

**The Bible and popular culture:  
Engaging sacred text in a world of others**

Mary E. Hess, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership  
Luther Seminary  
mhess@luthersem.edu

This essay was sparked by the conversations begun at a conference sponsored by the American Bible Society entitled “Futuring the Scriptures.” I am interested in the issues raised by that conference because I am a religious educator who works primarily with adults (I teach in a seminary, and support adult Christian ed in parish settings). My concern for new paradigms for bible study very much grows out of my attempts to find ways to help persons of faith remain embedded in communities of faith, and yet also true to their vocations in other cultural spaces as well. For many years I lived in an inner city neighborhood in Boston, MA, one in which questions of crime and violence were not particularly foreign, and pop music and soap operas formed the basis of many conversations. At the same time I was teaching in a graduate program in pastoral ministry and religious education at a Jesuit college situated on a hill in the suburbs. Now I live in a large upper midwestern city, St. Paul, MN, and teach at a Lutheran seminary. Most of my teaching takes place in middle class, white contexts, and with people who find themselves drawn to ministry as a vocation. Pop culture has not disappeared from the mix, however, with films and television, music and the Web, still interwoven in my students’ lives, and the lives of those I share a neighborhood with.

I will make two arguments in this essay. First, I believe that engaging scripture at this time and in this place (as I noted my locations above) requires engaging mass mediated popular culture as well. Second, that process of engagement is often difficult and strange, and thinking about it as a process of encountering an “other” is particularly fruitful for those of us who are intent are finding ways to think through scripture into the twenty-first century and beyond.

*Thinking through scripture by way of thinking through others...*

What does it mean to “think through scripture”? I have in mind a process that is lively and embodied, that has cognitive or rational components, but also affective and physical elements. As a religious educator, I try to help people come to a sense of themselves and their communities that is bound up with, intertwined, perhaps even constituted by, the sacred texts at the heart of Christian life. So thinking through scripture is living with and through it. It is a process that requires active

Christian practice, not solely adequate Christian belief. But how do we go about facilitating this kind of scriptural practice in the midst of cultures, at least in the contemporary United States, where what is considered “sacred” is under contention, and even within graduate theological contexts, what is considered “scripture” is at times in question?

My first response, as always, is that we go back to the stories that are at the heart of the Christian community. In that central place, at least when read in terms of Jesus’ life and engagements, we encounter a praxis of shared involvement with “others,” those persons found at the margins, or outcast from community altogether. Jesus frequently shared table fellowship with those defined as “other,” and the gospel writers often recall teachings related to embracing the “other.” How can we live into those stories now? What does it mean to embrace “others” in our contemporary contexts?

These questions only raise more, because one immediate response is that we, as Christians, have not learned how to do this. We have, instead, learned the opposite: how to name and create “others” as a means of strengthening our own identities. In many ways the warfare between various elements of the Christian community has rarely been so brutal. The civil war in Rwanda would be one particularly compelling example, but clearly the troubles in Northern Ireland, in the former Yugoslavia, as well as in the United States (here I’m thinking of the violence involved in hate crimes and in pro-life settings) are all illustrative as well. Far from embracing “others,” we are rarely capable of sharing our own differences in peaceful and just ways.

I have struggled with this dilemma for many years. My work has focused on understanding the ways in which mass mediated popular culture contributes to the shaping of religious identity. At first I began that study convinced that pop culture contributes to that process only in destructive ways. I thought that there were clear and obvious connections between representations of “otherness” and the construction and maintenance of that otherness, often through violent means. Now I am not so sure. Indeed, in recent years I have come to engage questions of difference, of “otherness” that emerge *within* specific religious communities — differences identified by gender,

by race, by class and so on -- at least as much as differences that are apparent *between* faith communities.

So how might popular culture function in shaping identity? And why would such a question be relevant in the context of a book that seeks to engage new paradigms for biblical study? To answer that question, I need to make an assertion, and then process the implications of that assertion in a variety of ways. Let me begin by borrowing an assertion from Herb Anderson and Ed Foley. They argue that storytelling is at the heart of human being. "Part of the power of narrative," they write, "is that it enables us to make deep human connections that transcend unfamiliarity in locale and experience.... it is as if stories have mystical power to invite us, willingly or unwillingly, to enter unknown worlds" (Anderson/Foley, Jossey-Bass, 1998, 4). Anyone who has ever been caught up in a film or television show knows that the power of narrative is even more deeply underlined by the addition of moving images and music.

