

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to write a conclusion to a project that is only a preliminary effort on the road to engaging popular culture to enhance religious education. I am very conscious of how hard it has been to try to weave a story from threads as diverse as the practices of religious education, psychology, theology, and media criticism. Yet I continue to believe that this weaving is a vital project in a culture such as the United States, and in a context such as Catholic religious education.

When I am asked to speak about these issues in parishes, it is often in the context of scriptural reflection. More than once I have had the opportunity to do so when the central text has been the *Emmaus* story from *Luke*. Now I regularly suggest that text because it provides a useful mnemonic for the process by which I think religious educators can utilize popular culture. It may seem awkward to turn to scripture now, only at the end of this dissertation, but it is an element of Christian community that has never been far below the surface for myself, and other religious educators who engaged in this project, and making it explicit now builds yet another kind of bridge.

The *Emmaus* story is found in the last chapter of *Luke*:

Now that very same day two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking together about all that had happened. And it happened that as they were talking together and discussing it, Jesus himself came up and walked by their side; but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.

He said to them, 'What are all these things that you are discussing as you walk along?' They stopped, their faces downcast.

Then one of them, called Cleopas, answered him, 'You must be the only person staying in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have been happening there these last few days.' He asked, 'What things?' They answered, 'All about Jesus of Nazareth, who showed himself a prophet powerful in action and speech before God and the whole people; and how our chief priests and our leaders handed him over to be sentenced to death and had him crucified. Our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free. And this is not all: two whole days have now gone by since it all happened; and some women from our group have astounded us: they went to the tomb in the early morning, and when they could not find the body, they came back to tell us they had seen a vision of angels who declared he was alive. Some of our friends went to the tomb and found everything exactly as the women had reported, but of him they saw nothing.'

Then he said to them, 'You foolish men!' So slow to believe all that the prophets have said! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer before entering into his glory?' Then, starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself.

When they drew near to the village to which they were going, he made as if to go on; but they pressed him to stay with them saying, 'It is nearly evening, and the day is almost over.' So he went in to stay with them.

Now while he was with them at table, he took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; but he had vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?'

They set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven assembled together with their companions, who said to them, 'The Lord has indeed risen and has appeared to Simon.' Then they told their story of what had happened on the road and how they had recognized him at the breaking of the bread.¹⁸⁵

This powerful story, found in this detail only in *Luke*, has been, like the story of the Prodigal Son, one of the biblical narratives Christians repeat to ourselves. There is something profoundly familiar about the dilemma the disciples found themselves in, something that resonates with great depth

¹⁸⁵ Luke 24:13-35. Taken from the *New Jerusalem Bible*.

in the last years of the twentieth-century. We, too, as Christians struggling to be faithful after the *Shoah*, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, witnessing to the devastation in Rwanda, Bosnia, Chechnya, not to mention the despair and devastation just around the corner in our inner cities and our rural farm fields, wonder where Jesus is for us, what if at all his presence means. Our world is dying around us from our own greed and wastefulness, our children often hold guns in their hands, drugs (both legal and illegal) are flowing through our streets, and church communities often seem like little more than fragile havens in the midst of postmodern culture.

Yet Christians believe that God so loved the world that God broke into history, sending God's child/Godself to bring us hope, redemption, a model of right relationship. Coming to us directly as the child Jesus, Christians believe that God came to us as the most vulnerable of human beings, seeking to draw us into a passionate relationship of care, honesty, integrity, hope and love. Somehow in the waning years of the 20th century, we are finding it ever easier to forget this relationship, to ignore it or to deny it, to find ways of privatizing such a relationship into isolation, or fundamentalizing it to such an extent that it no longer compels us, but rather we act as if we control and compel it.

The story of the disciples on the road to *Emmaus* calls us powerfully back into that relationship, and suggests some ways in which we can learn to "open our eyes" once again. It has also been for me a very apt mnemonic of a process for utilizing popular culture within religious education. First, the story talks about the mundane way in which the disciples met Jesus — as they were walking along the road, in the midst of their daily practices. Second, the disciples engaged in conversation with

the stranger on the road, a conversation that included their retelling of the events of the past few days, and the stranger's interpretation of their embeddedness in a community that stretched back over several centuries. Third, and finally, they quite literally "broke bread together" in the midst of community.

Openness to encountering God in daily life; engagement in interpretive, historically grounded dialogue amidst difference (that is, "with strangers"); and sharing hospitality in a practice that has deeply symbolic resonance — these three actions produced a context in which the disciples could recognize the "burning in their hearts" and in which their "eyes could be opened." Neither one of these practices was enough in and of itself, but all together created a transformative framework.

