

2004

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## Recommended Citation

Hess, Mary E., "The Bible and Popular Culture: Engaging Sacred Text in the World of "Others"" (2004). *Faculty Publications*. 320.  
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## Published Citation

Hess, Mary E. "The Bible and Popular Culture: Engaging Sacred Text in the World of "Others." In *New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millennium*, edited by Robert M. Fowler, Edith Waldvogel, Blumhofer, and Fernando F. Segovia, 209–24. New York: T & T Clark International, 2004.

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## The Bible and Popular Culture

### Engaging Sacred Text in a World of Others

*Mary E. Hess*

This essay was sparked by the conversations begun at a conference sponsored by the American Bible Society entitled *Futuring the Scriptures: The Bible for Tomorrow's Publics*. I am interested in the issues raised by that conference because I am a religious educator who works primarily with adults (I teach in a seminary and support adult Christian education in parish settings). My concern for new paradigms for Bible study very much grows out of my attempts to find ways to help persons of faith remain embedded in communities of faith and also be true to their vocations in other cultural spaces as well. For many years I lived in an inner city neighborhood in Boston, Massachusetts, one in which questions of crime and violence were not particularly foreign, and pop music and soap operas formed the basis of many conversations. At the same time I was teaching in a graduate program in pastoral ministry and religious education at a Jesuit college situated on a hill in the suburbs. Now I live in a large upper Midwestern city, St. Paul, Minnesota, and teach at a Lutheran seminary. Most of my teaching takes place in middle class, white contexts and with people who find themselves drawn to ministry as a vocation. Pop culture has not disappeared from the mix, however, with films, television, music, and the Web still interwoven in the lives of my students and neighbors.

I will make two arguments in this essay. First, I believe that engaging Scripture at the time and place in which I am located (see above) requires engaging mass-mediated popular culture. Second, that process of engagement is often difficult and strange, and thinking about it as a process of encountering an "other" is particularly fruitful for those of us who are intent on finding ways to think through Scripture into the twenty-first century and beyond.

### Thinking through Scripture by Way of Thinking through Others

What does it mean to “think through Scripture”? I have in mind a process that is lively and embodied, that has cognitive or rational components, but that also has affective and physical elements. As a religious educator, I try to help people come to a sense of themselves and their communities that is bound up with, intertwined with, perhaps even constituted by, the sacred texts at the heart of Christian life. So thinking through Scripture is living with and through it. It is a process that requires active Christian practice, not merely adequate Christian belief. But how do we facilitate this kind of scriptural practice in the midst of cultures, at least in the contemporary United States, where what is considered “sacred” is under contention and, even within graduate theological education, what is considered “Scripture” is at times in question?

My first response, as always, is that we go back to the stories that are at the heart of the Christian community. In that central place, at least when read in terms of Jesus’ life and engagements, we encounter a praxis of shared involvement with “others,” those persons found at the margins or those outcast from community altogether. Jesus frequently shared table fellowship with those defined as “other,” and the gospel writers often recall teachings related to embracing “others.” How can we live those stories now? What does it mean to embrace “others” in our contemporary contexts?

These questions only raise more, because one immediate response is that we Christians have not learned how to do this. We have instead learned the opposite: how to name and create “others” as a means of strengthening our own identities. In many ways the warfare between various elements of the Christian community has rarely been so brutal. The civil war in Rwanda would be one particularly compelling example, but clearly the troubles in Northern Ireland, in the former Yugoslavia, as well as in the United States (here I am thinking of the violence involved in hate crimes and in attacks on abortion clinics) are all illustrative as well. Far from embracing “others,” we are rarely capable of sharing our own differences in peaceful and just ways.

I have struggled with this dilemma for many years. My work has focused on understanding the ways in which mass-mediated popular culture contributes to the shaping of religious identity. At first I began that study convinced that pop culture contributes to that process only in destructive ways. I thought that there were clear and obvious connections between representations of “otherness” and the construction and maintenance of that otherness, often through violent means. Now I am not so

sure. Indeed, in recent years I have come to engage questions of difference, of “otherness,” that emerge *within* specific religious communities—differences identified by gender, by race, by class, and so on—at least as much as differences that are apparent *between* faith communities.

