

INTRODUCTION

Unlike many of my peers on the cusp of the Baby Boom/GenX transition, I grew up immersed in church.¹ My mother is an organist, a musician who plays for the services in a church in my hometown, and who teaches organ at the local university there. As a child I spent many hours lying on the steps up to the altar in our deserted sanctuary listening to the sonorous tones of the organ blowing through the large, empty space as she practiced for her Sunday commitments. By default, for there really was no other choice in a single parent household, my sisters and I spent every Sunday at church, and many other days and evenings during the week. That church, however, was not simply an empty building, but also a lively community that surrounded us and nurtured us and kept us focused on what was right in the world, in part by helping us to engage the world's brokenness.

I begin with this description because, as I noted, this was not a typical experience for many of us who grew up in the 1970s and 1980s. Even those of us who regularly attended church did not often have access to a "behind-the-scenes" view of what went on. What was typical, and certainly true for me as well, is that we grew up surrounded by television and the mass media. Television theme songs were the music we could sing to each other, and the daily ritual of gathering in front of the flickering screen certainly has had more staying power for many of us than

¹ By "church" I mean the Christian community, and more specifically a Congregational church that was affiliated with both the UCC and the NCCC in Wisconsin.

gathering in a sanctuary on Sunday morning. Yet somehow, for me at least, these two experiences are inextricably linked to each other. I have grown up in both of these communities² — the Christian community, and the mass-mediated popular culture³ community, and have, ever since, struggled to find a way to build bridges across what seem to be ever wide and deeper chasms between the two.

As I have become more deeply involved in academic contexts I have found the need to learn how to build different kinds of bridges — those between the everyday experiences of the people I grew up with in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, the people in my neighborhood in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts — people living in a world permeated by mass-mediated popular culture — and the theories and perceptions of people living in a world permeated by “the book,” that is, in academe. And yet something about building these bridges has always felt familiar to me. I have often felt that these differing groups of people, differing cultures⁴ really, are

² “Community” is a difficult word to define, and has been subject to such misuse that I use it somewhat reluctantly. I generally use it to denote a group of people that share something in common, whether it is geographic location, written text, religious interest, and so on, and yet who also are quite diverse. Thus a local parish could be a community, as could the group of people who subscribe to the *Boston Globe*. “Com” generally meaning something on the order of “with” or “together” and “unity” having to do with bringing together of difference.

³ I use a variety of these terms throughout this text. In general, “mass mediated” refers to any kind of meaning that is communicated through an electronic medium that has mass access or dispersion, such as television, radio, commercial film, and so on. By “popular culture” I am usually referring to the mass-mediated kinds of popular culture that we experience here in the United States. I am *not* referring to the kind of locally generated, vivid cultures that some researchers also refer to as “folk” cultures, although it is possible for small groups of people to develop their own “local” culture around some piece of mass-mediated popular culture. (Fan groups are one such instantiation that share something in common with folk cultures. See Jenkins (1992) for example.)

⁴ “Culture” is another word that I will use extensively throughout this text, and yet it is a word that has a complicated and contested set of meanings in contemporary usage. Shweder points out that “no sociocultural environment exists or has identity

trying to deal with the same problems, or at least with similar concerns and hopes and dreams and pain. If we could only find a bridge that would connect across the divide, without denying the realities on either side, perhaps we could share with each other and learn from each other and comfort and challenge each other in ways that would bring us all closer to that elusive vision that Christians profess is the Reign of God.

It is in search of this kind of bridge that I have eventually found myself situated within the world of religious education, particularly as described by the program in religion and education that is housed at the Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry at Boston College. Within this context my passion for nurturing entrance into, and sustaining wholeness through, religious community has grown and deepened to such an extent that I can no longer envision myself *apart* from religious community. And yet the religious community I am now a part of, the Roman Catholic communion, is itself deeply broken and in need of the building of bridges, even within its own boundaries. Indeed, the plurality of religious communities in evidence across the globe suggests that religious education itself is vastly more complicated now than it was during the time we could, at least nostalgically, believe that there was “one true religion.” At the same time, I have not left behind my fascination with mass-mediated popular culture, and have found within it some of the few examples of globally shared consciousness possible in this time period.

independently of the way human beings seize meanings and resources from it, while, on the other hand, every human being’s subjectivity and mental life are altered through the process of seizing meanings and resources from some sociocultural environment and using them” (1991, p. 74). This dynamic, fluid process accords well with the definition of “culture” often found within a cultural studies framework, namely that “culture” is generally used to refer to “all the expressive, meaningful, interactive aspects of everyday life in an industrial society” (Dines & Humez, 1995, p. 569). The “in an industrial society” aspect is crucial, as it points to this definition’s intention of ascribing importance to socio-economic frameworks, as well as those found within art or literature contexts (as in the more general usage of the term).

