CHAPTER FOUR

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE DESCRIBED, THEOLOGICALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY

One way in which I began to ask a broader question, to try to deepen the analysis of this research project, was to consider how the process had *not* met my initial expectations. Pursuing one difficulty I mentioned earlier — the question of why we did not engage in explicitly religious language and symbolism for much of the workshop —in concert with recent articulations of theology and psychology will further nuance and extend understanding of what happened in this workshop.

What is religious experience?

It is fairly easy in this culture to perceive religious experience primarily through the lens of explicitly religious language and religious symbolism.[139] I discovered that I am, myself, guilty of this narrow vision because for much of my initial analysis of this workshop process I felt disappointed that we had not made more use of scripture during workshop sessions, we had not prayed together in typical prayer forms, we did not often describe our interpretations of various pop culture texts

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[139] That is, what is "religious" in Christian terms, for example, is imagery that uses symbols such as the cross, language that speaks of "salvation, redemption, Christ" and so on. In some ways what popular culture labels "religious" has more in common with what a previous generation might have labelled "devotional" or "pious." The adjective usually suggests an explicit link to an institution, yet often lacks elements of the mystical, or is voiced as an opposite to "spirituality." For more on this shift, see White (1997), Murdock (1997), Bar-Haim (1997), and Hoover (1997).

in theological language. Yet in speaking with members of the group, it was clear that we had all (at least those eleven who stayed throughout the workshop and engaged in exit interviews), felt that the process had contributed to our religious knowledge and experience in some helpful, even profound, way.

As I continued to read over the workshop and interview transcripts, I began to recognize that even as the group critiqued the dichotomy between "secular" and "religious" culture that is so often invoked today, I had fallen into that same dichotomy in analyzing our process. There was clearly something in our project that affected people in a positive way that was connected to the development of their own religious consciousness. But that "something" was also just as clearly not the kind of explicit theologizing often found in catechetical texts or in so-called "Christian" music and television.

One issue that was raised repeatedly, both in the media literacy materials and in the process of discovering how different people responded differently to various media texts, was that of the ways in which media contribute to the social construction of knowledge. The curriculum referred to it as the principle that "media construct reality," and workshop participants discovered this principle amidst discussions of the ways in which news is constructed, and of the ways in which our images of each other are or are not represented in commercials, for instance. It is this understanding that I believe has to be at the heart of how we, as religious educators, understand our mission in a pluralist and mass-mediated world. But a perception of the social construction of knowledge is often viewed as disorienting, if not threatening, in many church contexts.

My attempt to deepen the research analysis by asking how Christian religious knowing and experience might be enhanced by engagement with mass-mediated popular culture is obviously very dependent on definitional issues. For instance, what is "religious knowing and experience"? What is meant by "enhanced" and by "engagement"? These questions in turn are influenced by issues I raised earlier in my chapter on methodology, that is, issues of epistemology. How do I "know" religiously, or know that something is religious? How do I "know" that I am "having" a "religious experience"? In what ways do I and my religious community seek to define and shape that knowing?

Obviously these are crucial foundational issues, and seeking to answer even part of one of these questions could encompass a book in itself. What I intend to do in this chapter is lay out the definitions I have begun to use in my own understanding of this project, and to suggest some of the ways in which these definitions, which come from both theological and psychological disciplines, complement each other, and allow religious educators to claim a broader focus for our work, a focus that can enhance religious education by engaging mass-mediated popular culture.

By way of brief summary and as an aid to following my argument, my logic is as follows. Drawing from contemporary Catholic theology, as well as contemporary psychological theory, I will define Christian religious knowing at its heart to be affective as well as intellectual (or belief oriented). This kind of knowing structures religious experience, incorporating a sense of relationality to one's deepest sense of self, to each other, and to God, with a *connecting* of that relational perception to a set of beliefs and language that have explicit roots in a religious community. This definition creates some clear distinctions between a "spiritual"

experience or form of knowing, and a "religious" experience or form of knowing, in this latter part of the definition. I understand a religious form of knowing to be connected to, or at least described through, language and images that arise from within a specific religious community.

Given this definition, it is then possible to suggest that the conclusions that have emerged from this research project thus far could be extended in several ways:

1. Critical engagement with mass-mediated popular culture can enhance our religious experience because mass-mediated popular culture on occasion supports a depth of emotional response that can alert us to our deep relationality, to a connected transcendence of self.

2. This definition of religious experience requires that we understand religious education as a community project that needs to take into account the dynamics of mass-mediated popular culture. One clear consequence of this understanding is confirmation of one reason why our workshop process was so effective: it was built around a small group process that sought to create an open, dialogical, community space.

3. Perhaps paradoxically, utilizing media literacy tools in the service of religious education also effectively highlights some of the many ways in which mass-mediated popular culture supports a denial of connectedness and a distortion of that relationality, a denial and distortion that works against authentic transcendence of self.