So how might popular culture function in shaping identity, and why would such a question be relevant in the context of a book that seeks to engage new paradigms for Bible study? To answer that question, I need to make an assertion and then process the implications of that assertion in a variety of ways. Let me begin by borrowing an assertion from Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley. They argue that storytelling is at the heart of human being. “Part of the power of narrative,” they write, “is that it enables us to make deep human connections that transcend unfamiliarity in locale and experience. . . . It is as if stories have mystical power to invite us, willingly or unwillingly, to enter unknown worlds” (4). Anyone who has ever been caught up in a film or television show knows that the power of narrative is even more deeply underlined by the addition of moving images and music.

My primary assertion, growing out of theirs, is that human storytelling, at least in this time and place, is thoroughly embedded in and permeated by mass-mediated popular culture. Pop culture shapes our narratives in multiple ways, including our explicitly religious narratives. While many creative people are exploring various aspects of this assertion, the implications I would like to explore in the rest of this essay grow out of Anderson and Foley’s idea that stories invite us into unknown worlds. They invite us to encounter things and people, places and practices, that are in some ways “other” to us. Both Scripture and mass-mediated popular culture invite us into the unfamiliar, invite us to encounter the “other.” But how do we do that constructively? How do we do that in ways that lead us into deeper relationship rather than into deeper division? And what, if anything, might encountering the unfamiliar in popular culture have to do with encountering the unfamiliar in Scripture? I will devote the rest of this essay to exploring these questions.

### *“Thinking by means of the Other”*

Richard Shweder is a cultural anthropologist who has spent decades studying very diverse religious cultures. He describes four ways in which anthropologists go about thinking through others: “thinking by means of the other,” “getting the other straight,” “deconstructing and going beyond the other,” and “witnessing in the context of engagement with the other.” Each of these proves evocative in relation both to popular culture and Scripture, and I would like to consider each in turn. None of these four

modes should be considered more valuable than the others; rather, each provides resources and processes by which we can ensure that our encounter with "otherness," particularly in the contexts of both pop culture and Scripture, can be constructive and honest.

Shweder's first category, "thinking by means of the other," has to do with engaging some aspect of the "other" as a means to learn more about ourselves: "Thinking through others in the first sense is to recognize the other as a specialist or expert on some aspect of human experience, whose reflective consciousness and systems of representations and discourse can be used to reveal hidden dimensions of our selves" (108). There are many ways in which mass-mediated popular culture attempts to function as an "expert" of sorts. One example would be the way in which pop culture has become a ritual in which we participate and which provides the "data" that we share in our attempts to communicate with each other. "Did you see that game?" someone asks, or, "What do you think about that candidate?" or, "Did you hear about that flood?" Most of the time the questions as well as the answers come from our listening and viewing in pop culture contexts. Mass-mediated popular culture also presents itself as an expert on what engages a "mass" of people. In both of these cases the expertise comes from defining the language (by which I mean more than simply the verbal issues) that we use in our attempts to communicate with each other.

But how does it reveal "hidden dimensions"? One obvious answer is that it gives us access to situations, feelings, settings, and actions that used to be entirely private. Indeed, the ability to enter a person's bedroom, even live between his or her sheets, is one of the most problematic ways in which communities of faith encounter the "otherness" of television, film, and other mass media. Representing and portraying a multiplicity of sexualities is just one of the ways in which popular culture invites us to reveal (sometimes to our detriment) the hidden dimensions of ourselves. However, television news and other pop culture genres have also brought to public attention various sexual abuses that communities of faith have perpetuated.

How is Scripture an expert? In particular, how might Scripture be an "other" who is an expert on something for which we yearn? More and more we find that the language of popular culture, while revealing some emotions and some contexts, hides others. There are in our sacred texts multiple expressions of emotions and ideas, modes of being and practice that are very alien to our contemporary context and that are consequently more valuable by virtue of that alienness. Finding ways to understand that

joy and sorrow are intimately co-mingled, for example, is not easy within popular culture. Scripture, however, provides a route into that recognition.

