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## Faith-based Media Literacy Education: A Look at the Past with an Eye toward the Future

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### Abstract

This article addresses several fundamental questions about faith-based media literacy education in the United States, including how the assumptions, motivations, goals, and pedagogy of those Christians who are operating within a media literacy framework come together to create a unique approach to teaching media literacy. After briefly reviewing Christian engagement with media, as well as the history of faith-based media literacy education in this country, this paper examines the philosophical and theoretical assumptions of scholars and practitioners, identifies practical applications, and concludes by suggesting some ways in which this sub-field might develop in the years to come.

*Keywords:* religion, faith, faith-based, Christianity, church, and (of course) media literacy

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Not many years ago, Rogow (2004) analogized the development of media literacy in the United States to the renovation of a house done by committee – the debates about preservation, demolition, and rejuvenation being hampered by a lack of a unifying vision. While we will leave it to others to assess the overall project's progress in the time since, we will adopt her metaphor briefly to consider the placement and condition of one of the rooms in that house, faith-based media literacy education.

Considering the relatively few efforts dedicated to this movement, one might envision it as that nicely decorated spare bedroom: eminently useful when called upon for service but ultimately unnecessary to the everyday functionality of the structure. Or, considering the uneven progress of the scholarship and programs dedicated to this purpose, perhaps it's more like the unfinished basement: tremendous potential lies therein, with some of the area already put to great use, but residents must navigate around the remains of projects begun and abandoned by well-intentioned weekend warriors. More positively, one might recall that many of the initial blueprints for the media literacy movement in the United States were created within religious communities, and thus envision the current expression of those plans to be the foundation for the whole house— an integral, but now generally overlooked, structural element.

In order to determine which, if any, of these analogies is most useful, this article will address some fundamental questions about the faith-based movement, particularly as it applies to that informed by Christianity in the United States. Certainly, other religious traditions have developed pedagogical strategies in response to our media-saturated culture, but the contributions to particularly Christian-based efforts are numerous and varied enough to warrant a separate analysis. Furthermore, many of the findings and questions raised by this article would be equally important to scholars working in other faith traditions. Specifically, this article will consider how many of the assumptions, motivations, goals, and pedagogies of those Christians who are operating within a media literacy framework come together to create a unique approach to teaching those skills to both children and adults that can be defined as faith-based. We will examine the work of both scholars and practitioners and conclude by suggesting some ways in which this sub-field might develop in the years to come. Although churches and other religious education programs are frequently acknowledged as a locus of program implementation (Kellner and Share 2005; Kubey 1998; Martens 2010), very little research has yet addressed this movement.

There has, however, been a growing recognition by many that the influence of the church as a social institution has been eroding in the past several decades and increasingly replaced by media. Silverblatt (2004)

makes a convincing case that media are the dominant social institution in Western society, fulfilling functions once handled by home, school, government, and, of course, the church itself. Davis et al. (2001) argue that television operates as a religion, not only because it offers a moral code and public rituals and creates a community of adherents but because, as our “national storyteller,” it portrays a vision for the way we are to conduct our lives, and we mold our identities based upon those representations. Lyden (2003) develops a similar analogy between religion and film. Although much has changed about television, film, and other media and their uses in the last decade, particularly an increasing audience fragmentation and convergence with internet technologies, the comparison remains a useful one. Perhaps we might now envision the media “religion” as comprised of a growing number of “denominations.” Evaluating media in light of Geertz’s (1973) definition of religion, a number of connections are apparent. Even a cursory consideration of the conceptions perpetuated by media—ideas about consumerism, authority, self-image, and what it means to live a good life—along with the resulting moods and motivations they generate, argue in favor of the concept of media as a substitute religion.

The term “media” has been used by scholars and media literacy advocates in varied ways. It has represented many traditional media such as television, film, radio, recorded popular music and print publications, but currently can encompass a wide variety of increasingly interrelated, interactive, newer communication forms, most involving the Internet and related communication technologies. While any assessment of the principles and progress of faith-based media literacy education must acknowledge that all media forms are important, it is clear that more traditional media, often commercial, media forms tended to be the focus. In addition, the natural parallels between the storytelling function of television and film and the storytelling found in scripture have undoubtedly contributed to a greater focus on narrative and image-based media within faith-based media literacy circles. “The way to the realm of God in the gospel stories is lined with the images of the parables,” writes Hoffman (2011, 48). “[T]he images of television, movies, and the Internet can also pave the way to a deeper understanding of the Gospel today.” Among even recently-published texts examined in this article, the dominant media addressed include television, film, and print, although internet sites have received greater

attention as of late. Hoffman’s (2011) book, for example, contains several exercises involving Facebook, YouTube, and other web sites.

Not only are media representations problematic, but media technologies and their applications, both those introduced in the past and those that have emerged in more recent years, themselves have posed provocative questions for religious communities. Some within the Christian community have wholeheartedly viewed these technologies as a means of fulfilling their organizational missions and educational goals. Others have considered them inhibitors of Christian understanding and growth. In our contemporary digital media environment, how are church leaders, Christian educators, and members of church communities to make responsible decisions about new interactive technologies? Scholars such as Schultze (2002, 2004) seek to guide Christians both in their personal use and in liturgical settings through the dilemmas they present. In an age of GodTube, tweeting preachers, and iPhone “confessional” apps, such guidelines surely provoke thoughtful reflection on the topic of technological engagement. At the same time, however, they underscore the need for a more general and universal framework by which church leaders and religious educators might answer questions their congregations face daily about the religious implications of their media use: What technologies are valuable and for what purpose? What kind of community is media use creating, and what kind of community is being destroyed? Who is privileged by a technology and who is left out? Campbell suggests that church members “may need to undergo a detailed process of evaluation and reflection to consider the positive and negative aspects brought on by the new technology before a decision can be made” (2010, 5).

Faced with this encroaching pseudo-religion and the dilemmas of new technology, communities of faith have drawn upon both theological doctrine as well as pragmatic strategies to provide guidance to their members. Understandably, the “image” of electronic and digital media has posed greater theological problems than the “word” of print for American Christians, and particularly for Protestants. According to Hess, “where historically religious communities were at the forefront of pushing print-based literacy, now more and more of them are struggling to figure out where they stand in relation to media literacy” (2006, 248). Articulating a theology of media is a controversial and developing task, but what seems clear is that religious

communities are increasingly engaging in or poised to engage in dialogue. A number of factors contribute to this willingness, according to Lyden (2003): the convenience of new technologies, the desire of scholars to cross disciplinary boundaries, and a growing recognition that understanding media is integral to understanding culture. Whatever the reasons, this increasing engagement with media opens the door to media literacy education within the church.

Articulating a sense of urgency, one member of the Catholic Church described cultural phenomena which demand the attention of religious educators: the inability of television viewers to discern what was real in many “real-life” dramas, the potentially negative health impact of pharmaceutical industry advertisements, the use of communication technology as an escape, and the increasingly disjointed society produced by technology as common interpersonal transactions such as banking, shopping, newspaper reading, and mail delivery are turned obsolete by computerization.

In the Christian tradition, religion is based on the concept of ‘community’ and worship requires a coming together of common believers. In an increasingly individualized and computerized society, how will the Church continue its task of sharing the good news and serving others?