My primary assertion, growing out of theirs, is that human story telling, at least in this time and in this place, is thoroughly embedded in, and permeated by, mass mediated popular culture. Pop culture shapes our narratives in multiple ways, including our explicitly religious narratives. There is much to say about this assertion, and many very creative people are exploring various aspects of it, but the implications I'd like to explore in the rest of this essay grow out Anderson and Foley's idea that stories invite us into unknown worlds. They invite us to encounter things and people, places and practices, that are in some ways "other" to us. Both scriptural stories, and mass mediated popular culture stories, invite us into the unfamiliar, invite us to encounter the "other." But how do we do that constructively? How do we do that in ways that lead us into deeper relationality, rather than into deeper division? And what, if anything, might encountering the unfamiliar in popular culture have to do with encountering the unfamiliar in scripture? I will devote the rest of this essay to working with these questions.

*"thinking by means of the other"*

R. Shweder is a cultural anthropologist and psychologist who has spent decades studying very diverse religious cultures. He describes four ways in which anthropologists go about thinking through others: “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 proves evocative in relation both to popular culture, and to scripture, and I’d like to consider each in turn. It is important to understand, however, that in using these four modes, I am not arguing that we should privilege one among them, but rather suggest that each provides resources and processes by which we can ensure that our encounter with “otherness,” particularly in the contexts of both pop culture and scripture, can be constructive and honest.

Shweder's first category, "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. (Shweder, 1991, p. 108).

There are many ways in which mass mediated popular culture attempts to function as an “expert” of sorts. One example would be the way in which pop culture has become a ritual in which we participate, that provides the “data,” if you will, that we share in our attempts to communicate with each other. Did you see that game? someone asks, or, what do you think about that candidate? or, did you hear about that flood? Most of the time the questions as well as the answers come from our listening, viewing, surfing in pop culture contexts. Mass mediated popular culture, by definition as a “mass medium” (and we may be approaching a point in time where that label is no longer accurate), and one which is “popular,” also presents itself as an expert on what engages a “mass” of people. In both of these cases the expertise comes from defining the language (by which I mean more than simply the verbal issues) that we use in our attempts to communicate with each other.

But how does it reveal that which is hidden? One obvious answer is that it does so by giving

us access to situations and feelings, settings and actions, that used to be entirely private. Indeed, the ability to enter people's bedrooms, even live between their sheets, is one of the most problematic ways in which communities of faith encounter the "otherness" of television, film, and other forms of mass media. Representing and portraying a multiplicity of sexualities is just one of the ways in which popular culture invites us to reveal hidden dimensions of ourselves, not always to our benefit -- but perhaps not always so much to our detriment, either, given the kinds of abuses of sexuality that communities of faith have perpetrated and television news (among other pop culture genres) has brought to public attention.

On the other hand, how is scripture an expert? In particular, how might it be an "other" who is an expert on something for which we yearn? More and more we find that the language of popular culture, while revealing of some emotions and some contexts, hides others. There are in our sacred texts multiple expressions of emotions and ideas, modes of being and practice that are very alien to our contemporary context -- and more refreshing for that alienness. Finding ways to understand that joy and sorrow are intimately co-mingled, for example, is not easy within popular culture. Scripture provides a route into that recognition, among many others.

But there is another way, one directly tied up with both scripture and popular culture, in which I think it is important to "think by means of the other." There are many people today for whom living with and through scripture is very alien, simply because they are unfamiliar with the experience of living with sacred text that has been communally defined. Many young people in the U.S. inhabit this space, particularly those whose families have no involvement with communities of faith, and who, in attending public schools, have had little or no exposure to the sacred texts of any community of faith. At the same time, many of these people have in recent years had multiple opportunities to engage stories from scripture in the context of mass-mediated popular culture. Television and film abound that draw on scriptural stories (Moses and the various Jesus stories being just a few). Popular music is replete with songs that use scriptural references, and the Web is rapidly being permeated by sites that use scriptural references in a multitude of ways. Indeed, the

shallow and often careless manner in which these media have used biblical stories has on occasion angered communities of faith, even touching off public protests in some cases.