But there is another way, one directly tied up with both Scripture and popular culture, in which it is important to "think by means of the other." Many people today find living with and through Scripture very alien simply because they are unfamiliar with the experience of living with a sacred text that has been communally defined. Many young people in the U.S. inhabit this space, particularly those whose families have no involvement with communities of faith and who, in attending public schools, have had little or no exposure to the sacred texts of any community of faith. At the same time, many of these people have in recent years had multiple opportunities to engage stories from Scripture in the context of mass-mediated popular culture. Increasingly, television and film have drawn on scriptural stories (Moses and the various Jesus stories being just a few). Popular music is replete with songs that use scriptural references, and the Web is rapidly being permeated by sites that use scriptural references in a multitude of ways. Indeed, the shallow and often careless manner in which these media have used biblical stories has on occasion angered communities of faith, even touching off public protests in some cases.

From the point of view of these young people and others who have not had the opportunity to live with and through Scripture (as opposed to simply being familiar with the plot lines and characters of scriptural stories), engaging sacred text is very much "other." At the same time, from the point of view of communities of faith, the modes and manner in which scriptural stories are wrested from their living contexts and employed in mass-mediated popular contexts is very "other." Whichever side of the dividing line you live on, you are likely to see the opposite side as "other" to your own identity.

I believe we need to take seriously Shweder's notion of "thinking by means of the other" and engage both sides of this line as possibly disclosive, even revelatory. Speaking as a religious educator, I am obviously located within a community of faith, so from that "side of the line," I urge communities of faith not to boycott or ignore popular culture, but to ask deeper questions of it. Why do particular scriptural stories have resonance for people living wholly outside of the communal confines of a specific community of faith? How might the disturbing ways in which young people and others are claiming the insights and images of Scripture be new and possibly disclosive?

When I have the opportunity to do so, I ask people living on the "other side of the line," to consider the ways in which living in a community of faith might have something compelling to offer. I join them in

exploring a pop culture “text,” a film like *The Matrix*, for instance, and invite them to think about how communities of faith have lived into the question of what is real and how we know to what end we are committed in our lives (both of which are questions central to that film). This process does not end here, however, for as Shweder notes, there are many ways to think through others.

*“Getting the Other Straight”*

Shweder’s second process is something he terms “getting the other straight,” by which he means “providing a systematic account of the internal logic of the intentional world constructed by the other. The aim is a rational reconstruction of indigenous belief, desire, and practice” (109). Much biblical exegetical work, particularly from the historical-critical frame, would be familiar in this mode. There are many anecdotes told by people beginning graduate theological education about the consequence of engaging historical-critical tools—“I’ve lost my Bible!” is a common refrain. The underlying anxiety or humor (depending on the perspective) has to do with coming to grips with a text they thought they knew, but in exploring its internal logic discovered that it was something “other.”

The goal in this mode goes beyond simply learning the outlines of a narrative or becoming familiar with the major characters in the Bible. It requires digging deeply into the contexts of scriptural texts, learning how to “read” them in their multiple genres. Some of the resources emerging from new technologies are very helpful here. For example, scattered across the Web are numerous, credible sites that introduce people to the geography of the Bible. These sites help people to explore the etymology of various words used in the Bible, provide vast, easily searchable concordances, and provide images and music that reflect our best guess as to what we might have seen and heard in antiquity.

But what about “getting the other straight” in terms of mass-mediated popular culture? By what means can we read the underlying logics and discern the “beliefs, desires, and practices” that form the foundation of pop culture? Media educators have worked on these questions for some time and have begun to develop a range of tools that are, in some ways, very similar to biblical exegetical tools. These educators help students discover the different genres of popular culture; they explore the various grammars (visual and otherwise) that permeate pop culture. In particular, as a central aspect of their pedagogy, they introduce students to the unique production characteristics of particular genres of media. They do so not because they expect their students to master the technical aspects of film making, for instance, or to become adept at recording and

editing musical scores, but because in performing these practices their students gain a more vivid, deep, and critical appreciation for film and for music. As with Scripture, there are numerous Web sites available to provide ready access to these tools and methodologies.

“Thinking by means of the other” and “getting the other straight” are very useful modes, then, for beginning to engage Scripture and for becoming more aware of mass-mediated popular culture, but both can remain simply an interesting side trip, a way to be a “tourist” in a different culture without allowing that culture to be integrated into one’s own identity. It is possible to engage “others” in this frame and yet remain in a position of differentiation without ever moving to “reintegration.” That is, it is possible to engage sacred texts as an interesting and compelling example of meaning-making without having them bound up in one’s core way of making meaning in the world. It is equally possible to venture into popular culture without coming to a deep appreciation of its ubiquitous presence in the process of shaping identity. How might religious educators facilitate moving beyond this kind of differentiation?

