Frame shifting/Shifting frames:
Using popular culture texts in religious education and pastoral ministry

(please note: this paper is not yet finished, please do not cite it without contacting me first)

Mary E. Hess
Boston College
hessma@bc.edu

This paper is based on research currently being conducted at Boston College, through a program called "Religious Education and the Challenge of Media Culture." Part of our goal in that project is to share the insights emerging from contemporary communications and culture research with practitioners of religious education and pastoral ministry. We hope to discern more adequately the context in which religious educators are working, and thus develop more appropriate educational interventions. I am also writing from the experience of teaching a graduate level course entitled "Media literacy and religious education" at Boston College, in an online format. Both of these projects are collaborative and ongoing, and thus this paper is an initial attempt to draw some useful conclusions.

from pipeline to ritual....

One of the most interesting aspects of contemporary communications research, at least to religious educators, is the shift in underlying paradigm from an instrumentalist focus to a cultural focus. This shift is relevant in part because it expands our understanding of what is occurring in a communications "event," allowing religious communities more creative access. That shift can be recognized in part in the change in the way we talk about communication, particularly mass mediated communication. Rather than using the metaphor of a message "pipeline" or envisioning information as something the mass media deliver in much the same way that trucks deliver cargo, recent scholarship has begun to talk about communications media as crucial elements of our cultural surround, with the information they "contain" or "convey" seen almost as raw materials from which we then make meaning. From this perspective, religious communities have access to mass mediated communication at almost any point of the process, rather than simply at the point of production of message.

Adán Medrano, speaking to a meeting of the Bishops of the Netherlands points out, for example:

> ... these two worlds [media and church] have conflated into each other and share the same spaces.... we are encountering religious experience in everyday media culture, and it is in media culture that our religious symbols and myths are alive....

> Media technology has become naturalized in our daily environment and is in fact the material with which we form and inform our habits, relationships, conversation and identities.   In terms of our church life, shared media experiences provide the symbolic material for our imagination and the construction of our religious identity. ... (Medrano, 1998, 3-7).

Such an understanding suggests that rather than focusing on the "delivering" of a message, church communicators ought to be focusing on engaging culture. A similar shift in emphasis is already underway within religious education. We have learned that it is not enough to present doctrine simply as an intellectual activity. We have to find ways to make the beliefs and identity of our community of fiath come alive to people emotionally. We have to show how they are embodied in concrete practices, and explore them critically, otherwise they have little impact and even less attraction or resonance. Paulo Freire pointed to this shift in his discrimination between "banking" practices of education and "praxis" oriented approaches [Freire, 1985 #124]. What does a praxis-oriented approach, in relation to our emerging understandings of mass mediated communication, suggest about using popular culture texts in religious education?

To begin with, we need to understand how religious symbols are currently "put into play" in our cultural surround. If we are concerned with people's practices we must first observe what they actually are, not what we would like them to be. As David Morgan points out:

> In a consumerist culture like the one that increasingly interlaces the globe, a symbol is commodified (taken from its original setting and mass-produced) and floated on the open market until somone appropriates it (literally: makes it one's own by first purchasing it and second incorporating the artifact into daily life). But meanings cling to the material structure of most artifacts with more or less tenacity insofar as artifacts are already in circulation was certain kinds of signifiers. For instance, almost no one is unaware that a cross is a Christian symbol. What exactly it means is not usually clear, but that it is a sacred object that is not supposed to be profaned and that it signals a certain kind of personal and/or collective commitment is understood. [reference to XMC post of 10/11/98]

Communities of faith need to confront the difficult implications of such a shift in context. First, we no longer hold cultural hegemony (if we ever did). As Brueggeman points out, "the church is no longer part of the intellectual-ideational hegemony of our culture.... at a quite practical level, the church is no longer a

dominant intellectual force in society and can no longer count on cultural reinforcement" [Brueggemann, 1997 #237, p. 40]. In many cases people first encounter religious symbols in the popular marketplace, not even within religious community. They are also encountering religious symbols and ideas from a multitude of traditions, and picking and choosing which, if any, have relevance and resonance for them.