From the point of view of these young people, and others who have not had the opportunity to live with and through scripture (as opposed to simply being familiar with the plot lines and characters of scriptural stories), engaging sacred text is very much “other.” At the same time, from the point of view of communities of faith, the modes and manner in which scriptural stories are wrested from their living contexts and employed in mass mediated popular contexts is very “other.” Whichever side of the dividing line you live on, you are likely to see the opposite side as “other” to your own identity.

I believe we need to take seriously Shweder’s notion of “thinking by means of the other” and engage both sides of this line as possibly disclosive, even revelatory. Speaking as a religious educator, I am obviously located within a community of faith, so from that “side of the line,” just to continue with this metaphor for a moment, I urge communities of faith not to boycott or ignore popular culture, but rather to ask deeper questions of it. Why do particular scriptural stories have resonance for people living wholly outside of the communal confines of a specific community of faith? How might the disturbing ways in which young people and others are claiming the insights and images of scripture be new and possibly disclosive?

When I have the opportunity to do so, which is not often, I ask people living on the “other side of the line,” to consider the ways in which living in a community of faith might have something compelling to offer. I join them in exploring a pop culture “text,” a film like the *Matrix* for instance, and invite them to think about how communities of faith have lived into the question of what is real, and how we know to what end we are committed in our lives (both of which are questions central to that film). This process does not end here, however, for as Shweder notes, there are many ways to think through others.

*“getting the other straight”*

Shweder's second process 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" (1991, p. 109).

Much biblical exegetical work, particularly from the historical-critical frame, would be familiar in this mode. There are many anecdotes told by people beginning graduate theological education about the consequence of engaging historical-critical tools -- "I've lost my bible!" for one. The underlying anxiety or humor (depending on the perspective), has to do with coming to grip with a text they thought they knew, but in exploring its internal logic discovered that it was something "other."

The goal in this mode goes beyond simply learning the outlines of a narrative, or becoming familiar with the major characters in the Bible. It requires digging deeply into the contexts of scripture texts, learning how to "read" them in their multiple genres. Some of the emerging resources available through new technologies are very helpful here. Scattered across the Web are numerous very credible sites that introduce people to the geography of the Bible; that help people to explore the etymology of various words used in the Bible; that provide vast, easily searchable concordances; that provide images and music that are reconstructed as our best sense of what might have been available at the time.

But what about "getting the other straight" in terms of mass mediated popular culture? By what means can we read the underlying logics, discern the "beliefs, desires and practices" that form the foundation of pop culture? Media educators have worked on these questions for some time, and have begun to develop a range of tools that are, in some ways, very similar to biblical exegetical tools. These educators help students discover the different genres of popular culture, they explore the various grammars (visual and otherwise) that permeate pop culture. In particular, they take as a central aspect of their pedagogy introducing students to the unique production characteristics of particular genres of media. They do so not because they expect their students to

master the technical aspects of film making, for instance, or to become adept at recording and editing musical scores, but because in performing these practices their students gain a more vivid, deep, and critical appreciation for film and for music. As with scripture, there are numerous web sites available that provide ready access to these tools and methodologies.

“Thinking by means of the other” and “getting the other straight,” are very useful modes, then, for beginning to engage scripture and for becoming more aware of mass mediated popular culture, but both can remain simply an interesting side trip, a way to be a “tourist” in a different culture without allowing that culture to be bound up integrally within one’s own identity. It is possible to engage “others” in this frame and never step beyond a self-enclosed identity. Or worse, to remain in a position of differentiation without ever moving to “reintegration.” That is to say, it is possible to engage sacred texts as an interesting and compelling example of meaning-making, without having them bound up in one’s core way of making meaning in the world. And it is equally possible to venture into popular culture without coming to a deep appreciation of its ubiquitous presence in the process of shaping identity. How might religious educators facilitate moving beyond this kind of differentiation?

*“deconstructing and going beyond the other”*

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

Then there is ‘thinking through others’ .... 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 (1991, pp. 109-110).

This mode of learning and knowing is perhaps the one most feared by our contemporary religious institutional authorities (speaking from within my Catholic situatedness), and perhaps the mode most painfully practiced by religious outsiders. Far too often of late this mode has not been the

“third sense” as suggested by Shweder, coming after “we have already appreciated what the intentional world of the other reveals,” but the first mode practiced, before sufficient respect — or even simple attention — has been given to understanding each other’s worlds. I often find Catholic persons in positions of religious authority, for instance, condemning mass mediated popular culture as a vast wasteland of violence and illicit sexuality, while religious outsiders (younger generations, in particular) condemn such religious authorities as close-minded and repressive arbiters of meaning. Neither seeks to understand the other from within her own situatedness.