*“Deconstructing and Going Beyond the Other”*

Shweder believes that the next step, at least from the point of view of anthropology, involves “going beyond the other.” Many educators would identify their next step as “critical reflection,” which shares much with Shweder’s assertion that “‘thinking through others’ . . . comes later, after we have already appreciated what the intentional world of the other powerfully reveals and illuminates, from its special point of view. ‘Thinking through others’ is, in its totality, an act of criticism and liberation, as well as discovery” (109-110). “Going beyond the other” is perhaps the mode of learning and knowing most feared by our contemporary religious institutional authorities (speaking from within my Catholic tradition), and is often painfully practiced by religious outsiders. Far too often this mode has *not* been the “third sense,” as suggested by Shweder, coming after “we have already appreciated what the intentional world of the other reveals,” but instead is often the first mode practiced, before sufficient respect—or even simple attention—has been given to understanding each other’s worlds. I often find Catholic persons in positions of religious authority condemning mass-mediated popular culture as a vast wasteland of violence and illicit sexuality, while religious outsiders (younger generations, in particular) condemn such religious authorities as closed-minded and repressive arbiters of meaning. Neither seeks to understand the other from within the other’s perspective.

We have not recognized the extent to which our complicated relationship with Scripture and culture has led to a drawing of sharp boundaries around Scripture that, in granting it normativity, have paradoxically narrowed and limited its reach. We as persons of faith have sought to be "in the world, but not of it," and in doing so we have become increasingly irrelevant, as we have refused to recognize how permeable cultural boundaries are and how much our worlds are interpenetrating each other.

There are some Christian communities, for instance, that have actually forbidden encounters with media that offer radically new and challenging interpretations of Scripture. Yet without the opportunity to "think beyond" the ways in which we have previously engaged Scripture we cut ourselves off from an essential part of the process of adult learning and growth. "Going beyond," especially when it is a mode by which one can encounter the paradoxical and conflicting claims of tradition and faith, is a crucial mode of encounter and meaning-making. Robert Kegan, a noted adult educator, recognizes how central this process is when he identifies the process of "contradiction" at the heart of adult learning. Deconstructing and going beyond the other begins to open us up, not just by way of critically engaging the "other," but primarily by practicing a critical perspective that inevitably transforms our own self-perception. As Kegan notes, this process is often painful and is one for which little educational support is provided.

Kegan's description of the learning process is noteworthy in this context, because he believes that human development in general, and meaning-making transformation in particular, proceeds by way of "confirmation, contradiction and continuity." Teachers can support authentic growth and development by attending to this tripartite process. "Confirmation" has to do with the extent to which the way a person "makes up" the world is confirmed by others. Religious educators attempt this kind of confirmation when we meet people where they are and assess their current knowledge and mode of understanding before we challenge it.

"Contradiction" is a process of moving through and beyond such meanings to new and different ways of understanding the world. Contradiction occurs both inadvertently and naturally, as well as through deliberate intervention. Entering graduate theological education often has this impact on students in relation to Scripture study, but crises of health or relationship can also have this impact. Teachers often call the skills involved in processing contradictions those of "critical thinking."

Confirming reality for students and then proceeding to contradict that reality only creates confusion, at best, and rigidity of belief, at worst; therefore, we must simultaneously provide what Kegan terms "continu-

ity.” Continuity is the crucial process of finding ways to connect one’s current construction of the world with those that one has made in the past. Religious educators can bring historical-critical biblical tools to bear on the tale of Noah’s Ark, for example, but unless we help our students come to grips with the ways in which Bible stories “are all true, and some of them really happened,” we risk our students falling either into biblical literalism or biblical irrelevance.

In describing this cycle of “confirmation, contradiction, continuity,” Kegan explores the ways in which we carry along and construct our definitions of “self” and “other.” He also explores the ways in which tremendous amounts of pain can be experienced amidst the learning process. “How I am” becomes “how I was” *before* shifting to “how I am now.” The very process of that transition involves a fundamental revisioning of one’s self and a distinct “dis-embedding” of oneself from a particular culture as part of the process of reintegrating into the next understanding. Far too often that pain can be externalized onto some “other” that is readily at hand.

