



uOttawa

L'Université canadienne  
Canada's university

**FACULTÉ DES ÉTUDES SUPÉRIEURES  
ET POSTDOCTORALES**



**FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND  
POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES**

**Wendy Martin**

AUTEUR DE LA THÈSE / AUTHOR OF THESIS

**Ph.D. (Religious Studies)**

GRADE / DEGREE

**Department of Classics and Religions Studies**

FACULTÉ, ÉCOLE, DÉPARTEMENT / FACULTY, SCHOOL, DEPARTMENT

**Seeking Through the Small Screen: Television as a Resource for  
Negotiating and Constructing Personal Spirituality**

TITRE DE LA THÈSE / TITLE OF THESIS

**Peter Beyer**

DIRECTEUR (DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS SUPERVISOR

CO-DIRECTEUR (CO-DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS CO-SUPERVISOR

EXAMINATEURS (EXAMINATRICES) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS EXAMINERS

**Lori Beaman**

**Marie-Françoise Guédon**

**Naomi Goldenberg**

**Lynn Schofield Clark**

**Gary W. Slater**

Le Doyen de la Faculté des études supérieures et postdoctorales / Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

**Seeking Through the Small Screen: Television as a Resource for  
Negotiating and Constructing Personal Spirituality**

**By  
Wendy Martin**

**Dissertation submitted to  
The Faculty of Graduate and Postgraduate Studies, University of Ottawa  
As partial requirement for  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies**

**© Wendy Karthryn Martin, Canada, 2007**



Library and  
Archives Canada

Published Heritage  
Branch

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

Bibliothèque et  
Archives Canada

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file    Votre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-49379-3*  
*Our file    Notre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-49379-3*

**NOTICE:**

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

**AVIS:**

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

■ ■ ■  
**Canada**

## Abstract

One of the noted changes in religious behaviour in North Atlantic societies, has been the movement away from traditional institutionalized religions and towards non-institutional religion and personal forms of spirituality often characterized by individuals' mix and match various religious and secular ideas, beliefs and practices in order to form personal forms of 'religion' (Luckmann 1967; Bibby 1987, 1991, 2001; Roof 1993, 1999; Wuthnow 1998; Zinnbauer 1999; Heelas 2002; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Such trends then beg the questions, specifically how are people constructing their personal religions? Are there common resources helping to shape and influence individual's personal forms of spirituality? How are elements such as individualism, consumerism and communication and information technologies impacting upon and reflected in contemporary religious practices?

Inspired by these research questions, this thesis investigates how television functions as a cultural resource for negotiating and constructing personal forms of spirituality. Using in-depth interviews with 30 research participants this project examines how self-identified 'spiritual' individuals define and describe the relationship between their spirituality and their television viewing. Combining insights from sociological literature examining contemporary spirituality, with the research participants' definitions and descriptions of spirituality, I come to interpret spirituality as both a product and a process; that is, spirituality as 'specific beliefs and practices' and spirituality as 'the act of learning, thinking, talking about transcendent meaning' (Besecke 2002; 2005). The term 'transcendent' as it is used in this context refers to the postulation by individuals or collectives, that there is some form of reality and meaning outside, beyond or underneath every day, objective reality (Luckmann, 1967: 58; Berger 1969: 53; Wuthnow 1976: 71; Dawson 1987: 228; Besecke 2005:183)

Based on this understanding of spirituality as product and process, I argue that television programs play a role in cultural dialogues about transcendent meaning, offering a platform through which viewers reflexively explore a variety of spiritual themes, topics and issues. To support this argument, I present interview data demonstrating how the participants in this study use television programs as way to help define what counts as spirituality; to shape and inform their spiritual beliefs, general worldviews and concepts of morality; to foster curiosity, learning and open-mindedness; as an outlet for working through different possibilities, options and potential forms of ultimate meaning, as evidence of

transcendent reality; and importantly, as a way to satisfy their interest in spirituality. Further, I argue that participants use television as a resource for a particular form of spiritual consumption as they continuously seek out both new and more information, knowledge, and ideas related to an assortment of religious, spiritual and transcendent themes.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to express my heartfelt appreciation to everyone that has contributed to this endeavor. I thank all of the participants for generously sharing their time and stories. I feel privileged to have met and gotten to know each of them. It truly was an enriching experience academically and personally. I hope some of them found it rewarding as well.

I also extend my thanks to the four wise women that comprised my thesis committee for their help – directly and indirectly. I thank Dr. Lori Beaman for her detailed and thoughtful recommendations and comments regarding this project, for being a friendly and encouraging face at conferences and assisting me with my academic publications. I express my appreciation to Dr. Marie-Françoise Guédon both for her thoughts regarding this project and for her encouraging me to look at the world through different lenses. I also would like to thank her for introducing me to the work of Tony Buzam and for helping me develop techniques to order my creative, but often chaotic thoughts and theories. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Lynn Schofield Clark for her willingness to be part of my thesis committee. As Dr. Clark has been a pioneer in the field of media, culture and religion, particularly through her ethnographic studies of teens and the media, and because her work has been so foundational to how I have come to think about media, religion and culture, it truly was an honour to receive her recommendations, advice and encouragement!

Further, I also thank Dr. Naomi Goldenberg for being such a source of inspiration and for introducing me to academic theories of religion and popular culture in my days as an undergraduate student and helping me to develop them further during my doctoral studies. I also wish to thank Dr. Goldenberg for her mentoring, providing me with practical advice for developing my academic career, and for bringing me to my first academic conferences.

