to engage on a “meta” level the question of translation more broadly construed.

Shweder’s fourth mode is “witnessing in the context of engagement with the other”:

In this fourth sense of ‘thinking through others,’ the process of representing the other goes hand in hand with a process of portraying one’s own self as part of the process of representing the other, thereby encouraging an open-ended self-reflexive dialogic turn of mind."iv

This last mode of engaging the ‘other’ is the mode with which we have the least experience in religious institutions. Far too often we engage in conversations across differences – whether ecumenically or in interfaith dialogue – from the arrogant position of having the truth, rather than from the humble position of confessing that the Holy Spirit is ever at work in the world, continuing to reveal God to us. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the distaste for media culture which many religious leaders routinely express. Or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, but in a similar vein, the routine use of media without any critical engagement with them, that other religious leaders espouse.

I believe that there were only two participants within our workshop who worked in this framework, Wayne Dunkley and Alan McCormack. Perhaps coincidentally – although my intuition says not – they were also two of our
youngest participants. Wayne Dunkley worked with a website he had been
developing prior to the workshop’s beginning: www.sharemyworld.net. Wayne
is an artist who works in traditional film photography, as well as in digital
media. He made a self portrait of himself and then pasted it up in a variety of
contexts in the Toronto area. He then returned to these “posters” and took
photographs of the many and various ways in which they had been “amended.”
Next he used those photographs as the base for a web site in which he explores
“the degradation and removal of the/a black male.” This website is not only a
powerful exploration of his own experiences, but a vibrant interactive
community, with people from many different contexts posting responses to the
site. It is a fascinating example of an “open-ended self-reflexive dialogic turn of
mind” in image as well as text. Even this many months later the site continues to
grow, with Wayne continuing to add new “books” of dialogue to it.

The other participant project that I believe falls within this fourth of Shweder’s
categories, is Alan McCormack’s attempt to explore the work of local film artists within
the context of liturgy, creating a convergence of experience and reflection that is in
many ways new and unique to digitally mediated cultural spheres. Even during the
week of the workshop, Alan brought his considerable talent for shaping ritual
expression to bear in the daily worship experiences we shared. That contribution alone
was immense, and crucial to the depth of the workshop’s impact. His larger project,
however, was to approach elements of “secular” media culture from a ritual
framework, and simultaneously use the ritual framework of worship to stretch and
challenge “religious” culture. His project deliberately broke the “clear” divide between
these supposedly “separate” cultures, and demonstrated the ways in which they are
interpenetrating and interwoven forms of meaning-making. Indeed, his project
demonstrates that it is most descriptive to understand communities of faith as
witnessing to Christ in the context of multiple, mediated spheres.

It is not clear to me whether any of our professional media demonstrations fit this
category. If any do, it is probably the film The Matrix, although how one engages that
film is heavily dependent (more so than typical) on contextual factors. I think you could
make an argument that this film demonstrates Shweder’s fourth category in its very
essence, since the film is “about” the ways in which reality is socially constructed and
interpenetrating, and questions whether or not our experience can sufficiently break
through such constructions to make sense of “reality” in some bedrock way.

Ultimately, I believe it is this last category of Shweder’s, “witnessing in context of
engagement with the other” that holds the most promise for faithfully playing with new
media. It may also be the best framework we could engage in our struggle to think
about how to nurture religious faith in the midst of globalization. I have been forcefully
struck by the ways in which Friedman’s definition of globalization, while purporting to
be only a description, contains within it – particularly towards the conclusion of his
book The Lexus and the Olive Tree -- a prescription that reads almost explicitly as a plea
for deeper and more sustained religious education. Yet the definitions of globalization I
quoted from theological educators at the beginning of this paper suggest that digital
media are at best irrelevant.
The one clearly recognizes a need to “witness in the context of engagement with the other” (particularly if the “others” are religious faith and the digital technologies that make globalized economics possible), while the latter makes no mention of the technological project of globalization at all. I do not believe that communities of faith can continue to ignore the role that digital technologies are playing in globalization – however defined. But I am specifically concerned that when we do take up the question of how digital technologies might be structuring our realities and hence our faith witness, that we not leap immediately to instrumental models.

If this workshop and the research project in which it is embedded accomplishes nothing else – and I am certain that several important projects have been supported by it – I hope that it provides a convincing argument for the necessity of understanding religious education as a dialogical witness that must always occur in the “context of engaging others.”

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2 Ibid., p. 109.
3 Ibid., pp. 109-110.
4 Ibid., p. 110.