This wasn’t written last year, or even five or 10 years ago. It was written with startling prescience three and a half decades ago by Elizabeth Thoman (1977), the founder of *Media & Values* magazine, a forerunner to the Center for Media Literacy. How well have Christians answered her call in the years since? To answer that question adequately, we will need to address in brief some historical context for Christians’ relationships with both media and literacy.

### **Christian Engagement with Media**

The histories of Christianity and media from the Reformation forward, and particularly in America, are deeply intertwined, and their effects reach into the twenty-first century. Print was a highly instrumental medium for early American Protestants, one used to reach a new nation with Bibles, tracts, and pamphlets, and it was only during the second half of the nineteenth century when most religious publishers believe that reputable fiction “could have a place in the Christian home.” (Nord 2004, 117). Throughout the twentieth century, electronic media sparked a similar debate.

Alarmed by the apparent divide between traditional values and media portrayals, Protestants and Catholics took active roles in the national discussion about how to protect the public, and children in particular, from unsavory content. Within evangelical denominations, whose political power became more prominent in the late 1970s, two extreme and seemingly contradictory orientations were notable: on one hand, the vociferous critique of objectionable media content; on the other, evangelicals’ “uncritical faith in technology,” which, when applied to television, like print and radio before, was seen to serve Christ’s great commission to share the gospel with every nation (Schultze 1990, 29). A result of the latter belief, notes Romanowski (2007), was an outcropping of explicitly Christian-themed media: popular music, novels, television shows, and film. Much was criticized for its amateurish quality, and much more was relegated to narrowly-tailored Christian radio and television stations. Yet, in the last two decades, openly religious popular art has been gaining a wider audience and signals what Romanowski characterizes as a paradigm shift in evangelical engagement with popular culture.

Foregoing the previous generation’s activism, today’s churchgoers have a more amiable relationship with popular culture. Citing research that reveals little distinction between the media intake of Christians and non-Christians, Romanowski writes:

[L]ike most people, church-goers generally think of popular art as entertainment, downtime after a long day, or a social activity to be enjoyed with friends. They don’t think too much about the films and videos they watch or the music they listen to (2007, 40).

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Christian engagement swings from either of these two extremes, either all-out rejection of popular culture or unthinking embrace. The vast middle ground, it seems, is characterized by a nuanced negotiation of interpretation, mediation, and lived experience. In previous research, we both have discussed the interrelation of faith and media with a number of individuals. The pastor who frequently uses blockbuster movie clips to illustrate theological principles to a congregation more familiar with *Pirates of the Caribbean* than with Pharisees and publicans; the evangelist who explains that while he won’t let his daughter read or see the *Harry Potter* books and films, he’s enjoyed every one of them;

the music leader who plays in both the church band on Sunday mornings and in a bar on Friday evenings—each one has thoughtfully reflected on the context and content of their media engagement and its implications for their family and others. In justifying the choices he and his wife make for their children, the music leader mentioned above explains his philosophy:

We're firm believers that truth can be found anywhere. Truth is Christian, therefore if something contains truth, it's true... I hope that the kids know truth, period, then they can find it and spot it in whatever it is. They can hear it in a secular song as well as in a Christian song. They can see it in a *Veggie Tales* movie, and they can also see it in a Disney movie, they can see it all over. And they can also distinguish the truth from a lie. We don't want them to get into a subculture where if it doesn't have a label on it, we won't believe it. We'll throw it away. So content is really important to us, and we want to keep talking about content, but not necessarily always shoving in down their throats. We're more concerned that their minds are engaged. (J. Heilman, personal communication, 2007)

While at a distance, this Christian family's media diet might be indistinguishable from a non-Christian's, it is apparent that a lack of contemplation isn't the issue.

The skills this father speaks of instilling in his children—the ability to “read” media and evaluate and critique messages—are those promoted by media literacy educators. His implication that the children will conduct this evaluation in light of the truths taught by Christianity, however, distinguishes his approach from others which rely on the students' ability to construct general knowledge structures (Potter 2001) or which primarily encourage students to reflect on their personal experiences as media users (Buckingham 2003). Although like this father, many Christians arrive at this process independently, media literacy advocates have been promoting such training for decades.

As it is within the fields of education and communication, the term “media literacy” is relatively new within religious communities and is used even today somewhat infrequently to describe efforts to critically question media culture. However, its essential principles of inquiry and interpretation are embodied in many articles, books, and websites written for Christian readers about how to engage media from a faith-informed

perspective, and many of these texts will be identified throughout this article. It is important to understand that efforts to practice some form of faith-based media literacy are not nearly as isolated as relevant scholarship might suggest, but it is difficult to define the parameters of media literacy in religious contexts.

### **A Brief History of Faith-based Media Literacy Education in the U.S.**

The roots of media literacy education can be found in visual instruction, film education, literary analysis, and even the practice of rhetoric dating back into antiquity. With so many disparate influences, it is no wonder the field is prone to “fragmentation and dissonance” and that even its brief history as a distinct educational discipline is, as Hobbs and Jensen's (2009) review illustrates, a fabric entangled with many threads. Woven into that fabric are the threads of many religious influences. As Cheung (2006) observes, churches have been instrumental in media education worldwide, and the origins of such advocacy in the United States are often credited to the efforts of Christian scholars working within both secular as well as explicitly religious frameworks. One of these pioneers was Father John Culkin, a Jesuit priest, whose background in film studies and friendship with Marshall McLuhan informed his advocacy for and development of media literacy initiatives, which have earned him recognition for founding media literacy education in the United States (Hailer and Pacatte 2007; Moody n.d.)

Another notable influence is Elizabeth Thoman's groundbreaking work in the 1970s. A Roman Catholic nun working on her graduate degree, Thoman began publishing *Media & Values* magazine as a forum in which to discuss the social and cultural implications of new communication technology. Although intended for a broad audience of educators, the magazine frequently published articles from a faith perspective. In 1989, she founded the Center for Media and Values, later renamed the Center for Media Literacy (CML), which continues to be recognized as one of three primary national organizations in the field (Martens 2010). Today, CML advocates media literacy instruction in mainstream public education, and not from any particular religious orientation. However, its website remains a primary source of information on faith-based media literacy.

Prompted by statements and policies from the Vatican to include media education and critical reflection in catechetical and Catholic school education, the Catholic Church has been a leading force in media lit-

eracy education. Campbell (2010) notes that since its inception in 1948, the Pontifical Commission for the Study and Ecclesiastical Evaluation of Films on Religious or Moral Subjects has been instrumental in guiding church policy on how media should be used in Catholic education and on issues of media literacy. In 1993, the Center for Media and Values worked with the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) to produce *Catholic Connections to Media Literacy*, a project of the Catholic Communication Campaign. It appears to have been the first faith-based media literacy curriculum packages developed for use in Catholic classrooms and parishes. The potential market for the curriculum was impressive: at the time, the NCEA served 7.6 million students in Catholic education. More recently, Sisters Rose Pacatte and Gretchen Hailer have developed media literacy curricula for use in Catholic education, and Mary Byrne Hoffman recently published a media literacy guide for use in catechesis. Their work will be examined later in this article.

