

INCULTURATION: AN APPROACH TO MEDIA STUDIES WITHIN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Introduction

Religious belief today exists in relationship with a new kind of culture; a media culture which is dominated by the power of the Image. The challenge facing religious educators is that of facilitating the urgent dialogue between a religion that is based upon the Word and a culture which is increasingly obsessed with the Image. In this paper it will be argued that such a dialogue is possible and can draw deeply upon the sources provided by the emerging theology of inculturation.

1: CULTURE

Approaches to media studies

For several decades now there has been an interest in media among religious educators. The initial reaction of many educators when approaching the media is to emphasise their technological aspects. The possibilities for any depth discussion within the area of religious education of the media based upon purely technological grounds is however severely limited, although ethical issues (such as the tendency for access to expensive technology to increase the gap between rich and poor) are obviously worthy of consideration.

Another reaction of teachers is to focus upon the messages of mass media – especially as these relate to the portrayal of sexuality and violence, the increasing invisibility of institutionalised religion in mass media productions, and the emphasis upon consumerism and materialism especially in advertising. This second approach tends to be interventionist – the media are seen as presenting a set of values that are in opposition to the values of the gospel. The job of the religious educator is

seen as being to intervene educationally to counteract the values of the media. While this second approach cannot be isolated from the wider framework of which they form a part – to quote McLuhan ‘the medium is the message’.

A more useful approach, to complement though not totally replace the above, is one which situates the mass media within the context of cultural studies. Pope John Paul II in his World Communications Day Message

for 1989 for example adopts such a perspective stating that:

Today, for example, one no longer thinks or speaks of social communications as mere instruments or technologies. Rather they are now seen as part of a still unfolding culture whose full implications are as yet imperfectly understood and whose potentialities remain for the moment only partially exploited.

What is culture?

For many culture is simply regarded as ‘high culture’, the expressions of art, dance, and classical music which are appreciated solely by a highly educated elite, especially in Western society. However sociologically, psychologically, philosophically and theologically the term has a broader and more fundamental meaning than this. Like the concept ‘religion’, the concept of culture is notoriously difficult to define in a broad, inclusive sense. Anthropology views culture as constituting all the learned behaviour acquired by an individual as a member of a social group or groups, (that is, non-genetically endowed behaviour). From a sociological perspective Giddens (1989) defines culture as consisting of the *values* the members of a given group hold, the *norms* which they follow, and the *material goods* they create (1989, p.31). Aylward Shorter, a theologian, defines culture as a transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a pattern capable of development and change (1988, p.5). He elaborates that culture comes into existence through collective processes, and involves sets of symbols and conceptions, interpretations of experience, and sets of social identities, which are communicated both formally and informally, consciously and unconsciously. He suggests the rather neat analogy that culture is the grammar of a society. Dermot A.Lane (1993, p.11) notes that culture includes ‘ways of life, value systems, the rights of people, beliefs, and traditions shaping human identity’. The ‘working definition’ of culture which underlies this paper is: **a socially constructed environment which, using symbols, presents, often unconsciously, a dominant worldview, coherent or otherwise, within which individuals locate their identity and generate meanings.**

Most reviewers note that contemporary western society is characterised by rapid cultural transformation, the replacement of a monocultural environment by cultural plurality, including the subcultures of the young, pop culture, and the marginalisation of religion from the cultural mainstream.

This is an edited version of a paper presented by **Dr Andrew**

* **McGrady** at ISREV, Los Angeles, 12 August, 1996. The paper was dedicated to the memory of Fr. Joseph Dunn the director of the Radharc Production team for thirty years: the founder and first director of the Catholic Communications Institute of Ireland, and the person who by his practical assistance, expertise, hospitality and friendship nurtured the interest of the author in the area of mass media.

Concept of ‘root paradigms’

Of particular importance to any discussion of culture of relevance to religious education is the proposal of William Biernatzki (1991 & 1993) and Hugh Montefiore (1992) that a key method of cultural analysis is that of the identification of root paradigms. A root paradigm is ‘an unquestioned – and practically unquestionable – assumption about the fundamental nature of the world and humanity underlying and influencing all social actions within a particular cultural context’ (Biernatzki, 1993, p.126). These are so taken for granted that they are invisible within a culture, and are regarded as a depiction of ‘the way the world ‘really is’, not merely the way our culture teaches us to think it is.’ (Biernatzki, 1993, p.132). Values and symbols are founded upon the root paradigms of a culture, and can point towards them, especially when appealed to emotionally in conflict situations.

