

Brian Eno recently wrote that "familiarity breeds content. When you use familiar tools, you draw upon a long cultural conversation -- a whole shared history of usage -- as your backdrop, as the canvas to juxtapose your work. The deeper and more widely shared the conversation, the more subtle its inflections can be." (Wired magazine, January 1999) [put this quote on a powerpoint slide]

In my teaching, which takes place both in seminary and graduate theological contexts, as well as in parish and congregational settings, I am very interested in just what the cultural conversation is that we're engaging, because I'm very interested in creating as widely and deeply shared a conversation about Christian faith, and as subtle and complex and embodied, a conversation, as possible.

If Eno is right, that "familiarity breeds content," then it seems inescapable to me that we need to take seriously the ways in which people live within popular culture -- particularly mass mediated popular culture -- as part of the canvas upon which we work as religious educators.

There are some obvious ways in which this canvas can be seen -- such as explicitly religious symbols taken into pop culture (Madonna's use of Catholic symbols, *Touched by an Angel's* angels, and a whole host of other images [use some to display on screen]), but there are also ways in which any discussion of faith, of relationality with God and Christ, is painted on a canvas that includes images from the news, from advertising, from the Web and pop music, from myriad sources of what I think we could now call digital culture, since that term spans everything from music to television to film and beyond. [here again, put images into powerpoint]

My hunch is that this process that Eno speaks of, of "familiarity breeding content" is part of the depth and substance behind the notion of "practices" being constitutive of identity. Obviously, "practicing something" creates at least familiarity with it. Recently there has been very interesting research being done on Christian practices, and in what ways these practices are constitutive of Christian identity. I'm interested in how it is that we think about "practice" in a mass mediated age, and in particular,

how we think about Christian practice in the context of mass mediated popular culture.

If our familiarity with the basic postures and languages of faith builds, indeed breathes, content through our lives, how is that content shaped through its encounter with mass media?

In the rest of my time this evening, I'd like to explore more of what is meant by "Christian practices," particularly in relation to media culture, and then, in turn, I'd like to suggest some ways that religious educators ought to rethink what we do in light of supporting Christian practices in the midst of a media culture.

Kathryn Tanner, a Christian theologian who has spent significant time thinking about the various ways in which we currently conceive of "culture", and then in turn how those conceptions interact with theology, has suggested that: "Christian practices are ones in which people participate in together in an argument over how to elaborate the claims, feelings, and forms of action around which Christian life revolves" (Tanner, 125).

I think this is an interesting definition, because it both suggests that there is something around which Christian life revolves (at a minimum I think we can all agree that that is Jesus Christ), and yet it leaves how we embody that "something" to be specified by the arguments in which we engage as think through, work through, pray through, our ways of being in the world.

Another group of scholars, those working in conjunction with the Valparaiso University Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, have argued that Christian practices "are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world" (5). I think this definition fits well with Tanner's, although it, too, leaves the definition

of what constitutes "Christian" pretty vague.<sup>1</sup>

The practices the Valparaiso Project name in the book that lays out their argument, *Practicing our Faith, A Way of Life for a Searching People*, include honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives. Each of these practices points to a particular way of being in the world, a specific set of concerns and communicative responses to those concerns, that shapes what it means to be Christian, that indeed, constitutes Christian identity. Each of them also embodies various forms of communication.

As I started to think about what Christian practices in relation to mass media are, I realized that I could think about the mass media in the context of each of these other practices, because each of them has various representations within the mass media, and each can itself apply to how someone engages the mass media. What counts as "saying yes and no," for instance, particularly in terms of prayer and examination of conscience, within the world of the television drama? This is an example of how a specific practice is "re-presented" to us by the mass media.<sup>2</sup>

What might we learn by asking in what ways our practice of "saying yes and saying no" is permeated by the agenda-setting effect of the mass media? What might we learn by discerning in what ways it might be appropriate to "say yes and say no" to how we consume media representations, to how we engage various kinds of mass media? In what ways might our practices of attention in relation to media — escaping into the dream creating space of entertainment, for example — support and/or interfere with finding the internal silence necessary for clear examination of conscience? As I started to ask these questions, I realized that I was engaged in