And last, in this list of academic mentors, but most importantly, I thank my thesis supervisor Dr. Peter Beyer. To him I extend my absolute gratitude for all of the practical advice, personal encouragement, and for making me hand this research in regardless. I am sincerely grateful for his patience, for his ability to help me articulate what I was thinking, and for helping me develop my academic skills and portfolio through providing me with research, teaching assistant and sessional lecturing opportunities. I truly could not have had a better thesis supervisor and academic mentor.

I also owe much to the people around me – family and friends that have provided endless support, comfort, and much needed breaks. While there are many people to whom I owe thanks, I especially would like to express my appreciation to Beth, Paulette and Mel for being such wonderful friends throughout the ups and downs of this process. Also, I must thank my fabulous family and extended network of loved ones, I so greatly appreciate the constant encouragement, that always seemed to arrive at just the right time.

In particular I would like to thank Doris Jamieson whose best wishes I could always feel and Janet Martin for her constant encouragement and interest in my work – even when she could no longer understand it. I also wish to thank (in writing) my sister Jennifer for all of her help with this project and for being such a wonderful sister and friend. I further extend my thanks and appreciation to Glenn for always have a cold beer and a good time planned during my vacations. And of course I thank Jamieson, Sophie and Zachary for being constant reminders of what is truly important in life and really, just for being who they are!

Finally, I attempt to convey my thanks to my parents Andrea and Warren Martin for always going above and beyond the call of duty. While there are too many reasons to list, in particular I wish to thank them for fostering my love of learning since I was a child and for encouraging and supporting me throughout my many years of education. I especially, thank them for their constant emotional, financial and practical support and advice throughout all the ups and downs experienced over the last six years. This doctorate belongs almost as much to them as it does to me.

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter One: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
a) The Inquiry	
b) Structure of Argument	
c) Method and Sample	
i) Methodology	
ii) The Sample	
d) Overview	
<b>Chapter Two: D-I-Y Religion? Characterizing Reflexive Spirituality</b>	<b>21</b>
a) The Contemporary Religious Landscape	
b) Invisible Religion	
c) Rational Choice and New Forms of Religion: Audience and Client Cults	
d) Defining Spirituality	
e) Spirituality in the Canadian Context	
f) Spirituality as Conversations about Transcendent Meaning	
<b>Chapter Three: Television as a Cultural Forum</b>	<b>44</b>
a) Interpreting Audiences: Developments in mass media audiences theories	
b) The Meaning and Being of Television: Television and Social Construction	
c) Forging a Link Between Religion and Television	
<b>Chapter 4: Spirituality as Universal and Particular</b>	<b>126</b>
a) Interpretive Categories	
b) The Transcendent Reality and its Specific Forms	
c) Reflections on Morality, Meaning and Purpose	
<b>Chapter 5: Television as Conversations about Transcendent Reality</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>Meaning and Morality</b>	
a) General Approaches to Viewing	
b) Television as a Spiritual Resource	
c) Cultivating Open Mindedness Through TV	
<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion</b>	<b>265</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>275</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>284</b>
I) Recruitment Questionnaire	284
II) Interview Questions	293
III) Dissenting Data: Laurie and Pierre	299

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

As a student of religion, over the past decade I have been intrigued by the persistent presence of television shows depicting religious, spiritual and supernatural themes. The past popularity of television programs such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The X-Files*, and *Joan of Arcadia*, to name some obvious players, all offer examples of how non-official and non-institutional religion and spirituality are manifesting in television media culture. In the field of religion and culture theories that postulate the interpenetrating relationship between religion and television abound. However as scholars of religion, of course we are bound to see religious and spiritual themes in popular culture. We are trained to. Our eyes and minds have been shaped in such ways that we will notice aspects of religion, even if minute. Consequently, as a researcher, feeling bombarded with religion and spirituality in popular television, the questions I began to ask were not so much, what do academics see and how do we interpret and understand the phenomenon, but how do members of the broader culture respond to it? Do non-specialists see the religious images? If they do, do they care? Are they meaningful? How do people relate to, interpret and understand them? What impact do they have upon people's lives, if any?

### **The Inquiry**

Inspired by these initial questions, this research project examines the relationship between personal forms of spirituality and television programs. Taking cues from research conducted by Luckmann (1997), Roof (1999), Heelas (2002), and Bibby (1987; 1993) demonstrating that individuals are increasingly constructing personal systems of ultimate significance from a variety of sources, and from studies of religion and popular culture, such as those conducted by Newcomb (1990), Schultz (1990), Primiano (2001) and Blythe (2002)

which demonstrate the prevalence of explicitly and implicitly religious themes in television programs, I examine the degree to which individual spiritual seekers consciously draw upon the content and themes of television programs as a source of spiritual meaning. This project began by posing the question ‘what is the relationship between personal spirituality and the proliferation of television programs presenting religious, spiritual and otherworldly themes, characters and storylines?’ Data gathered through in-depth interviews with 30 research participants form the primary focal point for this study. Interview participants generously shared their beliefs, opinions and stories during this process offering detailed descriptions of their lives including their religious or spiritual life histories, current belief and meaning systems, and personal experiences; as well as in-depth discussions about their television viewing preferences, descriptions and analyses of specific programs and their interpretations of the relationship (if any) between their spirituality and the television programs that they watch.