Here we have not recognized the extent to which our complicated relationship with scripture and with culture has led to a drawing of sharp boundaries around scripture that, in granting it normativity, have paradoxically narrowed and limited its reach. We as persons of faith have sought to be “in the world, but not of it,” and in doing so have become more and more irrelevant, as we have refused to recognize how permeable cultural boundaries are, and how much our worlds are interpenetrating.

There are some Christian communities, for instance, who have actually forbidden encounters with media that offer radically new and challenging interpretations of scripture. Yet without the opportunity to “think beyond” the ways in which we have previously engaged scripture -- and indeed, have canonized it -- we cut ourselves off from an essential part of the process of adult learning and growth. “Going beyond,” especially when it is a mode by which one can encounter the paradoxical and conflicting claims of tradition and faith, is a crucial mode of encounter and meaning-making. R. Kegan, a noted adult educator, recognizes how central this process is when he puts the process of “contradiction” at the heart of his exploration into supporting adult learning. Deconstructing and going beyond the other begins to open us up, not just by way of critically engaging the “other,” but primarily by way of practicing a critical perspective that inevitably transforms our own self-perception. As Kegan notes, this process is often a painful one, and one for which little educational support is provided.

Kegan’s description of the learning process is worth taking note of in this context, because

he believes that human development in general, and meaning-making transformation in particular, proceeds by way of “confirmation, contradiction and continuity.” Teachers can support authentic growth and development by attending to this tripartite process. “Confirmation” has to do with the extent to which the way one “makes up” the world is confirmed by others (whether contextually through interaction with others outside of oneself or intrapersonally in relation to engaging the world). Religious educators attempt this kind of confirmation when we meet people where they are, assessing their current knowledge and mode of knowing before seeking to challenge it.

“Contradiction” is a process of moving beyond and through such meanings to new and different ways of understanding the world. Contradiction occurs both inadvertently and naturally, as well as through deliberate intervention. Entering graduate theological education often has this impact on students in relation to scripture study, but so can crises of health or relationality. Teachers often call the skills involved in processing contradictions those of “critical thinking.”

Confirming reality for students, and then proceeding to contradict that reality only creates confusion at best, and rigidity of belief at worst, however, if we do not at the same time provide what Kegan terms “continuity.” Continuity is the crucial process of finding ways to connect one’s current construction of the world, with those that one has made in the past. Religious educators can bring historical critical biblical tools to bear on the tale of Noah’s ark, for example, but unless we help our students come to grips with the ways in which biblical stories “are all true, and some of them really happened,” we risk our students falling either into biblical literalism, or biblical irrelevance.

In describing this cycle of “confirmation, contradiction, continuity,” Kegan explores the ways in which we carry along and construct our definitions of “self” and “other.” He also explores the ways in which tremendous amounts of pain can be experienced amidst the learning process. “How I am” becomes “how I was” *before* shifting to “how I am now.” The very process of that transition involves a fundamental revisioning of one’s self, and a distinct “dis-embedding” of oneself from a particular culture as part of the process of reintegrating into the next

understanding. Far too often that pain can be externalized onto some “other” that is readily at hand.

It is this kind of "externalizing" onto an "other" that is at the heart of much of our contemporary brokenness, particularly the violence and humiliation that characterizes some of the more painful conflicts within communities of faith, and between them. I believe that if we do anything in providing new paradigms for biblical study, we must at least break open this process and find ways to support people through the painful encounter with the contradictions and discontinuities of our lives as lived in communities of faith. One such contradiction and discontinuity is bound up in our struggles over the relevance of scripture to popular culture, and vice versa. Engaging the “otherness” of both scripture and popular culture as similar, rather than specifying that one is “sacred” and the other “secular,” offers an integrated approach that can succeed where the continuation of a polarized dualism cannot.

In dealing with these contradictions, we need to approach the process carefully. Religious educators need to think about how we faithfully demonstrate critique of religious insider stances, for instance, if we are to gradually erase the line between “insider” and “outsider” within our communities of faith. How, for instance, can I as a Catholic educator take up questions of supporting persons who are gay and their families, while being faithful to the ways in which I represent institutional Catholic interpretations of scripture on homosexuality? How might I, as a Catholic woman, embody educational leadership in community in such a way as to break open the scriptural issues around women’s leadership in worship? These issues are alive in popular culture, and so are also lively within communities of faith.

