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D R A F T / this is not a finished paper, and is placed here only to make it possible for my colleagues to engage me in conversation around the ideas presented herein. Please do not quote this essay without checking in with me first.

Introduction...

My time in the study commission has led me to a number of convictions that can be traced, in sum or part, to the meetings where they first started to emerge for me. From the very beginning of our work together I think we took as an axiom – or at least I absorbed with intensity -- the sense that James Carey once spoke of that mass media are best understood as pervasive rituals in which we participate, rather than as instruments we control (or that control us). This emphasis on a cultural studies approach to mass media was clear from the first meeting I attended in Uppsala, Sweden, and it was that emphasis that made our habit of going locally to experience the convergence of media, religion and culture so appropriate.

There were other themes that had a profound impact on my own thinking. In Hollywood, for instance, I remember arguing that religious experience -- not simply free floating “spirituality” -- could exist in and through the events of mass mediated popular culture. But it was the testimony of the various Hollywood artists and producers to which we listened that catalyzed my conviction that there was more going on there than any specific producer could “control” -- other than the Breath of God herself.

The Boulder meeting helped focus for me the necessity of understanding how practice shapes meaning, particularly the ways in which certain kinds of practice “de root” symbols from the communities where they originated, and can contribute to making their performances more shallow. That meeting also helped me see how the focusing of our attention can so constrain our sense of who we are and what we are about.

Our Edinburgh meeting was a powerful one for me, but perhaps less on the part of the commissions’ work and more because we met concomitantly with the MRC conference. In particular I remember Jeremy Begbie’s intervention at the conference, and the powerful way in which he gave voice to my heretofore unstated sense that the sonic environment of mass media -- the music, in particular -- was a crucial part of the meaning-making process.

I missed several of the meetings -- Belo Horizonte because I had just given birth to our second child; Accra because the very week the Commission met my family and I were moving our household halfway across the country for me to take up a teaching position. Of the meetings I could attend, it was our meeting in Bangkok that was the most political of my engagements. We met there in the early days of July of 2001, a full two months before the terrorist strikes in New York and DC that would so convulse the US. Yet even though those events were still to unfold, that meeting pressed upon me the intimately painful consequences of rapid globalization. The investigative journalists and independent filmmakers who were part of the group we listened to and traveled with raised issues of environmental damage, of religious persecution, of the interlocking nature of gender and class oppressions, of the dangers of ethnic violence. Yet they also

brought powerful evidence of hope, and of the ability of communications media to provide spaces in which God's incarnation, in which God's revelation of divine care for humanity, could be made manifest.

As I sit before my computer, in the spring months of 2002, and ponder the ways in which my journey with the commission has brought new ideas and new life to the various contexts in which I live and work, I find myself reflecting on my own answers to the Commission's core questions. Unlike social scientists – who I believe work primarily in empirical ways, looking for the most adequate description of the specific material locations they inhabit – or theologians, who I believe are engaged in the systematization and making coherent of our claims about God and God's presence in our lives -- I am a religious educator. I think religious educators at heart work in more synthetic than analytic ways. That is not to say that we don't value or use analytical and empirical tools, but more to recognize that we tend to take emerging descriptions and test their adequacy and coherence in practice, rather than in deconstructive or constructive argument.

When the Study Commission sought to answer its central core issues, I found myself wanting to jump beyond any emerging and still tentative suggestions to pragmatic pastoral responses. So, for instance, as we asked "in what ways can we say that the media have come to occupy the spaces traditionally occupied by religion?" I found myself accepting what was only a hypothesis at the time and moving to build on it. Many of our social scientists began to describe various media – particularly electronic mass media, whether television, film, music or the Web – as "cultural databases" upon which people draw to make sense of their lives and their relationships. Since "religion" has traditionally been understood as a central fabric in that process, it was easy for me to jump ahead. I began from the assumption that media fulfill many of the spaces traditionally occupied by religion – particularly those having to do with ritual action, authoritative naming, and narrative practices.

When the Commission posited that mass media in particular are better understood as ritual activities we participate in, rather than as instrumental means to convey messages, I immediately began to think about how religious educators might dance within that ritual activity and bring our own unique lens and creativity to it.