I arrived at these conclusions based on a rather brief incursion into theological anthropology (as a basis for claiming an understanding of religious experience in Catholic Christian language), and constructive

developmental psychology (as a basis for describing religious knowing and experience in "secular" terms). Putting these two different languages together builds a bridge that resists the dichotomy noted earlier, giving me a way to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of our knowing through claiming a very specifically constructed image of that knowing (that is, a Catholic Christian one). In building this bridge I can name and claim an epistemological standpoint that grows out of these two disciplines. I can also suggest some significant paths for further exploration of Christian religious education in this context (the subject of my final chapter).

First, how does theological language help us to talk about what it means to be a human being, to talk about what it means to "know" and to "know God"? Second, how does a psychological framework mesh with this theological anthropology? What can it tell us about "knowing," and in particular, "knowing God"? Third, how do these frameworks help us detect specific consequences of our cultural context on human knowing, and human knowing in relation to God? Then, finally, within this nexus of descriptions, in what ways did the experience of our workshop suggest that Christian religious experience could be enhanced by engagement with mass-mediated popular culture?

A theological anthropology

In a world characterized by a stark historicity, as well as a definitive "turn to the subject," where does one begin to speak of God? For contemporary Christian theologians struggling to be coherent and pertinent in a context characterized by scientific modernism and religious

pluralism, that starting point often begins and ends in human experiencing. What it means to be human, what if anything we can "know" about human *be-ing* in relation to God; questions of "from whence" we come, and "toward what"[140] we move are far more influential and absorbing than abstract explorations of the nature of a transcendent, disengaged deity. The historically critical focus of such an anthropology begins to suggest that assumptions about *how* we know shape directly our descriptions of *what* we know. Karl Rahner is one of the central Catholic theologians of this century who has used an epistemological approach — a specific understanding of "how" we know — to describe a theological anthropology. His description is particularly helpful for its ability to discern religious knowing in a modern context permeated by scientific frameworks.

1. Mystery

Rahner's most basic answer to the question — what is it possible for human beings to know?— is that we can know that we do not know. That is, we can know that there is always more to know than we are capable of comprehending. "How" we know is always shaped by an awareness, whether conscious or not, of the finite nature of our knowing. Yet as Rahner describes it, the very act of recognizing that our knowledge is finite gives us the conceivability of infinity. The horizon of our finitude points toward infinity. This dynamic process is at the heart of Rahner's theological methodology (1992, p. 32):

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[140] I am indebted to McDargh (1983) for this language.

> Every goal that he[141] can point to in knowledge and in action is always relativized, is always a provisional step. Every answer is always just the beginning of a new question. Man experiences himself as infinite possibility because in practice and in theory he necessarily places every sought-after result in question.

Such a stance obviously provides a stark contrast to our current contemporary fascination with electronic technology, particularly to those proponents of information technology who continually and actively assert that all knowledge can be accessed, controlled, and manipulated.[142]

Rahner asserts that human beings are unique among other creatures in this ability to recognize that there is something we are forever reaching toward, but never quite achieving. Most starkly this is the experience of impending death, as we yearn for eternity but experience the finality of our limits. Yet we also "know" this kind of "reaching toward" in everyday life, in moments of anxiety over whether we can ever be understood by those we love or understand them, in moments of joy in the miraculous and unmerited love of or for children, in experiencing the silence of the winter sky in the deepest night or the tumultuous roar of whitewater rapids.

The fundamental, affective aspect of this human experience is one of orientation toward mystery, toward an appreciation for the "more" that we can sense but never know. That orientation necessitates an active

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[141] Rather than add "[sic]" each time Rahner's exclusivist language appears, I will simply note from the outset that I think his use of such language betrays the inadequacy of his anthropology, which is "unipolar" in nature, which is to say that it suggests that it is possible to describe a universal anthropology, and in singular terms. I take exception both to Rahner's use of "man" as generic for human, as well as his use of male pronouns for God, and will problematize the underlying anthropology later in the chapter through the addition of feminist voices.

[142] See Postman (1993) for a particularly compelling analysis of this fascination.

decision on the part of each human being to embrace or evade that mystery. Yet in our current cultural context, for many people "mystery" is more often something to be solved within a sixty minute dramatic show than an underlying companion to our moving and breathing. Again, another sharp cultural contrast is evident here.

2. Freedom

An active decision to embrace mystery implies the second fundamental characteristic of Rahner's theological anthropology: freedom. To be human is to be free. Rahner's definition of "freedom," however, is neither easily summarized nor readily grasped. Freedom is not the "capacity to do something which is always able to be revised..." (1992, p. 95-96). He is not describing a narrow "freedom" that is sought after only or primarily through political means, or a capacity to choose that is limited to the "choice" of an endless array of products in a consumer marketplace. Rather, "although it exists in time and in history, freedom has a single, unique act, namely, the self-actualization of the single subject himself" (1992, p. 95-96). Again, "in real freedom the subject always intends himself, understands and posits himself... he does not do some*thing* but does *himself*" (1992, p. 94).

