

**Response to the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media panel session on  
“Beyond Bathrobes and Beards: Experiments in new media translation.”**

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I need to respond here from my specific location, as someone deeply immersed in the practice of religious education – both as a graduate theological educator in a seminary, and in the context of communities of faith as a Christian educator. In both of those contexts one of my primary goals is to find ways to support students in what should be a lifelong task of weaving their own narrative with that of the divine Word encountered in the Bible.

In both Catholic and Lutheran contexts (I am a Roman Catholic layperson teaching in a Lutheran seminary), we understand Bible to be sacred text revealing the Divine narrative. And at the same time, we also move from a deep recognition of the brokenness of humanity, and consequently the need to engage Bible in all of its complexity with clear humility and intellectual rigor.

In our contemporary cultural context, this is not an easy practice, and promoting what some call a “biblically centered spirituality” is often a difficult art of helping students to become comfortable with engaging “otherness” at the same time as they find that “otherness” a key part of their own identity construction.

“Otherness” arises in multiple ways when engaging biblical text: meeting a God who does not conform to the simplistic representations of media culture, for instance, or encountering one’s own sin when confronted by the Word. Yet students also encounter a profound grace that reaches far beyond any expectation their typical experience suggests.

This experience of meeting the radically transcendent yet intimately loving God of our confession, is further complicated by a cultural context that increasingly provides few comparable experiences by which to process such an encounter.

It is that context that has prompted my engagement with the ABS transmediation process over the years. (I should note: my experience with it has been wholly as an educator who finds the resources they produce remarkably useful. Unlike many of the people on this panel, I’ve had no involvement in the process of creating them.)

Mary Boys writes that: “religious education is ...the making accessible of the traditions of the religious community and the making manifest of the intrinsic connection between traditions and transformation.<sup>1</sup> What does it mean to “make accessible the traditions of the religious community,” when those traditions are fluid and innovative interactions between multiple contexts? In part I believe it means that we have to make accessible, quite self consciously and intentionally,

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Boys, *Educating in Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989) 193.

the very means by which we participate in constructing and performing a tradition.

As Terrence Tilley writes about “tradition”,

Our fidelity is constituted not by a ‘what’ but by a ‘how.’ Our faithful memories are not preserved in practices frozen in the past but in living performances that warm our hearts and enlighten our minds. Our communal memory, as Paul Connerton reminds us, is carried in our bodies shaped by our practices, especially those ritual practices that remake us, .... invent and reinvent us as a people.” 185

I believe an essential part of the practice of Christian fidelity is the continual translation of sacred text within our contemporary context so as to support our inhabiting it fully. The religious ritual practices that remake us, in Tilley’s terms, that invent and reinvent us as a people, used to be primarily bound up and authorized within religious institutions. But in our current postmodern and digitally mediated cultural contexts, as Gregor points out so eloquently, these ritual practices are shaped by many other institutions and communities, including those of popular mass mediated cultures.

It is quite difficult to find ways to give maturing adults, let alone adolescents and young adults, access to self conscious, communally oriented processes of interweaving the human and divine narratives within sacred text .... Particularly in media culture. The ABS transmediation project has been one of the best ways I have found to support this process.

I have found the CD-ROMs in particular, and more recently the web site, to be a rich treasure trove of solid resources with which to help people enter into the

process of translation. Few parishes have access to the kind of theological reference library that is needed to do translation, yet the CD-ROMs and web site, with their hypertextual approach to learning, resource this process very well, and with an ease of navigation that does not interfere with the native curiosity of the learner.

In the seminary context I have found the video translations a crucial tool for cracking open my students' imaginations. Textual criticism and many of the other exegetical tools we introduce them to, bound so directly to print cultures, are often foreign enough for students that they have a hard time finding their own voice and bringing their own imaginative capacities to bear while using them. The ABS videos are different enough – provide enough “otherness” if you will – to open up that process. They also implicitly declare that the biblical text speaks provocatively to our contemporary context, in its terms... they teach that the Bible is indeed an experience of the incarnate Word, not simply an ancient text that we are somehow trying to reapply in our contemporary contexts. As Terrence Tilley writes:

*tradita* alone do not carry the tradition. Further... the greater the difference between the context in which the *traditor* learned the tradition and the context in which the tradition is transmitted, the greater the possibility that a shift in *tradita* may be necessary to communicate the tradition. **Paradoxically, fidelity to a tradition may sometimes involve extensive reworking of the *tradita*.** “ 29

It is precisely fidelity to a tradition – particularly tradition understood as continually undergoing transformation -- that I am interested in supporting in my students, and thus the ABS new media project – in its reworking of the “tradita” – has given me some potent new ways to do this.