It is this kind of “externalizing” onto an “other” that is at the heart of much our contemporary brokenness, particularly the violence and humiliation that characterizes some of the more painful conflicts within and between communities of faith. I believe that in providing new paradigms for biblical study, we must at least break open this process and find ways to support people through the painful encounter with the contradictions and discontinuities of our lives as lived in communities of faith. One such source of contradiction and discontinuity is our struggle over the relevance of Scripture to popular culture, and vice versa. Engaging the “otherness” of both Scripture and popular culture as similar, rather than specifying that one is “sacred” and the other “secular,” offers an integrated approach that can succeed where the continuation of a polarized dualism cannot.

In dealing with these contradictions, we need to approach the process carefully. Religious educators need to think about how we faithfully demonstrate critique of religious insider stances, for instance, if we are to erase gradually the line between “insider” and “outsider” within our faith communities. How, for instance, can I as a Catholic educator take up questions of supporting persons who are gay, while I am trying to be faithful to the ways in which I represent institutional Catholic interpretations of Scripture on homosexuality? How might I, as a Catholic woman, embody educational leadership in community in such a way as to break open the scriptural issues around women’s leadership in worship? These issues are alive in popular culture and are also lively within communities of faith.

These are difficult questions raised by Scripture and popular culture from within my own location, but there are equally difficult ones in others. If we can begin to engage them we might at the same time be able to change our stance towards those “others” beyond our self-defined boundaries. We might be able to educate toward a religious identity that can truly and thoroughly embrace difference. To do so, however, we have to find a way beyond differentiation and into reintegration. It is Shweder’s fourth mode of “thinking through others” that brings us to the kind of continuity Kegan suggests is necessary for this kind of transformative learning.

*“Witnessing in the Context of Engagement with the Other”*

Shweder’s fourth step recognizes that the “process of representing the other goes hand in hand with a process of portraying one’s own self as part of the process of representing the other, thereby encouraging an open-ended, self-reflexive, dialogic turn of mind” (110). What does it mean to recognize that in thinking through others we are intimately engaged in portraying ourselves as part of that process? I began this section of this essay quoting Anderson and Foley’s assertion that human beings are story-making people. Later in that same book, the authors suggest that the goal of story-telling “is not just to discover a world or provide an interpretation of a world that allows us to live in it but rather to discover and interpret a world that allows us to live with ourselves. We retell incidents, relate occurrences, and spin tales in order to learn what occurred, especially to *me*” (5). Indeed, in some manner, we make ourselves up in the process of making up the world. I will have more to say in the second section of this essay about the relational and communal consequences of this story-telling, but right now, I will explore the implications of this statement for Bible study.

“Making each other up” is often a legitimate concern many communities of faith have about popular cultural representations. Indeed, anyone who pays sustained attention to television in particular will sense that the reality constructed through it implicitly supports systems of oppression far more often than it explicitly deconstructs them. Many people of faith would affirm the normativity of Scripture, “Truth with a capital T,” because it provides a way in which to confront the negative representations and destruction through omission that they can clearly identify in popular culture. This understanding of normativity, however, tends to equate truth with a particular set of statements or convictions that hold over time and across cultures and that create identity over and against “others.”

Is there a way to address questions of normativity that allows us to affirm that we do, indeed, make each other up, but that does so without

losing transcendence or without losing our ability to speak of universals? The concern over universality arises in large part because knowledge frameworks that specify that knowledge is socially constructed eschew any notion of an abstract neutral universal. Yet the inability to speak of a universal in abstract, disembodied terms does not require us to give up the possibility of finding an embodied, specific way to speak in universal terms. Catholic theologian Roberto Goizueta, for example, writes that “we discover the whole, or the universal, not by adding up the particulars, but by entering fully into their very particularity, *within which* we will encounter their universal significance: ‘To know is to recognize the specific phenomenal activity that, in each case, reveals to us the Universe.’ In the words of the poet William Blake, we can ‘see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower’” (97). This description, an organic theological anthropology arising from within the U.S. Hispanic/Latino community, pushes us to recognize the ways in which we are inextricably bound to each other and yet still remain individual persons loved by God. Relationality is the very fabric of our existence; it is, in Goizueta’s terms, “constitutive” and “preexistent.” As Goizueta notes: “Only if I affirm your own concrete particularity and uniqueness will I be able to understand how your own life and history reveal a universal truth that is also true for me” (157).