While several of our members struggled to determine what the relationship of religious authority is to modes of symbolic practice, I decided that it would be interesting to assume that Medrano's hypotheses were correct, and simply move on from there. Similarly, it no longer seemed useful to me to ask whether or not "the new situation calls into question dichotomies of 'sacred' and 'profane' or 'good' vs. 'bad' media." Instead, I took as a given that such dichotomization was no longer descriptive and instead worked to see what would happen if we gave pastoral agents "permission" to find God wherever the Spirit breathed.

This strategy was enormously productive in a religious education context. People began to flock to workshops and classes that I was involved with, telling story after story of the ways in which they had had experiences within popular culture

contexts that had had powerful impacts on their connections to God and to each other. Religious educators – particularly those who work and teach in the parish and primary school contexts – leapt with vigor into using mass mediated popular culture materials to evoke conversation about the intimate and powerful process of interweaving the divine and human narratives.

Most of the power of my own research experiences has come from taking the emerging descriptions various social scientists are proposing and testing them out within pastoral and educational circles. That is to say, rather than trying to “prove” or “disprove” them on an empirical level using positivist methodologies, I have been drawn towards what might be termed “participatory action” research strategies.

An example from the Commission: Henrik Boes’ masters’ thesis was showcased early in the study commission’s time together. I decided it would be interesting and perhaps informative to see what kind of an impact that study would have on pastoral agents. That was the genesis of my earliest research project, where we gathered groups of religious educators, first at the local parish level and then later at the graduate school, and still later faculty levels, and engaged people in exploring both Boes’ thesis (which is a hypertext document) and Adan Medrano’s ideas. There was enormous energy generated in those meetings, and the ideas that emerged proved catalytic for various further projects. To me, this was evidence that the descriptions Hoover and others were developing were at least adequate, and potentially powerfully constructive.

Another example has to do with the various ways in which the theologians on the commission have struggled with adequately descriptive and coherent “language” – I put it in parentheses because I wish to speak in terms of image and music, as well as text – for how we identify God’s presence among us. When Peter Horsfield noted that “//” I immediately began to think about ways to bring pastoral agents and artists together with respect for their individual integrities. When Juan Carlos Henriquez spoke of “//” my desire to do so became more urgent. This was the genesis of my second major research project, which is still underway. Here again, rather than trying to deconstruct analytically the deep issues dividing artists from religious communities, I have been more interested in determining if we could find an environment in which both artists and pastoral agents could work, and thus discover together an emerging language for engaging God’s presence in the world. It’s too early in the journey of that project to know if we’ve created such a language, but it is clear that new kinds of energy and synergy are being evoked. The initial workshop we held in that project took place over two years ago, but the participants from that group still work with each other and are seeking new opportunities to gather. Again, that level of engagement and passion suggests that Peter and Juan Carlos’ insights, tentative though they may be, are descriptive in new and evocative ways for communities of faith.

As I think about these learnings, and as I reflect back upon my time with the Study Commission, I am struck again by the premonitions I felt at the Bangkok meeting. Though we were only there a few days, over and over I felt pressed to

recognize how enormously painful the process of globalization is for peoples all over the world and particularly in southeast Asian contexts. I was also aware both of how much media made that impression on me real and deeply affective, and how much various media projects also contributed to my sense of hope in the face of what could be despair. Two months later, after I had returned to my familiar surroundings in the upper Midwest of the United States, those feelings were renewed with force and vigor on September 11.

In the months since, I have been struck by the important role that various forms of mass media have played in the United States as we struggle – particularly within religious communities – to respond to the events of September 11. There were two “rituals” in particular, both nationally and perhaps globally televised, that aired in the two weeks immediately following the September 11 attacks that reinforced for me the validity and descriptiveness of the Study Commission’s work. Because I think an analysis of these rituals might be illustrative, I’d like to spend the rest of this essay considering them.

Religious meaning embedded in religious practices; Mass media as environments for meaning-making

On September 14, 2001, there was a “national service of prayer and remembrance” held in the Episcopal Cathedral in Washington, DC. That service was broadcast on television on a number of different networks. My description and any quotations I provide were drawn from the ABC telecast, with my own transcriptions. Just about a week later, on the evening of September 22, 2001, there was a nationally televised (perhaps actually globally aired) fundraising event put together by a number of superstar entertainers. My description and any transcriptions are taken from both the audio CD and the digital video disk recordings of that event which were sold as further fundraisers.