Though members of Protestant denominations have faced challenges of greater fragmentation and lack of unifying mandate, an early curriculum – earlier, even, than *Catholic Connections* – was created by the Media Action Research Center (MARC), a group of communication professionals from several Protestant denominations. Published in 1980, *Growing with Television: A Study of Biblical Values and the Television Experience*, offered lessons for children, teens, and adults. Its message was clear: the study of television is useful as a “values clarification resource” (Martens 1980, 4). The goals, therefore, were to first strengthen the students’ faith, and second to teach them how to use critical thinking skills to avoid programs that were contrary to the faith and seek out those that were consistent. Comparing television and Christian values would help the student “achieve freedom from the tyranny of the content values and the presence of TV” (4). Around the same time, MARC, in conjunction with a number of Protestant denominations, created a media education curriculum with wider appeal, one that could be used in secular settings. *Television Awareness Training* has been called “an influential ‘foreparent’ of today’s media literacy movement” (Logan and Price n.d.) and despite its lack of an explicitly religious viewpoint, was widely used in both Protestant and Catholic churches due to its “values-based” approach.

The United Methodist Church continues to ac-

tively respond to its members’ engagement with media by affirming the value of media literacy education (United Methodist Church 2004). Other Protestant groups have recognized the need for formal instruction, though implementation of efforts has been inconsistent at best. The National Council of Churches of Christ USA, which represents about 100,000 member congregations of varied Protestant denominations, issued a policy statement regarding the role of local churches in media education in which they stated unequivocally, “we must be media literate” (National Council of Churches of Christ USA 1995). This affirmation called upon member churches to create centers for media literacy training which would “develop and implement the use of media education materials to reinforce faith values.” However, while the organization has developed initiatives in media justice, it is not clear that substantial progress in education has since been made. The same appears to be true for the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Media Mission, a non-profit organization of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., once planned to develop a media literacy curriculum but has since abandoned those efforts to reasons discussed later in this article.

As media literacy scholar Stout observed, religious media literacy has been “uneven both in terms of conceptualization and level of analysis achieved” (2002, 49). He attributes this delay to several challenges unique to faith-based efforts that are not found in its secular counterparts, challenges resulting from religion’s often dualistic response to our pluralistic society. He anticipated, however, that scholars would address religious media literacy with increasing frequency, and would particularly strive to understand what distinguishes religious media literacy from the more general embodiment of the term. Nearly a decade later, one might wonder how well he predicted the scholarly development of the subfield.

The disappointing answer is, not particularly well.

### The State of the Movement Today

Two qualifications to the preceding statement are worth noting. The first is this: whatever advancements that have recently occurred have been the products of a handful of dedicated and passionate scholars and practitioners. If progress can be made by so few, then there is reason to be optimistic about future endeavors. Secondly, a lack of articulated solidarity is rather understandable, given the same uncertainties

within the broader movement. Expecting religious-oriented scholars to have done much more by now would be, to return to our original analogy, a bit like asking interior decorators to arrange the furniture before renovators have settled on Georgian or Colonial Revival. While faith-based media literacy education could certainly proceed along its own path, it certainly makes sense for it to draw upon the knowledge and materials of the broader movement where applicable.

### *Definitional Issues with Faith-based Approaches to Media Literacy*

We will begin our analysis by examining the terms and definitions associated with this movement. There appears to be little consistency in the terminology, which is unsurprising given the same inconsistencies in the broader field (Martens 2010) and is due, in part, to the independent development of efforts in the past several decades. Two lines of heritage contribute to current efforts: one that developed concurrently and has a reciprocal relationship with the more general media literacy field, and one that originated outside of the media literacy framework but seeks to teach Christians how to develop similar skills.

Those approaches that draw upon the media literacy field often rely on commonly-accepted definitions of media literacy but add a theological element. We have adopted the term “faith-based media literacy” from Blythe, who defines it in terms of the framework and process used to analyze meaning created by media. “Such an approach may be useful to viewers seeking a more substantive and conceptually rich definition of media literacy from a principle-based perspective,” she writes (2002, 139). In another text, however, she abandons that label in favor of “theological analysis of media” in which “principles of biblical exegesis are combined with principles used in the media literacy movement” (Blythe and Wolpert 2004, 54). The term “media literacy” is used sparingly in an earlier text co-authored by Blythe (Davis et al. 2001), although the book clearly illustrates the application of media literacy principles. The preferred term therein is “theological interpretation,” presented not as an alternative to secular media literacy, but rather as the result of a sustained reflection achieved by first “reading” television using principles of media literacy, then by asking particular questions that arise from one’s theological understanding.

The same media-literacy-plus-faith conception

is evident in the curriculum designed by Hailer and Pacatte. Drawing heavily the “five key questions” and “five core concepts” presented by the Center for Media Literacy, it coins the term “media mindfulness” to describe the “set of Christian life skills and a life style rooted in these concepts” (2007, 8). They write, “Media mindfulness adds Gospel values to the media literacy approach, discerning God’s presence in media stories and discovering what this reflection process means for us as disciples” (14).

A term that has developed outside of the media literacy education framework is “media discernment,” a movement which Jenkins (2004) equates with the application of media literacy within a religious context. Although the term is rarely used within scholarly literature, and rarely by media literacy advocates, it is frequently used within religious circles to refer to a process of engaging with popular culture that is thoughtful, nuanced, and informed by religious belief. Denis Haack, the founder of Ransom Fellowship, an organization devoted to the interaction of the Christian faith and popular culture, defines discernment as “a process that involves answering simple but probing questions,” many of which echo the “five key questions” presented by CML. Not only does the organization illustrate the application of media literacy principles to popular media texts, but it seeks to educate others about how to apply those same principles— often by asking questions without providing answers, allowing the reader to arrive at his or her own conclusions after engaging in critical reflection.

If Ransom Fellowship employs media discernment as a probe by which to actively seek out the best in popular culture, conservative evangelical Focus on the Family envisions media discernment as a shield by which to avoid immorality. Framing the problem in warfare terms, authors of the site warn against the deception that is likely to follow from a lack of discernment— a process that involves asking a series of scripturally-based inquiries (“Does [the media text] present a temptation to sin?” “Does it honor and glorify God?”)— and suggest that action follows critique: “be willing to turn off the set, stop reading, or leave the theater. Always be ready to refute the false ideas or unbiblical thinking that will nearly always be present to one degree or another” (Waliszewski and Smit-houser 2011). While the authors raise many valid concerns about the deceptive nature of media images, the site provides little instruction on evaluating the more subtle messages inherent in media and acknowledges

few motivations for cultivating discernment other than protection of the consumer and the consumer's family.

The term "cultural agency" is one adopted by Warren (1997) to describe a process of critical analysis in which people of faith can make judgments about media consumption. He draws inspiration from the process of "cultural action" developed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who developed a process of teaching reading and writing to illiterate adults in his country in the mid-twentieth century. Traditional notions of literacy education, just like those regarding religious education, relied upon a unidirectional flow of information, one in which passive students accepted instruction from an authoritative source, a process which reinforced existing power structures and discouraged dialogue. Freire's work challenged that paradigm and contributed to current media literacy concepts by encouraging individuals to critique and challenge societal structures and gain voice through their newly acquired skills. Although Warren does not explicitly rely upon the language or findings of media literacy scholars, his central concerns parallel theirs:

Full cultural agency... is an active way of looking at and making decisions about the meanings and values created for us in our society, but it is also an active way of examining and judging the channels by which these meanings and values are communicated to us. Seen this way, cultural agency embraces as a basic tool cultural analysis: the ability to bring cultural products and their latent imagination of life before the "tribunal of judgment" to assess their value or appropriateness (18).