These are difficult questions raised by scripture and within popular culture from within my own location, but there are equally difficult ones in others. If we can begin to answer them we might at the same time be able to change our stance towards those “others” beyond our self defined boundaries. We might be able to educate towards a religious identity that can truly and thoroughly embrace difference. To do so, however, we have to find a way beyond differentiation and into

reintegration. It is Shweder's fourth mode of "thinking through others" that brings us to the kind of continuity Kegan suggests is necessary for this kind of transformative learning.

*"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. ... (Shweder, 1991, p. 110).

What does it mean to recognize that in thinking through others we are intimately engaged in portraying ourselves as part of that process? I began this section of this essay quoting Herb Anderson and Ed Foley's assertion that human beings are story-making people. They go on, later in that same book, to suggest that the goal of story-telling "is not just to discover a world or provide an interpretation of a world that allows us to live in it but rather to discover and interpret a world that allows us to live with ourselves. We retell incidents, relate occurrences, and spin tales in order to learn what occurred, especially to *me*." (Anderson/Foley, Jossey-Bass 1998, 5). Indeed, in some manner, we make ourselves up in the process of making up the world. I will have more to say in the second section of this essay about the relational and communal consequences of this story-telling, but for just this moment, I'd like to explore the implications of this statement for bible study.

"Making each other up" is often the concern many communities of faith have, legitimately, about popular cultural representations. And indeed, anyone who pays any sustained attention to television in particular will sense that the reality being constructed through it implicitly supports systems of oppression far more often than it explicitly deconstructs them. Many people of faith would affirm the normativity of scripture, "Truth with a capital T," because it provides a way in which to confront the negative representations and destruction through omission that they can clearly identify in popular culture. This understanding of normativity, however, tends to equate truth with a particular set of statements or convictions that hold over time and across cultures, and that create identity over and against "others."

Is there a way to address questions of normativity that allows us to affirm that we do, indeed, make each other up? But that does so without losing transcendence, without losing our ability to speak in some way of universals? The concern over universality arises in large part because knowledge frameworks that specify that knowledge is socially constructed eschew any notion of an abstract neutral universal. Yet the inability to speak of a universal in abstract, disembodied terms, does not require us to give up the possibility of finding an embodied, specific way to speak in universal terms. Catholic theologian Roberto Goizueta, for example, writes that:

We discover the whole, or the universal, not by adding up the particulars, but by entering fully into their very particularity, *within which* we will encounter their universal significance: 'To know is to recognize the specific phenomenal activity that, in each case, reveals to us the Universe.' In the words of the poet William Blake, we can 'see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower.' (1995, p. 97).

This description, which Goizueta suggests is an "organic theological anthropology" arising from within the U.S. Hispanic/Latino community, pushes us to recognize the ways in which we are inextricably bound into each other, and yet still remain individual persons loved by God.

Relationality is the very fabric of our existence, it is, in Goizueta's terms "constitutive" and "preexistent." As Goizueta notes: "only if I affirm your own concrete particularity and uniqueness will I be able to understand how your own life and history reveal a universal truth that is also true for me" (1995, p. 157).

This description provides further impetus for engaging in a complex and holistic process of "thinking through others," for how else might we come to "understand," as Goizueta puts it, "how your own life and history reveal a universal truth that is also true for me" (1995, p. 157)? I can not believe that it is possible to do this, to be respectfully present to others, without also recognizing the ways in which mass mediated popular culture swirls around us in the process. So here we are, back to the implication of the assertions I made at the beginning of this essay: human beings are story-tellers, our stories are permeated by popular culture, and in engaging them through both scripture and popular culture, we engage ourselves and each other.

This kind of "witnessing in the context of engagement with others," however, is not often an easy or comfortable process to pursue. We need powerful and passionate metaphors and role

models to help us embrace this struggle, particularly as we confront our own brokenness and the divides that threaten to tear us asunder. Daloz, et. al. speak of a “responsible imagination” that is capable of paying attention to images of dissonance and contradiction, “particularly as revealing injustice and unrealized potential” and this is precisely the kind of imagination religious educators need to call upon (1996, p.151-152).

There are multiple examples of ways in which educators have tried to support this kind of imagination, and in the process provide access to the continuities of Christian community. Here are two multi-media productions, by way of short example.