Biernatzki argues for ‘the application of ... root paradigm analysis to mass media communication’ (1993, p.129). He considers that those who wish to communicate religion through the mass media should be aware of the root paradigm of the culture with which they are seeking to communicate and should formulate the religious message in terms of that root paradigm and associated symbols. Thus, those wishing to communicate religion and values ‘should try to penetrate not only the values and symbols of the culture but even to the root paradigms which underlie them. Communication which is not somehow consistent with the deepest assumptions of its audience about the nature of the world, the nature of humankind and the expectations about human motivation and action which people take for granted, will have little chance of success’ (1993, p.131). It is of course possible to reverse Biernatzki’s argument; not only is root paradigm analysis necessary in order to communicate religion in terms central to today’s culture, the culture associated with mass media is also constructed around defining root paradigms.

Culture and religion

Tillich (1987) observed that ‘religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion.’ Religion is not divorced from or above culture – along with other elements such as science, technology, and the arts; it both shapes, and is shaped by, the culture with which it interacts. To quote William Fore (1993, p.56): ‘every religious act, both of organised religion and of individual faith, is culturally formed. Religion comes clothed in culture’s language, uses culture’s history and its art forms, relies on those common understandings which are supplied by culture’s current mythology, and refers to current cultural experiences. There is no other way it can communicate except through culture and its forms.’

2: MASS MEDIA AS CULTURE

An on-going, probably unresolvable debate, is that of whether the mass media simply reflect culture

(or a variety of cultures) or in effect constitute a culture (or set of cultures). It is useful to acknowledge that in fact the relationship between the mass media and culture is diverse, differing between different media forms, in different societies, and within different generations within those societies. The relationship can be conceptualised along a dimension; at one extreme the mass media simply reflect a broader culture, at another point along the dimension they actually shape culture, and at the other extreme, in a growing number of instances, they not only shape culture but present so pervasive a world-view that they function as a cultural environment providing a mediated alternative to direct first-hand primary experience. Neil Postman (1987) argues that electronic media are strongly shaping contemporary American culture noting that ‘we have reached ... a critical mass in that electronic media have decisively and irreversibly changed the character of our symbolic environment. We are now a culture whose information, ideas and epistemology are given form by television, not by the printed word’ (1987, p.28). Later he goes further and argues that television has become the culture of American society: ‘television has achieved the status of ‘meta-medium’ – an instrument that directs not only our knowledge of the world, but our knowledge of *ways of knowing* as well ... Television has gradually *become* our culture. Its ecology, which includes not only its physical characteristics and symbolic code but the conditions in which we normally attend to it, is taken for granted, accepted as natural’ (1987, p.80).

Either as a culture in their own right, or a central factor shaping popular culture, the mass media have influenced the way in which pupils throughout the western world learn and their expectations as to how communication will occur. Attention spans have been shortened; highly differentiated elaborations of complex ideas have been replaced by the sound bite and the news clip; the test of the validity of an idea is often how it relates to lived experience; the concrete instance is favoured over the abstract principle; values are presented as products in a market-place from which the consumer can select; authority is based upon consent.

The cultural studies approach to media studies

A recognition of the socio-cultural implications of media is of course not new. McLuhan’s twin assertions that ‘the medium is the message’ and that ‘the medium is the message’ were a clear call to shift the focus of our analysis away from the so-called ‘content’ messages of the media examined in isolation. McLuhan outlined the characteristics of a pre-literate oral culture, a literate culture (initially based upon the technology of writing and amplified into a mass culture since the time of Gutenberg by print technology and, in more recent times, by mass education), and an emerging post-literate culture based upon electronic mass media technologies (McLuhan, 1964).

There is also a strong British tradition of approaching the study of mass media within a cultural

studies paradigm. Historically this originated at the Centre for Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham and in the work of writers such as Raymond Williams who in 1974 published *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* and in 1982 the *Sociology of Culture*. For Williams media products function as 'texts' revealing the 'structure of feeling' of a culture and indicating its values and significant meanings. As such, it is possible to apply methods of textual analysis to mass media products.

John Coleman (1993, pp.4,7) considers the cultural studies approach to be an alternative to the more dominant structuralist approach which tends to stress how mass media feed into and reinforce the political economy of capitalism helping to create a 'culture of consumerism' by aggregating audiences which are then sold to advertisers. The structuralist tradition sees the mass media as reinforcing a mass society characterised by undifferentiated public discourse and a one-dimensional man dominated by passivity. Coleman describes the alternative cultural studies approach as flowing from the observation that audiences are quite diverse, coming from a huge variety of social groups and sub-cultures. It is founded on the belief that audiences discriminate and make critical judgements while engaging in acts of interpretation of media messages. John Fiske in *Television Culture* (1987) argues that while a TV programme such as a news-report or a soap opera may frame a preferred meaning, viewers actually negotiate appropriate individual meanings according to their social situation and experience. He states that the making of culture out of media products 'is a process that can only be performed by their consumers, not by their producers' (1987, p.323).