However, as Stout and Scott (2003) acknowledge, definitions that audience members attribute to media literacy are as important as those ascribed by scholars and practitioners. What does being media literate mean to individuals as they negotiate their media use in practice as members of interpretive communities? In their analysis of three groups of Mormon media users, Stout and Scott (2003) conclude that there are diverse approaches to media literacy even among that single faith tradition. This suggests that while faith-based media literacy in theory might define a set of terms, approaches, and goals, media literacy in practice among different Christian traditions and denominations will likely look very different as congregations and families emphasize varied aspects of the analytic process.

#### *Scholarly Approaches*

Martens' (2010) meta-analysis of the broader field identifies two primary theoretical research trends. While both the media effects and cultural/critical approaches tend to focus on different aspects of the learning process—effects research on the development of cognitive abilities, and critical/cultural research on the dialogical process of reflecting on experience as consumers and producers—the field as a whole, he explains, tends to define media literacy education in terms of knowledge and skills acquired about media industries, production processes, messages, audiences and effects.

Tobias (2008) provides a review of four often overlapping approaches to media literacy education—protectionist/interventionist, critical thinking, critical pedagogy, and art/aesthetic—as well as a review of traditional and progressive pedagogies. Like Martens (2010), Tobias notes that in contrast to other countries where media literacy education has a longer history, the protectionist/interventionist or media effects approach is by far the most frequently used construct in the United States. Pragmatics and politics of the last several decades have contributed to this condition. Studies suggesting links between media use and unhealthy attitudes and behaviors have prompted government programs, school officials, parents, and other sources of funding and support to be more likely to be persuaded by a results-oriented appeal.

Though these categorizations are instructive, it is difficult to similarly classify faith-based approaches. Simply put, there isn't a canon of research large enough to support such a division. It would be more accurate to describe the approaches taken by individual researchers in the field. In order to identify these researchers, we conducted a survey of the scholarly literature on faith-based media literacy education. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the field, a search was conducted in three databases: (1) Communication and Mass Media Complete (ESBCO) using the search terms "media literacy" or "media education" combined with "religion" or "faith" in the abstract; (2) ALTA Religion Database using "media literacy" or "media education" within any text; and (3) Education Research Complete (ESBCO) with "media literacy" or "media education" combined with "religion" or "faith" in the abstract. The results included fewer than 50 articles; when narrowed to peer-reviewed journals, fewer than 20, and when narrowed further by eliminating those which referenced media literacy only tangentially, or which involved efforts outside of the United States, only a handful remained.

What follows is a discussion of this literature, as well as a handful of additional articles found elsewhere.

Religious media literacy faces a number of unique barriers which, according to Stout (2002), demand new approaches that leave behind the “culture wars-type analysis” that focuses on issues of moral conflict and fails to address ways in which media can enhance spirituality, be appreciated for aesthetic value, and serve a socializing function in communities. One area for exploration, he suggests, is the way that religious media literacy is interpreted and practiced within familial, social, and political structures. By viewing media use in its social context, questions of direct effects and the emphasis on content analyses that seek to uncover such effects are less helpful than questions about what media use means in any given situation. By framing his later study in an audience-oriented perspective, he discovered that Mormons approach media literacy in various ways, some valuing structured guidelines, others relying on personal interpretation and autonomy, and others defining media literacy in terms of relationship dynamics. “These findings suggest,” they write, “that the richest source of insight about media literacy is not the content of messages, but the expressed needs of the audience member” (2003, 155). Understanding those varied needs, they argue, is necessary for the development of media literacy programs.

Stout (2002) further suggests that future efforts focus on ways in which media can enhance religious teaching and cites Hess’ (2001) argument on that theme. Hess, a Roman Catholic education scholar, is by far the most prolific researcher in this area and situates her theoretical work squarely within a critical/cultural approach in which studying the process of consuming and producing media is more instructive than studying the process of decoding content (2003). For Hess, media literacy is one way in which to build bridges between communities through theological dialogue:

What would we do if we would ask, not what is our community of faith’s perspective on this piece of media (translated into: do we approve or disapprove of its apparent content, or do we know how we can “use” it), but how is God speaking to us and through us in the midst of this conversation? (2004a, 93).

The challenge of religious educators, Hess argues, is to adapt their roles in a society in which religious meaning-making is happening without their intervention and often within unexpected contexts.

“Rather than being transmitters of doctrine,” she writes, “we need to become interpreters of culture—speaking both to and from the church about the ways in which the Holy Spirit is moving in the world” (Hess, 2004b, 154). This requires a pedagogical transformation from a linear, instrumental paradigm to a communal, dialogic model—a shift to “knowing how” rather than “knowing that” (155). Not only does this dialogic model allow for the deconstruction of media messages and a critique of power structures, but, following Freire’s conception of literacy as a tool of empowerment, gives voice to individuals as they both “read” and “write” media texts. In tracing a history of religious media literacy education, Hess (2006) notes that religious communities were “focused on ways to get beyond mass-mediated popular culture, rather than seeing it as an original and crucial matrix in which to do theological reflection and live faithfully” (247). These theoretical assumptions constructed the framework of Hess’ dissertation research on the use of media literacy in the context of religious education (1998), which employed a methodology of “participatory action research,” a process in which both researcher and subjects actively participate in the program under study (2001).

Hess’s approach has been met with a certain amount of skepticism. In a review of one of Hess’ books, Shoemaker (2007) resists the collaborative model of learning she proposes, concerned that allowing students to inject texts with their own, often limited perspective may cause more harm than good. Additionally, he argues that it isn’t “theologically productive” to put much value in the meaning-making that might be found by examining media texts, or think that future research might be built upon those foundations. “Such imaginings,” he writes, “only lead me to despair for the future of theology” (457). Shoemaker’s critique underscores the philosophical resistance media literacy educators may confront from various religious communities who may otherwise agree that media education in some form is advisable but resist the dialogic strategy Hess and many media literacy advocates propose.

Working within a similar context as Hess (the teaching of religion) but with a theoretical orientation that leans more towards an instrumental approach, Cheung (2006) discusses many religious educators’ concerns regarding media’s potentially negative effects. “[I]s it possible to empower pupils with the ability to be more discerning and to decide what is of value and what is not?” she asks. “Media education seems to be a possible means of achieving this” (505.) Indeed,



not only did teachers in her study find media education helpful in connecting religious experience to everyday life, in finding common ground with students, and in increasing students' interest in religious education, but Cheung found that students believed themselves to have increased their ability to decode "hidden messages" in media. Though this research was conducted in two Hong Kong religious schools, we note it here because it is unique in seeking to assess the effectiveness of faith-based media literacy instruction through empirical means.