The first example is the animated videotape series from BigIdea Productions, entitled “Veggie Tales.” These animated children’s shows translate scriptural texts into a world of animated vegetables acting out stories on a kitchen counter top. Each episode begins with the veggies out of costume discussing some pressing question. They then perform a story “in costume” that attempts either to portray a specific biblical text (as in the story of Daniel in the lion’s den), or to cull it out of a specific dilemma (as in the story of Madame Blueberry, whose tree house collapses under the weight of the “stuff” she has purchased from “Stuffmart” – thus giving new meaning to the phrase, “troubling one’s house”). At the end of the show, the veggies return to their “natural” state and pose a question to “QWERTY,” the computerized bible, who comes back with a specific scripture verse.

These shows are captivating, to young children and college students alike, not simply because they contain sophisticated digital animation, good music, and silly humor, but because they weave references to mass mediated popular culture throughout their references to biblical culture, interweaving the two in interesting and provocative ways. One challenge to parents raising young children in this digitally mediated world, is finding ways to integrate biblical imagination into the media children naturally gravitate towards. Television, particularly videotapes, are a familiar feature of preschool and elementary school age lives, and VeggieTales provides a way to make biblical stories present within that context. They also model one mode of engaging scripture: searching it

for answers to troubling questions. The downside of these productions, on the other hand, is that like any image-driven medium, video meaning is not easily constrained to one message. The meaning one person draws from a production might be quite different from the meaning intended by the author of the production. Nor are the questions posed as easily answered as these productions suggest. They are appropriate for young children, and amusing for adults, but by no means the only way in which to present scriptural texts. Still, they provide access to one way to live with scripture in the midst of a digitally mediated culture.

Of equal, or perhaps even more importance given our current cultural illiteracy with regard to history, is providing access to the ways in which communities of faith have engaged scripture over time and across multiple contexts. For this challenge, the American Bible Society CD-ROMs are a vital resource. These digital media provide a hypertext approach to scripture, giving the person using them the primary responsibility for providing the path through the materials, for evincing the necessary questions in search of multiple answers. They are rich in various instantiations of the text in question: music versions of the text, images based on the text, music videos of various versions of the text. The CD-ROMs also provide exegetical resources that allow the person using them to trace out the meaning of various words in a passage, link that passage to a specific geographic context, and so on. Finally, they offer an introduction to story-boarding, enabling people to develop their own video interpretation of a text. By providing multiple translations of a text, translations that include not simply various print versions, but also musical and image choices, the CD-ROMs facilitate the opening up of the process of biblical translation and interpretation, making it accessible to people.

*theological entry points into responsible imagination...*

We need more than multi-media productions of biblical texts to provide continuity, however. We need new metaphors for bringing biblical themes to bear in contemporary contexts. Earlier in this essay, new voices in theological anthropology provided insight into questions of normativity and universality. Here they can provide new routes by which educators can support a responsible

imagination. One entry point that is profoundly helpful from the educational standpoint of "providing confirmation, contradiction and continuity" grows out of the work of Miroslav Volf, who writes that:

The struggle for survival, recognition, and domination, in which people are inescapably involved, helps forge self-enclosed identities, and such self-enclosed identities perpetuate and heighten that same struggle. This holds true for relations between genders no less than for relations between cultures. To find peace, people with self-enclosed identities need to open themselves for one another and give themselves to one other, yet without loss of the self or domination of the other. (Volf, 1996, p. 176).

Part of this opening up comes with the recognition that we are inextricably, constitutively bound into one another. But that recognition alone does not erase hatred, domination, systemic oppression, or any of the other sins with which we live. Instead, as Volf suggests, we must ask:

... the right kind of question, which is not how to achieve the final reconciliation, but *what resources we need to live in peace in the absence of the final reconciliation....* Both the modern project of emancipation and its postmodern critique suggest that a *nonfinal reconciliation in the midst of the struggle against oppression* is what a responsible theology must be designed to facilitate" (1996, pp. 109-110).

Searching for such a nonfinal reconciliation can lead us to self-descriptions that are more complex and ambiguous, more embracing of "others," more capable of sustaining the critical continuity that Kegan suggests that our contemporary situation demands of us. Asking what these resources could be is a question that grows organically out of Shweder's notion of "thinking beyond the other," and Kegan's descriptions of dealing with contradictions in meaning frame. I am convinced that new paradigms for bible study must ask this kind of question.