Each participant’s discussion about her or his spiritual beliefs contained some slight, and in some cases, significant differences from the other participants. Since personal spirituality by definition is highly individualistic and idiosyncratic, such differences in details were to be expected. However, there are still some consistencies amongst them that in fact help to account for why the variations, while noticeable do not render their forms of spirituality dissimilar. The spiritual worldviews of participants account for this diversity since they conceptualize the transcendent as a universal force or reality that manifests in countless ways depending upon the individual and their personal, social and cultural context. The unifying factors within each participant’s description of spirituality are rooted in their emphasis on diversity, pluralism, and open mindedness, the concept of universal transcendent reality, meaning and morality, which manifests in limitless particular forms, and

the emphasis on spirituality as continuous growth, learning, questioning and transformation. Moreover, the emphasis on spirituality as a process of learning, thinking, questioning, considering possibilities and being open minded demonstrates a correlation of participants' personal spiritualities in terms of their form, as well as in regard to some of their content. It is this form of spirituality, as consuming information, ideas, narratives about spirituality, religion and the transcendent, that establishes a palpable link between participants' personal spiritualities and their television viewing

### **Structure of the Argument:**

The theoretical perspective for interpreting the data gathered from interviews originates within the field of sociological studies of religion in late modern societies. Initially, declining rates of participation in traditional religious institutions beginning during the mid-twentieth century seemed to point towards growing irrelevance of religion both in society at large and in the lives of individuals. Such trends seemed to confirm the predictions of classic thinkers in sociology, such as Max Weber and Karl Marx, that religion in modern society was fated to give way to secularization. Certainly, such predictions, as well as the new body of literature arguing that secularization was well underway in late modern societies were not altogether off the mark. Organized or official religion had long since lost its role as the primary source and regulator of systems of signification for societies as a whole (Berger 1967' Luckmann 1967). As Peter Berger argued, following Weber, the rupturing of the 'sacred canopy' of the Medieval Christian Church by the Reformation ended the exclusive hold that any one system of signification could have over societies at large (1967). Shifts toward institutional and social differentiation effectively separating religious institutions from other social spheres further contributed to the decline of religious authority

at the public level. The resulting effects of the loss of religious authority and the availability of a plurality of both religious and secular options, rendering religious worldviews a matter of choice rather than a matter of obligation, do demonstrate that at least in some manner secularization is indeed a reality. However, secularization is not a totalizing effect. As Beckford notes, "Evidence of secularization at one level has no necessary implications for other levels of the social system" (2003: 47). The renewed vitality in traditional religious institutions, the emergence of religio-political movements, new religious movements and new forms of religion indicate that far from disappearing or losing all relevance, the religious landscape of late modern societies is changing shape.

Thomas Luckmann (1967) was a forerunner in recognizing such transformations. Luckmann's theory of religion provides a conceptual basis for identifying the process of adopting and constructing personal systems of ultimate significance through drawing upon a variety of cultural sources as in the case of personal spirituality, as a form of religion characteristic of modern societies. Arguing that religion was not synonymous with official institutional forms of religion but rather the process of meaning-making, Luckmann asserted that religion therefore is a fundamental human activity and as such it would endure, even if particular historical forms of religion disappeared or declined. Further, Luckmann contended that the nature of religion in modern societies was undergoing a transformation, increasingly moving towards privatized and personalized forms. He noted that a range of secondary institutions offering an assortment of religious themes and models of ultimate significance, often designed specifically to cater to the needs and preferences of individuals in a consumer fashion were an increasingly dominant form of religion in modern societies. As such popular culture, particularly those aspects disseminated through mediated forms, becomes an important site for the construction and negotiation of meaning and significance. While

official institutional forms of religion still persist, they compete alongside a range of other meaning systems which individuals can more or less choose to adopt either wholesale or piecemeal. Luckmann's concept of invisible religion provides a conceptual basis for identifying spirituality as a non-institutional form of religion characteristic of late modern societies.<sup>1</sup>

Luckmann's theory of invisible religion has served as a backdrop for locating the form of spirituality expressed by participants in this study as a larger cultural pattern of non-institutional religion that has emerged as one of the characteristic forms of religion in late modern western societies. While personal or reflexive spirituality is not the only non-institutional form of religion visible in the late modern religious landscape, the work by scholars such as of Roof (1993; 1999), Wuthnow (1998), Heelas (2002) and Woodhead and Heelas (2005) have all demonstrated that it is quite a prevalent form. All of these scholars have presented theories, as well as qualitative data, helping to identify and define the category of spirituality, clarifying what people tend to mean when they describe themselves as spiritual, and what sorts of activities, behaviors and beliefs this term tends to characterize. Popularly, spirituality is often contrasted or differentiated from religion as a category of belief and practice, with religion being identified with organized, institutional forms of religion (Heelas 2002). Spirituality, scholars have noted, tends to refer to a highly individualistic form of religion based upon seeking and choosing personal belief and meaning systems from a variety of religious, spiritual and cultural options (King 1996; Roof 1999, 2003; Heelas 2002). However, despite the diversity and individual choice, spirituality

