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Responding to the Challenges of Religious Storying in a Digital Age: Building New Opportunities through www.Feautor.org

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Responding to the Challenges of Religious Storying in a Digital Age: Building New Opportunities through www.Feautor.org

Mary E. Hess

Abstract

Religious storying – the process of creating and forming religious identity within and through a religious community’s stories – is dramatically affected by the rise and ubiquity of digital storying processes present within wider cultural contexts, particularly those impacted by what has been termed “mass media”. Most specifically, processes of authority (authorizing), production of authenticity, and structure of agency are shifted; in some cases flattened, in others narrowed or constricted. A specific website created to provide a vehicle for publishing and reviewing “open sourced” religious resources is explored as one mechanism of response to this shift in cultural context.

Introduction/Situatedness

I have to begin by noting that in some ways the fields of study that engage digital storytelling are many, diverse, and still emerging. My primary area of research and teaching is religious education, and most recently my work has focused in the area of theological education and digital technology. So I am a neophyte in this discussion.

At the same time, it will likely not surprise the reader that story-telling is at the heart of religious experience and religious identity, particularly in the contexts in which I teach – that is, within predominately Christian communities. There is quite literally no way to be a Christian without immersing yourself in stories: the stories of God as found in biblical narratives, the stories of people who have gone before one in community (the “communion of saints” or the “tradition”), the stories of people with whom one worships and lives in Christian community. Indeed, one could argue that becoming a Christian and living as a Christian is at heart a process of learning how to weave divine and human narratives together with respect to their individual integrities, and in doing so, practicing telling your own faith story as part of that weaving (Anderson & Foley 1998).

Story-telling is a complex process, and as more and more of us live in contexts in which stories float across wide expanses of distance, and even more vast and diverse arenas of human experience through the powerful tools of digital technology, it becomes ever more pressing for people who attend to religious experience to learn what we can of how that experience is shaped and formed by mediatization.

I hope to accomplish two things in this essay: first, to share with you some of the work in media studies that describes the ways in which digital/mediated cultures are impacting reli-

gious identity and experience; and second, to talk about a specific website that seeks to provide a unique resource for engaging these shifts.

Mediatization and Religious Stories

It is quite clear from work in media studies that the process of mediatization has had a variety of impacts on religious communities and contexts. Whether you identify that impact in terms of shifts in religious practice moving from institutional, historically grounded communities into media contexts; or you describe the ways in which ritualized behavior can be described in relation to media events and constructions; or you explore the kinds of religious symbols and stories that have been uprooted from their originating communities and “floated” upon a cultural sea; or you explore “secular” ideas that have begun to function in religious ways, there is no end to the ways that various mass media and/or digital media are impacting religious communities.¹

I have tended to write of these impacts as affecting three elements of religious life: how institutions and individuals understand religious/normative authority, how authenticity and authentic practice are constructed within mediatization versus the ways in which a specific religious tradition has understood authentic practice, and the impact such mediatization has upon definitions of religious agency (Hess 2005; Hess et. al. 2004). In making this claim, I am not trying to suggest that these are the only such elements we ought to consider, but they are certainly the three that most directly impact upon the smaller domain of religious education, which is my chief concern.

Taking the underlying theoretical and empirical work of various media scholars (for example, Stewart 2006) and making it tangible for church leaders, Medrano writes that “shared media experiences provide much of the symbolic material for our imagination and the construction of our religious identity” (Medrano 2004, p. 148). This is a statement that takes very seriously the ways in which our reality is socially constructed. In noting that “the voice of the Church is just one voice among many” (p. 148), Medrano describes one tangible consequence attributable to “flattened authority” structures. He also emphasizes the active nature of such meaning-making, of such storying, describing the ways in which resonance and relevance are key factors (pp. 148–149).