The meaning of this "freedom" is clearer when understood explicitly in connection with the responsibility entrusted to us in our relationship with God. That is, in order to be fully free to embrace that holy mystery which we understand, however imperfectly in our experience of self-actualization to be a relationship with God, we must be free to forgo it, to evade it, to deny it. Freedom is absolutely required if human beings are to

be understood as saying "yes" to God. Saying "yes" implies the ability to say "no." Otherwise it embodies neither real freedom nor real responsibility (Rahner, 1992, p. 102). This ability to say "yes," this freedom to choose to embrace or to deny holy mystery fundamentally structures our lives. Given our equally essential historicity, it is a decision that is constantly being made, over and over again, in the concrete events of day to day life. As such it is not a decision which we can point to with finality and note that here, on such and such a day, in this precise context, I said either "yes" or "no" and thus determined the rest of my life's structure. Rather, the "answer" our life will be to the question God poses as ultimate, holy mystery can only be known in our life's entirety. Such an understanding is not only at odds with contemporary culture, but it also is sharply distinguishing of a Catholic perspective from some Protestant perspectives, in which one experiences a "saving event" or conversion, that once and for all marks one's life.

It should be clear that in Rahner's description we cannot speak of what it means to be human without touching on what we can say toward, about and with God. Rahner writes that "man is the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God" (1992, p. 116). This description of God carries several presuppositions. First, "God can communicate himself in his own reality to what is not divine without ceasing to be infinite reality and absolute mystery, and without man ceasing to be a finite existent different from God" (1992, p. 119). That is, God can be at one and the same time both the eternal mystery and horizon toward which we yearn yet never achieve, and yet also profoundly present to and with us. Second, this absolute self-communication requires that "being" is "being-present-to-self." That is, "the essence of an existent

insofar as it has being is personal self-possession and inner luminosity… the ontological self-communication of God to a creature is by definition a communication for the sake of immediate knowledge and love" (1992, p. 122).

3. Self, relationality, God

In understanding "being" as "being-present-to-self," Rahner situates the experience of embracing God fundamentally in the experience of embracing self. This is not the "self" of egotistical, individually-oriented, consumer-driven US society, however, but the "self" that is at its heart a centering grounding moving outward, an embrace of self that can only see self as intimately linked to God and all other selves (1992, p. 131):

> … a person who opens himself to his transcendental experience of the holy mystery at all has the experience that this mystery is not only an infinitely distant horizon, a remote judgement which judges from a distance his consciousness and his world of persons and things, it is not only something mysterious which frightens him away and back into the narrow confines of his everyday world. He experiences rather that this holy mystery is also a hidden closeness, a forgiving intimacy, his real home, that it is a love which shares itself, something familiar which he can approach and turn to from the estrangement of his own perilous and empty life.

Therefore, human beings moving from a yearning toward mystery, who in their fullness of freedom choose to embrace freely and fully that yearning in its entirety, encounter God and in that encounter most fully encounter themselves as well. It is also fundamentally a part of Rahner's

anthropology that this encounter is necessarily and always an encounter *in relation* with other human beings (1975, p. 128):[143]

> ...on the one hand the experience of God and the experience of self are one, and on the other hand ... the experience of self and the encounter with our neighbor are one... the unity between the love of God and love of neighbor is conceivable only on the assumption that the experience of God and the experience of self are one... These relationships... are present, as a matter of necessity, all at once, and as mutually conditioning one another, in every act of the subject... whatever form this act may assume.

Mystery, freedom, person as a self in the midst of community in the midst of relationality to God and each other: these are the critical elements of Rahner's theological and epistemological description of what it means to be human.

Several feminist theologians take up Rahner's anthropology in the midst of this focus on "relationality" and extend it in powerful ways. Both Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine LaCugna, for instance, do so by meditating at length on the significance of the Trinity for human belief and experiencing. Johnson moves from a consideration of the Trinity "from below,"[144] and thus to a description of human personhood growing out of specific women's experiencing, and moving from that to a representation of God. LaCugna approaches the Trinity "from above," and thus begins her description of human personhood in a delineation of humanity as typified by Jesus Christ. In both instances, these contemporary Catholic feminist theologians describe an anthropology

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[143] Actually, Rahner uses the term "neighbor" and it may be appropriate in this particular time period, given the destruction of life forms around us, to conceive of "neighbor" in terms broader than simply "human" being.

[144] Here I'm using these terms roughly, to denote the starting point, the desire to consider Jesus through the lens of his humanity (and thus "from below"), or through a consideration of his divinity (and thus "from above").

that affirms Rahner's egalitarian starting point — all human beings must be seen as essentially equal and free, regardless of gender, class, race, and so on — but move to question the situated biases that can deform such an anthropology. They describe an anthropology that embraces the diversity of human being, the multiplicity of ways in which human beings experience themselves and their situatedness.