This dissertation project grows out of these intensely personal roots, and it is important for me to share them here because much of what follows takes seriously the claims of contemporary feminists who argue that “from where” one knows thoroughly structures “what” and “how” one knows. This is an insight that is becoming ever more visible in our contemporary context, whether one labels it “postmodern” or simply an insight moving to expand upon the modern.

Indeed, people who are engaged with the leading edges of the technological revolution our culture is currently undergoing, particularly the transformation of our modes and methods of creating and distributing information, are convinced that in the decades to come, *context* will be everything. As Paul Saffo wrote in *Wired* magazine (March 1994, pp. 74-75):

It is not content but context that will matter most a decade or so from now. The scarce resource will not be stuff, but point of view... The future belongs to neither the conduit or the content players [that is, neither the owners of cable-tv, for example, or the creators of tv-sitcoms] but those who control the filtering, searching, and sense-making tools we will rely on to navigate through the expanses of cyberspace.... In a world of hyperabundant content, point of view will become the scarcest of resources.

“Point of view” is, as anthropologists make clear, often provided through the sharing of stories, and the embodying of a culture’s most central stories in ritual. Religious experience, religious institutions, religious narratives, in particular have been central to that embodiment. At this time in U.S. cultural history, however, religious narratives are generally *not* the most-repeated or even perhaps the most respected, stories. Rather, the narratives (mostly fragmented and fragmentary, superficial and imagistic) of mass-mediated popular culture form the bulk of the stories that purport (appropriately or not) to bind us together.

Consider, for example, what is generally represented by “family values” versus how Roman Catholic social ethics envisions family, or think about the continuing popularity of “melting pot” images and language versus the experiences shared by members of ethnic or racial groups struggling to survive. Consider how mesmerizing the spectacle of the OJ Simpson trial was for many people compared to the general experience of attending an Easter Sunday liturgy. I am convinced that people wishing to deepen religious community and nurture authentic religious experience must seek to understand how the narratives of popular culture already shape and construct us prior to, or at least at the same time as, religious narratives. Reciprocally, we, as religious educators in particular, need to be open to the ways in which popular culture may lead us more deeply and faithfully into religious community by exploring and questioning its current shape and commitments.

Within the field of Christian religious education many people note that we need to learn how to construct complex interpretations, how to provide our own lifegiving re-telling of our central stories, indeed how to provide the kind of context Saffo notes as so critical. Mary Boys writes that “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” (1992, p. 19). And Thomas Groome notes 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...” (1980, p. xv).

One of the more powerful models currently extant in the Christian community for engaging this process is that of the base community, or house church. This model is based in large measure on the work of liberation theologians, and the pedagogical strategies of Paulo Freire.⁵ As a

⁵ See, for example, Freire (1985), Macedo (1994), and Kanpol (1994).

Catholic, middle class, white, heterosexual, able-bodied North American, how can I respect and use strategies developed in such a different context, and arising from such a different situation? Part of the answer, I believe, lies in learning how to critically appropriate and interpret the narratives of popular culture.

Why popular culture in particular? As bell hooks (1992, p. 2) notes in talking about race:

... there is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain that oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people.

Similar connections exist between our mass media and oppressive representations of women, of people with physical or mental challenges, indeed, of any and all “differences” that do not contribute to sustaining the status quo of our commodified and consumerist culture.⁶ It is quite possible that religious experiences and religious institutions that challenge the dominant imperatives of our culture might also experience such systematic “false representations.”

We need to learn how to emancipate⁷ ourselves from the oppressive social constructions we live within — both in the smaller circles of our

⁶ While the precise mechanism in which such oppressive systems utilize popular cultural representations is still being explored, *that* they do is no longer a question within a cultural studies approach to the mass media. For a sustained exploration of the issues involved, see Dines & Humez (1995), Angus & Jhally (1989), McCarthy & Crichlow (1993), McLaren (1995) and hooks (1994)

⁷ “Liberate, free from bondage” is the definition as written in the American Heritage Dictionary, which is language that is permeated by religious metaphors. Lather (1986, p. 259) suggests that “emancipatory knowledge increases awareness of the contradictions hidden or distorted by everyday understandings, and in doing so it directs attention to the possibilities for social transformation inherent in the present configuration of social process.”

faith communities, and in the larger circles of our social/secular world. As base communities have shown us in Latin America, part of that “conscientization” process is engaging our own “popular” knowledges, taking seriously our sense that “it feels right to me.” As Audre Lorde writes (1984, p. 56):

The dichotomy between the spiritual and physical is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic — the sensual — those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.

Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, “It feels right to me,” acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge... The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.