Consider the consequences of these shifts for religious institutions. In my own church, a local Roman Catholic parish, authority no longer automatically accrues to those whom the structures assume it should (the hierarchical line from Christ to pope to bishop to priest to community). Authenticity becomes a far more important criteria for truth than carefully construed philosophical argument. Hundreds, if not thousands, of years of carefully shaped

¹ Given that almost all mass/popular media are created and circulated through digital means, I will be using “digital media” as one subset of popular media. I realize that digital media and mass media are not co-terminous, and that indeed we might have arguments about whether certain forms of media can even be termed “mass” at this point, but all of these categories overlap consistently enough that in this context there is little to be gained by sharply differentiating amongst them.

formation and history carry little immediate power for the 14-year-old whose attention has been shaped to engage digital video games, multi-tasking relationships carried on via cell phone, instant chat, email and in person all at the same time.

Consider the role that feelings play in mediated culture. We watch a film, and we are drawn into the characters and the setting. We find ourselves “transported” into a different context, and the emotions evoked there. Even if the storyline is fantastical – think of the *Harry Potter* books and movies, for instance – if the feelings evoked pass the test of authenticity, then the fiction is *real* in some important way, and the storyline may become one we use to *feel our way through* our own lives. This is in part what Medrano is referring to when he writes that mediated contexts provide much of “the material with which we form and inform our habits, relationships, conversation and identities”. It is also a facet of Margaret Miles’ book *Seeing and Believing*, which is an extended argument that audiences feel our way through the various media that surround us, and in doing so stretch – or narrow – the realm of what is possible (Miles 1997).

Authority, then, is being fundamentally reshaped by changing judgements about authenticity. But what constitutes “authenticity”? It is surely a category or set of criteria that are everywhere in use, but rarely defined. One key component has to do with matching one’s internal feelings with one’s expectations and experiences. In feeling our way through situations, do our feelings resonate, do they harmonize, do they conform with our previous experiences and our expectations? The verbs here are deliberately musical, because one of the elements of making meaning in this way which is worth attending to, is that while the feelings themselves are deeply personal and internal, the way in which meaning is made draws on external resources. Single line melodies can be beautiful, but most music carries its meaning in multiple lines. “Authenticity” can be accorded to widely disparate circumstances, but generally must be built based on previously shared experiences.

This is where mediated cultures can be so perplexing, because on the one hand they provide a seemingly endless variety of stories into which to be drawn, into which one’s experiences can be tuned, but on the other hand, that endless variety is actually fairly narrowly circumscribed. Indeed, we find ourselves flooded by media in which stories are told and we are invited to “feel with” various characters, but the key question might well be whether this “feeling with” enlarges us or narrows us.

Storying That Grows Empathy, Rather Than Mere Sympathy

Thomas Boomershine has written that in mediated spaces we tend to reason more by means of sympathetic identification than through philosophical argument (Boomershine 1999). That formulation is useful in this context, for it not only points to the elements of resonance and personal relevance Medrano noted – after all, sympathetic identification is a process of “feeling with” – but it also points directly to some of the dynamics religious communities most seek to change, largely because sympathetic identification is not enough. Most theologians would argue that Christian faith calls us to deep empathy. Sympathy involves being able to

imagine oneself into another's position by using one's experiences to "feel with" them. Although it involves an "other", sympathy does not really stretch beyond oneself, it is still profoundly self-centered. Empathy, on the other hand, involves being able to feel with another even if one has *never* had the same experience, and even if the experience places one's own experiences in a different light. Empathy involves a degree of self differentiation and compassion that is far more other-oriented.

I believe one can see these distinctions very clearly in many of the gospel stories. Jesus is asked "who is my neighbor?" and doesn't simply reply that s/he is one's friend, but that in fact one's neighbor might even be one's enemy (Luke 10:29). The "trick" or "turn" of many of the parables is that a listener often identifies with a particular character, only to find that the story rewards a different one – an outcome that can only be understood on the basis of empathy. A listener wants to be paid for the work she has done, but in the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20) *every* worker is paid the same, even the ones who only worked towards the end of the day. Outrage over fairness erupts. "Shouldn't I be paid more because I worked longer?" – is a statement speaking from sympathy. Agreement that all should be paid the same regardless of their hours of work might grow, instead, out of an empathic sense that the worker who spent most of the day waiting to work without hope, suffered in doing so; or that all are entitled to share in common. Parables are a specific form of narrative in the Christian tradition, and as Anderson & Foley note:

Parabolic narratives show the seams and edges of the myths we fashion. Parables show the fault lines beneath the comfortable surfaces of the worlds we build for ourselves. Myth may give stability to our story, but parables are agents of change and sometimes disruption (Anderson & Foley 2001, p. 14).