---

<sup>1</sup> Beyond Luckmann other sociologists have similarly demonstrated that the decline in membership in traditional religious institutions has mainly been indicative of a transformation of the religious landscape, rather than the end of religion. For American based research see Wuthnow (1976; 1998) and Roof (1993; 1999). In the Canadian context see Bibby (1987; 1993; 2003). For theories examining trends in Europe and the United Kingdom see Davie (1994; 2000), Hervieu-Léger (2000), Heelas (2002) and Woodman and Heelas (2005).

often contains similar features, such as a holistic concept of the divine, the desire for connection or personal relationship with the divine, the quest for meaning and identity, and an emphasis on personal development, awareness, growth and learning.<sup>2</sup>

Further, the work of Roof, Wuthnow, Woodman and Heelas describes the affinities between spirituality and the cultural context of late modern societies. In particular this body of research draws a clear connection between development of spirituality and broader social trends towards the questioning of both religious and secular authorities; increased personal autonomy, choice, and individuality; the consumer orientation of culture; and the ever expanding role and influence of the electronic communications, particularly the mass media. Quite similarly, David Lyon (2000) identifies personal or bricolage style spirituality as one of the key religious forms emerging in relation to new social context, the “inflated characteristics” of communication information technologies, particularly mass media, and consumerism characteristic of postmodernity. While such cultural contexts offer much in the way of freedom, diversity, and potential, they also bring uncertainty, ambiguity and risk. Within this framework, popular spirituality is interpreted both as a reflection and a response to such cultural conditions.

Robert Wuthnow proposes that a “seeking oriented spirituality” characterized by exploring and choosing from various cultural resources as way to define and negotiate relationships with the transcendent is a favorable form of religion amidst the abundance of choices, rapid change, and uncertainties of late modern societies (1998: 6-10). Likewise,

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that while differentiating the terms spirituality and religion is useful for identifying and characterizing different trends and forms of religion, the polarization of these terms does raise some problems. First constructing religion and spirituality as opposing categories, may imply that one form is more or less authentic than the other. Second, the categories may impose false boundaries, for example, suggesting that spirituality is private, rather than public, or that religion is about institutional authority, rather than personal relationships. As such, rather than employing these terms as rigid categories or definitions, I employ them as conceptual tools, helping to define and distinguish the specific mode of belief and practice expressed by the participants in this study.

Reginald Bibby has argued that religion à la carte and bricolage styles of spirituality may be particularly effective forms of religion helping individuals negotiate and resolve the complexities, multiple roles and competing demands characteristic of late modern life (1987: 137-149).

Adding to these dialogues, although from slightly different vantage point, is Ronald Inglehart's thesis that the cultural characteristics of postmodern societies that give rise to postmaterialist values<sup>3</sup> in turn express a particular form of spiritual concern (1997: 285). Inglehart explains that postmaterialist values tend to emphasize meaning, purpose and quality of life, self expression, valuing of diversity and pluralism, personal involvement and agency over deference to institutional or external authorities, flexible and changing beliefs, and concern with personal well-being. He further suggests that while postmaterialists show decreased involvement and trust in traditional institutional forms of religion, they demonstrate a high level of interest in religious and spiritual concerns, such as contemplating the meaning and purpose of life. The concept of postmaterialism lends further insight into the form and the content of spirituality through identifying the values that are expressed through the form of spirituality. In turn this helps to locate participants' within a larger demographic category and further contextualize the details of participants' spirituality within the broader cultural, economic and political dynamics of postmodern society.

Correlating with these definitions and observations, this study found quite similar patterns within participants' descriptions of their spirituality, emphasizing diversity,

---

<sup>3</sup> Inglehart's theory of materialist and postmaterialist values rests on hypothesis that socio-economic conditions are reflected in values and life-concerns (1990; 1997). Inglehart argues that the high level of economic prosperity and physical security in advanced industrial societies are conducive for widespread socio-cultural changes in values orientations, from those that focus on "economic and physical security" (Materialist values), towards those that emphasize "individual self-expression and quality of life concerns" (Postmaterialist values) (Inglehart 1997: 28) Societies in which economic and physical security are precarious tend exhibit cultural values emphasizing survival.

multiplicity, open mindedness, a holistic concept of the divine, personal interpretations and beliefs, self development, personal growth, learning and knowledge. While the descriptions of personal spirituality offered by each participant reflect their unique personal biography and particular idiosyncrasies and tastes, the style of spirituality and the general themes that are raised are not only common to other participants in this study but also consistent with patterns and descriptions observed in other studies of contemporary spirituality. As such, while this data cannot be generalized beyond the participants in this study, it can be seen as part of a larger trend.

Multiple theories and studies of religion observed that the religious landscape reflects the broader consumer orientation of late modern societies (Berger 1967; Luckmann 1967; Bibby 1987; Roof 1993, 1995; Lyon 2000). The influence of consumerism is further reflected in the characterization of the landscape as a spiritual marketplace with individuals free to choose (or to opt out) from countless religious and spiritual themes offered by an assortment of providers. While fully formed and comprehensive religious systems are on offer and are still the preferred option for some, others prefer to select different themes and beliefs from a variety of sources.

The mass media play no small role in this process. The aforementioned theories all recognize that the mass media functions as a significant resource for individuals as they construct their personal belief systems. Roof notes the multiple influences of the media on contemporary religion suggesting it functions as “a source of information and authority” (1999: 68), a form of contemporary myth, and reinforces the ethic of consumption (69-70). In a related manner, Lyon identifies the relationship between the media and religion arguing that “people construct religious meanings from the raw materials provided by the media” (2000: 57). However, while it is hardly new to suggest that individuals draw upon the media

as they construct their systems of ultimate significance and spiritual meaning, few studies have actually examined specifically how and to what extent individuals do so.