I believe that both of these televised events functioned as powerful religious witnesses, and that in many ways the themes the Study Commission has been working on, and which I noted earlier, can be demonstrated by considering them.

Let me start with some simple descriptions. The first event – the “national service of prayer and remembrance” – was broadcast “live” on most major television channels in the US. The version I describe aired on ABC with accompanying commentary provided by news anchor Peter Jennings. As with most ABC news coverage of such events, the “story” began airing well before the actual service began. Various cameras provided images of the dignitaries arriving at the church, as well as long shot images of the church itself – both exterior visions of its gothic outlines, as well as interior shots of its stained glass windows, traditional gothic architecture, and the people gathered as congregation that day. As the event unfolded Jennings provided commentary, all of it off camera. That is, you did not see him at all but only heard his voice as he noted – with a tone somewhat subdued from his usual voice – who the camera was focusing on, or made comments “setting context” for the event.

The service was quite “traditional” in effect – an effect Jennings reinforced by his comments on the familiarity of the hymns chosen: “all those great Christian hymns this morning that are in their own way, one might argue, are not only so essential to the Christian faith and to Christian religion but have become so widely accepted as simply evocative and familiar hymns that are sung by people, Christian or not.” He was referring to hymns such as “Oh God our help in ages past,” “A mighty fortress is our God” and “the battle hymn of the republic,” which were interspersed with more patriotic songs such as “God bless America,” and “America the Beautiful.”

The service had a whole variety of religious “professionals” involved, including both the white woman [rector] of the Cathedral (the Rev. Jane Holmes Dixon) as well as its Black male dean (the Very Rev. Nathan Dean Baxter), and then a host of invited ministers – Dr. Muzammil H. Siddiqi, president of the Islamic Society of the United States; Rabbi Joshua O. Haberman, rabbi emeritus of the Washington Hebrew Congregation; Rev. Kirby John Caldwell, pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston, TX; Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Archbishop of Washington; and the Reverend Billy Graham. Jennings provided commentary giving these people’s names and affiliations, as well as particular pieces of information that were no doubt intended to explain their presence, such as Rev. Caldwell’s “close personal friendship with the president,” or the fact that Cardinal McCarrick’s nephew was a priest still missing in the Trade Towers implosion.

The service utilized both traditional church music – including organ, children’s choir, and so on – as well as the Navy sea chanters, a military orchestra, the operatic mezzo soprano Denise Graves, and classical guitar.

There were many traditional forms of religious practice on display – readings from sacred texts, prayers the community gathered listened to, a brief sermon, and offering plates passed throughout the congregation. Indeed even a basic *ordo* was present, with gathering, invoking, listening, responding and sending involved.

The second ritual, by way of stark contrast, was explicitly NOT a religious ritual in any traditional sense of that word. Indeed, Tom Hanks introduced it by noting that “those of us here tonight are not heroes, we are not healers, nor protectors of this great nation. We are merely artists, entertainers, here to raise spirits and, we hope, a great deal of money. We appear tonight as a simple show of unity to honor the real heroes and to do whatever we can to ensure that all their families are supported by our larger American family. This is a moment to pause and reflect, to heal and to rededicate ourselves to the American spirit of one nation indivisible.”

The event was a series of musical performances interspersed with brief comments by other entertainers, glimpses of other celebrities manning the phones taking in pledges, or, on two occasions, montages of film and interviews. None of the performers were introduced and while they appeared to share similar settings, there was no audience or any other of the typical “sets” you

might expect from such performance. Indeed, it was not entirely clear whether the event itself was taking place “live” or was edited together in some simple fashion. The sets the performers appeared on were largely dark, lit primarily by banks of large white column candles set on stepped shelves – reminiscent of the banks of votives in the back of some churches, although these were large candles rather than small votives. Most of the performers wore black, or variations on black, although their clothes ranged from suits and dresses to torn jeans and t-shirts.

What is striking to me, at least personally, was how enormously affecting I found this second ritual, how deeply theologically and spiritually compelling, in contrast to how dry and alienating I found the first. As someone who has advanced graduate degrees in theology, teaches at a Christian seminary, and works professionally to support communities of faith, this personal reaction is disconcerting at best. But I believe it also points to the shift in role that religion plays out in various cultures, particularly in the United States, and the ability of mass mediated environments to subtly shape and alter the practices of religious meaning-making.