A media literacy advocate whose work appears in both scholarly journals and popular works, Teresa Blythe may be seen as staking out a middle ground. Her conception of audience interpretation is grounded in cultural studies, but she does not ignore the potential negative effects media have on users and encourages Christians to actively critique media messages for adherence to biblical values. Her aim is to provide a framework for guiding individuals through a theological evaluation of a media text: an episode of *The X-Files* (1999), top-rated television dramas (2002), or the film *K-Pax* (Blythe and Wolpert 2004). By evaluating these texts in ways consistent with secular media literacy principles and then posing questions which integrate theological concepts, Blythe suggests possible connections between text and scripture but still provides room for viewers to reach their own conclusions. Situating media literacy in a faith-based context necessarily leads to particular kinds of questions: "How does this show depict the human condition? What view of good and evil is implied? In what ways is this slice of American popular religion similar to or different from a Christian view of life?" Such questions presume a level of "faith experience" that allow participant responses to proceed in a meaningful way, and yet do not require a particularly high degree of biblical literacy. Asking "how does this story resonate with my life and spiritual journey?" (Blythe and Wolpert 2004) allows for a certain flexibility that asking about the scriptural implications of this story does not. This may, some might argue, be an inherent weakness of this approach and lead to the conclusion there is in reality very little difference between such a faith-based approach and any other media literacy perspective which accounts for an individual's life experiences in the development of meaning.

### *Principles of Faith-based Media Literacy*

How, then, can we differentiate a specifically Christian approach? Core principles of media literacy and media literacy education have been articulated by the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), CML, and other organizations and scholars, and, among faith-based scholars and practitioners, there appears to be little, if any, direct disagreement with these concepts. However, while there are many strong parallels with the secular model, several notable assumptions distinguish a Christian approach. Although there are many variations of and levels of commitment to the Christian faith, such basic ideas as a personal, all-knowing, ever-present, loving God, redemption through Jesus Christ, the authority of Scripture, absolute rather than merely relative truth, revealed realities about the spiritual world, and numerous God-given principles for living resonate with many in the Christian community. In one way or another, they in part can frame a Christian faith based media literacy education initiative. What follows is a modest attempt to consolidate the guiding principles of faith-based media literacy education by those scholars and practitioners who have addressed them.

*Media provide images of society that have powerful influences on our conceptions of reality.* This recognition is at the heart of media literacy education, but support for this concept can be also found within the Christian tradition. Canadian media literacy educator and Jesuit priest John Pungente draws upon the prayer method of St. Ignatius of Loyola to understand the power of imagination in shaping an individual's sense of reality. In his "imaginative prayer," the disciple would envision a scene from scripture in such a vivid way that they could see, hear, smell, taste and feel the scene around them. This was a recognition, Pungente asserts, that our imaginations powerfully construct the reality we inhabit.

When we watch movies and TV shows we are more than being entertained; we are being formed and shaped. We expose ourselves to narratives that shape what is possible, and then we can—consciously or unconsciously—live out those possibilities (Pungente 2010).

Certainly, the images provided by media have the power to create a reality consistent with scripture. Hoffman writes, "Gospel and media both share the ability to reveal what is sacred through image" (2011, 54). Because media's imagined realities are so powerful and pervasive, however, members of religious communities

often have a greater understanding of and faith in media images than in those presented in Scripture and in religious tradition. “How do we cope with human life in which the common values no longer seem to be established by the Ten Commandments,” Thoman (1977) asks, “but by hundreds of thousands of TV commercials?”

However, individuals negotiate meaning according to their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. “[T]elevision,” writes Blythe (2004) “— just as books, music, or fine art — has no power in and of itself to inject us with values.” (140). Hailer and Pacatte (2007) reassure educators that while media do have powerful influence on children and teens, most research has not established conclusive links between consuming media and specific behavior. They further remind instructors that there is not a correct way to interpret movies, television, or music, and that they must remain open to the meaning found by students. That does not imply that there is not another “reality” that is constructed by the media, but that the reality as interpreted by the instructor and the reality as seen by the student may be quite different things.

*The values promoted by the media are often false, destructive, and thus in contradiction to those promoted by Christianity.* Despite warnings from some church leaders of the depravity to be found in media, religious media literacy educators affirm that media are not inherently good or evil. Hailer and Pacatte (2007) cite statements by Pope Pius XII declaring that motion pictures, radio, and television, “though they spring from human intelligence and industry, are nevertheless the gifts of God, Our Creator, from Whom all good gifts proceed.” The NCC agrees, reasoning that since media are indeed God’s gifts “they must be considered as being held in trust for the community by those who control them. Therefore, stewardship is a necessary corollary of creation” (NCC 1995, 2).

There is a recognition, however, that the predominant worldview portrayed in media and that of Christianity are in contraposition. The stories told by media are not neutral; they portray images of mankind, of God, and of the relationship between and among them that are, in varying degrees, either true or false.

In contrast to the media’s worldview that we are basically good, that happiness is the chief end of life and that happiness consists of obtaining material goods, the Christian worldview holds that human beings are susceptible to the sin of pride, that the chief end of life is to live in harmony with all of creation, and that happiness consists in creating the reign of God within one’s self and among one’s neighbors—which includes the whole earth. (Fore 1990)

The fundamental Christian doctrine of sin informs this view of the power of media. With tremendous economic, social, and political power, media inevitably become “a primary locus of sin” (Fore 1988). If sin is understood as a deviation from God’s word, then the myths perpetuated by media which are both systemic (such as the notion that fame alone is a desirable and meaningful achievement) and content-related (such as the persistent portrayal of authority figures as ignorant, inept, and ineffective) are sin. When we accept the deviation, we accept sin. However, the central Christian doctrine of redemption is neither necessary nor possible in its absence. How media handle the sin and redemption narrative is of primary concern.

*Critical inquiry and the skills of “reading” the media are necessary to discern between truth and falsehood in media representations of reality.* Critical analysis is better than censorship, Christian faith-based media literacy advocates seem to agree. One perspective holds that if God is the God of creation, newness and life, then censorship must be avoided because it restrains new information and ideas (Fore 1988, NCC 1995). Another perspective has a more pragmatic foundation. Media avoidance, once advocated more heavily among religious organizations and still promoted by particularly conservative evangelical groups, is frequently considered neither effective nor practical, with unintended consequences—the “forbidden fruit syndrome” chief among them—making this approach a risky one. “We do not consider media boycotts helpful,” explain Hailer and Pacatte. “[W]e believe that empowering others to choose media wisely and question everything they hear and see through media mindfulness is much more effective, influential, and long lasting” (2007, 9). Similarly, writes Cheung, “[t]he role of religious educators is not to denigrate media artifacts so pupils will turn off the tube. Instead, their role is to assist in the development of their understanding of media messages” (2006, 509). Fore (1990) cites a quote by T.S. Eliot on the efficacy of this perspective:

So long as we are conscious of the gulf fixed between ourselves [as Christians] and the greater part of contemporary [culture], we are more or less protected from being harmed by it and are in a position to extract from it what good it has to offer us. (3)

This strategy assumes three competencies: a knowledge of Christian tenets, an understanding of contemporary culture, and the ability to contrast the two. Media literacy skills of interpretation, analysis, and critique provide the latter skills, but varying levels of biblical literacy, as well as denominational differences in interpretation and application, must be accounted for in media literacy programs and teaching styles. The responsibility to choose wisely is fundamental to the agency with which God has entrusted mankind. “Rationality and responsibility, rooted in an unshakeable faith in God, provide us a certain discernment and wisdom with which we can approach the options that the media poses” (Steyn 2006).