This description provides further impetus for engaging in a complex and holistic process of “thinking through others,” for how else might we come to “understand,” as Goizueta puts it, “how your own life and history reveal a universal truth that is also true for me” (157)? I cannot believe that it is possible to be respectfully present to others without also recognizing the ways in which mass-mediated popular culture swirls around us in the process. So we are back to the implication of the assertions I made at the beginning of this essay: human beings are story-tellers whose stories are permeated by popular culture; in engaging them through both Scripture and popular culture, we engage ourselves and each other.

This kind of “witnessing in the context of engagement with others,” however, is not often an easy or comfortable process to pursue. We need powerful and passionate metaphors and role models to help us embrace this struggle, particularly as we confront our own brokenness and the divisions that threaten to tear us apart. Daloz et al. speak of a “responsible imagination” that is capable of paying attention to images of dissonance and contradiction, “particularly as revealing injustice and unrealized potential.” This is precisely the kind of imagination religious educators need to call upon (151-152).

There are multiple examples of ways in which educators have tried to support this kind of imagination, and in the process provide access to the continuities of Christian community. Here are two multimedia productions, by way of short example. The first is the animated videotape series for children from BigIdea Productions, entitled *Veggie Tales*. These videos translate scriptural texts into a world of animated vegetables that act out stories on a kitchen counter top. Each episode begins with the veggies out of costume, discussing some pressing question. They then perform a story “in costume” that attempts either to portray a specific biblical text (as in the story of Daniel in the lions’ den) or to cull it out of a specific dilemma (as in the story of Madame Blueberry, whose tree house collapses under the weight of the “stuff” she has purchased from “Stuffmart,” thus giving new meaning to the phrase, “troubling one’s house”). At the end of the show, the veggies return to their “natural” state and pose a question to “QWERTY,” the computerized Bible, who responds with a specific Scripture verse.

These shows captivate young children and college students alike not simply because they contain sophisticated digital animation, good music, and silly humor, but because they weave provocative references to mass-mediated popular culture throughout their references to biblical culture. Parents of young children in this digitally mediated world are challenged to find ways of integrating biblical imagination into the media children like. Television and particularly videotapes are a familiar feature of pre-school and elementary school age lives, and *Veggie Tales* provides a way to make Bible stories present within that context. They also model one mode of engaging Scripture: searching it for answers to troubling questions. The downside of these productions is that like any image-driven medium, video meaning is not easily constrained to one message. The meaning one person draws from a production might be quite different from the meaning intended by the author of the production. Nor are the questions posed as easily answered as these productions suggest. They are appropriate for young children and are amusing for adults, but are by no means the only way in which to present scriptural texts. Still, they provide access to one way to live with Scripture in the midst of a digitally-mediated culture.

Given our current cultural illiteracy of history, providing access to the ways in which faith communities have engaged Scripture over time and across multiple contexts is of equal or greater importance. For this challenge, the American Bible Society CD-ROMs are a vital resource. These digital media provide a hypertext approach to Scripture, giving the user the primary responsibility for providing the path through the materi-

als, for evincing the necessary questions in search of multiple answers. They are rich in various instantiations of the text in question: music versions of the text, images based on the text, music videos of various versions of the text. The CD-ROMs also provide exegetical resources that allow the user to trace the meaning of various words in a passage and link that passage to a specific geographic context. Finally, they offer an introduction to story-boarding, enabling people to develop their own video interpretation of a text. By providing multiple translations of a text—translations that include not simply various print versions but also musical and image choices—the CD-ROMs open up the process of biblical translation and interpretation by making it accessible to people.