In part this stark contrast has much to do with the fact that I engaged both of these events in a televised format. I was not present in the national cathedral for the service of prayer and remembrance, instead I was “participating” if you will through the mediation of television, which in turn presented this ritual to me along with Peter Jennings’ commentary on it. The “typical” television newscast rules were in place. That is, a news anchor was there to “interpret” the event to me – even if he was off camera and present only in voiceover. Second, there were regular captions that appeared over the images noting that this was “live,” naming it as “the national service of prayer and remembrance,” and in one case running in scrolling type across the bottom of the picture, a 1-800 number people could call to make donations to a charity. Third, close-ups focused, for the most part, on identifying the reactions of various military and government elites to the events unfolding in front of me.

The telethon, on the other hand, while quite explicitly produced by entertainment superstars and featuring almost exclusively these celebrities, broke a number of television “rules”: first, it was broadcast on multiple channels simultaneously – both pay, network, and public channels. Second, it was aired entirely without commercial interruption of any kind. Third, none of the performers were in any way identified. In what was a time of quite extraordinary events, this “breaking of the rules” seemed emotionally resonant in a way that a news broadcast of a religious service – even though I am on all accounts a professional religious insider – could not be for me.

I believe that this is quite a good example of the points the study commission has made in its time together about the ways in which our “practices” shape the meanings we create together. Various genres of mass media evoke their own familiar “practices,” which in this case being broken sharply changed the meaning-making on at least my own part.

The televising of these events thus shaped – although did not in any way control -- my quite differing responses. In the first, the explicit religious service, I was a “participant” only insofar as I was an observer at a distance from the event. Even the gathered congregational “participants” in this service were largely observers, being invited to participate only in singing a few hymns. The Lord’s Prayer, traditionally a prayer that all Christians, at least, would speak aloud, was *heard* via its performance by mezzo soprano Denise Graves and as the camera panned the people gathered, it appeared that no one was even mouthing the words along with her. In the second event, although it was quite explicitly the musical performances of superstars, I was invited into participation in a number of ways. The few stars who spoke, addressed me (as viewer) directly; that is, they were filmed looking directly into a camera and there was no other “audience” perceptible.

In the first event, as Peter Jennings pointed out: “this is an invited audience, this is not open to the public. What you are seeing in bits and pieces is the political, and military, and to some extent bureaucratic superstructure of the country.” Clearly I was not “invited” in any way to this service, other than as an invisible observer, even a voyeur. Indeed, all of the participants in this event wore clear professional clothing – whether religious professional garb, military uniform, or the ubiquitous business suit of the governing class. In the second event by contrast, in addition to being directly addressed by performers, I was explicitly invited to call the phone number provided to contribute funding to the charities supported by the telethon. On occasion the camera would break away to the phone banks and it was obvious that superstar entertainers were even participating here, by answering the phones. The genre of “fund-raising telethon” has always been a more populist-oriented frame, and in this case that frame clearly addressed me. Even the clothing “symbolism” participated in that invitation, because while a fairly uniform use of black or navy blue drew the set pieces together, the performers wore t-shirts, jeans, dresses, suits, all sorts of clothing providing a whole range of ways in which to identify with at least some of the performers.

Theological language, musical language, and the shaping of ritual meanings...

What about the second set of themes I noted earlier that the Study Commission has addressed, the creation of “language” to speak of God’s presence, that is, the more explicitly theological task? Here again comparing these two rituals is informative. In the first, the “national service of prayer and remembrance,” explicitly theological language was present throughout the event – albeit “mediated” by Peter Jennings’ commentary.

From the opening moments of Rev. Dixon’s welcome, through the Very Rev. Baxter’s invocation, as well as the various readings from sacred texts, “God talk” was clearly evident. It was a carefully modulated “God talk,” however, for clearly these religious professionals were conscious of the pluralism of their congregation. Dixon noted that “those of us who are gathered here, Muslim, Jew, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Hindu – all people of faith want to say to this nation and to the world that love is stronger than hate and that love lived out in justice

will in the end prevail." Baxter was more biblical in his language, noting that "today we gather to be reassured that God hears the lamenting and bitter weeping of mother America [a reference to his earlier invocation of the Prophet Jeremiah's words about Rachel]."