This is where faith-based media literacy most obviously departs from its secular counterparts, as it affirms that the legitimacy of the images and stories told by media can and should be judged according to adherence to scripture, church tradition, and personal spiritual experiences. In the debate over whether media literacy education should have an explicit ideological agenda (Hobbs 1998), the faith community clearly argues for the affirmative. Of course, this is not the only purpose of media literacy education, but discriminating among the various representations of media is among religious educators’ top priorities. “Debunking contemporary myths” (Steyn 2004) and identifying the “cultural biases and distorted values systems of our culture” (Fore 1988) allow Christians to be responsible and thoughtful media consumers.

It is important to note that rather than dictating specific conclusions the viewer is to draw, many of the current approaches provide various levels of guidance: “What Christian values, morals, or social issues are supported or ignored in this show?” (Hailer and Pacatte 2007); “Is the image of God portrayed here one that we have recognized or experienced?” and “How does this story resonate with our lives and our spiritual journeys?” (Blythe and Wolpert 2004) or “What does scripture/my faith tradition/my reason/my experience have to say about the issue presented in the text?” (Blythe 2002). Scriptures are frequently provided to suggest connections between the text and the gospel.

*Faith-based media literacy education develops Christians who are equipped to serve the society in which they live.* Just as secular media literacy educators hope to develop engaged members of society, one of the aims of faith-based media literacy education is its widespread social benefit. Christian educators see their task as not only training students to skillfully negotiate their interaction with media, but equipping students for service to the community through spreading the gospel, revealing truth, building and sustaining community, and advocating justice.

The Great Commission has long played an essential role in Christian engagement with media, but most commonly as a tool of production; that is, books, radio, television, and now interactive digital technologies have been seen as vehicles by which the gospel may be proclaimed. For media literacy educators, the Great Commission is, indeed, a legitimate, even a primary, aim, but they envision a broader purpose. It is not enough to convey the gospel message through existing media. What’s needed is an understanding of the language of culture so that the gospel presented is relevant. Fore (1993) explains:

We must re-present the Gospel—the meaning of the good news to us—in stories that connect with the lives of people living in today’s culture. It is not enough to re-tell earlier stories. Those stories belong to a completely different culture. To reproduce them ‘without note or comment’ implies that to us ultimate meaning—the meaning of God—is found in the past rather than in the present. (58)

Haack (n.d.) justifies engaging popular culture through discernment “[b]ecause we live in and are part of culture, and when the gospel is brought to bear on culture, the result both brings glory to God and provides an opportunity for non-Christians to hear the good news in terms they can understand.” Media literacy educators understand that technologies impose limitations on message content, and some see explicitly religious programming as problematic at best (Fore 1988; Potter 2001). As producers, then, Christians are encouraged to approach content with “great caution and theological sensitivity” (Fore 1988, 10).

This social obligation also includes educating people on how to see truth over falsehood in popular culture, and faith-based media literacy ideally provides the skills of critical analysis necessary to do so. Thom-an (1977) argues that media literacy is needed by all,

and providing that education is one way the church can serve society. In order to be effective educators, Christians must understand popular culture so they can know how society sees itself. “[W]ithout this knowledge,” the Pope warned in his 1971 Pastoral Instruction on the Media, “an effective apostolate is impossible in a society which is increasingly conditioned by the media” (Thoman 1977). If Christians are concerned about helping people understand who they are and more particularly, who they are in relation to God, they need to understand who people believe themselves to be by attending to the cultural framework of media and how it influences thought, attitudes and behavior (Hess 1998). Even within church communities, young people in particular are in need of guidance. Hoffman (2011) writes that children are “crying for help” and that the job of the religious instructor is to “toss out the lifeline of media literacy and pull our children back into safe waters where they can navigate the often opposing currents of Gospel and culture” (69).

Additionally, media literacy can illuminate critical issues to which Christians should respond. “If we are open to it, television has the ability to show us—in exaggerated forms—what we need to take a look at in our culture” writes Blythe (2002, 149). Johnston (2000) put it this way:

Like the rabbits in the coal mines in nineteenth-century England that were used to sniff out poisonous gas, movies can smell the currents in our society, exploring dimensions of reality that are there for us as well but which we have not fully perceived (64).

Yet we cannot expect to renew culture without relationship. Community can be enhanced or endangered by media content and technologies. While some media educators recognized the divisive potential of communication technologies more than thirty years ago (Thoman 1977) it is a widespread concern today. Advocating before the FCC, Tessa Jolls, Thoman’s successor at the CML, stated that “all stakeholders—the media and communications sector, parents, teachers, schools, and students themselves — need to fully engage in the enterprise of building communities of responsibility and care, online and off” (Center for Media Literacy 2009, ii). Who better to add to that list of stakeholders charged with building community than religious communities?

Finally, Christians serve society through democratic participation and advocacy for social justice. Both the NCC and the UMC point to dangers inherent in the highly commercialized and elitist media “which reinforce a limited worldview and provide enormous profit to a privileged few” (NCC 1995, 5). Christians are called upon to work for equal access, particularly within developing nations, and for advancing responsible knowledge in domestic affairs:

The Church carries a responsibility to helping its members achieve media literacy, not only to read and understand the gospel but also to discern from the flood of information an understanding of the events of our world today. Citizens cannot get responsible political information without media literacy. The current media revolution challenges all people to resist becoming mere consumers of messages that are created and controlled by a relatively small number of super-powerful transnational media corporations (UMC, 2004, 2).

*Christians can enhance their own spirituality by becoming media literate.* Just as the men on the road to Emmaus encountered Christ in the midst of their daily business, God can be found in everyday experiences, even within popular culture (Hess 1998). Johnston observes that throughout the Old Testament, God often chose nonbelievers to speak truth to his people. Failing to acknowledge that God continues to work through believers and nonbelievers alike means that “we have failed to see that God is in all of human culture, both in the way of life of a people and in the expression of that identity through human creativity” (2000, 67). And, though Christians often overlook the affective qualities of their faith experiences, media can be powerful connectors to the divine by tapping into our emotions. Popular culture, as Blythe puts it, can “shimmer with glimpses of God” (2004, 10). Because “God continues to speak to us through media in modern parables” (Hailer and Pacatte 2007), one of the dual purposes of their secondary school curriculum is to teach media literacy as a tool by which teenagers can “reflect, grow spiritually, and find meaning in ways that integrate faith and culture” (10).

Using traditional Christian spiritual practices such as *lectio divina* (“sacred reading”) or the Ignatian prayer of *examen*, Blythe and Wolpert (2004) illustrate ways in which Christians can heighten their spiritual awareness by connecting the secular and the sacred.

“Considering that the average American spends more than seven hours a day in front of a screen,” they reason, “... we had better hope that God meets us in and through visual media” (13).

### Practical Applications

While scholars frequently reference the implementation of media literacy programs within churches and other religious settings, acquiring evidence of these efforts is problematic either because the programs are highly localized, short-lived, or both. What follows is by no means a comprehensive review of practical applications of faith-based media literacy education, but rather an offering of examples of what has been and is being accomplished.

