

## **Notes for the session on media, religion and culture**

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I come at this whole discussion from some very specific locations. I am, first of all, a religious educator. That means that I work synthetically across a lot of borders, one foot in theological education, one foot in the local church, one foot in parochial schools --- if I had three feet! I am also a Roman Catholic, teaching in a Lutheran seminary. I hope that what I have to say is useful, but more in a evocative way, rather than a prescriptive one.

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>

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

This is what I take to be the broader task in which I'm engaged. Jack Seymour writes that there are four elements to the more specialized form of religious education that is graduate theological education, although in many institutions one of these will be dominant over the others, and in some not all four will be present. He writes of graduate theological education being about: theological understanding, denominational socialization, spiritual formation, and the reconstruction of the church and the world.

Let me now put these two together and made an argument as to why, given these definitions, media, religion, and culture are at the heart of what we do in seminaries, and why the broader work in which you are involved is crucial to our ability to be faithful in our specific context.

If Seymour is right, then in at least three elements of theological education the interwoven nature of media and culture are very present. There is no way to speak of "denominational socialization" for instance, even in very shallow ways, without being aware that every denomination has a communications strategy, and uses multiple forms of mass media to make their presence known and to articulate to their members who they are and what they are about. The same thing is true from a "cultural" perspective. We are, in some ways – particularly in the Protestant and Reform contexts – entering, if not already fully present in, a post-denominational world. In part that is because the growing edge of our religious communities is most often found with people who are at least bilingual if not multi-lingual, and who are therefore accustomed to moving readily and freely between multiple contexts.

Similarly, is there any way to speak of “reconstruction of church and world” without being cognizant of how media and culture are woven together? It is particularly clear, following Sept. 11, how inadequate our grasp of this goal is in our communities of faith – especially in terms of their national and global leadership. Even the Roman Catholic church, which given its hierarchical structure is more able to respond quickly and publicly to such events, is only now preparing a teaching statement on what faithful Catholics ought to be about. In some ways September 11 was a particularly powerful “teachable moment” for all of us in churches and seminaries. I had some of my most compelling discussions that day and in the days that followed. And churches throughout the country are reporting vastly increased attendance at Sunday services, although that is beginning to fall off. Still, very few of these churches could mobilize their congregants to do more than mourn, bury their dead, and begin to learn something about their Muslim neighbors.

Still, you would find, I would imagine, very little disagreement in seminaries today about the reality that media and culture are wholly intertwined with what it means to do “reconstruction of church and world,” or to be involved in “denominational socialization” at the seminary level.

What of Seymour’s final two elements – theological understanding and spiritual formation? These two, I think, would present a different kind of challenge. Having taught now in three very different graduate theological institutions, two associated with large universities, I can say that at least in those contexts very

few faculty believe that nurturing theological understanding has anything much at all to do with media. They might grudgingly allow that culture has to be involved, particularly at those schools where more than lip service is paid to post-colonial or liberation forms of theology. But most faculty would not approach the task of supporting theological understanding by engaging both media and culture at the same time.

If ignoring media and culture would be the general response within the task of theological understanding, a far more hostile response is provoked when you consider what is involved in spiritual formation. I believe that most theological school faculty – to make, no doubt, an overly broad generalization! – find media and culture THE problem in shaping and supporting spiritual formation. They are especially worried about – to the point of deep anxiety and even hostility – introducing various elements of digital cultures into the graduate theological context, particularly within seminaries. Consumer commodification, misrepresentation of religious experience, the disembodied aspect of distributive learning via online methodologies – all of these “effects” of media are viewed with deep suspicion and distaste by many, many faculty. Given the recent generous program of the Lilly Endowment to place large amounts of digital capacity into seminaries, these anxieties are at an all-time high.

I don't have much time today, so rather than patiently going through all of the reasons why these concerns arise, and ways to deal with them, I'd like to jump directly to the assumption that given what you've already heard today and the work you're engaged in, you'll agree with me (at least for the moment!) that

confronting the inescapably interwoven nature of media, religion and culture is at the heart of religious and theological education.

Let me then turn to some of the potent opportunities that exist, and some of the resources that I think we can bring to bear on these challenges. In doing so I hope to make clear the extent to which academic study of media, religion, and culture – even and especially in non theological contexts – is so important to our enterprise within graduate theological education.

I'm going to move primarily from within theological discourses, because particularly at many seminaries they are still given pride of place over sociology, anthropology, communication studies, and so on.

Terry Tilley, who directs the program in Catholic Studies at the University of Dayton, has recently made a compelling argument about the process of “tradition-ing.” If you remember, I started this presentation with Mary Boys’ definition of religious education, 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>2</sup>

She takes very seriously inextricably connected nature of traditions and transformation, and now Tilley has picked up on that same theme and in his

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Boys, *Educating in Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989) 193.

book, *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, made a powerful argument about this process.

I'll just give you two quotes:

“Human beings engage in practices that constitute traditions; as contexts vary, those practices change, sometimes radically and sometimes deliberately. The grammar of the tradition, we could say, is both made (by the participants’ practices) and found (as intellectuals reflectively analyze those practices and write rules for the practices like the present one). The grammar of the practices shapes us in the ways in which we live and move and have our being; but we also reshape and reinvent the grammar of the practices, and perhaps even change the rules as practices are translated into new places. In this sense traditions are both made and found.” 150-151

“Practices generate rules for continuing the practice. To recognize a tradition we can uncover its ‘rules,’ noting that rules and their application are both relatively constant in their continuity and often rather fluid in the inventive application of them.” 151

I would hope that you can already hear in these quotations some resonance to the ways in which scholars are beginning to talk about the reception of mass media, about the ritualized ways in which we engage mass media. But you might not “catch” how important his argument is from within theological discourse, because it is thoroughly grounded in the theological arguments that shape how Catholics, in particular, understand authority, understand tradition, and understand what we believe to be at the heart of our faith.