The "line up" of religious professional who read from sacred texts included a Muslim, a Jew, a Protestant and a Catholic. Hebrew bible texts were cited – both from Jeremiah – as well as New Testament texts (Caldwell read from 2 Corinthians and McCarrick from Matthew). The texts appeared to me, at least, to be moving towards an ever more Christo-centric focus, leading up to the Rev. Billy Graham's sermon.

Graham's message was primarily one of hope:

"For the Christian, I'm speaking for the Christian now, the cross tells us that God understands our sin and our suffering for he took upon himself in the person of Jesus Christ our sin and our suffering. And from the cross God declares I love you ... The story does not end with the cross, for Easter points us beyond the tragedy of the cross to the empty tomb... My prayer today is that we will feel the loving arms of God wrapped around us and we will know in our hearts that he will never forsake us as we trust in him. We also know that God is going to give wisdom and courage and strength to the president and those around him and this is going to be a day that we will remember as a day of victory."

This is preeminently insider Christian language, interpretable within that frame as deeply aware of the brokenness of all humanity. Yet in this context these words are easily "heard" differently. Even the language of "victory," which in the Christian context is directly tied to God's loving gift of the son to attain victory over our -- read human – sin, could here have all too many resonances to military victories, surrounded as it was by the visual and musical impact of all the branches of the U.S. Armed forces.

What about the second ritual? The superstar telethon was in no way an explicitly religious event. Indeed, as I noted earlier, from its very beginning its spoken language eschewed such terms; as, for example, when Tom Hanks spoke of "one nation indivisible" but abruptly stopped before adding "under God." Yet my experience of the event was profoundly, spiritually, religious. How so?

In Christian theologies there is a distinction often made between "first order discourse" and "second order discourse." "First order discourse" is direct address, a preacher telling a congregation "God loves you" and "God forgives you" or a congregation speaking in first person to God. "Second order discourse" is telling about, or explaining something – "God is a God of love," or "God is a God who can forgive your sins." Both are important and powerful ways of communicating, but first order discourse is proclamation, whereas second order discourse can be experienced as "instructing." In some intimate and interesting ways, I experienced the first ritual – and remember, I was experiencing it via television, which included the news anchor commentary and edited images – as

second order discourse, and the second ritual – the superstar telethon – as first order discourse. What is that about?

Clearly one element of that distinction grew out of the televisual mediation of the events. As already noted, the first ritual's impact was strongly shaped for me by Peter Jennings' commentary. That commentary functioned at a variety of levels to "teach" viewers about the event, whereas the second ritual was mediated in a form of "direct address." Again, the element of practice here shaped the meaning. Yet I am also reminded of my learnings from the Edinburgh meeting of the Commission, where it became very obvious how crucial an element "sonic environment" is in shaping meaning-making. The second ritual was almost entirely musical. Indeed, it is still a profoundly moving experience even in its audio CD version, which omits all of the interspersed funds solicitations and image montages which are included in the DVD version. While the visual imagery of flickering candle flames and darkly colored sets no doubt enhances its meditative resonances, it is the music of the event that carries its primary meaning-making power.

Here you can find theological language deeply embedded throughout the ritual. From the first song, which is Bruce Springsteen singing "My City of Ruins," there is an explicit address to God:

"Now with these hands, with these hands... I pray Lord, with these hands... I pray for the strength Lord... I pray for the faith Lord... we pray for your love Lord... with these hands... pray for the lost Lord... with these hands ... pray for this world Lord... (...) come on, come on, come on rise up, come on rise up, come on rise up..."

Sung in the first person, these repetitive lyrics combine with the slow rhythm, breathy delivery, acoustic guitar and harmonica, to evoke a prayer that invites the viewer to participate by singing along. Unlike the lyrics of the many hymns found in the first ritual, these are ambiguous. They can be interpreted in many ways, including for me an evocative resonance of resurrection which led to a whole stream of associations: resurrection, Jesus' resurrection, the Trade Towers broken under the sinfulness of our world, a heartfelt hope that our sinfulness might yet be redeemed, and so on. This kind of pattern – repetitive lyrics, meditative/prayerful delivery, ambiguity of meaning, direct address – continues throughout the event. Indeed, while I could not find any information about who the event planners really were and how they approached the evening, it is difficult not to assume that they were familiar with liturgical ritual, particularly liturgical forms such as Taize.