Twenty years ago, *Media & Values* magazine, published by the Center for Media Literacy, was a primary resource for critical reflection on the interaction of media literacy and Christianity. Today, the CML website provides links to dozens of articles on that theme. While magazine publication ceased in 1993, and archived articles about TV shows *Dallas* and *The Cosby Show* recall a simpler media landscape, many of the principles contained therein remain relevant today and remind readers of the movement’s foundations. While the CML currently develops teaching resources, including the *CML MediaLit Kit*, none of them are from a specifically faith-based perspective.

Perhaps no media literacy advocate working in a religious context has made greater advances in program development than Sr. Rose Pacatte. She is director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies, a project of the US/Toronto Province of the Daughters of St. Paul designed to promote media literacy education in churches and schools, and is a regular columnist for *St. Anthony Messenger*, a Catholic family publication, along with *The National Catholic Reporter*, and she has written several books designed to be lectionaries of popular films (Malone and Pacatte 2001, 2002, 2003). Most recently, she co-authored two textbooks for use in elementary and secondary Catholic schools and in churches (Hailer and Pacatte, 2007, 2010). The textbooks contain a number of cross-curricular applications (history, literature, art, health, etc.) making them adaptable for and by teachers of nearly any subject. For adults working in ministry, the Pauline Center offers both a one-week summer course and a ten-month program in media literacy. Sr. Pacatte also teaches an online course in media literacy at her alma mater, the University of Dayton.

While Hailer and Pacatte’s textbooks are designed for broader educational use, Mary Byrne Hoffman’s (2011) *Catechesis in a Multimedia World* is written specifically for the instructor of religion. For Hoffman, the difference between Generations X and Z is not a gap but a chasm, one made almost impossibly wide by communication technologies. Digital natives are of another universe, she writes, echoing the frustration and anxiety of religious education instructors. Their challenge is to engage students in a shared spiritual journey, but they don’t speak the same language, don’t process information in the same way, and don’t even inhabit the same realities. Written for the inexperienced but willing digital pilgrim, her book is divided into two parts. The first is designed to cultivate within the educator a sense of appreciation for the gospel elements to be found in media. As Hess has suggested, Hoffman uses Freier’s empowerment spiral to guide catechists through a personal reflection of several films. The second half of the book introduces the core concepts of media literacy and provides lesson plans adaptable for grades 1-12 that encourage students to engage with television programs, films, and internet sites. Supplemental material is available online through the publisher’s website, and readers would likely find the lessons easily adaptable for many denominations and religious settings.

Working within the Protestant tradition is Sue Lockwood Summers, whose media literacy research and teaching spans nearly 25 years. In the late 1980s, as a library media specialist, she began researching media effects and even taught a college course on the topic, but it wasn’t until she was invited to a conference in Ontario that she heard the term media literacy. Realizing her course “was off the mark” in focusing solely on the negative, she returned to create a college-level course on media literacy (personal communication, June 13, 2011). She has since authored several textbooks on the subject (Quesada, Rosen, and Summers 1998; Summers 1997, 2005) but not until lately has she turned her attention to developing a curriculum specifically within a Christian framework. She is currently (as of 2012) in the process of writing a curriculum, which she hopes will be implemented primarily by church groups.

According to its mission statement, the Presbyterian Media Mission (PMM), an outreach mission of the Presbyterian Church, “communicates a creative and compelling witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ through media” (Presbyterian Media Mission

n.d.). Additionally, it aims to provide media literacy education and is frequently contacted to provide speakers to churches and both public and parochial schools throughout western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio. According to director Craig Hartung, the organization once sought to develop a curriculum to support these efforts, but found it difficult to keep up with how quickly popular culture changed. "So now we have a more customized approach," Hartung says. The organization acts primarily as a connector between churches and college professors or other professionals with an expertise in a given area, although sometimes PMM staff will handle it themselves. The most common requests they receive are by groups concerned with the effects of content either of children's programming or of news and information shows, and are generally for single training sessions to answer specific questions. He expressed doubt about the Presbyterian Church's willingness to undertake the development of a formal, long-term course in media literacy, citing both a tendency to be a bit behind in media and technology issues, as well as a general misunderstanding about the purpose and value of media literacy education (C. Hartung, personal communication, June 6, 2011).

Outside the U.S., several initiatives are worth noting. The Jesuit Communication Project (JCP) in Canada is led by John Pungente, a leader in the media literacy movement, who authored several curricula for use in Canadian schools as early as 1989. Like the CML, the JCP grew out of a desire to connect faith communities and media education, though much of Pungente's work has been developed with secular education and audiences in mind. Still, much of his writing, including his book *Finding God in the Dark* (2004) is written with a Christian framework. In the UK, St. John's College at Durham University has begun CODEC, a research institute designed to explore the intersection of Christianity, digital media and culture. It offers an annual media literacy course for those involved in ministry, with a dual focus on critical thinking and production skills (St. John's College 2011).

In addition to the books by Pungente (2004), Malone and Pacatte (2001, 2002, 2003), Blythe and Wolpert (2004) and other similar texts mentioned in this article that provide both a rationale and method for interacting with media from a theological perspective, Leonard's (2006) *Movies that Matter* provides another notable example of the application of Christian principles to media consumption. Director of the Australian Catholic Office for Film and Broadcasting,

Leonard encourages filmgoers to engage in the process of inculturation, "discovering where Christ is already active within a given culture" (xii). Fifty films provide the basis for questions prompting theological reflection. While Leonard's work focuses on the films and the specific questions they prompt, rather than on the process of asking questions itself, it does offer many useful examples which illustrate the application of critical inquiry informed by faith. A skilled educator could certainly use Leonard's example—and the examples provided by many other similar works—as the basis for translating this process of inquiry and reflection to other media texts.

### Future Directions

Where are the architects of this corner of the media literacy edifice to go from here? With the understanding that "media literacy education is a highly contextualized activity that takes many forms in many different cultural and learning environments" (Hobbs and Jensen 2009, 2), it would be unwise to copy blueprints from secular media literacy education agenda and expect progress to occur in exactly the same manner. While a great deal of similarities exist, significant differences in principles, objectives, attitudes, and context require a distinct set of expectations and implementations.

The necessary first step—the one to which this article contributes—is identifying the movement's current orientation. It is encouraging that media literacy education in general is gaining greater momentum in the United States, though widespread challenges must still be overcome if it is to be fully mainstreamed into our educational priorities. Because some of these challenges are inherent in the complexities of government regulations, media education had, even in the 1990s, enjoyed greater success in private and parochial schools than in public schools (Kubey 1998), though not necessarily from a faith-based perspective. There is little information available to show what curricula, programs, and methodologies are being utilized in Christian schools, in churches, home school organizations, and in private religious groups, or any evidence of their relative effectiveness.

Consequently, empirical research is necessary to determine the current state of affairs of faith-based media literacy education. Questions that must be answered include the following: How do religious educators who currently implement some form of media literacy define the subject and its goals? To what extent is media literacy taught from a specifically Christian

perspective in religious settings, and what is that perspective? If it is taught from a Christian perspective, to what extent does it enable learners to develop or apply their own views and conclusions? Can essential doctrines of the Christian faith that effectively universally frame these efforts or must Christian faith-based media literacy education initiatives be narrowly tailored to particular Christian group beliefs and practices? Will religious communities perceive there is a need for a faith based media literacy education approach? From a practical standpoint, one may ask: Does a comprehensive strategic plan govern the adoption of policies in these contexts, or does the impetus for media education spring from teacher interest? Is media literacy taught as a separate course or integrated into existing courses such as English or history? Are faith-based curricula being implemented or are more general curricula and textbooks being adapted for use in religious contexts? Descriptive research based on systematic investigations into the current practice of teaching faith-based media literacy in the United States would answer these important questions.