### Theological Entry Points into Responsible Imagination

We need more than multimedia productions of biblical texts to provide continuity, however. We need new metaphors for bringing biblical themes to bear in contemporary contexts. Earlier in this essay, new voices in theological anthropology provided insight into questions of normativity and universality. Here they can provide new routes by which educators can support a responsible imagination. One entry point that is profoundly helpful from the educational standpoint of “providing confirmation, contradiction and continuity” grows out of the work of Miroslav Volf:

The struggle for survival, recognition, and domination, in which people are inescapably involved, helps forge self-enclosed identities, and such self-enclosed identities perpetuate and heighten that same struggle. This holds true for relations between genders no less than for relations between cultures. To find peace, people with self-enclosed identities need to open themselves for one another and give themselves to one other, yet without loss of the self or domination of the other. (176)

Part of this opening up comes with the recognition that we are inextricably, constitutively bound to one another. But that recognition alone does not erase hatred, domination, systemic oppression, or any of the other sins with which we live. Instead, as Volf suggests, we must ask

the right kind of question, which is not how to achieve the final reconciliation, but *what resources we need to live in peace in the absence of the final reconciliation*. . . . Both the modern project of emancipation and its postmodern critique suggest that a *nonfinal reconciliation in the midst of the struggle against oppression* is what a responsible theology must be designed to facilitate. (109-110)

Searching for such a nonfinal reconciliation can lead us to self-descriptions that are more complex and ambiguous, more embracing of "others," and more capable of sustaining the critical continuity that Kegan suggests that our contemporary situation demands of us. Asking what these resources could be is a question that grows organically out of Shweder's notion of "thinking beyond the other" and Kegan's descriptions of dealing with contradictions in meaning frame. I am convinced that new paradigms for Bible study must ask this kind of question.

Such a question does not search Scripture for definitive answers to final questions, but looks to stories and places in which we can find ways to struggle. Indeed, the struggle itself is the goal; a phrase very similar to the feminist chant that "the process is the goal." I am reminded of the word image that Buckminster Fuller, the man who created the geodesic dome, coined within architecture for describing the essential stability of structures created by holding opposing forces together with respect for their integrity: "tension" + "integrity" = "tensegrity."

As I wrote at the beginning of this paper, I have been looking at cross-cultural work as a way of thinking about communicating across various "sub-cultures" within the Christian church. In no way do I believe that these groups of "religious insiders" or "religious outsiders" actually inhabit separate spaces. Rather, I have been looking at ways in which we might find some larger common ground and engage our real differences rather than recognize our differences, hide them, and deny their reality within the church. While Volf speaks about the realities of Christians and other religious communities engaging each other across large geographically-induced cultural divides, I think he is equally relevant when we consider the generational divides that exist within Christian churches.

Volf writes that "one of the most basic tenets of the Christian faith is that *we* are the perpetrators who crucified Christ, *we* are the godless whose godlessness God exposed. For us, sinful and limited human beings, following in the footsteps of the Crucified means not only creating space in ourselves for others, but in creating space for them making also space for their perspective on us and on them" (215). What is required to make this kind of space in ourselves and in our paradigms for Bible study? As I noted earlier, Shweder and Kegan suggest that at a minimum we must cultivate ways of thinking through others that allow us to see not only our differences or the authentic utility of each other's ways of being in the world, but also the limitations and constraints of our own and others' modes. Beyond that, we must grow to understand the ways in which our explorations lead to a more full understanding of ourselves and of how we, quite literally, make each other up.

There is perhaps no source for our identity that is more central than Scripture, and so it is Scripture that *must* help us both engage these limitations and support us in engaging *its* limitations. Volf vividly describes the ground necessary for this kind of pedagogy, although I should point out that I read his image through my own Catholic lenses, which like Goizueta, show me a reality where “community is the *source* of individuality” (152). Volf suggests that by considering how we engage in a *literal* embrace, such as a physical hug, we can understand more deeply how we can and must embrace our differences without losing either our self-identity or our constitutive community in the process. He identifies four steps in an embrace: “opening arms, waiting, closing arms, and then opening arms again” (141ff):

Open arms are a gesture of the body reaching for the other. They are a sign of discontent with my own self-enclosed identity, a code of *desire* for the other. . . . More than just a code for desire, open arms are a sign that I have *created space* in myself for the other to come in and that I have made a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by the other. . . . Finally, open arms are a gesture of *invitation*. (141-142)

Religious educators need to ask ourselves, how open are our arms? Have we reached out to all those within our community who might be alienated from the institutional church? Alternatively, if we speak from within an alienated community, have we opened ourselves up to relationship within the institutional church? Have we been willing to desire such an invitation? Have we opened ourselves up to the kinds of meaning-making that await us with others? Have we tried to “think by means of others” and tried to “get the other straight”? Have we, within institutional contexts, immersed ourselves in mass-mediated popular culture by listening to music, going to films, surfing the internet, hanging out at the mall, or going down to the local teen hangout? Have we, within alienated contexts, believed it worth doing to “think by means of” or to “get the other straight”? Have we, as young people, tried to figure out why sitting in silent prayerful meditation with Scripture might bring new insight?