The first ritual sought to be inviting in its pluralism – for example, the religious professionals present were drawn from a variety of faiths -- but I experienced it as "tolerance" rather than "pluralism." The entire event was held in a Christian cathedral, shaped using Christian symbols and ritual gesture, replete with Christian language, and led very explicitly by Christians – both President Bush (whom Peter Jennings noted "had a very specific hand in putting it together") and the resident ministers of the cathedral. The second ritual, on the other hand,

while clearly open to Christian interpretations, was from its start much more polyvalent. This openness to multiplicity of interpretation was particularly evident in the choice of music, which ranged over most of the pop genres (excepting heavy metal and rap), and included performers as diverse as Tom Petty, Enrique Iglesias, Alicia Keys, Limp Bizkit, Bon Jovi, Sheryl Crow, and Wyclef Jean. Again, I have no information as to how the producers chose the performers, and whether the performers or the producers chose the songs. But the end result was an interesting and powerful unity through diversity.

Consider Stevie Wonder's song, "Love's in need of love today." In its opening musical bridge he sang/spoke:

"When you kill in the name of God or in the name of Allah, you are truly cursing God, for that is not of God. When you say that you hate in the name of God or in the name of Allah, you are lying to God, for that is not of our Father... let us pray that we see the light..."

Is he suggesting that the God whom Christians worship and whom Muslims worship is the same or two different gods? There is some ambiguity there, and room for interpretation. There is also an implied direct address to the viewer – "when *you* say" (my italics) – that could be heard as simply rhetorical, but could also be taken to imply that each of us has at least the potential to sin in this way.

Or consider Faith Hill's song, "There will come a day." This song was perhaps one of the most energetic of the songs sung that evening, and was accompanied by rich orchestration and a full choir. The rising tension of its swelling choruses, the sharp punctuation Hill gave particular phrases, and the fulsomeness of the accompaniment lent the song an air of revival. Explicit Christian language – "There's a better place where our Father waits, and every tear he'll wipe away... the darkness will be gone, the weak will be strong, hold on to your faith, there will come a day A song will ring out down those golden streets, the voices of earth and the angels will sing alleluia... every knee will bow, sin will have no traced, in the glory of His amazing grace" – explicit Christian language was shaped by the melody and orchestration to be hoped for rather than fulfilled. A minor key and slower rhythm, for instance, wrought a compelling chorus that stretched what might have been an almost triumphalist song into a prayer for hope and forgiveness. As the song puts it "*every* knee will bow" (my italics). In this particular performance the choir accompanying Hill was primarily Black, and the cadences of Black gospel music also wove a specific kind of meaning for me, taking what would strike me as triumphalist in a white context and transforming it into a sustained plea for hope in the face of oppression.

Perhaps you think my interpretation "reads" too much into what was explicitly a fund-raising entertainment. But that is precisely my point: the very way in which the first ritual was mediated contributed to closing down its range of meanings, while the second ritual could be engaged in a variety of ways. Throughout my time on the Study Commission, at each of our meetings, I was struck again and again by the dynamic, fluid and shifting nature of meaning-making. It is clear

that people engage mass mediated “events” in a host of ways – resisting, contesting, negotiating, playing with, and so on.

One more example of the role music played in shaping these rituals provides a clear contrast. In both rituals the song “God Bless America” was played. In the days and months following September 11, this song has become a kind of national anthem, and its first phrase – “God bless America” – has been painted, sprayed, carved, engraved, splashed, cooked, written, and in many other ways made evident throughout the U.S. in both commercial and private establishments.

It could be claimed that the first ritual was “bookended” by this song. It was played as part of the prelude music, and President Bush’s last words were “God Bless America.” Played by the military orchestra in the mode of movie music, its orchestration was both full – meaning all the instruments were involved in creating harmonies for it – and pedestrian – meaning commonplace and typical of hundreds of film scores. At one point I felt like I was indeed being urged to “watch a film” that was being scored by some famous movie composer. Nothing about my experience of this music felt in any way new; rather, it seemed to be yet another instance of the by now too familiar muzak versions of patriotic music.