Jean-Pierre is right to point to the changing demographics around us, both as a challenge to some institutions but also as a vibrant and crucial witness to the community’s ongoing confession of our faith. The growing edge of many Christian denominations is to be found amongst peoples who are at least bilingual, if not multi-lingual. We need to find in this growing edge not simply a challenge to the hegemonic interpretations of Anglo-controlled communities, but a rich witness to the God in whom we all confess belief. Increasingly we need to work towards what the New London Group calls a “multi-literacy.” In their definition, multiliteracy “emphasizes how negotiating the multiple linguistic and cultural differences in our society is central to the pragmatics of [our] working, civic, and private lives” (New London Group, 1996, p. 60). Again, the ABS new media project provides rich resources for developing multi-literacy amidst the Christian community.

Much of what Fern writes in her paper I agree with, although there is one point in particular that I would want to contest. She writes of a decision during the production of the “Neighbor” to remove a particular shot because, as she put it, it “would have added an unnecessary layer of interpretation for the viewer.” This is an interesting way to describe the decision, because it suggests that it is possible for a producer to determine how, and on what levels, the person

engaging a production is likely to interpret it. My experience has been that no producer of a communicative event can control, or even very clearly foresee, what meanings the people engaging that event will bring to it and create with it.

Part of what I find so delightful and useful about the new media project – particularly in the CD-ROMs and the web site – is precisely the ability to navigate them in multiple ways, and from myriad locations.

My experience of teaching with these resources particularly resonates with Russ's description of the project. When he notes, for instance, that the ABS project “generally did not use audiovisual language in a proscriptive way, i.e. ‘this is how you *should* affectively respond to the story,’ but rather in a descriptive way, i.e. ‘this is the affective content of the literature itself,” I think he is calling attention to the way in which these new media translations invite you into an experience that *can be shaped by* the associated resources, but is not so arrogant as to attempt to compel a specific “read” of the text.

Indeed, we are in danger of refusing to meet Christ in the Word if we believe that we can control this encounter.

Given my responses thus far, you will likely not be surprised that I disagree quite a bit with Bernard's presentation. When he writes that the “homiletical tradition has not only developed particular tropes for many pericopes, but also has created the expectation that the meaning of a passage is simple, straightforward and well known” he is speaking of some homiletical tradition

other than those with which I am familiar, particularly within the Lutheran context. Part of the delight and wonder, as well as the challenge and confrontation of engaging the Word, comes from the myriad meanings people find within it, as well as the myriad ways in which context provides shape and resonance for it.

And while Bernard points to the important role “genre” plays in people’s engagement with a particular communicative event, I think he does not adequately nuance his argument. Stating baldly that “in video, image dominates sound” he ignores the subtle ways in which sound – particularly music – shapes meaning. Recent work in interpretation of music videos, as well as in other multi-media genres suggests that sound shapes meaning in ways we’re only beginning to attend to. (Parenthetically I would add here that one of the important contributions of the new media project has been J. Ritter Werner’s work with the music and soundscapes of the transmediations.)

Still, Bernard’s primary point that audiences engage communicative events in ways shaped by their particular locations and prior experiences, is a crucial one. Here again, the ABS project used the new media brilliantly, taking full advantage of the multiple learning entry points provided by a hypertextual framework.

Finally, I would reaffirm and perhaps strengthen an observation that Fern makes early in her paper. She talks of the crucial role of collaboration in the process. Not simply collaboration amongst biblical scholars, but also amongst creative producers. “Biblical scholars,” she writes, “were on the same playing field with

filmmakers and software designers, as well as musicians and graphic artists...  
Seemingly disparate disciplines became invaluable parts of the translation  
process as theory and praxis evolved over the course of the decade.”

It is precisely this kind of rich and multi-layered collaboration that we require in  
our postmodern contexts if we are adequately to encounter the Word,  
particularly in the process of helping students gain access to communal  
processes of traditioning. I have some experience myself with trying to bring  
together pastoral agents, scholars, and creative artists, and know how very  
difficult it is to create an environment in which all of these people can truly  
collaborate. It is therefore deeply disappointing to me that an organization with  
the kind of reach and resources such as the ABS has – having successfully  
managed such a process! – should now decide to step so decisively back from it.

I can only hope that they will reconsider their decision, or that some other  
organization will have the foresight and biblical commitment to step forward  
and continue this project.

Thank you.