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<sup>1</sup> In some ways, both of these definitions draw on the arguments of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who argues that a practice is: "... any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." (After virtue, p. 187)

<sup>2</sup> It is tempting at this point to explore the ways in which the practice of "forgiveness" has been argued about in recent days in relation to President Clinton. I simply note that this is one example of a "teachable moment" in which a profoundly theological question is being asked within contexts mediated by news formats.

reflection upon attention, and the process of engaging and paying attention.<sup>3</sup> In many ways "attention" is a practice that is embodied in all of these other practices, or at least shaped and focussed by them.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that "attention" -- the process of engaging attention, shaping attention, paying attention, and so on -- is the practice I think is most at stake and most embodied in, how we engage mass media, how we practice media in our contemporary culture, and linked to that, how we shape Christian identity.

Going back to the quote with which I started, "familiarity breeds content." David Morgan has pointed out some of the ways in which Christians have engaged mass mediated visual images of specifically religious symbols over time, and he has done so in part by pointing to how those images have meaning in context, in the ways in which people come to them and shape meaning with them.

He spoke of how people situated these images in their homes, and how they created meaning with them in their prayers, in the way they looked at them in relation to other images (such as family photographs) that they looked at, and in the ways in which they created stories, worlds of meaning around them.

I think we need -- religious educators need -- to do the same kind of reflection and observation of our ways of interacting with mass mediated popular culture, and raise that kind of focus of attention with our students. In saying that, I am essentially beginning to put forward an argument about how we focus and shape our attention to pop culture.

[perhaps point out media location exercise here?]

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this integration, see my dissertation, "Media literacy and religious education: Engaging popular culture to enhance religious experience," Boston College 1998, available on the web at: <http://www2.bc.edu/~hessma/diss.html>

So for the rest of this talk, I'd like to play with the possibility that the Christian practice, the argument "over how to elaborate the claims, feelings, and forms of action around which Christian life revolves" that we could engage as signally appropriate for mass media has to do with the focussing of our attention, or the practice of attention.

What do I mean by mass mediated popular culture, or to put it more simply, "media culture" ? (a term coined by Douglas Kellner)? I think we are all familiar with the "objects" of such culture: films, television, radio, magazines, books, cartoons, the WWW, and so on. What we are perhaps less familiar with are the industries that underlie such culture: the global conglomerates that provide the finances to pay the artists that create the films, television, and so on; the advertising which is the main mechanism of such finance; and the production of markets of consumption, which is the primary engine of advertising. [are there images I could use here?]

Media literacy educators are fond of saying that the most precious resource, that which is scarcest, in the U.S. context, at least, is attention. That is, most of our productive industries spend an inordinate amount of their time attempting to "capture" our attention, to create "sticky eyeballs" as they say in the parlance of the WWW. And it is not simply those forms of mass media that people immediately identify as "entertainment" that must create sticky eyeballs, or advertising per se, but also news media. [ok, where is that sticky eyeball image?]

How do we "attend" to popular culture, particularly in its mass mediated forms? [be present with, provide care for, focus attention on] What could this practice of attention be? What does and could the argument over the feelings, forms and so on of Christian practice look like?

In our contemporary context many Christians have thought about the practice of "attention," in mass mediated popular culture, in terms of paying attention to content. Both in terms of "content" and in terms of "payment" for that content. So on one end of the Christian spectrum you will find a vast amount of conversation and literature devoted to pointing out what is "dangerous" content for Christians,

and a vast amount of resources devoted to creating "safe" content. There are institutions that put content rating labels on record albums for instance, and others that rate movie content in terms of its relation to family values.

There are huge industries devoted to creating and marketing and distributing Christian content (from Christian music, to Christian entertainment, even to Christian clothing and other consumer products). I was recently in Chicago for a meeting, and on the way into the city from the airport I noticed several billboards advertising a Catholic radio station with the tagline: "hear no evil." This is an attempt, I'd argue, to somehow "certify" content as being safe for Christians.