Mass media as a cultural alternative to religion

William Fore suggests that 'television creates images of such power and such appeal that in fact it functions as though it was a religion' (1993, p.63). George Gerbner (1979) suggested that television, in providing a ritualised dramatisation of symbols and values, plays a cultural role similar to popular religion. Gregory Baum (1993, p.65) notes that the mass media do much more than mediate information: like religion they create the categories in which we perceive the world. Coleman (1993, p.9) argues that the media invent new patterns of knowing and valuing in society; they inform; they regulate behaviour, values and agendas. They provide a ritual function by connecting people to their environment and to other individuals. They reinforce group identity and provide a common background within a given society. Similarly, Colin Morris (1990) correctly notes that:

...even in secular society, certain archetypal themes run through the life and experience of believers and unbelievers alike. Their lives are touched by dread and glory, unearthly fears have to be subdued and some sort of response made to the ultimate questions of life and death. People still need to locate

themselves in the universe, in society and in their own heads. We cannot survive without drama, pageant, play and fantasy.

In a complementary approach to a cultural analysis based upon the identification of root paradigms several researchers such as Gregor Geothals (1981, 1993) and William Fore (1987, 1990, 1993) have noted that 'television has become the great cultivator of our culture, the great mythmaker of our time' ... providing myths which 'tell us what has *meaning* – for example, the meaning of social roles in society: who has the power, who is the aggressor, who is the victim. They tell us who can do what, to whom, with what consequences. By telling us 'the way things are' they convince us this is the way it ought to be'. (Fore 1993, p.57). For Fore (1990) television creates myths about the media themselves, including:

- the myth that the media tell us the way life really is, that 'seeing is believing', and that if we don't see it on TV it doesn't exist;
- the myth that information overload is inevitable and a 'natural' price to pay for living in modern society;
- the myth that there exists a free flow of information and that anyone with a message can 'get on TV'.

Fore (1990) also suggests that TV creates myths about society in general, including:

- the myth that efficiency is the highest good (if it 'works', it is good);
- the myth that technology is progress and that progress cannot be stopped, regardless of the human implications;
- the myth that the fittest survive (and that the fittest are young, white, males);
- the myth that power and decision-making start at the centre and move out and that those at the centre know best;
- the myth that happiness consists of limitless material consumption; that consumption is inherently good, and that property, wealth, and power are more important than people.

Myths, icons and ritual

The worldview presented by a media culture is enshrined in a number of images and metaphors which function as quasi-religious icons and which invite participation by ritual engagement. For Goethals icons (visual images) function within a myth as symbols of its world-view; they provide a sense of sacred order, an awareness of origins and a sense of destiny, and they provide models for the integration of human personality. Ritual is the symbolic re-enactment of myth that enables the on-going participation within it of successive generations. By being a mass medium television in particular makes available to all members of a culture, irrespective of their age, geographical

location, or educational level, common myths, icons and opportunities for ritual engagement.

Television offers public, shared symbols which for many Americans answer the questions 'Who am I?' and 'Who are we?'. Under a giant canopy of images all denominations and religious traditions are exposed to the same framing of reality. Thus, networks and cable TV, magazines and newspapers, combine forces to offer what religious institutions themselves once provided indirectly: images of an ordered world; icons of exemplary individuals, models of what human life can and should be like, and rituals that help to unify people who are diverse – racially, ethnically and religiously (Goethals, 1993, p. 28).

One way of conceptualising the relationship between myths, icons, root metaphors and rituals as we find these in the work of Biernatzki, Coleman, Fore and Goethals is by using the analogy of an iceberg. An icon is similar to that the tip of the iceberg visible above the waterline. It is our primary conscious experience of the cultural entity, both attracting our attention and inviting our engagement. The whole of the iceberg, both the visible part above the water, and the much larger section floating below the waters of our immediate consciousness, parallels the root metaphor and its associated myths. Just as an iceberg has hidden depths and textures, so too a cultural entity has layers of meaning deriving shape and form from its root metaphor. Further, just as there are a number of ways of physically interacting with an iceberg (usually requiring the use of specialist tools such as boats, protective clothing, climbing gear, and diving equipment, all provided in collaboration with others), so too ritual provides both the tools and the procedures for engaging with the icons, myths and root metaphor of a cultural entity, and it usually does so in a manner shaped by the previous experience of others. To explore an iceberg we must enter its space, dwell safely within the environment it creates and eventually distance ourselves from it. Such an exploration of an iceberg changes us and changes the iceberg by affecting, in even a small way, its ecology. Similarly ritual provides the devices which enable us to enter the realm of the cultural entity, to explore its surface meanings and to probe its submerged, initially hidden, zones of meaning. Ritual enables us to enter and abide with safety, and eventually to distance ourselves from an entity, which, like an iceberg, always has the potential to overwhelm us.