Johnson

Johnson begins her work with an affirmation of Rahner's insight that "immanence" and "transcendence" are intimately connected: "the one relational God, precisely in being utterly transcendent, not limited by any finite category, is capable of the most radical immanence, being intimately related to everything that exists" (1992, p. 229). Thus it is a violation not only of the individual experiences of women, but indeed of God's own self-communication, if we do not encounter God actively present in specific women's experiences. Delving deeply into the biblical wisdom tradition, Johnson suggests one way to name such an encounter with God is to revision and reclaim the partners of the Trinity as "Spirit-Sophia," "Mother-Sophia," "Jesus-Sophia."

Yet Johnson is not simply suggesting additional images for God, or following Rahner's framework in describing a unipolar anthropology. Rather, she is very conscious of the ways in which white feminists in the past have claimed their experiences as essentially descriptive of "women's" experience, and thus denied the rich differences embodied in women all over the world. She is also conscious of the tendency towards individualist imagery that can lodge itself in a unipolar frame.

Johnson is searching for a theological anthropology that is neither dualistic nor unipolar, but rather "transformative and person-centered." The myriad discourses and representations in which human persons are embedded, and which create both the constraints and the opportunities in which we become "self," and that self a "self-in-community," or "self in relationship," crucially inform her theological anthropology. Johnson (1992, p. 156) recognizes that "human existence has a multi-dimensional character," and thus any attempt to describe an adequate anthropology must also "move ... toward the celebration of diversity as entirely normal."[145]

In Johnson's framework, as in Rahner's, sin resides in denying whole self, in refusing God's freedom, in collaborating with any structure that practices similar denials and refusals. As such, her framework is intimately suffused with powerful language and imagery that can be used to critique unjust structures, and to vision more whole community/communion, all the while conscious of the finite nature of human knowing.

LaCugna

LaCugna also wants to incorporate myriad and diverse human experiencing into her systematic theology, but rather than moving from human experience to describing and naming the Trinity, she moves from the Trinity to a description of ideal human experiencing. Picking up on

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[145] Johnson (1992, p. 156) speaks in particular of a "multi-polar anthropology" which "allows Christology to integrate Jesus' maleness using interdependence of difference as a primary category, rather than emphasizing sexuality in an ideological, distorted way."

Rahner's insight that "the economic trinity is the immanent trinity and vice versa,"[146] she uses the notion of their inseparability to re-vision the Trinity. "Christian theology must begin from the premise that because the mystery of God is revealed in the mystery of salvation, statements about the nature of God must be rooted in the reality of salvation history" (1993, p. 4). That is, "the identity of the economic and immanent Trinity therefore means that what God has revealed and given in Christ and the Spirit is the reality of God as God is from all eternity.... The personhood of Jesus Christ ("hypostatic union") who is God-with-us, discloses also God-with-God. The Incarnation thus is proof of the strict identity between God in the economy and God as such" (1993, pp. 212-213).

These statements may seem incomprehensibly theological, or at least so utterly embedded in a theological context as to shed no light on any conversation outside of that context, but in making these claims LaCugna is essentially describing Jesus as "the ultimate norm and archetype of human personhood...." (1993, p. 291). She is using deeply rooted, traditional theological language to argue that "personhood" *is* communion, and our understanding of it as such requires that we understand persons "as essentially interpersonal and intersubjective"; as requiring a "balance of self-love and self-gift"; as being so bound into relationality that with "each new relationship we 'are' in a new way, we 'exist' in a new way..." (1993, pp. 288-292).

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[146] LaCugna (1993, pp. 211-212) notes: "The phrase 'economic Trinity' refers to the three 'faces' or manifestations of God's activity in the world, correlated with the names, Father, Son and Spirit. In particular, economic Trinity denotes the missions, the being sent by God, of Son and Spirit in the work of redemption.... 'immanent' Trinity refers to the reciprocal relationships of Father, Son, and Spirit *to each other*, considered apart from God's activity in the world."

Like Johnson, this is a "multi-polar" or "transformative" anthropology that begins with a recognition of the central mystery at the heart of human experiencing. All persons share in this mystery which is intimately a part of God's self-communication. But LaCugna does not want to define this mystery in universal terms that once again confine theological anthropology to abstraction. Such a description can easily become equated with the hegemonic culture which proposes it. Carr clarifies, for example, that in such an anthropology "the upper elite is really the paradigm for all people, and thus women and minorities must conform to the single (male, white, Protestant) norm" (1990, p. 128). Rather, LaCugna (1993, p. 291), like Johnson, opts for an anthropology which proposes that:

> Each encounter with another human being is an encounter with the truth of our own common humanity, even though human nature is always embodied under distinct conditions. No one human person, and no one way of being human, can set itself up as the criterion of what it means to be human. The ultimate norm and archetype of human personhood is Jesus Christ.