The distinction they are making here – between the parabolic and the mythic – is a function of the dialectical dynamic of much of the Christian "Story" writ large. That is, the Christian Story is a story about life coming about through death. It is a story that has at its heart – at least in the mainline Catholic, Protestant, and Reformed versions – a peculiar kind of insistence that:

to live we have to die. In the meantime, we look for enough courage to love the questions and live the contradictions of the stories and rituals that bring them to life. To do so in a spirit of reconciliation does not demand resolution but allows transformation as we never imagined it and grace where we least expect it (Anderson & Foley 2001, p. 183).

That *both* the parabolic and mythic are necessary may also echo the reality that *both* the sympathetic and the empathetic are required. Developmental psychologists teach us that it is impossible to grow into empathy if one has not first experienced sympathy. The reality that much of mediated culture invites sympathetic identification, then, is not so much an impossible obstacle to Christian storying, as it is a first step and an invitation. Christian community

calls us into modes of *empathy*, but our wider contexts teach us *sympathy*. This contradiction is particularly evident within the narrative forms most prevalent in mediated spaces.

It is also clear that more constrained versions of Christian identity actually foster a desire to limit the possible development of empathy by closing down invitations to experience “otherness” as a means towards transformation. Perhaps the most obvious example of this constriction might be the response of several Christian communities to the *Harry Potter* book series. In part because these novels have central characters who are witches and wizards – a category of “being” that Christian communities have over centuries often repudiated – many Christian communities have argued that their children should not even be allowed to read the books, for fear of contamination. At heart that is a fear about risking change, about risking a possible identification with an “other” who is so far outside the bounds of one’s experience that one cannot imagine identifying with them. Yet empathy is a form of identification that does not merge. In other words, one can empathize with someone else *without becoming* that other. Sympathy, on the other hand, invites identification through an assumption of sameness.

So, too, the fear of representing homosexuality in positive ways in mass media. Many Christians in the US are deeply worried about the positive portrayal of gay characters, in part, I believe, because they fear people identifying with them, and perhaps even “becoming” them. Such a fear ignores the research that suggests that being gay is not a choice, but rather a given. But it also ignores the possibility of being able to empathize with someone who is very different from you, without in some way *becoming* that person. Even the most conservative of Christian communities ought to be able to find ways into *empathy* with those most marginalized in our culture.

So what does this mean for religious educators? For local churches? We need to think about everything we do in terms of stretching sympathetic identification to empathetic identification. At the same time, we must do so in the media with which any specific community is most fluent, and we must do so building from the clear recognition that many of the more traditional modes of religious practice are *not* all that familiar to people. That doesn’t mean that we avoid traditional modes, but it *does* mean that we have to rethink how we introduce people to them, and we have to be adept at walking alongside of people as they explore their faith and its implications for their daily practices. Anderson and Foley write:

The spirit of reconciliation, which enables us to enter a world of contradiction, is the same disposition that allows us to embrace paradox without needing to resolve it. This is a spirituality that thrives only in paradox, between the mythic and the parabolic, around the human and divine story, and in the tension of the individual and communal. It is a spirituality that is nourished by the ambiguity of mighty stories and dangerous rituals. This experience of ambiguity is inevitable because pluralistic living is a permanent part of contemporary human society. If we are to flourish in this society, we need to learn how to tolerate opposing forces, both within and without (Anderson & Foley 2001, p. 180).

So how are we to support such a flourishing ability to live in paradox? There are no doubt multiple answers to that question, but given that my purpose in this essay is to explore the ways in which digital storytelling shapes religious identity, it will likely not surprise you that my particular response to that question lies also with digital storytelling.