I don't want to argue that content is unimportant, but I do want to suggest that content is not so easily quantified or labelled, precisely because of the practices of meaning-making, the practices of attention.

On the other end of the Christian spectrum, you will find people who are extraordinarily conscious of the ways in which money shapes media content. Here you can find people who concern themselves with the ways in which our manner of "paying" for the attention we lavish on media must, they believe, inevitably shape the messages we take from that media, and the ways in which that media structures our lives.

Living in a consumer society, they argue, all media is owned by industries that require the production of more consumers, and hence all media ultimately subordinates meaning-making into commodification. We can not and do not engaging in resisting, negotiating, contesting, or in other ways frustrating that commodification, we simply fall prey to it. These Christians tend to look with scorn upon the Christian publishing and broadcasting empires as simply further evidence of "empire building," of the creation of more commodification, with simply a Christian label to it.

I should apologize for the caricatures I'm developing here, because indeed either end of this spectrum is more complex than I'm painting it. But my point is that

neither of these "takes" on the process of paying attention to mass media sufficiently respects the ways in which people bring mass mediated materials into their meaning-making processes, into the ways in which they shape and employ their attention.

One of the most interesting aspects of contemporary communications research, at least to me, is the shift scholars are making in the underlying paradigm they use to describe communication, a shift that moves away from an instrumentalist focus to a more cultural focus. This shift can be recognized in part in the way they 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.

Perhaps a concrete example will help to make my point more clearly.

In my own faith context, that of the Catholic community, there was recently published a video entitled "Hollywood Vs. Catholicism," that purported to be a documentary showing many ways in which Hollywood has deliberately attempted to create entertainment that is derogatory of Catholic meaning-making. Now, I think that there are instances within U.S. history where we can point to people who tried to advance an anti-Catholic agenda, but this documentary did not do that kind of social history. Instead it simply took many clips of several films and asserted that the content of these films clearly showed their anti-Catholic intent, and further, that the best way to engage them was by not giving them any attention at all, that is, by boycotting them in movie theaters, and not renting them on video. Thus, in this case, there was both concern with "what" the content was, and some engagement

with the economic structure that produced that content.

Is this an effective way to structure Christian identity? Perhaps. But my own reaction to the documentary, and that of many other Catholics to whom I've since shown it, is that it actually served to introduce me to films I would like to see. Why was that? Because creative art is not a simple or easy process of creating content that everyone will take in in the same way. No producer can be assured that the content they create will be "read" the same way by everyone who engages it. For many of us who are passionately immersed in Catholic community, but all too aware of its flaws and human failings, the films excerpted in this documentary (films such as *Priest*, *the Last Temptation of Christ*, even *Monty Python's Life of Brian*) highlighted dilemmas that exist within the Christian community, providing opportunities to confront difficult issues -- oftentimes with humor or irony that helped ease the pain of doing so.

Paying attention to content (both in terms of content, and in terms of economic structure), is one way to think about the shape of attention in a mass mediated context. But engaging in arguments over what constitutes appropriate Christian content may be an ultimately doomed enterprise, since content is so dependent on context, and on the practices you use to engage meaning.

In my previous example, for instance, the documentary sought to show "bad" content, and suggested that the right response was to economically bypass that content. That tactic backfired, however, because even simply showing the content to point out how bad it was highlighted the inadequacy of the criteria being used to judge it. Then, asking people to boycott media that you have just shown them is interesting, is counter-intuitive. Indeed, in some ways this documentary "produced" the opposite of what it was trying to create, because it allowed numbers of progressive Catholics to find films they otherwise might not have been aware of, that helped them to further solidify their critical stance.

So thinking about paying attention solely in terms of critiquing content, or solely as a mode for somehow shortcircuiting consumer commodification may not be so

appropriate or helpful. But are there other ways of engaging our attention? And perhaps some that are more productive of Christian identity and community?

I'd like to raise up one, in particular, for your reflection, and that is what Daloz et. al. call a "responsible imagination."