On an aspirational level, and to the extent possible, scholars and practitioners must come together on the objectives of media literacy education. Parochial school administrators and teachers, clergy members, leaders of faith-based organizations, and scholars working in the fields of religion, education, and communication should contribute to a determination of the goals media education should serve. As reflections on beliefs and values are within the purviews of religion and media literacy alike, their goals may, in fact, be closely aligned. Some of the more frequently cited objectives of faith-based media literacy advocates include the recognition of media's influence on our perceptions of self and on society; the development of skills necessary to critique culture through the lens of faith, with the specific ability to critique theological issues portrayed in media; an awareness by students of their own media use and its spiritual implications; advancing social justice; produce media messages consistent with the Christian faith; demonstrating responsible use of technology; spreading of the gospel, and enhancing students' spirituality.

As Cheung (2006) noted, the development of 21st century skills is an essential component of religious education as it is in secular education, and media literacy is increasingly seen as one of those skills. Researchers surveying private schools' use of technology argue:

In many Christian and non-Christian denominations, the purpose of religious education is to assist students to function in the world, while not necessarily being of the world. At this point in time, it would be impossible for students to function effectively in the world without the ability to not only use computer technology, but to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of the data that they receive by using this technology (Dosen, Gibbs, Guerrero, and McDevitt 2004).

While these authors referred only to the ability to evaluate computer-mediated texts, one could easily extrapolate their argument to all media texts. However, as Martens (2010) discovered, "media literacy is seldom taught as a goal in itself," and that in practice it is frequently imbedded in efforts to promote active citizenship and public health. To what ends will religious educators employ media literacy? The answer may largely depend upon denominational differences both in terms of theology and practicality. The field needs active discussion among interested parties in order to begin outlining commonalities and points of departure among faith traditions.

Doctrinal differences may be a challenge facing faith-based media literacy educators, but hardly an insurmountable one. Hailer and Pacatte's (2007) secondary school textbook is punctuated by references to the authority, ritual, and history of the Catholic Church. For example, a sidebar to each chapter entitled "Media Saints and Greats" references those in the Catholic tradition who have contributed to contemporary understanding of media. However, because it primarily relies on a process of inquiry informed by scripture, a skilled educator could easily adapt this curriculum for use in a Protestant school.

A greater challenge than how to teach media literacy is whether to teach it at all. Certainly, this problem exists within the public school system and, as Kubey (1998) pointed out, may be less of a problem for private and parochial schools. The relationship between federal and state governments and public education necessarily involves complex issues of power, politics, and competing agendas. Private and independent schools have greater autonomy to implement programs more quickly and with fewer restrictions. However, another problem plaguing media literacy education in public school systems may be an even greater problem for small private schools. Unlike other countries, the decentralized nature of U.S. public education results

in fragmented agendas and uneven implementation. Private and independent schools, home school associations, and churches often lack needed resources. So, even if decisions are made in favor of adopting a media literacy curriculum, textbooks and multimedia resources may not be available to meet those needs. Dosen et al. (2004) note that recent surveys have revealed that private schools in the United States are less likely than public schools to own computer technology and have access to the internet and found, in their survey of Chicago area private schools, a reluctance among private school administrators to own or use televisions and other non-interactive media in the school.

Institutional challenges are one thing; philosophical challenges another. As discussed earlier in this paper, Christian engagement with media runs from a full embrace of popular culture to complete avoidance, making the value of media education possibly a tougher sell within some religious communities. Although Lloyd-Kolkin and Tyner (1988) found public and parochial school teachers equally enthusiastic about including media education in their curricula, they emphasized different goals and values in doing so. Public school teachers were significantly more likely to support goals of understanding subjectivity of media content and how media works than parochial school teachers, who were found to be significantly more likely to teach students to distinguish fact from fiction.

Not only might Christian educators stress different goals of media literacy education than their counterparts in secular schools, but the pedagogical methods of religious education might not be favorable to the kind of dialogic approach necessary to media literacy. Such approaches tend to be unidirectional, at least in Australian Christian schools, write Collier and Dowson (2008), resulting in a less than desired impact on students' actual attitudes and behavior. They elaborate:

One potential reason for this apparent lack of efficacy lies in the pedagogical approaches taken by at least some Christian educators (Cooling 1994c). Specifically, pedagogies that focus on the transmission of Christian beliefs rather than on more active and inductive approaches to Christian education fail to address underlying values, and thus typically fail to engage the allegiance of students within and beyond the walls of the classroom (Skillen 2000). Moreover, transmissional models also fail to engage

students in religious exploration and thus in the exploration of "real life" issues pertaining to faith and faithful values (Cooling 2000).

Religious educators must overcome any hesitancy to be, as Hobbs has frequently put it, a "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage," or, as Hess encouraged, to focus on "knowing how" rather than "knowing that." The challenge in parochial schools, write Dosen et al. (2004), "is to realize that we are all learners, and there is one Teacher. Perhaps, technology may provide leaders and teachers in our religious schools with the impetus to make this more of a reality" (290). As Stout (2002) argued, the faith-based media literacy agenda must include research that explores such obstacles to the implementation of educational programs. Both quantitative and qualitative research would be useful in identifying attitudes and beliefs that would hinder, as well as encourage, those efforts.

After identifying major challenges, both institutional and ideological, researchers should investigate the efficacy of existing faith-based curricula in achieving stated goals. Experimental field research could contribute to our understanding of how media literacy education increases knowledge and skills as well as how it impacts actual media behavior. Armed with that knowledge, educators might then begin to develop more effective curricula, programs and other resources that are narrowly tailored to the contexts in which they will be implemented.

Within religious contexts, media literacy education practices in the United States have been unevenly implemented and unsupported by relevant research. However, the development of media literacy education in a broader sense opens the door for faith-based research to benefit from existing findings while building its own framework. As it does, its contribution to the larger effort is promising. Religion has the tendency to be invisible to someone who has only experienced one form; for them, the assumptions, beliefs, images, rituals, and symbols of their personal experience are taken for granted -- they're commonplace. Trying to critique one's own religion without having experienced another would be as productive as a fish—to paraphrase McLuhan—critiquing water. But as anyone who has experienced a denominational or even entire religious conversion can attest, the new faith elicits a host of questions. What is the meaning of this symbol, that rhetoric, these artifacts?



If media are indeed our national religion in twenty-first-century America, as some scholars suggest, then who better to ask some of the most insightful questions about their values, images and stories than those for whom another religion is their standard? Certainly, faith communities must be willing to engage in thoughtful discourse about media, one that is informed by both grace and humility. If that is the case, then perhaps faith-based media literacy won't be relegated to a spare room or the basement after all. Perhaps, instead, it will be the dining room—the place where some of the most fruitful, engaging conversations take place, and where community is built and renewed.

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