LaCugna reaches deeply into Trinitarian imagery when she suggests that "the meaning of to-be is to-be-a-person-in-communion" (1993, p. 250). When Rahner posits an experience of God through an experience of grounded "self," LaCugna moves on to point out that that experience of "self" must always be understood as "self-in-communion," not just the interior communion of one person with holy mystery, but the whole of the experience of holy mystery moving in and through and with all other persons.

Given this relational definition of being, "freedom" can be more readily understood as "achieved in communion. Freedom is freedom-for or freedom-toward another" (1993, p. 299). We are most free when we most move to "transcend limitation through conformity to ourselves as

creatures ordained for love and communion with God and with others" (1993, p. 289). We are in our very natures oriented towards the "yes" that embraces the holy mystery of God and thus embraces the holy mystery of each other and ourselves.

Sin in this framework is described in terms similar to those of Johnson's framework: a deliberate denial of our connectedness with God, and thus with ourselves and each other, and any collaboration with structures that practice such denial (1993, p. 284). God's grace is, then, the ever-present, ever-healing, ever-available reality that empowers us to refuse such denial, and instead to embrace God and ourselves and each other, to live in holy communion with all that has being.

This understanding of what it means to be human, of what it means to "know" — always partially ("mystery"), always in relation ("relationality"), always with the freedom ("freedom") and the risk of choosing not to know the depth of our connectedness and in doing so to cut ourselves off from the most essential aspect of ourselves (our relationality through God) — suggests that "religious experience", at least within my own understanding of Roman Catholic descriptions of such experience, necessarily involves these three elements: mystery, relationality, freedom.

Some implications of this anthropology for this project

Johnson and LaCugna's theological insights into human being and human knowing form a substantial foundation upon which a definition of "religious experience" can be both grounded and liberated. Mystery, freedom, relationality, the experience of the particular as the prerequisite

for any encounter with God — this is a specifically Catholic Christian theological naming of religious experience. This anthropology affirms descriptions that detail the fundamental relationality of human personhood, and suggests that embracing difference, however that "difference" might be embodied in a pluralistic, multicultural world, is an essential element of embracing ourselves, God, each other.

Psychology's contributions to this frame

How, then, does this framework encounter contemporary psychological descriptions of what it means to be human? The psychological theorizing most frequently cited by religious educators is developmental psychology, particularly James Fowler's use of it in his work on "stages of faith" (1982). Developmental psychology builds upon the work of theorists/researchers such as Erikson and Piaget, who sought to understand how the biological imperatives of human being interacted with human consciousness to create ongoing meaning-making capacities. The notion of "stages of faith" has been compelling for religious educators, in part because it has provided us with a framework for discerning how to prepare appropriate educational interventions.

Yet the developmental framework has not provided much room for tracing ways of knowing oneself in relationship with God that encompass more than cognitive perspective-taking. There is little language there for describing *bodily* experiences of God, for discerning the ways in which sexual, iconic, aesthetic, mimetic, musical, and other rich approaches to God function in someone's life. Similarly, the fairly linear progression of ever increasing complexity and abstraction identified as the

developmental progression towards maturity suggests a much more recent and western European conception of faith than various religious communities profess, further limiting the framework's utility.

Neo-psychoanalytic object relations theory, on the other hand, *does* have both a language and a history of taking seriously more embodied ways of knowing. When theorists such as Jones (1991) and McDargh (1983) shine the light of this theorizing in a confirming way onto religious experiencing, it gives us a way to foster a deep empathy for whatever image of God, whatever experience of faith, an individual is currently embedded within. Where object relations theory poses difficulties to religious educators is in the process of translating its rich description of faith processes into educational practices. With the possible exception of the kind of companioning involved with certain forms of spiritual direction, religious education is not — and probably should never be — therapy, at least not in the clinical sense of that word. While the more cognitive emphases of developmental theory "fit" into pedagogy fairly easily, the task of infusing religious education with the insights of object relations theory is a more difficult one. It may be that this theory will prove most helpful precisely in the areas neglected by developmental frameworks — bodily practices, contemplative practices, musical and iconic ways of approaching God, the use of imagination, and so on.[147]

Yet in many ways these two psychological frameworks — developmental theory and object relations theory — are quite similar in their approach to religious experience. Both focus on the experience of "faith" as, in McDargh's words (1983, p. 71):

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[147] Here I am thinking, specifically, of how this understanding complements the work of religious educators such as Maria Harris (1987) and Kathleen Fischer (1983).

that human dynamic of trusting, relying upon, and reposing confidence in, which (1) is foundational to the life-long process of becoming a self, and (2) is fulfilled in the progressively enlarged capacity of that self for love and self-commitment.

This broad definition provides fertile ground for religious educators wanting to help persons grow in faith who have been socialized in a culture that often trivializes or eschews religious knowledge and experience. Not everyone may think of themselves as "religious," but most people have had some experience with the difficulty of sustaining trust. These frameworks also provide a translational language, or at least an alternative language, for articulating the kind of religious knowledge and experiences so richly described in the theological prose of Rahner, Johnson and LaCugna.