To do that I need to talk about the third dynamic, that of agency.

Storying That Grows Agency

When educators talk about the ways in which people learn, they often point to three areas: the cognitive, the affective, and the psychomotor. While I would not assume that these three match up perfectly with the ways I've been discussing authority, authenticity, and agency, I do believe that the match between "action" and "agency" is particularly close.

Agency has to do with whether persons feel like they are able to "make a difference", are able to "have an impact". In the United States it is common to see action on pressing issues represented in fairly individualistic ways. Indeed, careful examination of the ways in which newscasts represent action leads to the conclusion that agency is overwhelmingly represented as a function of consumption, or at least of individual action through circulation of funds. A powerful example would be responses to climate change. People view hurricane damage on television, and they are invited to send money to relief organizations. People flock to see the film *An Inconvenient Truth*, and begin to worry about how much gas their car uses, or whether they ought to buy solar panels. Even in political terms action is most often assessed in terms of the amount of money raised by a specific candidate, rather than the number of people who attend a mass rally, or some other indicator.²

When action is primarily depicted in terms of buying "things", it is not surprising that many people understand *consumption* as their primary means of agency. I'm not seeking to condemn consumption (or the lowering of one's consumption) as a form of action, rather I'm seeking to call attention to the dilemma that *only* representing agency in that way is highly problematic for religious communities. For millennia religious communities have conceived of agency as an attribute of humanity which is granted by God. Differing theologies will describe such agency in different ways, but one example would be a belief that God is active in the world and human beings share in that action as elements of God's ongoing creative activity (Guder 1998). Most of the biblical narratives center in one form or another on the agency of God. While individual human beings do indeed make individual human choices and take individual human action, much of the time action that is only individually oriented – or even more so, only about consumption – has devastating consequences.³

² To be fair, the film *An Inconvenient Truth* actually suggests many actions people can take that are not about consumption, including "if you believe in prayer, pray that people might have the strength to change" (Guggenheim 2006).

³ Biblical stories such as the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah, or of the Flood are some of the earlier examples, but even in the Second Testament literature (or the "New" Testament), there are multiple examples of negative consequences for hoarding money, or piling up possessions, etc.

Given such a theological understanding, it is highly problematic for communities of faith to reinforce limited notions of agency through consumption, yet that is precisely what many of them are doing. In the US we have a huge industry devoted to producing Christian “stuff” – everything from books and movies, to music, clothing, household goods, and so on. While much of this merchandise appeals to the conservative end of the Christian spectrum, there are equally problematic efforts on the liberal end. Specific boycotts of problematic products – or, their opposite, “girlcotts” urging people to buy specific products – do not step outside of the circle of consumption, they simply reinforce its underlying assumptions.

Clearly practices of lowering consumption can have transformative impact, they *are* a form of agency. I’m just not convinced that they are the *only* form of agency worth supporting. Most such efforts have little theological content associated with them, other than perhaps a desire to reinforce the “in” group over and against an “out” group – a highly problematic theological goal. Churches rarely argue that their parishioners should buy Christian “stuff” because God has created it. Urging people to boycott certain products – that is, refuse to buy them – or alternatively *to* buy products to encourage producers – is a means by which people can make a difference, can have agency, through consumption (or the decreasing thereof). It is a time-honored practice, and one that many religious communities have been involved with. It does not, however, reinforce any of the religious narratives that grow out of God’s agency, it does not draw people into constructing their own stories in ways that “weave the human and divine”. What would be an alternative?

Traditionally religious communities have posed alternatives through practices of communal worship. Corporate prayer and communal discernment are two such practices. There is a movement in the US around notions of “practices of faith” that has highlighted a number of these forms of action: testimony, discernment, healing, singing, and so on.⁴ In most of these practices God’s agency is clearly one aspect of the practice, even if human agency is also intimately connected to it; and relationality is a key component.