Likewise, the field of communications and media studies, with the exception of studies of televangelism and studies of religion in the news, also offers few in-depth studies of the relationship between individuals, religion and the media. However, the field is quite rich with theory and data examining how audiences use the media as they negotiate and construct worldviews in general. The work of James Lull (2000), Roger Silverstone (1994) and John Ellis (2000) help to identify ways in which the media has come to play a central role in creating and sustaining conceptions of reality. Lull's arguments in many ways parallel theories in religion because he looks at the process of selecting and choosing a range of symbols, beliefs and meanings as individuals construct their identities and personal worldviews. The difference being he does not address this issue in terms of religion, spirituality or transcendent meaning. The theories of Silverstone and Ellis similarly show an affinity with theories of religion, particularly implicit religion, since they both address the relationship between television and existential and ontological issues. Both emphasize how television has come to play a central role in structuring our concepts of time, space and reality not only through the content of the messages but also through the structure of viewing patterns. Further, Ellis's theories, while not naming it so, address the mythic functions of television as viewers use television programs to work through various questions, concerns and anxieties. Silverstone focuses on some of the more subconscious ways in which television reduces anxieties and uncertainties, while at the same time further producing them.

One of the significant developments within media theory has been the shift toward more complex understandings of the relationship between media messages and audiences. While early studies perceived television as offering a monolithic meaning systems and

audiences as an undifferentiated mass passively absorbing those messages, media theory has evolved to recognize the diversity of meanings imbedded in media texts as well as the multiplicity of audience interpretations (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Livingstone 1992; Shanahan and Morgan 1999). Notably Stuart Hall's (1993) analysis of encoding and decoding was foundational for these developments, helping to address audiences both as active and as socially situated. Further, while Hall's approach, as well as the others that have built upon it, recognizes that meanings and interpretations do vary depending on the individual, it still acknowledges that the systems of meanings are still structured and based upon basic shared meaning systems.

Cultivation Analysis<sup>4</sup> aids in further understanding these dynamics, through combining analyses of media texts with research into different methods and approaches to television viewing by individuals. Coinciding with the assertions of Wade Clark Roof (1999) that the mass media has assumed some of the functions traditionally assigned to religious myths and narratives, researchers such as Gerbner (1979), Signorielli (1990) and Shanahan and Morgan (1999) similarly address the ways in which television narratives act to shape conceptions of reality, implicitly teach lessons, values and morals, and provide guidelines for behavior and codes of conduct. This approach further addresses the fact that while there are dominant patterns of meaning communicated through television narratives, differences in viewing practices and capacities influence how media messages are interpreted, received and employed. Such methods offer much potential for addressing the relationship between religion and television. In fact Hoover (1990) has employed such research strategies for

---

<sup>4</sup> Cultivation Theory was first developed by George Gerbner (1967) in order to assess the influence that television has on viewers perceptions of reality over time. Generally this approach combines content analysis of television programs with survey and interview data gathered amongst viewers.

examining religious television and Sparks (1997; 2001) has used cultivation techniques to research the relationship between television viewing and belief in the paranormal.

Additionally, Hoover and Lundby's edited volume *Religion, Media, and Culture* (1996), plays a central role in helping to develop and present theories directly addressing the multiple relationships among religion, media and culture. In particular such work offers a variety of analytical frameworks for conceptualizing and analyzing the relationships among individuals and religion, media, and culture in light of cultural dynamics of late modern society. Such approaches place an emphasis on the changing locations and forms of religion, particularly as individuals and collectives increasingly use the media both as a forum for exploring and discussing various religious ideas and themes and as a resource for negotiating and reshaping concepts and forms of religion and spirituality. It was particularly through the influence of the theories presented in *Religion, Media, and Culture* that I first began to think about the value of pursuing this particular research project.

Further insight for this research is initiated through a small sample of work offering textual analyses of religious and spiritual content and themes in television programs. Studies detailing religious themes in programs such as Jon Wagner and Jan Lundeen's (1998) examination of *Star Trek*, Teresa Blythe (2002), Massimo Introvigne (2000) and Leonard Primiano's (2001) discussions of God images and depictions of the supernatural in popular programs, and John Sumser (1996) and Elijah Siegler's (2001) analyses of dramas as moral discourse, all help to identify some of the possible meanings, symbols and ideas that people may draw upon as they think about and construct their systems of belief. Further, Horace Newcomb (1988; 1990) and Lynn Schofield Clark's (2003) observations that mainstream programs tend to offer rather vague or denominationally unspecified references to the

transcendent, suggest that while reflecting preference of audiences, they also may shape and reinforce contemporary approaches to conceptualizing the transcendent in a similar manner.

The theories demonstrating how television programs present explicit and implicit religious themes, combined with the insights from the sociology of religion demonstrating that individuals construct personal systems of meaning from cultural sources, suggest that television is a likely resource for spiritual meaning. I then move on to examine how the participants in this study employ television programs as they explore their personal forms of spirituality.