Constructive developmental theory

Robert Kegan is a contemporary theorist who has tried to hold the two frameworks — developmental and neo-psychoanalytic — together in the service of education. His work has been utilized very effectively by people concerned with pastoral ministry — particularly Conn (1986), Conn (1989), and Liebert (1992) — perhaps in part because Kegan has sought to stretch his description beyond the purely cognitive into an understanding of human knowing that attends to its affective, as well as cultural and social dimensions.[148]

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[148] The one element of human meaning-making that is least emphasized in his theorizing is the bodily. It is present, given the ways in which Kegan's structure is indebted to Piagetian frames, but seriously under-theorized.

Kegan begins by suggesting that the bedrock of our personality, its foundation, lies in our ongoing struggle to make sense of the *relationship* of "self" and "other," always understanding that that relationship, that struggle, is embedded in particular contexts, and the very particularity of those contexts have important consequences for the meanings that will be made. The resonance here to a Catholic Christian theological anthropology is quite strong. Kegan's book *The Evolving Self* (1982) traces in detail how he believes these dynamics unfold in the process of human development. Rather than trying to summarize all that is described there, I would like to focus on three of his conclusions that will be important for my use of his work as a lens in this context.

First focus: relational spiral of development

First, Kegan suggests that human personality is constituted by an ongoing process of differentiation and reintegration that leads to the development of authentic "self." Becoming oneself is neither an issue solely of developing autonomy, nor is it simply an issue of building deep relationality, deep connections to others. "Authentic" in this context has a broad and far-reaching definition, but in particular it is descriptive of a degree of "autonomous relationality," free affectivity, increasing empathy, and the ability to move towards what finally has to be described in more transcendent terms as "love," or "sense of unity." Most of us can distinguish between our childhood era — where "self" was not even an issue — and our adolescent era — where "who am I?" and "what am I about?" consumed fundamental significance — and later permutations

on the theme. Who I am now is intimately linked to who I was then, but it is also more complex and in some ways multipartite.

This description of human experiencing suggests that the theological definition of "self in relation" might need to be stated in more complex terms than it usually appears, even given its understanding that human experience is fundamentally bound up with mystery and freedom.

Second focus: holding environment matters

A consequence of this understanding of self-development is the second focus of Kegan's that I find so helpful as a lens: his willingness to attend to cultural surround, or as he has labelled it, "holding environment." Drawing on Winnicott's work Kegan suggests that (1982, p. 257):

> ... we are "held' throughout our lives in qualitatively different ways as we evolve... Development at any period in the life history, involving an emergence from a psychobiological evolutionary state, must also involve an emergence from embeddedness in a particular human context. This is analogous to transcending my culture and creating a distinction between what now appears as the culture's definition of me and what is "really me."

It has already been apparent in the process of our workshop how powerful "the culture's definition" can be. For Kegan, an environment adequately supportive of human development will provide three crucial dynamics: confirmation, contradiction, and continuity (1982, p. 258).

"Confirmation" has to do with how well a particular environment corresponds to a specific meaning frame. If you believe the world is basically a good place, and you can survive well in it if you work hard and follow certain rules—yet the environment you are in is violently dangerous to your health, and follows no perceptible "rules,"—then your

meaning frame is not "confirmed" by your environment. Either your frame changes, or your world swallows you up. Questions of "media myths" become immediately relevant in this context, where what it means to "confirm" experience has taken on a elements of "defining" it rather than merely "representing" it.

"Contradiction" is Kegan's label for the process of posing challenges to meaning frames. These challenges can arise spontaneously amidst everyday life, or they can be deliberately created educationally. So-called "peak" experiences are one kind of challenge, as are traumas and other kinds of important losses. Experiencing an ecstatic religious vision is an example of a "peak" experience that could pose a crucial challenge to someone whose meaning frame does not allow for such experiences. Having a child born with a disability is an example of an event that might pose a traumatic challenge within some meaning frames. Obviously media culture poses contradictions or "challenges" all of the time to religious definitions of experience, not to mention more profound understandings of "self." The point Kegan makes is that such a challenge can shake a person's meaning frame to such an extent that their whole way of life, their entire sense of self, is called into question. Unless his third dynamic, "continuity," is present, such a challenge can prove catastrophic, leading to rigidity of belief, paralysis of action, even death.[149]

This third dynamic of "continuity" is a process by which a person who has sustained a radical contradiction to their meaning frame incorporates a new meaning frame, a new "narrative," if you will, that allows them to

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[149] Brookfield's (1987, pp. 46-47) discussion of the "creation of premature ultimates" has much in common with Kegan's understanding of the rigidity that creates problems when continuity is not accessible.