Epistemology, television and religion

A highly influential critique of the characteristics of contemporary media culture of interest to religious educators is that provided by Postman 1987 who draws a distinction between a technology and a medium: 'a technology is to a medium as the brain is to the mind. Like the brain, a technology is a physical apparatus. Like the mind, a medium is a use to which a physical apparatus is put. A technology becomes a medium as it employs a particular symbolic code, as it

finds its place within a particular social setting, as it insinuates itself into economic and political contexts. A technology ... is merely a machine. A medium is the social and intellectual environment a machine creates' (1987, p.86). Pivotal to Postman's argument is his perception of the fact that any medium has an associated epistemology and that with the cultural dominance of television there is not only a new world-view but a different way of knowing to that provided by print.

Television is nothing less than a philosophy of rhetoric. To talk seriously about television, one must therefore talk of epistemology (1987, p.17). ... My argument is limited to saying that a major new medium changes the structure of discourse; it does so by encouraging certain uses of the intellect, by favouring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom, and by demanding a certain kind of content – in a phrase, by creating new forms of truth-telling (1987, p.27).

So far Postman's critique differs little to that provided by McLuhan that the medium is the message, (Postman acknowledges his indebtedness to McLuhan). Postman however continues his argument by stating that not only is the medium the message, the medium is the metaphor.

A message denotes a specific, concrete statement about the world. But the forms of our media, including the symbols through which they permit conversation, do not make such statements. They are rather like metaphors, working by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality. Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed world or the television camera, our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, colour it, argue a case for what the world is like (1987, p.10).

In displacing print as society's dominant form of cultural expression, television has changed the metaphors that we use to know about our world. All aspects of public discourse – politics, religion, education – must therefore be 'recast in terms which are suitable for television' (1987, p.8). Postman expresses passionate concern that the epistemology of television is reductionist, understanding itself through the metaphor of 'show-business', and being characterised by entertainment.¹ Television creates a 'peek-a-boo' world

¹ Aylward Shorter (1988, pp.5,6) differentiates inculturation from 'enculturation' which is the learning process by which 'a person is inserted into his or her culture' from 'acculturation' which is one of the processes underlying cultural development by which one culture influences another culture, and from 'transculturation' (also termed 'cultural dominance') in which one culture seeks to destroy another culture by suppressing its traits and seeking to replace them with its own. Shorter considers that the alternative term

'where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again ... a world without much coherence or sense; a world that does not ask us, indeed, does not permit us to do anything; a world that is ... entirely self-contained ... (and) also endlessly entertaining' (1987, pp.78-79). For Postman the crux of the issue is that television has made entertainment itself the dominant metaphor for the representation of all experience, 'the problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining' (1987, p.89). Metaphors it should be remembered not only disclose, they also suppress. It is the nature of television as a medium to 'suppress the content of ideas in order to accommodate the requirements of visual interest; that is to say, to accommodate the values of show business' (1987, p.95).

Turning his attention to religion, Postman argues that not everything is televisable since 'not all forms of discourse can be converted from one medium to another. It is naive to suppose that something that has been expressed in one form can be expressed in another without significantly changing its meaning, texture or value ... what is televised is transformed from what it was to something else' (1987:pp.119 -120). When religion is depicted on television it has to conform to the metaphor of the medium, the metaphor of entertainment. Within the domain of this metaphor 'everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence' (1987, p.119). Religion has to do with enchantment rather than entertainment, a distinction which Postman regards as crucial since 'enchantment is the means through which we may gain access to sacredness. Entertainment is the means through which we distance ourselves from it' (1987, p.124).

So, is it possible to express a religion founded on the Word in a culture increasingly obsessed by the Image? Postman's answer seems to be no, not without destroying the very essence of religion and transforming it into something which it is not. There is an air of pessimism about his argument; he regards contemporary media as superficial, print as an inherently superior medium, and seems to lack any confidence in the potential of media consumers to be able to interpret the media and negotiate a range of meanings. If followed, his approach would lead to religion being completely divorced from mainstream culture and assuming permanently the position of a minority subculture based solely upon the word.

3. INCULTURATION: A THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM

A radical alternative, offering hope that the dialogue between Word and Image, and between media and religion, is possible is that provided by the

used in Catholic theology, 'interculturalism' is effectively synonymous with 'inculturation'.

emerging theology of inculturation.² Within recent Roman Catholic circles this has been discussed by Arrupe 1978, Shorter 1988, Principe 1991, Baum 1993, and in the Irish context, by Lane 1993. The first systematic exploration of the concept is to be found in a letter by the Superior General of the Jesuits, Pedro Arrupe who defined inculturation as:

...the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question ... but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a 'new creation' (1978, p.172).