Second, with the general skepticism and distrust of institutional structures has come a general rejection of institutional authority (cf. Bellah). It might have been possible at one point in the history of the U.S. Roman Catholic church, for example, to assume that any statement made by the Pope would automatically command immediate adherence and assent. Such unquestioned institutional authority no longer exists. While religious educators and other leaders may teach that papal statements are worthy of immediate and careful attention, even that is not often given them. The church has become simply one voice among many competing for people's attention and commitment.

What is the role of religious educator amidst this contemporary situation? First, we need to recognize that our communities of faith carry only one among many of the ways of being and knowing in the world that are competing for people's attention and allegiance. From that position we can envision our role as one of bridge builder, discerner, translator. Bridge builder, because we need to build paths for people from the context of consumer commodified mass mediated culture into the historically grounded, deeper veins of religious community. Discerner, because we need not only to share the traditions of our particular community with people, but also help to critique and situate the multitude of symbols and epistemologies currently being floated in the cultural "soup." Translator, because in many cases we have to find ways to translate traditional religious language and imagery into words and pictures that make sense in our contemporary context; and at the same time, translate the yearnings and quests of our pop cultural "texts" into religious language so that our faith communities can recognize them.

What do these roles look like in relation to integrating popular culture materials into religious contexts? Our research suggests that there are three areas in particular, that religious educators identify as having resonance and utility in religious education: as clues to social currency (bridge building), as a source of social

conscientization (discerning), and as entry points to experiences of transcendence and connection (translating).

social currency and bridge building

Bridge-building has to do with connecting one set of experiences, one particular locale, with another. Given that religious education is so often confined to "Sunday School CCD" contexts, or other limited venues, while popular culture surrounds and immerses us, the bridge building appears at first glance to go more often in one direction than the other. Popular culture can, for instance, provide specific clues to issues of "social currency." When formal religious education is limited to liturgy or one class a week, it is often difficult to discover and uncover the issues and themes that are pressing for people. As one example, in years past when the sacrament of reconciliation was popular in the Catholic community, and there were more than enough priests to offer it widely, parish priests usually had a very good sense of what kinds of concerns their congregations held, and what problems they ought to be dealing with through their liturgical and homiletical planning. Now the sacrament of reconciliation is often observed more in its absence than its presence, or in more communal and less personal contexts. How can an overwelmed and underresourced parish staff keep in touch with their community? In part — only in part, but in good part — by paying careful attention to the concerns addressed in popular culture and how their community engaged them.

Margaret Miles writes that "the representation and examination of values and moral commitments does not presently occur most pointedly in churches, synagogues, or mosques, but before the eyes of 'congregations' in movie theaters," [Miles, 1996 #129, p. 25] and her observation is a very helpful one. Members of our research workshops, and students in my class, offer many suggestions as to ways in which popular culture texts provide these important clues. Each genre has its own peculiar themes, although some cross over. Within soap operas, for instance, relationships are a key theme: marriages are usually vulnerable, identity is at issue (in mistaken identities, in long lost family members returning from the dead, in urban stereotyping and so on), and religious faith exists primarily in personal relationship to God, called upon as a comfort when facing crisis or death.

Another recent genre is that of dramatic shows focused on the supernatural. The "X-Files" is perhaps the most successful of these shows, but there are many others. As Clark, Hoover have shown, much of the fascination of these shows plays itself out in the hunger for connection to powers greater than those of human beings. Within the more "institutionally-distrustful" of these shows, that connection is primarily linked in a fearful way either to aliens of some sort, or quasi supernational beings such as vampires (in "Buffy the Vampire Slayer"). Within the shows that tread a more trusting part of the spectrum, the link is explicitly made to more traditionally religious beings (in "Touched by an Angel," "Promised Land," "Seventh Heaven" and others). Either way, the thread is the same — a need to understand a "super - natural" power, and to explore, at least vicariously, a relationship to that power.

Institutional distrust runs widely through another genre as well, that of television news magazines. The main epistemological response offered to such distrust and the fear that often accompanies it, is the objectivity of science. Yet as *Brill's Content* recently pointed out (October 1998 issue), even that so-called objectivity is being called into question. Here again the problematic explored is usually one of finding individual solutions through science to difficult problems (eating the right foods to avoid disease, finding the right water filtering solutions, managing one's money appropriately, and so on).