## **Method and Sample**

### **Methodology**

While there is much in the way of theory and peripheral data to suggest that television significantly influences spiritual and religious meaning systems, few studies have examined the topic from an ethnographic perspective. Clark's (2003) examination of the relationship between media depictions of the supernatural and the belief systems of teenagers stands out as one of the few to do so.<sup>5</sup>

The underlying aim of my research project was to identify how, to what extent, and if at all, individuals who define themselves as spiritual use television as a resource for negotiating and constructing their personal forms of spirituality. Consequently I relied primarily on ethnographic interviewing techniques as a means to discover how individuals who describe themselves as spiritual subjectively define their spirituality to determine how they perceived the relationship between their spirituality and their television viewing, or if indeed there was a relationship at all. Taking my cues from the theories and hypotheses

---

<sup>5</sup> Although this is beginning to show signs of change, in particular there is a growing body of research, mainly at the graduate student level, coming out of the University of Colorado's Center for Mass Media Research.

offered in both sociological studies of spirituality and religion and popular culture literature, I designed two questionnaires, one to be used as a self-administered questionnaire to help in the sample selection, the other to be used during interviews. The questions addressed three basic fields of inquiry: spirituality, television and the relationship between spirituality and television. The first series of questions was designed to address why participants define themselves as spiritual and to determine what counts as 'spirituality' from their perspectives. The second set of questions addressed their general television viewing habits and preferences, including asking participants to discuss some of the shows they watch regularly, describe plotlines and themes, as well as their reasons for watching them. The next series of questions was designed to address possible relationships between their television viewing and their spirituality, including directly asking participants if they believe there is a relationship between them.

The data collection consisted of two phases. Phase One involved recruiting individuals to fill out a self-administered survey asking a series of questions related to television preferences, followed by a series of questions related to religious and spiritual beliefs, and finally a brief section collecting basic demographic information.<sup>6</sup> The final question on the survey asked if they were interested in being contacted for an interview. Phase Two involved semi-structured qualitative interviews. Each interview was guided by a formal research questionnaire which included a variety of general and specific questions related to general life history, personal biography and current life circumstances; to spirituality and religion in general, specific details of their spiritual beliefs and practices, as well as more general beliefs, meaning systems and worldviews; and to television viewing preference, habits, and viewing competencies; followed by questions addressing the

---

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix I.

relationship between television, spirituality, beliefs and worldviews.<sup>7</sup> Participants were involved in one to three interviews, which generally took two hours each.<sup>8</sup> The actual length of the interview process varied considerably depending on each participant. The shortest interview consisted of one, one and a half hour interview, the longest interviews included more than seven hours of discussion.

Interviews involved both structured and unstructured portions. Since all interviews were guided by a research questionnaire, all participants were asked the same series of questions. This approach helped to maintain a degree of consistency throughout all of the interviews, enabling the data to be compared and contrasted. Most of these questions were styled in an open-ended manner so that participants could provide as detailed or as limited a response as they chose. While this approach was quite useful for maintaining methodological consistency and was certainly useful for determining some specific details of participants' beliefs and some of their opinions about television shows, such questions were structured through my presuppositions and biases. In particular I was concerned that some of the questions were too leading, encouraging participants to give responses simply because they were asked a question rather than actually eliciting responses that were more characteristic of their own thoughts and opinions. Further I was concerned that I was forcing participants to use terminology that was not authentic to them. Consequently I would often ask participants if terminology was appropriate or the questions even relevant to the ways in which they understand and interpret spirituality, television or the relationship between the two.

---

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix II.

<sup>8</sup> Some participants extended this process beyond the expected time limit with some participants engaging in more than three interviews. Similarly, while the 'official' time allotted for each interview was two hours, this time limit was often extended.

Additionally, some portions of all of the interviews followed the format of what Patten refers to as an “informal conversational interview”(1990: 280) by asking participants very general, ‘grand tour’ questions about their spirituality, television or the relationship between spirituality and television. This method proved to be quite useful. The strength of this style, as James Spradley (1979) advocates, is that it allows for participants to raise issues and themes that are important to them. Often I found these sections of the interviews to contain the most useful data as participants did not feel that they had to limit their responses directly to the questions that I was asking. In hindsight, this was also quite telling; just as the participants rejected organized religions and institutional authority because they found them too limiting in the ways in which they conceptualize the divine, codify beliefs and so forth, participants also tended to find some of my research questions too specific or slightly off the mark in terms of the categories I was using. Additionally, there were many areas that I simply did not think to address in terms of formal research questions that turned out to be quite important. For example the issue of ‘Reality TV’ was a blind spot in my questionnaire, but many of the participants raised it as a topic during their discussions about spirituality and television. Using both of these approaches in tandem allowed me to gather data that was both specific to the project at hand, while also maintaining consistency with participants’ subjective categories, terminology and interpretations.

### ***The Sample***

The data that has been used in this research was gathered from a series of personal interviews with 30 individuals. The selection criteria for the study participants include only three demographic specifications: participants were required to be over the age of eighteen years, live in the Ottawa-Gatineau region, and speak English. The other selection criteria

were based upon whether or not they watched television programs<sup>9</sup> and their responses to a variety of questions about the nature of their beliefs.<sup>10</sup> While the delimiters were few, and even those were very broad categories, accessing participants was challenging. Although personal spirituality is a quite a prevalent phenomenon, the individual, non-institutional and diffuse nature of it means that it is potentially everywhere in general, but nowhere in particular. Consequently I resorted to using verbal, visual and electronic advertising for recruitment, including visiting university classes and inviting students to participate, posting recruitment flyers in various locations such as bookstores, coffee shops, health food stores, and a doctor's office, and advertising on a website and a local cable channel and word of mouth. As such, all of the participants were self-selected.