When Tilley writes:

“While this example may seem extreme, it highlights the fact that *tradita* alone do not carry the tradition. Further, it illustrates the practical point that 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

he gives theological educators a way in which to argue that mass mediated popular culture is in fact a compelling locus of theological reflection. When he notes that:

“Authority in the Church does not have its foundation outside the Church but arises in the relationships between the communion of saints, the people who practice discipleship, seeking to live a holy life and die a holy death.” 181

or again, that

“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

he is giving us a mandate for exploring our ritual practices – and those practices include all of the ways in which we engage the task of interweaving our human narratives with those of the divine narrative. In short, he is “giving us permission,” if you will, within a theological framework, for serious investigation of the meaning-making occurring in mass mediated popular culture contexts. He is giving us a way to work on “theological understanding” as well as “spiritual formation” that takes very seriously how media, religion and culture come together.

But perhaps you worry that this is a singularly Catholic description, and taking Andrew Greeley and others like him seriously, you dismiss Tilley and his arguments as being too analogical and incarnational in their framework.

Let me then offer you Kathryn Tanner, whose book, *Theories of culture: A new agenda for theology* offers similar arguments from within a Protestant lens.

Tanner's work is especially helpful because she lifts up an understanding of religious community that privileges cultural contest, that sees it as constitutive of Christian identity. She writes, for instance, that "Cultural contest constitutes its [ie. the Christian church] very life as a community. Christians join together as a community in the task of figuring out the proper forms of witness and discipleship in the face of what God has done for us in Christ." (p. 3) And she notes that "the recipients make over the preferred message or meanings of the signs produced by elites so as to fit their own non-elite experiences and interests." (p. 5)

I see this happening in a number of ways, not the least of which is that there are cultural contests going on within the church itself at this very moment. Vibrant and interesting debates about the role of women for instance, that continue to occur even in the face of obvious hierarchical sanctions. Crucial and compelling ministries to gays and lesbians, even in the face of such sanctions. Or from a different angle, a growing number of churches within mainline Protestantism who are backing away from denominational goals in favor of local evangelization and mission efforts.

I know, as a religious educator who works primarily with adults, that I am at my most effective, we learn together most fruitfully, when we fully engage our doubts and divisions, when we struggle together over what it means to be Christian. I suspect part of what makes certain grassroots communities so vibrantly Catholic right now is precisely this ability to define themselves as Catholic over and against certain hierarchical pressures from within the church, as well as over and against certain consumerist and capitalist pressures from within the larger society. A similar move is taking place within at least parts of the Lutheran community over the role of larger ecumenical agreements.

When Tanner suggests that “what a sign means is not obvious from it (or from the sign system of the sender in which it figures) but from the way it negotiates this competitive field,” I can point to myriad examples of ways in which “signs” that have specific meanings within a church setting for instance, have radically differing ones outside of it. Or for that matter, a diversity even within it. The key for me, however, is this notion of the “competitive” aspect of the interaction.

If we, as theologians, are not present in this field, we have no opportunity to be immersed in the negotiation of signs.

Kathryn writes:

p. 8 “One becomes a Christian, one’s life becomes Christian, in the process by which one’s everyday beliefs, values and practices are turned in a Christian direction, and are altered and re-made thereby.... A properly Christian life takes

shape, not simply in church, if that is understood as an alternative and separate society, nor in the wider world, but in what happens between the world and the power of God's grace."

and again,

p. 9 "God is communicating Godself to us by coming to us, coming against us, in a cultural contest with all our old ways of thinking and doing. God's self-communication takes place in the cultural contest..."

God is communicating Godself in the middle of these struggles and in the middle of the efforts of people like myself and others to engage pop culture in complex and interesting ways.

What would we do if we would ask, not what is the church's perspective on this piece of media (translated into: do we approve or disapprove of its apparent content), but how is God speaking to us and through us in the midst of this conversation? What would it mean for elite theological discourse in the U.S. if we spent even a fraction of our time listening for God in ways in which people engage mass media?

I don't have immediate answers to these questions, but I know that the questions themselves are deeply energizing not only to myself, but to many, many of the people I live, work and worship with.

It is not, however, only at the level of elite theological discourse that these kinds of conversations are happening, however, and I wanted to conclude by sharing three examples of digital media that have proven powerful to me in the context of my own teaching.

The first is a new CD-ROM entitled “Ministry in a multi-cultural world: Beyond Borders.” This CD-ROM uses a very specific location, that of Latino Christians in the US to explore not only the ways in which theological discourse and faith-filled practice come together, but also the ways in which these practices and media practices, are interwoven. In addition to hours of interviews with theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Roberto Goizueta, Maria Elena Gonzales, and many others, it includes some beautiful and provocative, short digital art pieces intended for contemplation.

A second resource I would lift up is another CD-ROM developed by Christine Sleeter. It is entirely focused on multicultural education, and does not have any specific religious intent, but it provides a multitude of resources that can be readily used within a theological classroom for directly engaging questions of culture, and the intersection of culture and religious faith.

Finally, I would point to a plethora of resources being developed online by various faculty scattered across multiple seminaries, as resources to be shared in teaching. One that I find particularly interesting is the Almond Springs case study developed by Scott Cormode out at the Claremont School of Theology. You can find that one at [www.christianleaders.org](http://www.christianleaders.org). It is a complex and highly

developed case study written in a narrative, episodic fashion, with hundreds of links branching out to all kinds of fascinating resources.