Although it might not at first be obvious to religious communities, these themes and issues provide clear openings for religious education. The practitioners who participated in our research workshops and in my class come primarily from Catholic Christian communities, so their suggestions flow from those locations, but perhaps their ideas can be evocative for those coming from other faith traditions. These religious educators suggested that the themes of relationality, identity, confrontations with illness and death, and a desire for connection beyond oneself, are all themes that can be explored through engagement with sacred text (understood broadly to include liturgy and tradition, as well as scripture).

Their suggestions of how to use these themes however, are even more interesting. Rather than simply pointing out the connections, or asserting that the religious community holds a corner on the market on truth and thus we should eschew the representation embodied in a specific pop culture text and accept that

offered by the religious community (which in many ways would demonstrate an instrumentalist understanding of education), these religious educators suggest that people need to be supported in environments that allow them to draw the connections themselves, and then find ways to embody them in their own practices. What does creating this kind of environment and supporting this kind of practice look like?

Here are some of their suggestions:

> Gather a group of people to follow a soap opera together and explore the scenes which made people cry by suggesting that tears are one way of sensing God's presence.

> Choose a controversial show, such as *South Park*, and watch it together. Identify what made you laugh, and what made you uncomfortable. Why? What do those emotions tell you about norms for our community?

> Tape a television commercial and have a group watch it several times over. What desires is the commercial responding to? How do we fulfill those desires in our community of faith?

> Tape two different national news casts for the same evening, and then compare their similarities and differences. Think about how people of faith are represented, and then talk about how descriptive — or not — that representation is of your own faith community. [insert references]

There were many more suggestions, but the similarities among them are important: pop culture is engaged by a dialogical group (not in isolation); emotional responses are important raw data from which to work; there is a relationship of some sort between the mediated representation and the community of faith, but that relationship is not defined in advance but rather allowed to emerge from the dialogue; and there is someone present who must be fluent in the practices and norms of the faith community to serve as a resource and a facilitator.

In this case the role of the religious educator is to create a space within which there can be movement back and forth between the pop culture text and the community of faith, and in which that movement builds on existing resonance and relevance. Quite literally, the educator is building a "bridge" of meaning that makes explicit the direct connection between the two contexts, and that facilitates the uttering of authentic religious speech.

social conscientization and discernment

Another way in which popular culture "texts" are useful, is as a catalyst for conscientization. This is a familiar practice for many communities of faith. Media literacy education in the U.S. began, and in some cases still continues, as a project of religious communities. Strategies for deconstructing support for consumer commodification and other destructive processes are well articulated in curricula produced by the national Center for Media Literacy, and other such organizations. Critiquing "content", however, is only one way in which such texts can serve the goal of conscientization. As Freire notes, conscientization is at heart about "[insert quote]". A similar process is at work in religious descriptions of "discernment," as Frank Rogers notes: "[insert quote]". In both of these contexts, the primary concern is naming what has previously been unnamed or inchoate.

Because an ironic/critical stance towards meaning is now embedded even in texts one suspects the producers intend to be taken in without critique, critiquing overt content is only one aspect of the process . Asking what is *not* named or present, what is not represented, what is left out, is an equally important question. So too are finding ways to bring non-hegemonic viewpoints into the discussion. In our workshops and classes, the most effective way we found to do this was to ensure that the people present in the discussion were themselves coming from a diversity of location and perspective. I won't belabor this point in this paper, but will note that increasingly research is suggesting that effective learning takes place in situations of diversity. [insert references]

Questioning the "taken for granted," the "common sense," implied within mass mediated frameworks is perhaps one of the hardest tasks to do well, but it is helped by access to rich and strong alternatives.

translating transcendence and connection

The final role I suggest religious educators and other practitioners ought to inhabit is one of translation. As anyone who has lived in two languages knows, there are ideas and experiences that can be communicated well in some languages, and not at all in others. Some ideas "work" in a specific language and in another the idea simply does not exist, there are no words to speak it and yet we are compelled to

try anyway. For far too long many religious communities, particularly the Roman Catholic teaching hierarchy, have believed that certain kinds of experiences and ways of knowing the world are best communicated and hence their meanings controlled, in rational, linear texts.