In terms of general variables, of the 30 participants selected 15 were female and 15 were male, ranging in age from 18 to 73, although the group was more heavily weighted towards a younger demographic with 15 of the participants between 18 and 25, 14 of whom were students. The education levels of participants reflected a high level of formal education.<sup>11</sup> Of the 30 participants 6 hold post-graduate degrees, 7 had undergraduate degrees, 15 were currently attending university, one had one year of college education and one person had a high school education. Participants showed some degree of diversity in terms of their occupation. In addition to the 15 students, the other participants were involved in a variety of careers including a teacher, a nurse, a doctor, a psychologist, a social worker, a

---

<sup>9</sup> Participants were asked an open-ended question asking what programs they watch. This was followed by a series of close-ended questions about specific programs and channels. The choice of these programs was based primarily upon the types of programs that had either been identified by previous research as containing "spiritual themes" or programs that explicitly contained reference to themes such as God images, supernatural or other-worldly beings, religious traditions or practices, new age material and so forth.

<sup>10</sup> In particular I was looking for indicators of bricolage style belief systems.

<sup>11</sup> Part of this is accounted for due to the fact that I recruited at a university; however participants recruited through other sources also had a high level of education as 13 of 30 had at least one university degree.

journalist, an archeologist, a specialized trades-person, a small business owner, 2 general laborers, a retail clerk, a stay at home mother and 2 retirees.

While the initial selection criteria for the study involved finding people who defined themselves as spiritual, the sample did show some variation in terms of religious or spiritual background. Of the 30 participants 29 defined and described themselves as spiritual, 20 of whom identified as spiritual, but not religious, 9 described themselves as spiritual and religious, and 1 was neither spiritual nor religious. Out of the 9 that defined as both spiritual and religious, 1 used the term religion to refer to his own bricolage system of beliefs, 3 identified as Catholic, 1 Hindu, 1 Muslim, 1 Greek Orthodox and 1 Evangelical Christian. In terms of place of birth and ethnicity participants formed a fairly homogenous group. With the exception of 3 people, 1 born and raised in India, but relocating to Canada during his mid-adult years, 1 born and raised in South Africa and relocating during his early adult years, and 1 born in Iran who moved between Canada and Iran during pre-teen years, the remaining 27 participants were born and raised in Canada. The question of ethnicity was left up to participants to identify or define, being asked only if they “identify with any particular ethnicity?” As a response, 1 self-identified as Iranian, 1 as “Indian” (South Asian), 1 Greek, and 2 French Canadian (although not Québécois). Some participants did offer the response of Canadian but further expansion on the topic seemed to suggest that it was a response given mainly because a question was asked, and does not form a major category in their day-to-day sense of identity. The participants had few characteristics that either set them together or apart from one another as an interpretive category other than education levels and a similar approach to spirituality. It is from this sample that all interview data presented in this study was gained.

## **Overview:**

The material is divided into five remaining chapters:

Chapter Two: Examines sociological literature on non-institutional religion, with a particular emphasis on defining and describing spirituality. This chapter helps to establish my definitions of religion and spirituality and provides the theoretical framework for interpreting spirituality as part of trend. The key themes emphasized in this chapter include defining religion as transcendent meaning, identifying personal spirituality as a late modern form of religion, and extending the definition of spirituality to refer to the process of negotiating and constructing transcendent meanings. In sum this chapter argues that spirituality is a process of negotiating and constructing personal systems of transcendent meaning in relation to publicly available beliefs, practices and symbols.

Chapter Three: Offers an in-depth literature review of television and mass media theory. In this section I address three topics, audience interaction with texts; television and the social construction of reality, followed by a sample of literature analyzing the relationship between religion and the media. The purpose of this chapter is to create a clear connection between theories of religion and theories of communication and television. To this end, this chapter highlights theories that illustrate how communication is tied to the social construction of reality, namely how we socially construct and maintain shared systems of meaning; it demonstrates how television has come to play a central role in North Atlantic societies functioning one of the primary sources of knowledge, information, and entertainment; and illustrates some of the ways in which popular television programs present religious and spiritual themes.

Chapter Four: Is a presentation of field data. This chapter focuses specifically on participants' definitions, descriptions and discussions of their spirituality. The chapter

begins by presenting participants' definitions of spirituality, in particular offering a differentiation between 'spirituality' and 'religion.' Participants tend to suggest that spirituality is universal, however it manifests differently depending on cultural context and the life circumstances of the individual. In particular, participants tend to associate spirituality with three key themes of transcendent reality, meaning and morality. Following this discussion, the chapter moves on to examine some of the specific 'manifestations' or beliefs and concepts that participants associate with spirituality including: references to god concepts, or otherworldly beings, interest in the supernatural, discussion about ultimate meaning and purpose, concepts of fate and destiny, and ideas about morals and values. In keeping with my dual approach to spirituality this chapter focuses upon spirituality as 'product' (i.e. the specific beliefs and practices related to transcendent meaning, morality and reality).