make sense of their previous experiences and beliefs, while at the same time meeting the challenges presented to them appropriately and authentically. For feminist Catholics, for example, the Church continually and consistently poses all kinds of contradictions, and yet we can dig deeply into the tradition for resources that have been long overlooked, or we can re-interpret historical presentations so as to maintain our sense of "home" amidst this church, our sense of continuity with generations past while yet refusing to give up our critiques of the Church's patriarchal tendencies. Schussler-Fiorenza's (1992) "hermeneutics of suspicion and critique," and Fiorenza's (1986) "reflective equilibrium" are two examples of providing such "continuity."[150]

Kegan's concentration on the three-fold nature of a holding environment is particularly useful in beginning to understand why it is that we might, as Catholic Christians, hold a particular set of beliefs with regard to religious knowing and experience, and yet fail frequently to put those beliefs into action. If, for example, the cultural context in which we find ourselves systematically represents human experience as empty of the elements of human knowing held by our religious community, we face a critical dilemma. How we resolve that dilemma, Kegan argues, will shift over the span of our development. At particular points in our development it may well be impossible for us to reconcile the two competing or

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[150] In particular, each author has described a way of utilizing a text or element of the tradition that while uncovering the ways in which previous usage of the text or element was oppressive, yet reclaims it and incorporates it into a more liberating contemporary practice. Francis Schüssler-Fiorenza, for instance, describes "foundational theology as a reconstructive hermeneutics"; that is, a series of interpretive principles held in "reflective equilibrium" to create a solid foundation of meaning. In this way he can "confirm, contradict, and yet provide continuity" from within the tradition itself.

contrasting situations without denying one or the other. The question of how we handle this dilemma in relation to mass-mediated popular culture is a critical one, and will occupy most of my final chapter in this dissertation.

Third focus: empathy for the transitions

At this point, to continue laying out Kegan's framework, the third characteristic focus of his structure that will be an important complement to our consideration of religious meaning-making and religious education in a media culture, is his emphasis on the between-times, the transition points. More than anything in his work, I think this emphasis provides some clear and descriptive substance to the word "transformation."

It is this notion, a "change in our order of consciousness" that I see as most clearly descriptive of transformation, particularly the kind of transformation that educational processes can have an impact on. As Kegan writes (1994, p. 34):

> In fact, transforming our epistemologies, liberating ourselves from that in which we are embedded, making what was subject into object so that we can "have it" rather than "be had" by it — this is the most powerful way I know to conceptualize the growth of the mind.

Keeping in mind what Kegan has said about the complex and holistic way in which he understands "epistemology," I'm disappointed that he chose to use the word "mind" rather than "person." Still, I think his description is both powerful and helpful in the ways in which it allows us to think about transformation as intimately bound up with the ongoing development of *self-identity in relation to cultural surround.* It is particularly

useful for its ability to describe the process of meaning-making change, and some of the elements necessary to support such change.

One consequence of Kegan's attention to these shifts is his very real empathy for the pain that is experienced in undergoing such transformations. Each time one's notion of "subject" shifts to "object," a very real loss is endured. "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 (or description, or understanding of that culture) as part of the process of re-integrating into the next understanding of one's environmental surround. Again, this aspect of Kegan's thought has important implications for our understanding of the impact of mass-mediated popular culture on religious knowing and experience, a question I will take up most directly in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Consequently, religious experience is...

At this point in the chapter, it will be helpful to summarize the description of religious experience we are arriving at, a description growing out of both theological and psychological inquiries. From the theological conversation, human knowing, and thus experiencing, has three necessary components: mystery, freedom, and relationality (self understood to be transcended in relationality to God and other). Implied in this naming is a willingness to use a specific language, in this case one that grows out of the Catholic Christian community. From the psychological conversation, these three elements are also present, but

named somewhat differently: recognition of the contingency of life and trust in it anyway, ability to change and grow or evolve over time, and self in relation. For my purposes, then, and certainly in relation to this specific piece of research, religious experience can be defined as a convergence of these two descriptions. Religious experience is structured through religious knowing, which is characterized by a sense of limits and contingency, by a commitment to act in history ("freedom", or "evolution") even in the face of that contingency, and by a passionate sense of relationality (relationality to one's deepest sense of self, to each other, and to God). That religious knowledge is then connected to a set of beliefs and/or language that have explicit roots in a religious community.