Such a question does not search scripture for definitive answers to final questions, but rather looks to the stories and places in which we can find ways to struggle. Indeed, the struggle itself is the goal; a phrase very similar to the feminist chant that "the process is the goal." I am also reminded of the word image that Buckminster Fuller, the man who created the geodesic dome, coined within architecture for describing the essential stability of structures created by holding opposing forces together with respect for their integrity: "tension" + "integrity" = "tensegrity."

As I wrote at the beginning of this paper, I have been looking at cross cultural work as a

way of thinking about communicating across various “sub-cultures,” if you will, within the Christian church. In no way do I believe that these groups of people, that I have for the sake of argument identified as “religious insiders” or “religious outsiders,” actually inhabit separate spaces. Rather, I have been looking at ways in which in recognizing our real differences, and engaging them rather than hiding them or refusing to see them, or denying their reality within the church, we might come to some larger common ground. While Volf is speaking to the realities of Christians and other religious communities engaging each other across large geographically induced cultural divides, I think he is equally relevant when we consider the generational divides that exist within Christian churches.

Volf writes:

... one of the most basic tenets of the Christian faith is that *we* are the perpetrators who crucified Christ, *we* are the godless whose godlessness God exposed. For us, sinful and limited human beings, following in the footsteps of the Crucified means not only creating space in ourselves for others, but in creating space for them making also space for their perspective on us and on them” (1996, p. 215).

What is required to make this kind of space in ourselves and in our paradigms for bible study? As I noted earlier, Shweder and Kegan suggest that at a minimum we must cultivate ways of thinking through others that allow us to see not only our differences, or the authentic utility of each other’s ways of being in the world, but also the limitations and constraints of our own and others’ modes. Beyond that, we must grow to understand the ways in which in following these explorations we come to a more full understanding of ourselves and of how we, quite literally, make each other up.

There is perhaps no source for our identity that is more central than scripture, and so it is scripture that *must* help us both engage these limitations and constraints, and support us in engaging *its* limitations and constraints.

Again it is Volf to whom I turn for a vivid embodied description of the ground necessary for this kind of pedagogy, although I should point out that I read his image through my own Catholic lenses, which like Goizueta, show me a reality where “community is the *source* of individuality” (1995, p.152). Volf suggests that by considering how we engage in a *literal* embrace, a physical

hug, we can understand more deeply how we can and must embrace our differences without losing either our self identity or our constitutive community in the process. He identifies four steps in an embrace: “opening arms, waiting, closing arms, and then opening arms again” (1996, p. 141 and following):

Open arms are a gesture of the body reaching for the other. They are a sign of discontent with my own self-enclosed identity, a code of *desire* for the other.... More than just a code for desire, open arms are a sign that I have *created space* in myself for the other to come in and that I have made a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by the other.... Finally, open arms are a gesture of *invitation* (1996, pp. 141-142).

I think religious educators need to ask of ourselves: how open are our arms? Have we reached out to all those within our community who might be alienated from institutional church? Or, alternatively, if we speak from within an alienated community, have we opened ourselves up to relationality within institutional church? Have we been willing to desire such an invitation? Have we opened ourselves up to the kinds of meaning-making that await us with others? Have we tried to “think by means of others,” and tried to “get the other straight”? Have we, within institutional contexts, immersed ourselves in mass mediated popular culture — listened to music, gone to films, surfed the Net, hung out at the mall, gone down to the local teen hangout? Have we, within alienated contexts, believed it worth doing to “think by means of” or to “get the other straight”? Have we, as young people, tried to figure out why sitting in silent prayerful meditation with scripture might bring new insight?

The next step within physical embrace, Volf identifies as waiting:

Waiting... The halted movement of the arms outstretched toward the other has its own proper power, of course.... The waiting self *can* move the other to make a movement toward the self, but its power to do so is the power of signaled desire, of created space, and opened boundary of the self, not the power that breaks boundaries of the other and forces the fulfillment of desire. The other cannot be coerced or manipulated into an embrace; violence is so much the opposite of embrace that it undoes the embrace. If embrace takes place, it will always be because the other has desired the self just as the self has desired the other. This is what distinguishes embrace from grasping after the other, and holding the other in one’s power. Waiting is a sign that, although embrace may have a one-sidedness in its origin (the self makes the initial movement toward the other), it can never reach its goal without reciprocity (the other makes a movement toward the self) (1996, pp. 142-143).