Part of why I’ve been tracing these dynamics in terms of authority, authenticity and agency is so that I can ask a bigger question that is directly connected to all three within mediated cultures: Is our ability to conceive of certain ideas, to feel in certain ways, to imagine acting towards specific ends, is this ability being grown and enlarged, or being narrowed and constrained? I think far too often the answer is the latter, that we are being constrained. So what might religious communities do about these constraints? How might we respond? I think there are myriad responses, but for the purposes of this essay, I’d like to use a very specific example by way of illustration.

⁴ For more on this particular movement, see <http://practicingourfaith.com/>.

Digital Storytelling and Structures of Distribution and Sharing

Rather than focus on specific stories, though, or even on structures within stories – a topic many other scholars have fruitfully engaged – I’d like to focus on the architecture of the web, and the ways in which it supports and/or constrains specific kinds of storytelling in digital formats.

First, in mediated contexts such as those I’ve been focusing on, people’s stories inevitably draw on the “raw materials”, if you will, of the stories that float around them. In religious contexts most of those materials used to be “owned” by the religious community, in, first, the sense of having originated the stories. The gospel narratives of Jesus, for instance, are “owned” by the Christian community because they are the founding stories of the Christian branch of religious community which followed upon Jesus. But they are *not* owned, in the intellectual property sense of the word. Indeed, in the primarily oral culture in which they first emerged, “ownership” in the intellectual property sense of that word makes very little sense.

In our current contexts, however, much of the material that people draw on as they explain their faith journeys, as they build similes and analogies, as they draw resonance, as they tell their stories, comes from mediated popular culture. The raw materials they are using did not originate in specific religious community, but rather are claimed as having religious significance by people as they build their narratives. In some cases the material may contain explicit religious imagery (the music of U2 and Bruce Springsteen comes to mind), but no religious community “authored” or granted “authority” to the use of those images.

On the other hand, as people increasingly build narratives based on popular culture, they are finding themselves caught up in legal challenges over the use of such materials. The examples of this dilemma are myriad: churches wanting to use film clips in worship, but fearing being sued; people publishing “mix tapes” of their favorite music remixed with photos and images to *YouTube* sites, only to have them taken down as copyright infringements; folk groups in the global south having music they’ve created transcribed and copyrighted by groups in the global north without permission and in such a way that their work can no longer be easily accessed; and so on.

In some ways these are dilemmas that exemplify the concern I noted earlier about agency. Who can do what with what materials? In this case, the arbitrating authority has become the legal institutions which govern “intellectual property” rather than the religious community. Indeed, most individuals can likely escape legal notice, and thus legal prosecution, for use of such materials *until and unless* they desire to share them – which of course, is part of the point of religious community. That is, that it is our collective, communal, *shared* meaning-making that defines and shapes us as *religious* not simply *spiritual* beings.

The second constraint I want to note has to do with theological/editorial control. This is in some ways a challenge to authority: who gets to decide what constitutes appropriate religious expression? Who decides what stories can be told? In oral cultures there are multiple mechanisms for doing so – shunning, nonverbal body language, language enforcement, and so on. In digital contexts one might think there are few such mechanisms. Indeed, one of the complaints of many religious communities is how “skewed” certain expression of religion are on

the net, only vaguely resembling the intent of specific communities. Thus people can go to the web and find “Catholic” sites that few bishops would endorse, or “Catholic” sites that few theologians would recognize, and so on. Unfortunately, one of the responses to such a challenge has been to attempt to create hierarchical forms of editorial control. (I say “unfortunately” primarily because in this early stage of the net, we ought to be nourishing multiple possibilities, rather than seeking to narrow them.)

An example of this kind of control might be the meteoric rise of the site *GodTube.com*, which is the “fastest growing new site on the web”⁵ and which promotes its editorial control through a very clearly drawn theological rationale (URL: <<http://www.godtube.com/about/>>). Although anyone can submit content to the site, only contributions which adhere to their editorial policy will be published. In some sense the site attempts to create a “safe” haven for Christian content by putting very severe constraints on the kind of content welcomed there, and assuming the typical role of a centralized editorial body. This is a site which wants both to provide room for people to tell their own stories – but then seeks to control the content of the stories published at the site, by only publishing those which meet their criteria. In doing so the site reinforces a “sympathetic” engagement, without inviting the kind of crossing of borders and engagement with difference that would instead elicit and nourish empathy.