As noted earlier, this definition creates some clear distinctions between a "spiritual" experience and a "religious" experience in this latter part of the definition, in that a religious experience is understood as connected to, or at least best described through, language and images that arise from within a specific religious community.[151]

This definition begins to address part of the puzzle raised within our workshop process: was what we were engaged in contributing to our religious knowledge? and if so, in what ways? Throughout the process and the interviews that followed, participants returned again and again to a sense of the joy of engaging in dialogue with each other around the compelling images and relationships portrayed within mass-mediated popular culture. They spoke frequently of the need to do that *together*, not in isolation, and of the necessity of doing so in a group that had some

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[151] This desire to stay close to, and remain explicit about, a specific community also grows out of my aforementioned commitment to a standpoint epistemology that sees the universal in the particular (see my discussion of these issues in Chapter One).

diversity to it. There was a clear sense of uncovering new interpretations within this shared context, and yet also of the contingency of even these interpretations. There were not definitive or permanent interpretations of any of the media texts we engaged. There was a sense that new interpretations could and would always be arrived at. Finally, there was a clear belief that this engagement led them to new ways of understanding the world, and certainly of acting within their professional contexts. All of these are elements of the definition of "religious experience" I am suggesting. So perhaps we were contributing to our religious "know-ing" (as opposed to our religious "knowledge") by expanding our religious experiencing.

It is the final element of that description, that these perceptions be *connected with* the specific language and beliefs of a religious community that was least explicit in our interactions. As previously described, we did not often use the more traditionally recognized symbols, practices and stories of Christianity in our workshop. And yet, those symbols, practices and stories were carried with people into the context of our process — both in their own lives, and through elements of the media texts we engaged. Such elements often emerged in tangential discussions, or in passing references that the group built upon.

In other words, Christian practices, symbols and stories formed the backdrop to our process, created the glue that particularly initially, in recruitment and commitment to the research, brought people from diverse contexts together. Certainly it was also a piece of the "glue" in terms of the choice of media texts we considered, in all of which we could find religious elements, even if it required "reading into" the texts (as with the case of the *Diet Coke* commercial). Engaging religious education as the

primary context for our work together was the stated purpose of the group. Christianity was a clear element of our similarity; it created a ground upon which we could stand to explore our differences.

What was educationally most interesting to this group of highly trained and active religious educators was *not* the explicit bringing of traditional symbols, practices and stories into a mass-mediated context. It was not reading scripture, singing hymns, or reciting communal prayers somehow within the frame of mass media, but instead searching the mass-mediated popular culture "texts" for themes, images, experiences, and other elements that could be used to provide a bridge upon which to make traditional practices, stories and symbols come alive, whether in contrast or agreement. This finding is important to the education and formation of religious educators, and also clearly points to the necessity of embedding this kind of media literacy work either in an already religiously fluent community, or in a process that ensures that religious language, metaphor and ritual will be made accessible to those for whom it is not readily at hand.

The two cultures, "mass mediated popular culture" and "religious culture," have been understood as being very separated — remember all of the early references to the "dichotomy" of the two from the transcripts — and what this group tried to do was build a bridge between them. Yet building a bridge does not end the separation completely, and perhaps it *should* not do so, given the dynamic energy that rises amidst cultural conflict. In fact, if anything it was the dynamism of building the bridge that excited people.

Engaging mass-mediated popular culture enhances religious knowing, religious experience

How, then, does engaging mass-mediated popular culture enhance religious knowing and experience? This question was partly answered through our workshop process by putting us in touch with aesthetically pleasurable resources, and by helping us to critique and engage unjust representations. In theological terms, we enhanced our knowledge by providing a context in which we could become ever more aware of the richness of our diversity, of the mystery of our differing responses, and of the depth of our relationality. Indeed, we were "doing" theology in naming and claiming that knowledge as an encounter with God. In psychological terms, we enhanced our religious experience by providing a context in which we "confirmed" our pleasure in pop culture materials, "contradicted" that pleasure by deeper, critical analysis of them, and provided "continuity" for our experience by claiming it as significant to religious education.

Given this definition of Christian religious experience, it is then possible to suggest that the conclusions that have emerged from the research could be described in the following ways:

1. Critical engagement with mass-mediated popular culture can enhance our religious experience because mass-mediated popular culture on occasion supports a depth of emotional response that can alert us to our deep relationality, to a transcendence of self.
2. This definition of religious experience requires that we understand religious knowing as a community project, not simply an individual one, that needs to take into account the dynamics of

mass-mediated popular culture. A clear consequence of this understanding is confirmation of one reason why our workshop process was so effective: it was built around a small group process that sought to create an open, dialogical, community space.

3. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, given finding number one, utilizing media literacy tools in the service of religious education also effectively highlights some of the many ways in which mass-mediated popular culture supports a denial and distortion of our relationality. Indeed, our use of media literacy tools suggested that popular cultural representations often work against authentic transcendence of self. This last conclusion is more of an inference than a conclusion, and I will follow it up in the next and final chapter.

4. Finally, this definition of religious experience, particularly in its distinction between religious knowing and spiritual knowing, suggests that familiarity and ease of practice with regard to the religious language and ritual of one's community is a necessary prerequisite, or at least concomitant aspect of using popular culture within religious education.

Next steps and educational implications

How, then, do we move from this more "socially constructed" understanding of religious knowledge and experience into a clear sense of what our goals as religious educators might need to be in a mass-mediated context? It is in this consideration of goals, particularly in terms

of what constitutes "action," that this question can be answered, and as such will be the basis of my next chapter.