Daloz, et. al. spent a number of years interviewing people who have maintained a long term commitment to the common good (a difficult task in the U.S. context, in which commitment to selfish aims often seems more supported than commitment to common aims), and their study pointed to a number of common threads that were found in these people's lives. One in particular that I think is pertinent to this discussion, is something they termed a "responsible imagination." Because their definition is so interesting, I'm going to quote them at length (put up on screen, also on handout for audience):

The people we studied appear to compose reality in a manner that can take into account calls to help, catalyze, dream, work hard, think hard, and love well. They practice an imagination that resists prejudice and its distancing tendencies on the one hand, and avoids messianic aspirations and their engulfing tendencies on the other. Their imaginations are active and open, continually seeking more adequate understandings of the whole self and the whole commons and the language with which to express them.

Their practice of imagination is responsible in two particular ways. First, they try to respect the *process* of imagination in themselves and others. They pay attention to dissonance and contradiction, particularly those that reveal injustice and unrealized potential. They learn to pause, reflect, wonder, ask why, consider, wait.... They also learn to work over their insights and those of others so that they "connect up" in truthful and useful ways. They seek out trustworthy communities of confirmation and contradiction.

Second, they seek out sources of worthy images. Most have discovered that finding and being found by fitting images is not only a matter of having access to them but requires discretion and responsible hospitality — not only to what is attractive but also to what may be unfamiliar and initially unsettling.....

Living with these images, the people in our study appear to know that two truths must be held together — that we have the power to destroy the Earth and the power to see it whole. But unlike many who seek escape from the potent tension this act of holding requires, these people live in a manner that conveys a third and essential power: the courage to turn and make promises, the power of a responsible imagination. (Daloz, et. al., 1996, 151-152).

Two things they identified: paying attention to the process of imagination, and seeking out sources of worthy images. For these researchers, the process of imagination is more than superficial or what some people would call "mere"

entertainment. It is imagination in the deepest sense of that word, imaginative processes that sense and then focus on dissonance and contradictions, particularly those that reveal injustice and unrealized potential. It is imagination that lives within a community that helps to foster it, that helps to work over the insights that emerge from the process and connect them up with others. It is a seeking out of images -- not simply those close to hand, or those that are easy and reassuring, but also -- and perhaps more so -- those which require "being sought out," which are not all that easy to live with.

This definition of a responsible imagination is full of paradox and ambiguity -- not the certainty and clarity that the documentary I mentioned earlier sought to promote. Yet it was this kind of open, fluid and in some ways quite flexible definition that these researchers found necessary for continuing commitment to the common good in the people they studied. It is also this kind of practice of attention that is most open to engaging cultural ritual. And it is also, I believe, a way of thinking about attention that is open to the notion of process and argument that is so much a part of both Tanner's and the Valparaiso project's definitions of christian practice.

Such an understanding suggests that rather than focusing on the "delivering" of a message (that is, defeating the content we believe must be seen there, or defeating the producers of that instrumental content), we ought to be focusing on engaging culture, on stepping into active engagement with the rituals of meaning-making that pervade our culture.

We are already familiar with this shift in more traditional content areas within religious education. We have learned that it is not enough to present doctrine, for instance, simply as an intellectual activity. We have to find ways to make the beliefs and identity of our community of faith come alive to people emotionally. We have to show how they are embodied in concrete practices, and explore them critically. Paulo Freire pointed to this shift in his distinction between "banking" practices of education and "praxis" oriented approaches [Freire, 1985

#124]. Within communications studies, you could call previous understandings of how mass media work, what I've called "instrumental" approaches, a "banking" approach to communication; and you could suggest that the newer, emerging cultural definitions are praxis-oriented.

What does a praxis-oriented approach, in relation to our emerging understandings of mass mediated communication, suggest about shaping attention to mass media within religious education?

Well, I'm halfway home now, and probably just getting to the part of this lecture that most of you are interested in!

My research suggests that there are three ways, in particular, that religious educators might work on shaping a responsible imagination using mass mediated materials, or what some people call "pop culture objects" in communities of faith. The first of these is as entry points to experiences of transcendence and connection. The second is as clues to social currency, and the third, is as a source of social conscientization.