So we have obstacles having to do with legal restrictions, and we have obstacles having to do with theological identity. The example I’d like to explore in this part of my essay seeks to provide an alternative that overcomes both of these structural obstacles. It is a site that seeks to build its space from the standpoint or location of “open source” development. Perhaps you are familiar with open source software projects like the *Linux* operating system, or the *Moodle* course management system. These are software projects in which the source code – the internal architecture, the programming codes – that creates the utility is released into the open, so that other programmers might find ways to improve upon a particular piece of software’s functionality.

There is growing acceptance of open source software throughout the world. The operating system *Linux* has gained so much use that it is now widely viewed as a serious competitor to *Windows*, and in its wake have come numerous other projects that seek to build an alternative economic model based on widespread sharing and collaboration. There has been increasing exploration of what some have termed “Web 2.0” projects, projects that use collaborative software to build compelling and successful spaces. The software that has enabled much of this work grew out of open source projects, and includes things like RSS (or “really simple syndication”), wikis, tagging clouds, podcasting, social networking projects, and so on. Some of the more successful of such projects include: *Wikipedia*, *Googledocs*, *Flickr*, and so on. There are more and more such projects emerging in the religious realm, but to date we have not found any that privilege the open source element of widespread sharing across borders.

⁵ As reported by comScore (<http://www.physorg.com/news113153071.html> [11/1/07]). Such designations are notoriously unreliable, as web metrics are still being figured out. Nevertheless, this site clearly is growing rapidly enough that various news organizations are taking note.

Instead, most of these projects are like *GodTube.com* – taking the underlying software and seeking to make a “safe haven” of defined participation.

About two years ago a group of artists, scholars and pastoral leaders gathered at the invitation of the World Council of Churches to explore some of the thorny dilemmas that arise within pastoral communities around the use of music, particularly in terms of intellectual property concerns. This group sought to find ways to engage the challenges that arise when people seek to respect artists’ rights in creation, but also a community’s rights to share in meaning-making. Many different efforts arose from that consultation, but one in particular is the *Feautor.org* project.

www.Feautor.org is a website that several of us have worked on with the support of a small grant from a European foundation (which prefers to remain anonymous). We have worked on this prototype as a way of demonstrating the utility of collaboration, as well as the possibility of doing so without narrowing theological horizons. Indeed we seek instead to open up cross-border engagement.

In building a site created to take advantage of notions of open sourcing, we also were blessed with the ability to utilize one other recent innovation – *Creative Commons* licenses (<http://creativecommons.org/>). *Creative Commons* licenses are legal licenses that function within existing copyright regimes, while automatically granting certain kinds of uses. They exist in a variety of formulations along the spectrum between “all rights reserved” (what we traditionally have understood as copyright) and the public domain (where no rights are reserved). They are also electronically linked, so that it is a trivial task to attach one to a given piece of work and in doing so, also make the piece more easily accessible to net-wide search mechanisms. These licenses are not as radical as the work that is currently being done on “free” culture (free as in “freedom”, not as in “free beer”), but they do create a proactive mechanism within existing law for artists to promote the sharing of their materials. In that way they support a notion of “agency” that is both closely linked with a creative artist’s individual creativity, but which also recognizes the integral element of community, of audience, of sharing that is bound up with creation.

The site we are developing, *Feautor.org*, seeks to regain a sense of agency for creative artists *within* a framework that provides multiple ways of thinking about group identity. In doing so we support agency through creative authoring of resources and through the sharing of those resources; and we support authenticity by building on the development of shared participation. But what of authority? So much of religious identity is vested in communal understandings of authority. Whereas most traditional understandings of such authority have been vertical, and vested (as I’ve noted earlier in this essay) in structures of the church or in charismatic individuals, what other possibilities might exist? Here again is where we hope *Feautor.org* might provide an alternative.