For Arrupe, inculturation relates not only to the first insertion of faith into a culture but is an ongoing task. Since culture is a developing process there must be a continuous dialogue between faith and culture. Although the Second Vatican Council did not use the term 'inculturation', Pope John XXIII in his opening address to the council drew a distinction between the substance of the deposit of faith and the manner of its expression. Inculturation theology draws on several key Council texts such as *Lumen Gentium* (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, especially par.17), *Gaudium et Spes* (the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World which devoted a whole chapter to culture and in which paragraphs 44, 58 and 59 are often highlighted), and *Ad Gentes*, (which is concerned with evangelisation). Baum (1993, p.63) refers to the **Law of all Evangelisation** stated in *Gaudium et Spes* (GS#44) that the church must communicate its message to the culture in which it lives in the idiom of the culture, using the ideas and the terminology understood in the culture.

The Second Vatican Council saw the gospel as renewing and purifying human culture. Paragraph 58 of *Gaudium et Spes* states that 'God has spoken to humanity according to the culture proper to each age. Similarly the church, which in the course of time has existed in varying circumstances, has used the resources of different cultures in her preaching to spread and explain the message of Christ'. The document continues in a very radical manner to state that 'the Church, sent to all peoples of every time and place, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, any particular way of life or any customary way of life recent or ancient. ... She can enter into communion with the various cultures, to their enrichment and the enrichment of the Church herself'. *Gaudium et Spes* (GS#59) continues 'culture is to be subordinated to the integral perfection of the human person, to the good of the community and of the whole society. Therefore it is necessary to develop the human faculties in such a way

² Letter from John Paul II to Cardinal Casaroli appointing him as president of the Pontifical Council for Culture; quoted in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28th June, 1982, pp. 1-8.

that there results a growth of the faculty of admiration, of intuition, of contemplation, of making personal judgement, of developing a religious, moral and social sense’.

For those with a concern for religious education it is of interest that the first use of the term ‘inculturation’ by a pope in official documentation was by John Paul II in *Catechesi Tradendae* (*Catechesis in Our Time*, 1979) in which he states that:

Catechesis ... is called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures. ... Catechesis will seek to know these cultures and their essential components; it will learn their most significant expressions; it will respect their particular values and riches. The power of the Gospel everywhere transforms and regenerates. When that power enters into a culture, it is no surprise that it rectifies many of its elements. (CT#53)

One of the initiatives of the present pope was the establishment in 1982 of the Pontifical Council for Culture. In this context he notes that the synthesis between faith and culture ‘is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith. A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out.’ (Quoted by Dewey, 1916, p.85).

An inculturation-based theology of communication draws upon the following: the Trinity as a communion of persons in communication; Divine revelation as *kenosis*; the incarnation as the decisive event of communion between the divine and the human; the recognition that revelation occurs, and continues to occur, within the context of human culture, a culture which it can redeem; the emphasis on the power of the gospel to liberate the human individual to be an agent of social and personal transformation; the emphasis that the human individual shares in the creativity of the Divine and expresses this creativity in human work including the creation of media products; the call to use all resources available to us to establish the reign of God, a reign characterised by liberation, justice and peace; and the recognition that authentic communication establishes a community of persons.

Based upon the above we can attempt a summary of the key propositions of the emerging Catholic theology of inculturation:

- the expression of the revelation upon which a religious faith is based reflects a particular historical culture. An ongoing task of evangelisation is that of continually re-expressing faith in the context a plurality of cultures. As Lane (1993, pp.12, 20) states ‘the issue is no longer one simply of faith and culture but rather one of faith and cultures. ...Faith must be re-born in every age and culture’;
- the encounter between faith and culture is one which brings about transformation. Lane (1993, pp.23, 35) states that ‘inculturation brings out what is best in culture, or equally it can enable culture to

realise creatively its full potential’, it ‘means embracing the modern world in a spirit that is constructive and yet critical, that announces and denounces at one and the same time’;

- within the context of Roman Catholic theology inculturation has a strong grounding in incarnational theology. In Christ not only has the divine entered decisively into the realm of the human, but the human has been taken into the realm of the divine. Since the ‘Word has been made flesh and dwelt among us’ any distinction between the sacred and the secular is meaningless (the opposite to the sacred is the profane, not the secular). Since the whole of creation, including human culture, has been transformed by the incarnation, religion and culture cannot be seen as two opposing entities;
- the task of the re-expression of faith is more than one of simple translation. It is an interactive process of entering into communion with a culture, a process in which each culture is purified by the religious tradition, and the religious tradition itself is purified by the new culture.

Marshall McLuhan talked about the phenomenon of ‘rear-view driving into the future’, suggesting that, as we move from a literate to a post-literate age, we are rather like the driver of a car who cannot see the road ahead because the windscreen of our car is obscured, but can see where we have been by fixing our gaze on the view provided by the rear-view mirror. This analogy is helpful with respect to the emerging theology of inculturation. We are not quite sure where we are heading but we must continue the journey. As we look in our mirror we realise that the process of inculturation, though newly identified, is in fact as old as the Judaeo-Christian tradition itself. In so doing we can also recognise that we have inherited from our religious traditions two significant resources which uniquely equip us our task – these are the historical experience of our tradition and the expertise which is to be found within our tradition concerning hermeneutics.