We cannot, then, identify what “feels right to me” in isolation. We cannot do so without also telling each other our stories. Even sharing those stories in connection with “The Story” of Christian faith is not enough, for all of these stories (including any notion that there is “The Story”)⁸ are also intimately suffused with false and oppressive images and partial narratives. It is this insight about the thorough way in which destructive power permeates our contexts that is one of the gifts of what is usually called “postmodernist thought.”⁹

⁸ This is clearly a reference to the shared praxis method of Thomas Groome, who repeatedly refers to “the whole faith tradition of the Christian people” as “The Story” (1980, p. 22). While I find much that is helpful in the shared praxis method, I am trying to push more deeply into its basic assumptions from the perspective of critical engagement with the mass-mediated cultures in which many religious educators try to use this method. In particular, I am looking to the discussion currently taking place within cultural studies, and thus use Groome’s language primarily as an entry point for my own exploration.

⁹ “Postmodernist” is obviously a term that is still being defined, and is much contested. Building upon the work of Burbules & Rice (1991), Kegan (1994, p. 324) suggests

Marxists have often called this inability to acknowledge our participation in systemic power structures (whether as someone being oppressed by those structures, or as someone doing the oppressing) a “false consciousness.” Lather redefines false consciousness as “the denial of how our commonsense ways of looking at the world are permeated with meanings that sustain our disempowerment” (1986, p. 259). “False consciousness” has reared its ugly head in many ways within Christian communities, where our “commonsense ways of looking” have allowed us to accept profoundly unjust processes in our global world, let alone within our church structures. It is not enough, for example, to define Christian religious education as “a political activity with pilgrims in time that deliberately and intentionally attends with them to the activity of God in our present, to the Story of the Christian faith community, and to the Vision of God’s kingdom, the seeds of which are already among us,” (Groome, 1980, p. 25) unless we also attend to the ways in which that very definition may permit us to evade responsibility for our complicity in systematically oppressive structures.

Consider, for example, how “political activity” is represented in popular culture. How can we, as religious educators, lay claim to that phrase without first collaboratively “deconstructing” it and then imaginatively “reconstructing” it with our students? And what does it mean to speak of “political activity” in the context of a “Vision of God’s kingdom” if we continue to perpetuate sexism and racism in the very process of speaking of that “kingdom”? Or think about how symbols and images from the “Story of the Christian faith community” have already been “re-presented” to people in music videos, in television commercials, even in the flimsy sales circulars that flood newspapers every Sunday.

postmodernism is an attempt to “reelaborate and reappropriate modernist categories (such as reason, freedom, equity, rights, self-determination) on less absolutistic grounds (what I call “reconstructive” postmodernism).”

How can we hope to share a passionate “re-telling” of our Christian narratives if we don’t at the same time offer compelling “re-presentations” of those symbols and images, consciously attending to their role in popular culture? These concerns are not meant to vilify the “shared praxis” approach from which they come, but rather to suggest that even a vision such as that, whose primary emphasis is justice-laden, runs into enormous difficulties within the context of middle-class, white, hegemonic culture.¹⁰

So how do we learn to do this kind of “re-presenting” together? To use Saffo’s language, can we learn to use our religious experiences — in both their implicit, internal, personal sense and their explicit, communal, social sense — as “the filtering, searching, and sense-making tools we will rely on” to move through the expanses of our everyday lives? I began this research project with the hunch that we — people of faith, and more specifically, Christian religious educators — *could* use popular texts as a means of questioning and elaborating on our faith stories, and creating the context for and nurturing, the action such stories call us to — and we could use our faith stories to question and transform popular culture.

George Lipsitz, a social historian whose work increasingly centers on American popular culture, speaks compellingly of the pedagogical utility of using popular culture “texts” to explore the deep contradictions and disempowerment in his students’ lives (1990, pp. xiii-xiv):

¹⁰ As Dines and Humez (1995, p. 570) point out: “hegemony is a term developed by Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci to refer to the process by which those in power secure the consent of the socially subordinated to the system which oppresses or subordinates them. Rather than requiring overt force (as represented by the military or police), the elite, through their control of religious, educational and media institutions, attempt to persuade the populace that the hierarchical social and economic system is fixed and ‘natural’ and therefore unchangeable. According to Gramsci, however, such consent is never secured once and for all but must continually be sought, and there is always some room, for resistance through subversive (counterhegemonic) cultural work.” See also Kellner (1990, p. 17).

As my students and I used popular culture texts from the past to gain insight into the complex stories defining our present identities, we found terrains of conflict and struggle in the most unexpected places and allies in the most improbable individuals. Not because these films, songs, and shows reflected our lives directly, but, rather, because they reflected the core contradictions of our lives indirectly enough to make discussion of them bearable.

Lipsitz's experiences suggest to me that analyzing popular culture may be very fruitful in the context of religious education, both for the reasons I noted earlier in terms of "false consciousness" and "false representations," but also, quite frankly, because collaboratively and critically engaging popular culture may be an important step on our own journey to authentic religious experience.