*translating transcendence and connection*

In our contemporary mass mediated world, people's desires and yearnings are often given voice at least partially and initially within mass mediated objects. 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].

Indeed, those Christians who have been most intent on critiquing the "content" of mass media, would likely agree that in part they do so because they are so conscious of a particular medium's ability to evoke religious experiences, and they want to ensure that the experiences evoked are appropriate and appropriately channelled. Unfortunately, as I've tried to make clear already, content is not so easily controlled or produced.

Along with an acknowledgement of how much religious experience can be evoked by mass mediated representations, 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 that occur in what such leaders term "secular culture", thereby turning people away at the precise moment that they are perhaps ripe for what is traditionally called "evangelization."

Pop culture is replete these days with so-called secular artists engaging religious themes, often in very specific Christian language. Paula Cole has a new album, for instance, entitled "Amen." This is the same Paula Cole who composed the hit song that is the theme for Dawson's Creek. And Moby, whose CD "Play" was at the top of the charts for quite a while, encloses an eloquent essay of his Christian beliefs with that album. Both of these artists have been greeted with great skepticism by many institutional church leaders -- while the congregants of those same leaders

try to express often unarticulated, but no less real, religious feelings. The collision between religious meaning-making that occurs in mass mediated formats, and religious meaning-making controlled by church institutions is often so abrupt and painful as to drive younger people out of churches, or when such meaning-making is brought into churches, to drive older people out of them (which has been the case in the teen directed liturgies in my home parish).

The process of translating religious experience into language, and beyond that into commitment to a community of faith, is always fraught with difficulty, and the opportunity for misunderstanding and confusion is great. Such difficulties and confusions are somewhat eased when bridges are built that allow meaning to be created and sustained in multiple ways and in multiple contexts. When, indeed, a responsible imagination is at work helping to create a focus for attention that can see God present in all things.

*social currency*

A second way in which religious educators can engage media culture is as a source of social insight. Given that religious education is so often confined to “Sunday School” contexts, or other limited venues, while popular culture surrounds and immerses us, we need to recognize the ways in which popular culture can provide specific clues to issues of “social currency.” Margaret Miles, writing about popular film, suggests that:

We can survey the breadth of popular culture, and ask ourselves: what themes are emerging as common concerns? In doing so we need to think about this not only in overt terms: ie. what are the most popular films concerned with right now? But also, what desires are television commercials seeking to evoke and

respond to? What kinds of stories are news magazines covering? As we approach January 1, 2000, it's clear to me, for instance, that apocalyptic fears are emerging, whether claimed overtly in films such as the Omega Code, or more covertly in concerns for how the Y2K bug might affect society. These fears point to underlying concerns about the ways in which technology functions in our lives, and the meaning-systems, particularly positivistic science, that give rise to technologies.

On this theme, that of using pop culture texts in a search for social relevance, participants in my research projects have had a field day, offering many suggestions as to ways in which popular culture texts provide these important clues. The practitioners who participate in our research workshops have 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 suggest that the themes of relationality, identity, confrontations with illness and death, and a desire for connection beyond oneself, are all themes that consistently emerge within popular culture, and they are also all themes that are easily and naturally 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 a religious community holds a corner of 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. They focus on supporting a responsible imagination.

What could creating this kind of environment, supporting this kind of practice of attention look like?

Here are just some of their suggestions, more can be found on our project's web site:

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. To what desires is the commercial responding? 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.

There were many more suggestions, but the similarities among them are important as we think about how to shape practices of attention. In the first place, pop culture is engaged by a dialogical group (not in isolation). Second, emotional responses are important raw data from which to work. Third, 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 finally, 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. [this could be a powerpoint slide as well]

In this case the role of the religious educator is to create a space within which dialogue can flourish, in which there can be movement back and forth between the pop culture object and the community of faith, and in which that movement builds on existing resonances and relevance. I think this kind of space may be precisely

what Daloz, et. al. are writing about when they suggest that a responsible imagination is fed by trustworthy communities. It is certainly the kind of space that respects the process of imagination.

*social conscientization and discernment*

Yet 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. Indeed, in this pragmatic effort the end of the Christian spectrum I mentioned earlier that was most interested in how we “pay” for our attention, is well represented.