It is here that the pain of the dilemmas that emerge can be felt. Do we truly desire this embrace?

How long must we wait? How do we hold ourselves open without submitting ourselves to coercion? What do we do if the embrace is rejected — can we remain open to try again? The educational questions are myriad and deep. How can we teach in such a way as to remain open to that which might emerge? Can we sit in silence and allow silence to create a space for an invitation? Any classroom teacher knows how agonizing even 15 seconds of silence after a question is asked can become. Can we teach in such a way that our students, our communities of faith, grow more able and willing to wait for embrace? Can we provide the adequate support to enable the tension and pain of this transition, of this “not-knowing,” of this waiting for final reconciliation, rather than the certainty of it? Can we inhabit our questions even more fully than we have asserted answers?

Volf does not leave us here, however, for he points out that open arms can draw the other in, at which point we close our arms again:

Closing the arms.... This is the goal of embrace, the embrace proper, which is unthinkable without reciprocity.... It takes *two* pairs of arms for *one* embrace; with one pair, we will either have merely an invitation to embrace (if the self respects the other) or a taking in one's clutches (if there is no such respect). In an embrace a host is a guest and a guest is a host. Though one self may receive or give more than the other, each must enter the space of the other, feel the presence of the other in the self, and make its own presence felt.... For such free and mutual giving and receiving to take place, in addition to reciprocity, a *soft touch* is necessary. I may not close my arms around the other too tightly, so as to crush her and assimilate her, otherwise I will be engaged in a concealed power-act of exclusion; an embrace would be perverted into a “bear-hug.” Similarly, I must keep the boundaries of my own self firm, offer resistance, otherwise I will be engaged in a self-destructive act of abnegation. At no point in the process may the self deny either the other or itself. .... (pp. 143-144).

What is this reciprocity like in a teaching setting? How do we communicate the treasures of a tradition without shutting down the creative, improvisational abilities of new generations of faithful? Religious educators are often trained to bring answers to questions, not to enable questions to emerge. What does it mean to create a space within scripture study where those who are alienated from various parts of a community of faith, or various aspects of a tradition, are not only invited into the learning event, but embraced as essential and integral partners in the learning process? How do we practice this kind of “soft touch” within an institutional culture that far too often appears to be relying on hard repressive pressures? In part I think we need to do so by practicing precisely the kind of “thinking through others”

that Shweder advocates, keeping in mind Kegan's cautions about the pain such a process can incur, and yet the benefits as well.

Volf's description of the final element of embrace is that of "opening the arms again":

What holds the bodies together in an embrace is not their welded boundary, but the arms placed around the other. And if the embrace is not to cancel itself, the arms must be open again (Gurevitch 1990, 194). .... As the final act of embrace, the opening of the arms underlines that, though the other may be inscribed into the self, the alterity of the other may not be neutralized by merging both into an undifferentiated "we".... (1996, pp. 144-145).

The best teachers I have encountered, those who inspire in me the vision of teaching to which I aspire, teach with precisely this kind of embrace: one that gathers me into a reciprocal and energizing study of a particular topic, sharing the resources that the teacher brings to the task and helping me to identify those that I bring, and then opening up the embrace again to let each of us continue to go and grow in our own ways. Scripture at its best can be this kind of teacher, and it is this kind of teaching that we must bring to the task of bible study and thus the task of enlivening our faith communities, and supporting their embrace of all the vivid difference they now hold within them. If we cannot do that with each other, I hesitate to imagine how we might do it across larger boundaries. And yet finding a way to do it within our own boundaries, embracing the rich and painful differences that endure within us, can only support our efforts to live and work and embrace across the larger overlapping cultures we exist within.

## Reference List

- Anderson, H., and Foley, T. (1998). Mighty stories, dangerous rituals: Weaving together the human and the divine. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Beaudoin, T. (1998). Virtual faith: The irreverent spiritual quest of Generation X. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Daloz, et. al. (1996). Common fire: Lives of commitment in a complex world. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Goizueta, R. S. (1995). Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino theology of accompaniment. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Kegan, R. (1982). The evolving self: Problem and process in human development. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kegan, R. (1994). In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Shweder, R. (1991). Thinking through cultures: expeditions in cultural psychology. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vella, J. (1994). Learning to listen: Learning to teach. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Volf, M. (1996). Exclusion and embrace: A theological exploration of identity, otherness and reconciliation: Abingdon Press.