My suggestions for how to use popular culture in religious education follow this pattern closely, beginning with the recognition that we live in a commercial and mass-mediated world that we encounter daily. First, how do we find God amidst this world? We need to remember that it is more than possible, it is inevitable that we will encounter God in the midst of our daily lives — mass mediated and commodified though they may be. Second, what kind of dialogues might create a transformative context? I am suggesting that critiquing popular culture in dialogue is one such context. And third, how do our communal religious practices contribute to this transformation? This dissertation suggests that using media literacy tools in religious education is one practice that can be helpful. Yet one of the more important questions this dissertation leaves unanswered is how religious ritual practice could or should engage popular culture.

My main argument is that engaging popular media using the tools of media literacy can be an important step along a contemporary "road to

Emmaus,” but the tools alone are not enough, they must also be embedded in a framework that creates a transformative *context*.

This is an important distinction, since religious communities, in particular, have long been concerned about the *content* of commercialized popular culture, but have had a much harder time paying attention to the *context* in which it is embedded, and the ways in which that context is constructed. Yet religious communities have in the past been very adept at providing context, particularly through the embedding of specific practices within a tradition. Our deepest and most powerful resource in this postmodern context may in fact be precisely our ability to construct context, to *embed* our beliefs in ways of knowing and being that support them. This is part of what I take from the story of Emmaus — that it is neither the experience, nor the interpretation, nor the ritual, that, by itself, is capable of awakening us to God’s presence. Rather, all three together are critical components.

It is not just that we need to be aware of what popular culture preaches to us. The disciples on the road to *Emmaus* certainly could retell the events of the past few days. Once people know what to look for, they are generally very adept at pointing out the ways in which religious narratives and images are being used to sell virtually anything. Awareness is only the first step in changing feelings, in changing behavior. A second crucial step on the journey is creating a new “story,” a different interpretation. Such an interpretation requires a critical intellectual approach, as well as embodied practice.¹⁸⁶ The disciples needed a renewed retelling of the

¹⁸⁶ I have in mind an understanding of practice that has resonance with the way in which “practice” is used in relation to meditation. Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn (1997), for instance, define “practice” in this way: “practice means *embodying wholeness right now*. It is not like practicing the piano, or a dance step....”

tradition's teachings in light of current events, a retelling that came through the eyes of someone they perceived to be a stranger. The tradition they had grown up within held the seeds of this new understanding, but it was also a tradition radically called into question by contemporary events. A similar dynamic is at work in postmodern America.

As children and grandchildren of the Enlightenment, heirs to — if not actual participants in — the devastating events I outlined earlier, it is no longer possible for many Christians simply to accept the teachings of their religious communities without serious questioning and a highly critical “hermeneutic of suspicion.” Even religious educators, charged with passing on a community's belief systems and practices, recognize that we can not do so uncritically or simplistically. As I noted earlier, Mary Boys writes that (1992, p. 19): “claiming identity as a Catholic school entails constructing a curriculum that teaches the tradition with all of its painful shortcomings and sinfulness as well as with its distinctive insights and grace notes.” And Thomas Groome (1980, p. xv) writes that “to come to religious identity requires that we wrestle, like Jacob of old, with ourselves, with our past, with our present, with our future, and even with our God...”

How we choose to do this kind of critical interpretation, particularly how we share that interpretation through embodiment in practice is at the heart of a renewed understanding of religious education as we approach the millennium. I believe that this third step, embodiment in practice, has to take seriously the social construction of reality. Media literacy tools provide one mechanism for helping people shift to a meaning-making frame that embraces a “social construction of knowledge” perspective, an order of consciousness that is capable of engaging the shifting, chaotic and perhaps ever more complex world that we live within. But they are

only that, a tool, and it remains to communities of faith to pick up that tool and use it to foster strong, healthy, vibrant cultures that can live into the tensegrity of being religious in a mass-mediated world.

As Goizueta notes (1995, p. 72):

The human person is defined, above all, by his or her character as a relational being. Yet this relationality is not merely some static “essence” of the person, but an active relating in and through which the person defines him or herself, in interaction with others. Relationship is not something that “happens to” someone, something that one “experiences” in a passive way, or something one “possesses”; it is something one does, the most basic form of human action since, through relationship, we discover and live out our identity as intrinsically related beings. In what we do, we discover who we are.

In “doing” media literacy in the midst of religious education we can discover who who we are in ways that are enjoyable, as well as critical of dominant messages. And perhaps we can, in so doing, really feel our “hearts burning within us.”