Yet as I noted early in this paper, it is not adequately descriptive of our contemporary situation to speak of communication in purely instumentalist terms. Communities of faith can no longer, if they ever could, simply assert their claims and expect people to assent automatically and completely. Indeed, trying to assert our claims within the dominant language of science rules us out of order almost entirely (a point the Pope makes clearly in his latest text, *Fides et Ratio*).

If our own language is not hegemonic, and if our experiences and truth claims can not be articulated well in the hegemonic language, what are we to do? It is at this point that I believe we need to go to our traditions and ask what we have done in similar situations in the past. Within my own tradition, several suggestions emerge. The first is that of translation and enculturation. Catholics worshipped for centuries in contexts where Latin was not the dominant language, using Latin. This use both plagued people and freed them. It plagued them by making it difficult if not impossible to understand the doctrinal claims made in traditional propositional language. On the other hand, not understanding those claims in that framework freed educators to share the lifeways of the tradition through image and song, practice and embodiment. In most cases those songs, images, practices and other forms of embodiment were accomplished in the vernacular of the people. The tradition continues to be "enculturated" in the practices of the people gathered, while Latin continues to be the definitive language for doctrinal pronouncements.

In our contemporary mass mediated world, that enculturation of necessity takes place in part through the kind of bridge building I noted earlier, where people's desires and yearnings are given voice at least partially and initially through popular culture texts. In some ways the experience of feeling connected to people beyond one's immediate context, and to experiences beyond one's imagining, occurs more often through mass media technologies than it does in any other way. If we take theologians seriously in their claim that experiences of finitude, of connection beyond self, of transcendence, are essential experiences of religious community, than we must acknowledge that these experiences are occurring in mass mediated

contexts [Hess, 1998 #244].

Along with that acknowledgement comes the concomitant caution from religious educators and other practitioners who work with people of faith that we must recognize the vulnerability and fragility of feeling that often accompanies such experiences, and almost always accompanies their articulation in speech. Far too often religious leadership makes blanket claims negating or trivializing the kinds of experiential encounters made possible by mass mediated representations, thereby turning people away at the precise moment that they are perhaps ripe for what is traditionally called "evangelization." To take an example that is quite old by now, when the pop singer Madonna released her music video "Like a Prayer," religious leaders the world over began to denounce it as blasphemous. At the same time, a younger generation of seekers found that video a powerful vision of religious conversion and anti-racist sentiment.

The process of translation is always fraught with difficulty, and the opportunity for misunderstanding and confusion is great. Such difficulties and confusions are somewhat eased when a new community, a second generation community, arises that is at least bilingual. It is that community that is struggling to emerge right now, in part through the cohort of people often labelled "GenX." We need to look to them for leadership in this translational task. Part of what this research project and my experience with the class has demonstrated, is that people are engaging popular culture in profoundly meaningful ways. Religious practitioners ignore that engagement at our own peril.

re-claiming, re-imagining, re-investing in tradition...

Where should we go next? Recently Walter Brueggemann has struggled to use the metaphor of "exile" in the midst of postmodern culture. In seeking to articulate how one might preach in a radically altered, even postmodern cultural climate U.S., Brueggemann suggests that with the loss of cultural hegemony once owned by Christianity — a loss that in itself is liberating for many people — Christians ought perhaps to understand our pastoral situation as one of being in exile:

> On the one hand.... serious reflective Christians find themselves increasingly at odds with the dominant values of consumer capitalism and its supportive military patriotism; there is no easy or obvious way to hold together core faith claims and the social realities around us.... On the other hand..... the "homeland" in which all of us have grown up has been defined and dominated by white, male, Western assumptions which were, at the same time, imposed and also willingly embraced. Exile comes as those values and modes of authority are being effectively and progressively diminished. That diminishment is a source of deep displacement for many, even though for others who are not male and white, it is a moment of emancipation..... I suggest that "exile" (as metaphor) is a rich resource for fresh discernment, even though a *Christian exile* in a secular culture, and a *cultural exile* with the loss of conventional hegemony are very different (1997, 2).