Historically the Judaeo-Christian tradition has faced this sort of problem before – both religions had their origins in an oral culture. The myths that constitute the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the Sermon on the Mount, the parables of Jesus, all assert to this fact. While Jesus is presented in the gospel as being able to read (in the Capernaum Synagogue) and to write (on the sand at least) we have no text claimed to have been written by him. The compilation of oral sources into a written collection of sacred texts itself indicates the transformation of a religion based upon an oral culture into a religion based upon a book (the bible). The systematic presentation of the early Christian faith which we find in the New Testament letters does reflect a written culture, and in so doing reflects a different understanding of religion itself, a transformation which was amplified by the increasing contact between Christianity and Hellenistic culture and which led to the reshaping of the gospel message in the concepts and

categories of Greek philosophy. A further challenge to Christianity, which demanded 'inculturation' was of course the cultural, and communications revolution associated with the invention of the printing press. Texts reproduced by manual writing are radically different to those reproduced by print. The availability of large numbers of copies of the Bible, in the vernacular, created the social and cultural environment in which the Reformation could occur. One way of analysing the resultant tensions is to argue that the Protestant Reformers were operating within the newly emerging print culture (with its emphasis on the autonomy of the individual before God, freedom of access on the part of each individual to the sacred texts, and the authority of the written text) while the Roman Catholic church was operating firmly within the context of an oral culture (with its emphasis on the incorporation of the individual into the believing community, access to the sacred written texts within the context of that community, and the authority of the hierarchy to interpret the sacred texts). The present age can be seen as the third major challenge to the gospel as we move from a culture based upon the Printed Word to one based upon the Instant Image.

Our religious traditions also equip us with hermeneutical skills relating to the interpretations of texts. Lane (1993, p.25) defines hermeneutics as 'the art of understanding and interpreting different texts, events and human experiences' and he notes that such interpretation involves three realities, the phenomenon to be interpreted, the person interpreting, and the interaction between these realities. Within our tradition hermeneutical skills have been utilised primarily to examine the historical, social and theological environments in which doctrinal statements have arisen and to clarify their contemporary authority and significance, and of course for interpreting biblical material. The fluency, which our religious traditions have acquired in these contexts, provide a resource for interpreting the contemporary texts provided by electronic and mass media.

4: A RELIGIOUS EDUCATION METHODOLOGY BASED UPON INCULTURATION

The focus of inculturation is usually that of the evangelisation of a foreign, non-European culture within a missionary context. However in this paper the proposal is made to transpose the paradigm into the context of the examination of contemporary Western media culture and its relationship to religion. What is being argued is that the recognition that in many essential respects the mass media now constitute a culture in their own right allows the emerging theology of inculturation to be utilised as the general framework for an educational strategy within the domain of religious education. We are of course concerned with a specific focus – the approach to media studies within the educational context. Wider issues relating to the relationship between institutionalised religion and mass

media, such as the way in which the churches can use the public mass media for evangelisation, is not our immediate or primary concern. Our concern is with the more formal context – the structured learning situation and with the learner as a free, developing, human individual.

Implicit support for an inculturation-based approach to media studies within religious education can be seen in the comments concerning the general relationship between the school and culture outlined in the Vatican document *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, 1988, which argues that the Catholic school is based on 'an educational philosophy in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony' (#51), and that 'one of the characteristics of a Catholic school is that it interprets and gives order to human culture in the light of faith' (#52). Thus 'while faith is not to be identified with any one culture and is independent of all cultures, it must inspire every culture' (#53). The curriculum of the Catholic school should provide for 'careful rigor in the study of culture and the development of a critical sense' (#101), being 'especially attentive to the practical effects of culture', while strengthening 'those aspects of it which will make a person more human' and identifying the 'ethical requirements' to be found in the culture (#108). The 'proper autonomy of culture' has to be distinguished from 'a vision of the human person or of the world as totally autonomous' (#53). A mature religious faith is 'able to recognise and reject cultural counter-values which threaten human dignity' (#52).

There is of course no one single methodology that can be drawn from a concern for inculturation. Plato defined a slave as one who accepts from another the purposes, which control his conduct. The essential element of any educational intervention, within the context of religious education or otherwise, is simply to bring the media product from the general cultural environment into an educational setting in which, rather than being approached solely as an item of entertainment, it is seen as a 'text' to be critically reflected upon, analysed and interpreted. The precise approach followed in any educational intervention will depend upon a number of factors:

- the characteristics of the group of learners – the level of critical reflection attempted will obviously depend upon their developmental readiness;
- the precise media product being considered – one will pose different questions when considering an episode from a soap opera, a film, a news report, a documentary a pop song, a single advertisement, a sequence of adverts, or a TV game show;
- the dominant culture of the learners – the relationship between the mass media and general culture differs in Ireland or France from America, as it does for a group of urban teenagers or an older group of parents who are concerned about the effects of media upon their children.