Volf identifies waiting as the next step within physical embrace. “Waiting . . . [is] the halted movement of the arms outstretched toward the other” (142).

The waiting self *can* move the other to make a movement toward the self, but its power to do so is the power of signaled desire, of created space, and opened boundary of the self, not the power that breaks boundaries of the other and forces the fulfillment of desire. The other

cannot be coerced or manipulated into an embrace; violence is so much the opposite of embrace that it undoes the embrace. If embrace takes place, it will always be because the other has desired the self just as the self has desired the other. This is what distinguishes embrace from grasping after the other, and holding the other in one's power. Waiting is a sign that, although embrace may have a one-sidedness in its origin (the self makes the initial movement toward the other), it can never reach its goal without reciprocity (the other makes a movement toward the self). (142-143)

It is here that the pain of the dilemmas that emerge can be felt. Do we truly desire this embrace? How long must we wait? How do we hold ourselves open without submitting ourselves to coercion? What do we do if the embrace is rejected? Can we remain open to try again? The educational questions are myriad and deep. How can we teach in such a way as to remain open to that which might emerge? Can we sit in silence and allow silence to create a space for an invitation? Any classroom teacher knows how agonizing fifteen seconds of silence can be after a question is asked. Can we teach in such a way that our students and our faith communities grow more able and willing to wait for embrace? Can we provide the adequate support to enable the tension and pain of this transition, of this "not-knowing," of this waiting for final reconciliation, rather than the certainty of it? Can we inhabit our questions even more fully than we have asserted answers?

Volf does not leave us here, however, for he points out that open arms can draw the other in, at which point we close our arms again:

Closing the arms . . . is the goal of embrace. . . . It takes *two* pairs of arms for *one* embrace; with one pair, we will either have merely an invitation to embrace (if the self respects the other) or a taking in one's clutches (if there is no such respect). In an embrace a host is a guest and a guest is a host. Though one self may receive or give more than the other, each must enter the space of the other, feel the presence of the other in the self, and make its own presence felt. . . . For such free and mutual giving and receiving to take place, in addition to reciprocity, a *soft touch* is necessary. I may not close my arms around the other too tightly, [but] . . . I must keep the boundaries of my own self firm. . . . At no point in the process may the self deny either the other or itself. (143-144)

What is this reciprocity like in a teaching setting? How do we communicate the treasures of a tradition without shutting down the creative, improvisational abilities of new generations of faithful? Religious educators are often trained to bring answers to questions, not to allow questions

to emerge. What does it mean to create a space within Scripture study where those who are alienated from various parts of a faith community or of a tradition are invited into the learning event and embraced as essential and integral partners in the learning process? How do we practice this kind of “soft touch” within an institutional culture that far too often appears to be relying on hard repressive pressures? We can do so by practicing the kind of “thinking through others” that Shweder advocates, keeping in mind Kegan’s cautions about the pain and benefits of such a process. Volf’s description of the final element of embrace is that of “opening the arms again”:

What holds the bodies together in an embrace is not their welded boundary, but the arms placed around the other. And if the embrace is not to cancel itself, the arms must be open again (Gurevitch 1990, 194). . . . As the final act of embrace, the opening of the arms underlines that, though the other may be inscribed into the self, the alterity of the other may not be neutralized by merging both into an undifferentiated “we.” (144-145)

The best teachers I have encountered, those who inspire in me the vision of teaching to which I aspire, teach with precisely this kind of embrace—one that gathers me into a reciprocal and energizing study of a particular topic, sharing the resources that the teacher brings to the task and helping me to identify those that I bring, and then opening up the embrace again to let each of us continue to grow in our own ways. Scripture at its best can be this kind of teacher, and we must bring this kind of teaching to the tasks of Bible study, of enlivening our faith communities, and of supporting their embrace of all the vivid difference they now hold within them. If we cannot do that with each other, I hesitate to imagine how we might do it across larger boundaries. Finding a way to do it within our own boundaries, embracing the rich and painful differences that endure within us, only supports our efforts to live, work, and embrace our larger, overlapping cultures.

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