In the second ritual, by way of contrast, this song was sung by Celine Dion. Anyone who has even half an ear tuned to US popular culture knows that Celine Dion is a French Canadian pop singer who began her career not speaking much English but who has gained an international following through her concerts and the songs she has recorded for films (*Titanic* being perhaps the most famous). On one level you could not have a more familiar icon of movie music. But what was so arresting to me about her interpretation of the song was that it sounded and felt like a prayer. In shifting the emphasis of particular words, and stretching out particular rhythms, she subtly altered the meaning of the words – or perhaps reclaimed them? – into a prayer for God’s presence among us in the midst of this set of difficult events. Hearing a French Canadian singing “... land that I love, stand beside her and guide her...” lent a different nuance to those words, and made the interpretation yet more complex.

I cannot think of a more compelling example of the points Jeremy Begbie and others were making at our Edinburgh meeting in relation to “sonic environments” and their ability to shape the meanings of media engagements than my contrasting experience of this song embedded in two different rituals.

Political contexts, theological emphases: representation shapes meaning

I began this illustration by remembering my “premonitions” at the Bangkok meeting: the confluence of globalization, rapidly increasing oppressive systems, and the striking ability of mass media to shape meaning-making. Walking through my personal interpretation of these two televised rituals might be simply an interesting academic exercise were it not for the points our southeast Asian colleagues were trying to make.

Consider the first ritual, where Christianity was on display as a preeminently “insider” discourse potentially authorizing military force, unity of a kind that refuses difference and humility, rejection of an essential Christian teaching that we are all broken by sin, and valorization of a power structure that rules through an elite discourse. This was an engagement with Christianity that preached “we are all one – as long as you live under our, read “elite”, structures.” This is a religious culture televisually represented as “we are one in war.”

Contrast that with the second ritual, which was explicitly *not* a religious ritual and in no way held within Christian institutional structures. To the extent that it could be read as “Christian,” it had to be done within the interpretive framework I, as an individual, brought to it. Yet it was full of images and gestures that evoked the heart of my faith -- individuals joined together humbly sharing what little they can offer, a recognition of both hope and despair commingled, stories of heroes that were ordinary people moved to extraordinary sacrifice. Even the “displayed diversity” felt more real to me than the stilted words of the diverse religious professionals confined to one place in the middle of the first ritual. In the second ritual not only was Muslim language for God used from the opening moments (as in Stevie Wonder’s song), but Muslim children were interviewed about their experiences, and Mohammed Ali was at pains (literally, given his late stage Parkinson’s disease) to express that love is at the heart of Islam. As Will Smith, who appeared with Mohammed Ali noted: “It was hate, not religion, that motivated the horrible acts of Sept. 11, and in the wake of these events, nothing could be more un-American than to respond to mindless hatred with blind vengeance.”

While this message could be said to have been a part of the explicitly religious language used in the first ritual, it was overpowered – at least for me – by its embedding in the visual and musical representations that formed a sort of confluence between the religious victory language and the military and government symbolisms of elites.

Another crucial question that theologians are asking in our contemporary context has to do with authority, and this is also one of the core questions of the commission. When the commission asks -- “what is the relationship of religious authority to modes of symbolic practice?”-- I have to respond that it is being radically contested by the modes of practice we engage in within mass mediated contexts. But that contestation is not a uniformly negative or problematic one, in many ways it is also a radically reforming and even transforming act. Many of the kinds of authority on display in the first ritual, particularly as interpreted by Peter Jennings, ought to be contested by people of faith. Core gospel narratives would call Christians at least to construe power very differently than is typical of military and bureaucratic elites.

If the first ritual is a representation of religion as “we are one in war,” than perhaps the second ritual – at least for me – was a representation of the kind of religion the apostle Paul spoke of when he noted that “we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”

My sense of the conflict between these representations of religion was most striking in the different kinds of prayer that were invoked. If first order discourse directly addresses God and each other, while second order discourse intends to be more “instructive,” than consider the bulk of the prayers offered in each ritual.