In interpreting the results of the research workshop presented in this dissertation, I eventually focused on the question of whether or not critical popular culture analysis might be one way to deepen religious experience, or at least provide a context that can open up religious experiencing. Parker Palmer defines contemplation as "any way that we can unveil the illusions that masquerade as reality and reveal the reality behind the masks" (1991, p. 17). My hypothesis was that engaging popular culture critically might be a very fruitful form of this kind of contemplation, especially in a culture such as ours. I am particularly drawn to an understanding of "reality" and of "truth" that, like the old story about the blind people describing their perceptions of the elephant, recognizes that we all touch only one part of the elephant, and that the elephant may in fact exist differently in different dimensions.

Given this understanding of "reality"¹¹ any process I engage in to study religious experience in mass-mediated popular culture has to be collaborative. I am particularly interested in the intersection of

¹¹ For particularly eloquent articulations of this definition, see Shweder (1991), Lorde (1984), West (1996), and hooks (1990).

contemporary popular mass-mediated cultures and religious experience (both in terms of what we call “faith development” and in terms of community development). It seems to me that all too often in recent history religious communities have taken an either/or kind of approach to mass mediated popular culture: either it has a tremendous impact, which is all bad, and we ought to be creating and promoting our “own” forms of popular entertainment, our “own” news shows, and so on,¹² or media culture has very little to do with religious communities, and we ought not to pay so much attention to it.¹³ For example, when Madonna released her song/video “Like a Prayer” the response from some Roman Catholic church officials was to label it blasphemous and condemn it, rather than being open to interpreting the narrative within the video drama as a provocative example of religious conversion.¹⁴

The question I began this research project with was how popular culture approached from a media literacy perspective might be useful in religious education. As the project progressed my question deepened into one of wondering how religious experience might be enhanced by engagement with mass-mediated popular culture. I ask these questions from within a specifically Christian, even Catholic, context, and from within my own situatedness as a religious educator. While it’s possible that any answers I arrive at may make sense beyond those boundaries, I am not intending to draw any conclusions beyond this limited scope.

¹² The more fundamental of the Christian communities in the United States have used this strategy very effectively.

¹³ This strategy is very apparent amongst the more academic of the seminary and graduate theological faculties.

¹⁴ As reported by Schaeffer (1989): “A Roman Catholic group in Italy has threatened court action for blasphemy if the video is shown there. And Bishop Rene Gracida of Corpus Christi, Tex., was among those calling for a boycott.”

A map to what follows

Chapter One of this dissertation considers the ways in which I ask these questions, and how I hope to find answers. In particular it defines “participatory action research” as a strategy, and briefly touches upon some of the dilemmas involved in trying to approach research questions from a feminist perspective within religious education. This chapter describes my methodology, and suggests the operative commitments behind it. It also describes the adult education principles that underlie my chosen research strategy, and explains how they were embedded in a six session media literacy in religious education workshop that twelve religious educators and myself engaged in together as a way of exploring mass-mediated popular culture.

Chapter Two defines the version of “media literacy” we engaged and describes each session of our workshop: what we chose to study, how we studied it, and what we learned along the way. I have deliberately stayed very close to the format and chronology of the workshop in this chapter, describing the sessions in the order in which we undertook them, and compiling session handouts and other materials in attached appendices.

Chapter Three builds upon the work of Chapter Two by describing the kinds of learning that took place “outside” of the workshop. How did workshop participants engage these materials in their own lives and in their teaching practices? What kinds of insight did we arrive at in reflecting upon the process itself? Each of the participants was interviewed individually following the completion of the workshop, and those interviews were then transcribed and analyzed for common themes and insights, which are reviewed here.

Chapter Four focuses on one of the two major questions that emerged for me as the workshop facilitator and principal “researcher” in this project. That is, in what ways could our engagement with this kind of

material (mass-mediated popular culture texts) lead us into religious experience? Arguing that mass-mediated popular culture can be used to enhance religious experience requires that I define what I mean by “religious experience,” and this process of definition is helped by turning to the scholarly conversations now taking place within contemporary theology and psychology. This chapter, then, begins to build a bridge from the experience of the workshop into the domains of the academic conversation.

Chapter Five picks up the second question that emerged for me, personally, as I reviewed the workshop and interview transcripts: in what way could this process be said to be about the facilitating of “action”? Here I am particularly drawn to the work of Robert Kegan, an adult educator and psychologist whose complex description of human development suggests important substance for the word “transformation.” This chapter also introduces the concept of “border communities” as a new way to understand the kind of bridge-building I came into this project with a desire to do.

My concluding chapter reiterates the main insights generated through this research project, and then contextualizes them by considering the familiar biblical pericope of the “journey on the road to Emmaus” as a way to understand both how far we’ve come, and yet how much further we, as religious educators, have to go in building the kind of border community that can use mass-mediated popular culture as a transformative resource in religious education.