Indeed, one of the first challenges we faced as we began to develop this site was that of authority. The typical institutions we approached, institutions which we thought would be interested – publishers of religious materials, ecumenical organizations, and so on – were deeply suspicious of any website which did not have editorial controls in place upon submis-

sion of materials. We tried in several ways to allay such concerns, but in the end had to move away from existing institutions with the hope that a prototype could demonstrate the concept and then be gradually adopted.

The concept we are trying to demonstrate has to do with recognizing both the flattening of authority that is occurring throughout digitally mediated contexts, but *also* the more participatory and collaborative forms of authority that are beginning to emerge. Just as open source software production brings many eyes to bear on particular software projects, our goal is to build an environment, a space, tools, for helping people and communities build their own creative and evaluative capacities in the arena of religious resource publishing. Rather than assuming that the publisher of a specific religious community can adequately evaluate and edit materials appropriate for all the churches they might need to serve, we believe each church or faith community needs to discern the criteria it wants to use in choosing religious resources.

This is not the default position for most religious communities, who have tended to assume that it requires professionals to make such choices. Indeed, within religious education in particular, one of the deeper dilemmas religious organizations have faced is that in handing over the task of religious education to professionally trained teachers, families – wherein the bulk of religious education can and still does take place – have withdrawn from the task to some degree, and feel that they are not capable of educating their children religiously.

There are indeed ways in which professional teachers can be useful. Given the diversity of faith communities now present across the world, most families do not know enough about their neighbor's faiths to interpret them constructively to their children. It is also clear that professional educators have a variety of expertise and resources at hand in terms of understanding developmental psychology, knowing much more deeply and broadly about specific theologies, and so on. Still, we know from longitudinal as well as historical research that families remain the primary religious educators of their children, whether they do so intentionally or not. In addition, the next most primary resource is the immediate religious community (the church, mosque, synagogue, etc.).

So the challenge is to find ways to make the gifts and expertise of professionals accessible to, available to, the families and churches who could benefit from engaging them. Simply providing the expertise through publishing print materials is no longer a cost effective option, and even providing professionally trained teachers in local faith communities has not adequately met the need.

We've learned in other contexts – media education, for one – that a really effective way to help students become good evaluators of websites and other media, is to teach them how to produce within a particular medium. In seeking to meet the challenge of flattening authority, one of our goals with the *Feautor.org* site is to provide a space in which people can share the resources they themselves are creating, and at the same time learn to develop the evaluative capacities they need to discern how authoritative a given religious resource ought to be for them.

How do we imagine this will happen? As I noted earlier, one of the key ways we propose to respond to the flattening of religious authority, is to invite people back into the tradition in experiential ways. To build upon the dynamics of mediated spaces that privilege sympathetic identification, and then to do so in ways that stretch that identification into empathy. So the *Feautor.org* site, for example, seeks to invite *apprenticeship* in evaluating materials, as well as in creating and sharing them.

One of the key networks of support for the site is the *Religious Education Association*, which is an international network of professors, researchers, and practitioners in religious education. REA members who teach in higher education settings will not only support their students in publishing projects to the site, but will also assign them the task of evaluating specific resources, and putting their evaluations up at the site in the form of reviews. We hope in this way not only to support these faculty in helping their *students* develop evaluative capacity, but also to “model” for other site users how reviewing could be done, and what criteria might be useful.

The site also seeks to invite apprenticeship – and thus religious identity development – in ways that provide opportunities for crossing multiple borders. That is to say, rather than assuming that the most effective or appropriate resources for a given religious community are to be found and produced only *within* that religious community, the *Feautor.org* site takes a radically different position: namely, that to some extent *cross community* discussion and sharing might indeed contribute to the development of religious identity in fruitful and expansive ways. This is a radical claim, and perhaps a very risky experiment, for many religious communities have tended to define their identities “over and against” other communities. But it is also an experiment that is taking place in a variety of ways across the US, albeit not so much in digital formats.⁶

As we have worked on first dreaming of, and then seeking to create, this site we learned that we needed to build a variety of ways to *authorize* content into it. We have retained our original dream of a wide open space in which *anyone* can publish religious resources, and indeed in which what constitutes a “religious” resource is left open to creators. The first, and easiest, way to publish content on the site is simply to register as a user and begin.