To reflect the concerns of inculturation any teaching / learning approach will be characterised by some of the following:

- a commitment to treating media productions seriously, that is as cultural mediations of contemporary human experience. This commitment includes rejection of any stance which regards the electronic media as inherently less worthy a cultural expression than print, or of an approach which seeks to withdraw from media culture and create a religious subculture divorced from the cultural mainstream;
- a commitment to engaging in critical hermeneutics – treating the media product as a text to be interpreted and the learner as one capable of interpreting, (in other words it is not enough to tell the learners what a media product means, the pupils must be treated as active interpreters);
- a persistent focus upon the examination of the media product within a context in which the precise content depicted is related to the wider structural elements provided by the culture. This requires a concern to identify the manner in which media products are human constructions rather than descriptions of actual reality, a recognition that the texture of such constructions is conditioned by the epistemology inherent in a medium being used, and a belief that it is possible to construct alternative descriptions of reality;
- a recognition that, in the process of making a construction of reality, media products present a world-view and associated value system – their construction involves an act of interpretation on the part of their producers. Such constructions often set the agenda for public discourse and determine what is visible and invisible within a society; and their producers and editors act as gate-keepers controlling access to public discourse within a culture;
- a focus upon the way in which the symbols, images and metaphors used are indicative of an underlying root paradigm which contains assumptions about the nature of reality and human identity;
- a commitment to balance affective and emotional responses with a bringing to consciousness of that which is implicitly being suggested;
- a willingness to affirm, appreciate and celebrate those positive aspects of the culture which are reflected in the media product as well as to challenge that which needs to be transformed. As Baum (1993. p.65) notes the mass media of communication are an exciting development at the heart of modern society embodying human intelligence, artistic talent and technological innovation;
- a willingness to allow the religious tradition itself to be challenged and purified by its dialogue with contemporary media culture;
- an abiding belief in the power of human agency, that is in the power of the learners to interpret and

shape the culture in which they are immersed and to be agents of cultural transformation. This point is well argued in *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* which states that the ‘world of human culture and the world of religion are not like two parallel lines that never meet; points of contact are established within the human person. For a believer is both human and a person of faith, the protagonist of culture and the subject of religion. Anyone who searches for the contact points will be able to find them.’ In this context it should be remembered that the pupils we teach in the structured learning situation inhabit a number of cultures simultaneously. Their degree of conscious participation in each culture, the relative dominance of the various cultures, and their degree of dominance, varies between different situations and over time. Thus our pupils inhabit a general media culture, the subculture related with a particular magazine or pop group, the general social class structure of their family, and the particular religious culture of their church or school.

Valuing entertainment as a root paradigm

An inculturation approach to media as culture must take seriously the possibility that the root paradigm of this culture may be in fact be entertainment (and that its other functions of education and the provision of information are only possible with a mass audience to the extent that they can be translated into entertainment). Mention has already been made of Postman’s rejection of the culture of mass media, especially television, precisely because its dominant epistemology is entertainment. His position simply reflects the usual approach of religion not to value entertainment. Postman argues that enchantment is the process by which we enter the realm of mystery while entertainment is the device by which we distance ourselves from such an engagement. But this distinction is highly questionable; entertainment may in fact be a device, among others, which mediates enchantment. A clear instance of this, of relevance to religious engagement, is play. Reflection upon the experience of play, especially among young children, illuminates the way in which this is a highly entertaining ritualistic activity, which enables a concrete synthesis of enchantment, engagement and transcendence. It is often of a repetitive nature and follows clear patterns, which are usually rule-governed within a social and communal framework. The child will continue to engage in play to the extent that it is entertaining. By play the child enters a realm of mystery, tries on new roles and explores existing roles. In so doing the child situates his or her identity and explores possible relationships with others. In play, enchantment and entertainment coexist. Within the rituals of play entertainment and enchantment are intimately connected. Can the same be said of other rituals related to religion and the use of mass media? While a religious ritual is primarily an act

of worship it is also a celebration which may be entertaining as well as enchanting.