There is something very powerful about this metaphor, at least Brueggemann's explication of it, because it allows at one and the same time an ability to name the experience of disintegrating structures of religious community as we know them even as it suggests there is a vision for religious community that can endure beyond that disintegration and perhaps even be reinvigorated.

Searching the Hebrew scriptures for insight and resources that might speak to our current context, Brueggemann lifts up for discussion elements of the experience of exile including "the danger of despair" and the necessity of holding on to one's "mother tongue" (1997, 10). Brueggemann writes that imagining ourselves as exiles amidst this culture suggests that we must claim the freedom and power to re-imagine a resilient identity that "is rather intended for full participation in the life of the dominant culture, albeit with a sense of subversiveness that gives unnerving freedom" (1997, 13). Such a resilient identity could make it possible to engage the delights, the dreams and visions of mass mediated popular culture, for instance, while at the same time resisting the ways in which elements of that popular culture narrow and constrict our vision. Consumer commodification and racist representation, for example, are two such themes within popular culture that people of faith ought consciously to subvert and overturn.

By the same process, but within the context of religious institution itself, the metaphor of "being in exile" provides for GenX'ers and others who have identified the hypocritical and often oppressive structures of religious communities, a deeply resonant, biblical role model by which to be present within the community while resisting its hegemonic claims. This kind of subversiveness resides in the Hebrew

scriptures in part, Brueggemann argues, in the use of language characterized by such rhetorical stances as hyperbole, irony, contradiction, and deliberate ambiguity (1997, 43-44). These are also many of the elements of "irreverent spirituality" that Beaudoin argues are characteristic of a GenX experience. Beaudoin points out the extent to which people who see themselves as "GenX" fully utilize the spaces of popular culture to imagine themselves into a spiritual space and to build a religious community, while maintaining deep suspicion towards institutional religion.

Is it possible to reach out to GenX'ers — and others — experiencing exile from religious community, and at the same time to recognize our own (that is, religious communities') exile within a hegemonic culture? Again, it is Brueggemann to which I turn, although I am not entirely sure he would accept my interpretation. He suggests that in considering the experience of exile as written about in the Hebrew scriptures, three kinds of responses are seen: "assimilation," "despair," and "fresh, imaginative theological work, recovering the old theological traditions and recasting them in terms appropriate to the new situation of faith in an alien culture" (1997, 116). In this case the alien culture is media culture for religious "insiders," and religious institutional culture for religious "outsiders."

Religious educators need to walk that third path, in at least two contexts. We need not despair at the "flattening" of our religious symbols, or the agenda-setting of the mass media; nor should we simply assimilate into media culture, accepting without argument the use of pop culture texts within liturgical spaces, or accepting as accurate the representation of religious practices within the media sphere. Nor do we need to accept institutional religious distaste for popular culture as a meaning-making sphere, or institutional supports for oppressive cultural stances.

Rather, we need to become translators and bridge-builders, helping to identify the spaces within media culture that allow us to dream large dreams, to connect beyond ourselves, to be drawn into transcendence, at the same time as we pull forward into lived consciousness prophetic religious practices that have shaped our communities and called them to justice over time, and that can have deep resonance today. One way to do that is to take seriously the imaginative, ritualized, participatory ways in which people already engage media culture and build on them, build through them, to the imaginative, sacramental resources of our own religious communities. As Brueggemann notes, the need for re-envisioned religious practice

counters the

> ... technological emptiness that is filled by the liturgies of consumerism and commoditization. The issue in our own context is whether holy presence can be received, imagined and practiced in ways that counteract that powerful, debilitating ideology (1997, 9).

GenX'ers and others embracing elements of media culture to resist and subvert it, and in the process claiming religious identity that in itself resists and subverts the oppressive tendencies of religious institutions, have begun to find these ways of being in the world. It is up to those of us, religious educators and pastoral ministers alike, to find ways of connecting our historically grounded communities to such a search. We need to build the bridges, discern the problematics, and create the translations necessary to do so.