But we have also sought to be responsive to the concerns of specific communities of creators, particularly those who have a tradition of authorship that is collaborative and communal. One of our first big partners, *RedCreate*, a large network of liturgical animators in Latin America, has consistently sought to recognize the shared nature of their work. So even though in many cases individual artists “author” pieces in the network, there are also many pieces which are simply “of the people”. To respond to their desire to recognize that kind of shared authorship, and to create a space in which they could “authorize” more broadly the content that they wanted to encourage, we created a structure within the larger *Feautor.org* site, that of “groups”.

⁶ Some examples might be the Interfaith Youth Corps (<http://www.ifyc.org/>), the Catholic/Jewish dialogue directed by Mary Boys and Sara Lee (1996), several of the projects promoted by the Pluralism Project (<http://www.pluralism.org/>), and so on.

“Groups” are people who have come together and decided to exercise shared control over what is labeled as *their* group’s work. A group chooses an administrator (or administrators), drafts some basic documents describing who they are, and then contributes content to the site through an administrator they choose and whom they provide. We have made it possible to personalize the group sites a bit, allowing for changes in the color and style of the underlying template. In this way *Feautor.org* has become an opportunity for smaller groups to create a web presence, and to publish their materials.

A third option has also begun to emerge. This one is a combination of the first – anyone can publish to the site – and the second – people publish through an administrator. In this third case, we have created a queue line into which someone can submit their work for consideration of publishing under a particular group. That queue is then reviewed by the administrator of the group in question. If the administrator of the group approves, the contribution goes up on the site under their “label”. If the administrator does not, the contribution simply goes up on the larger *Feautor.org* site. This was an option that emerged as we worked with the ELCA Regional Resource Directors, because they have multiple people who contribute resources to the group, but they did not want to have multiple administrators. They also wanted to find a way to support people publishing things under an ELCA Regional Resource “label” without having to know the contributors in advance.

In each of these cases we have provided a space in which potential obstacles to publication are kept as low as possible. With the widespread ubiquity of the net, it is now possible using our site to publish a religious resource and make it accessible to communities across the globe. This is one way to respond to the “flattening” of authority mentioned earlier in this paper: We’ve essentially taken full advantage of that flattening and used it to open up possibilities. But simply making texts (and other media) available for use does not, in and of itself, do much to shift the ways in which flattened authority affects religious community. The key elements of a Web 2.0 strategy involve building as much participatory collaboration into a given project as possible.

Thus there is one other mechanism that we have implemented in the site in addition to open contributions and open reviewing – the ability to build “folksonomies”, or tagging processes that grow organically from use of the site. Anyone can “tag” a contribution on the site, from the author when they first upload it, to any user who registers at the site and wants to participate by tagging. We have implemented the tagging in what is called “tag cloud” format, meaning that the tags most frequently attached to a specific contribution will be depicted in a larger size font, than those that are rarely or only uniquely used for that contribution.

Authority, Authenticity, Agency ...

In conclusion, let me simply reiterate that while mediatization reshapes these three elements of religious storytelling – how institutions and individuals understand religious/normative authority, how authenticity and authentic practice are constructed within mediatization versus the ways in which a specific religious tradition has understood authentic practice, and the

impact such mediatization has upon definitions of religious agency – there are opportunities as well as contradictions present in that reshaping. www.feautor.org is one attempt to take advantage of that reshaping for the good of religious communities by building a space in which cross-border, open-source creation and sharing can occur. In the long run, we believe that this will invite the kind of empathetic identification religious community demands, and will encourage further exploration and sharing of religious story-telling in digital contexts.

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