What is needed to underpin a dialogue between the gospel and contemporary media culture is not just a theology of technology but an inculturation-based **theology of entertainment**, that is one which will enable us enter into communion with the notion of entertainment, and affirm it while both seeking to transform it and be transformed by it. The development of such a theology will of course firstly require us to articulate our suspicion of entertainment. Religious traditions are often dismissive of entertainment. It is seen as 'time-out' from serious work-related activity, a time in which we are 'open to temptation', when 'the devil creates work for idle hands'. Further while religious traditions stress the commandment that the Sabbath be a 'day of rest', it is often the opportunity for worship created by the absence of work, rather than the possibility of rest itself that is valued. Yet biblically Sabbath is presented as a celebration of that which has been completed and created, an affirmation of rest itself. 'God rested', rest is an **activity** of the Divine rather than a state of inactivity which is open to temptation. It was while Adam was sleeping, that is resting, that God created a partner for him, and while God was walking in the garden in the cool of the evening, presumably resting himself, that he looked for the reclusive Adam and Eve, seeking to enter into communion with them. If entertainment can be seen as a mode of playful engagement then it is possible to see it as a form of biblical rest. Perhaps entertainment creates the space in which we are free to participate in new cultures. It is 'cultural time-out' in which we are free to explore new identities and roles.

5: CONCLUSION

In preparing for this paper, I re-read many of the important sources that I had read in the past. By chance, I re-read Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* first. While the strength of his argument and the depth of his synthesis impressed me, I was left feeling depressed, powerless and overwhelmed by the pessimism which pervades his work. I then re-read some of the official Catholic Church documentation – the chapter on culture in *Gaudium et Spes*, selected passages in *Ad Gentes*, *Communio et Progressio*, the church's most systematic treatment of the media published in 1971, and recent documents published under the authority of the present pope, *Catechesis Tradendae*, and selections from his messages for World Communications Day – dealing with the church's response to *Computer Culture* (1989) and *Family Television Viewing* (1984). My spirits were lifted by their overwhelming sense of hope, realism, challenge and balance. Repeatedly an affirmation of media culture was evident, albeit accompanied by recognition that substantial aspects of media culture stand in need of redemption by the Christian gospel. What I did not find was a dominance of condemnation or rejection.

I agree with Jim McDonnell (1992, p.181) that 'we need to identify and celebrate those times and places where Christ is suddenly glimpsed in and through the media'. As religious educators we can celebrate the accomplishments of films such as *Dead Man Walking*, *Jesus of Montreal*, *Cry Freedom* and even a children's cartoon such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, all of which radically express the gospel in contemporary form; we can affirm the recognition of human dignity and emancipation in *Rain Man*; note the parallels between the gospel Infancy Narratives and a film such as *E.T.*; humbly admit our failings, both as religious institutions and as individuals, in the light of films such as *The Mission* or *Priest*; value the sense of human solidarity provided by media-events such as *Live-Aid*; recognise the ongoing contribution of religious programmes such as the BBC series *Everyman* and the Irish RTE series *Radharc*; highlight the snapshots of the human condition provided by many pop-songs such as *In the Name of Love* (U2), *Losing my Religion* (REM), *Another Day in Paradise* (Phil Collins), *In the Ghetto* (Elvis Presley), *It's a Sin* (Pet Shop Boys); as well as welcoming the many occasions in which TV and radio are made available for the live broadcast of religious ceremonies. It is too easy to simply focus on programmes with little or areligious content such as those which exploit sexuality, glorify materialism and entertain by violence. We cannot credibly enter into communion with contemporary culture, a culture in which the media play such a defining role, unless we adopt a balanced approach. Our credibility, and our hope of success, depends upon our ability to affirm as well as to challenge.

Of course situating a discussion of the media within the context of a recognition that in many respects it constitutes a culture, allows the use of many frames of reference familiar to religious educators. In contemporary academic discourse the notions of culture, paradigm, metaphor, symbol, icon, root-metaphor ritual, text, and identity are held in common with theology, anthropology, sociology and philosophy. A dialogue based on inculturation acknowledges that a culture may in fact be invisible to those who subsist in it (to quote John Hull's oft-made remark – 'who ever discovered water it wasn't a fish'). The approach acknowledges the role of the affective, the unconscious and the behavioural, as well as emphasising the need to bring to consciousness and to interpret the media text.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a methodology based upon inculturation is established on the basis of a firm belief in, and commitment to, the power of human agency. The mass media are not only the products of a deterministic political, economic and commercial supra-structure, they are human productions, which are offered to human consumers. Each generation has the possibility of re-shaping human culture. It is possible to educate the critical faculties of media-users and to develop the sensibilities of media-producers. Inculturation therefore allows the dialogue with our pupils to occur in a climate of trust and in the

belief of the possibility of responsible human action. In his message for World Communications Day 1989, Pope John Paul II expressed this well: his words are a fitting conclusion to this paper:

Let us 'trust the young'. They have had the advantage of growing up with the new developments, and it will be their duty to employ these new instruments for wider and more intense dialogue among all the diverse races and classes who share this 'shrinking globe'. It falls to them to search out ways in which the new (technological) systems ... can be used to assist in promoting greater universal justice, greater respect for human rights, a healthy development for all individuals and peoples, and the freedoms essential for a fully human life.

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