Clearly the commercial basis upon which most of the mass mediated popular culture of this country is created, has an impact on our imagination, on our ability to focus our attention. In large measure the impact is one of narrowing our attention to only those images and ways of being represented to us through mass mediated objects. Another way of to think of this effect of mass media is as one of channelling our attention towards an ever smaller set of ideas and ways of seeing ourselves and our relationships with each other and with God.

Critiquing this overt narrowing of our focus, however, is only one way in which such pop texts can serve the goal of conscientization. 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 even more important question. [use clips of Diet coke commercial]

Indeed, the goal ought to be one of bringing to attention that which is left out. (which is in many ways an excellent definition of conscientization)

One way to ensure that this kind of discussion takes place, is to find ways to bring different viewpoints into the discussion. In our research, 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. We can't stay locked away in "safe" or "pure" locations, barricaded against content that we fear but have not engaged. We must reach out, beyond the obvious outlines of our identities to those we fear and those we disdain. The biblical injunction to love our enemies surely must begin, at least in part, by reaching out to those from whom we are estranged, whether by structures of dominating power (as in situations of race, class, and gender oppression), or by our own fears and ignorance. Such a compassion and engagement is urged on us by no less than the teacher at whose feet we all long to dwell.

I won't belabor this point in this presentation, but I will note that increasingly educational research is suggesting that the most effective learning takes place in situations of diversity.

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 greatly supported by a responsible imagination, both in the sense of an imagination that can focus attention on perceived dissonance and contradiction, but also in the

sense of an imagination that is rooted in a community that has a richness of alternative story to share.

Here again I hope that you can hear the resonance with the Daloz. et. al. project, where they talk about engaging in a process of imagination, and paying attention to that process, particularly to its ability to identify sources of dissonance and contradiction, and the ways in which that dissonance might lead to a recognition of unrealized justice.

OK: experiential transcendence, social currency, conscientization

In each of these cases a responsible imagination applied to the practice of attending to mass media shapes the process of religious education, and builds a different kind of focus for attention.

Practicing this kind of attention is at times great fun -- particularly in contexts where pop culture previously was primarily ignored -- and at times very difficult, particularly where pop culture texts cause us to question taken for granted ways of seeing the world. But whether cause for laughter or for tears, it will always provide the opportunity to engage Christian identity. As I mentioned at the start of this lecture, each of the Christian practices the Valparaiso project identified is embedded in media culture, and permeated by meaning-making practices shaped by that culture. How we take up those practices, or to use Tanner's language, the arguments we engage in in attempts "to elaborate the claims, feelings, and forms of action around which Christian life revolves," must of necessity engage media culture. Indeed, the central faith claims of Christian life are "on the table" at this point in time, in a way in which they haven't been before.

We now have, courtesy of media technologies, compelling representations of

life lived out in multiple faiths, many of which are far distant from Christianity. We now have, courtesy of media technologies, multiple ways in which to capture our imagination and cede its territories to all kinds of dreams. Our struggle is to search out those dreams most worthy of our attention, and those communities most trustworthy and supportive of these dreams. Our struggle is to shape our attention and nurture it in as generous a way as possible, to shape it in, as Daloz et. al. remind us, a way that "resists prejudice and its distancing tendencies on one hand, and avoids messianic aspirations and their engulfing tendencies on the other hand." (151)

It is my devout hope that in doing so, in practicing the shaping of our attention, in bringing pop culture objects into religious education and bringing religious sensibilities to pop culture objects, we can truly create the familiarity that "breeds the content" that will continue to nurture and support our communities of faith for some long time to come.

In all these ways we can stretch and nurture, challenge and sustain, our manner of paying attention in the world. And in all these ways we can build familiarity with religious practice by building on and with the familiar images and sounds of media culture. Doing so we will surely deepen, nuance and make more complex the cultural conversation in which we are engaged, renewing and reinvigorating Christian practices along the way.

**Monday evening presentation**

**Pearl Toon Smith Memorial Lectures**

**Anderson University**

**1 November 1999**

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