In the first, the prayers that Rev. Caldwell led included a variety of petitions, although no response from the congregation. Caldwell prayed, for example that “as our leaders humble themselves and pray and seek your face, use them to perform and perfect your primary will for this nation, our allies, and for the entire world.” Coupled with the clear visual conflation of military and religious symbols (begun in the color guard preceding the cross down the aisle), this petition struck me, at least, as a direct invitation to see God as being “on our side” rather than in any way calling us to repentance. The leaders who were present may very well have been seeking to be present in humble and seeking postures. But the televisual representation of the event, particularly the corresponding commentary which pointed out the elite nature of the gathering, produced quite the opposite effect for me.

In the second ritual, there were no explicit prayers at all – and yet most of the songs functioned as prayer for me. Whether it was Bruce Springsteen or Stevie Wonder using the word “prayer” to call for love and humility, or U2’s plaintive cry that “we leave behind ... all that you’ve fashioned, all that you’ve made, all that you’ve built, all that you break, all that you measure, all that you fear, all that you count on your fingers and all that you steal, you’ve got to leave it behind” -- these songs *were* first order discourse for me. They invited me into a pattern of reflection and a posture of humble search that on multiple levels – experiential, theological, liturgical, and so on – *was* worship.

Again, this might be simply an interesting dilemma for institutional churches, except that as my colleagues in Bangkok were at gentle pains to point out religious establishments have enormous power – both institutionally and evocatively – to affect the material realities of the world we share together. I might have experienced the first ritual as *not* religious in any sense of that word personally, and yet it was institutional religion. And institutional religion holds enormous potential through its structures for communal relevance and change. The second ritual might have been the more spiritually resonant for me, but that resonance emerged in the individual, personal context of my engagement with the event. Even the fundraising was oriented not towards whatever root causes we might identify of the terror attacks, but simply at mitigating the more immediate losses of those most directly affected by them.

The first ritual is embedded in a very real set of communities that have structural and institutional ways in which they manifest power, while the second ritual – clearly powerful for me – has few if any relevant structures or institutions that would allow the liberative themes I felt were emerging to be embodied. Or does it? I don’t know. That may be the most compelling question that the Study Commission still has to answer for me. Peter Horsfield has suggested that there

are new religious structures arising in the midst of consumerist cultures. I am hopeful, but this particular comparison does not point to any.

Where might we go from here?

I hope that this comparison has proven useful, or at least helped to explain my own convictions from my time with the Study Commission. These are the kinds of conclusions I've drawn as I've engaged with the commission over the years, but where do they lead me to now? And what resources might best engage the challenges that are emerging? I suppose in some ways my response to the core questions that the Commission began its existence with is to raise what I see as the core questions pastoral agents face in these contexts:

- (1) How can communities of faith vivify their rich resources for people of faith in our contemporary context?
- (2) How can communities of faith learn to discern the Spirit blowing through contexts we have traditionally been highly suspicious of?

I have begun to work on these questions tentatively in a variety of contexts, and would like to propose at least the following routes of inquiry. I think we need to develop an understanding of faith that is built around a practices notion. Dykstra and Bass note that a "practices" orientation to faith would include at least recognizing that practices: "(1) address fundamental human needs, (2) involve deep knowing, imbued with the knowledge of God and creation; (3) are social and historical; and (4) stress the dynamic of fall and redemption, of sin and grace."

Such a definition provides room for thinking again about theology as a descriptive, rather than simply normative discourse. Terrence Tilley has already begun to do so, writing: :

"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

I would hope that you can already hear in these quotations some resonance to the ways in which scholars talk about the reception of mass media, about the ritualized ways in which we engage mass media. But you might not "catch" how important this 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:

“... *tradita* alone do not carry the tradition.... 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 theologians 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 theologians 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.

Kathryn Tanner’s 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. What would we do if we would ask, not what is the church’s perspective on this piece of mass mediated material (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 the 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.

As I look back over the commission meetings, and the research projects they spawned for me, I am conscious of a thread that is woven throughout all of them, a strand of meaning always trying to become more visible and prominent – my own vocation in this stream if you will – that is, the desire to foster and facilitate, to name and to nurture, an interconnected set of ideas that can share the Word in media culture, no matter how earthen the vessels in which it resides.

I am deeply grateful that the Commission has made these opportunities available to me, and I am hopeful that I can share what I have learned – and continue to learn – in ways that honor and respect all the individuals and organizations who gave of their time to meet with us, and so graciously hosted us in their contexts.