Chapter Five: Offers further field data, with the exclusive focus on participants' discussions and comments regarding the relationship between their spirituality and their television viewing. Notably, this chapter focuses upon how they think and explore spiritual ideas through television. This chapter begins with a presentation of participants' general attitudes about television and their approaches to television viewing, moving on to examine participants discussions about the relationship between spirituality and television. Key topics covered in this chapter include: discussions about God images, supernatural beings and paranormal phenomena, ideas concerning the meaning and purpose of life, and beliefs related to death and life after death, and various moral discourses presented and raised through television programs. In keeping with my approach to spirituality, this chapter focuses upon spirituality as 'process' (i.e. the process of negotiating, learning, thinking and talking about transcendent meanings).

Chapter Six: Offers a synthesis of the inquiry and further situates the data within a broader theoretical perspective, followed by a brief discussion of areas for future research. Rather than offering a generalized theory of spirituality or the relationship between spirituality and television, this chapter limits its conclusions to the data presented in this thesis. However as both personal spirituality and the popularity of television programs dealing with ‘spiritual’ themes are quite widespread phenomena, the chapter does recommend that future research be conducted in order to verify whether or not the specific trends documented in this research project are more generalizable.

## **Chapter Two: D-I-Y Religion? Characterizing Reflexive Spirituality**

### **The Contemporary Religious Landscape**

The simultaneous presence of secularism, fundamentalism, spiritual questing and mainline religions in early twenty-first century North Atlantic societies, depicts a religious landscape that is varied and complex, even paradoxical. Despite the diversity, these trends highlight the common themes of choice and autonomy in individual beliefs and practices. While issues such as family, community, and ethnic background all affect the degree and form of choice that an individual maintains there is not one overarching belief system at a societal level shaping worldviews. As Anthony Giddens asserts, traditions and pre-established beliefs and practices have lost much of their hold in late modern society, consequently both individuals and collectives must become more reflexive because they have an “indefinite range of potential courses of action” available to them “any given moment” (1991: 28-29).

In the realm of religion, the extreme reflexivity of late modern society is exemplified by the rise of the spiritual marketplace wherein traditional religions, new religious movements, popular spirituality and secular alternatives are offering competing worldviews and conceptions of reality. While some individuals choose religious orientations that offer overarching and unified meaning systems, there is also a growing trend towards individual forms of syncretism in which individuals combine elements from a variety of cultural and religious options. In *The Invisible Religion* (1967), sociologist Thomas Luckmann argued that personal and private forms of meaning would characterize new social forms of religion as religion reflected the modern social realities of pluralism, consumerism and individualism.

Luckmann does not stand alone with this argument. Bibby's discussion of 'Religion à la carte' (1987; 1993) and Roof's research into contemporary spiritual seeking (1999) have emerged as hallmarks of ways in which individuals explore and negotiate religious meaning within the context of late modern society. Both Bibby's and Roof's research demonstrate how individuals are increasingly constructing personal, individualized systems of ultimate significance from a variety of sources. Further sociological analyses of spirituality as manifested in the new age movement (Heelas 1996; Hanegraaff 1999), healing and holistic medicine (McGuire 1993; Bowman 1999), self-help and popular psychology (Wuthnow 1994); spirituality in the workplace movements (Salamon 2001); ecological and environmental movements (Taylor 2001a; 2001b; Dunlap 2004); and popular music, literature, film and television (McLure 1995; Miles 1996; Mazure and McCarthy 2001; Robertson 2002; Ostling 2003; Forbes and Mahan 2005), have all identified new ways in which 'culture' is increasingly used as resource for exploring and constructing religious meaning and spiritual identities in late modern societies. All of these examples point to changing definitions and forms of religion in late modern society. Consequently, the tools and strategies for understanding such forms of religion must be reworked to include more expansive, non-institutional forms.

### ***Invisible Religion***

Thomas Luckmann's theory of religion as first presented in *The Invisible Religion* (1967) and further expanded upon in his later writings (1990; 1996) serves as a useful starting point for my examination of the relationship between television and personal religion. Both his concept of religion and argument that religion in modern society must be examined through looking at how individuals construct personal systems of ultimate

meaning from an assortment of culturally available religious themes (Luckmann 1967: 102) are foundational for my understanding of the dynamics of non-institutional religion in late modern society. In *The Invisible Religion*, Luckmann set out to address the impact of modern society upon the individual. Following the line of thought presented by the classic sociological theories of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, Luckmann argues that the “problem of individual existence in society is a ‘religious’ problem” (1967: 12). Luckmann qualifies this statement, arguing that within this perspective “religion” and “religious” do not refer simply to the historical, institutional forms of religion, such as churches; rather, he is referring to the anthropological conditions of religion, that is the process whereby an individual transcends his or her biological nature to become a “Self” (to acquire a clear sense of self-identity with a personal history and conscience) through constructing a meaningful, moral and “objective” worldview in concert with other human actors (48-9). Self-transcendence as the process of becoming human as opposed to remaining a biological organism acting on instinct and drive forms the basic religious impulse. Luckmann further explains that the process by which an individual acquires a sense of self, that is a conscience, awareness of others, a shared language, a sense of the past, present and future and so forth, and adopts a worldview, is essentially a social process. Each individual does not have to construct a meaning system or worldview by him or herself; rather he or she becomes socialized into a worldview or universe of meaning from birth. It is within this context of socialization that the individual then develops a sense of self. Luckmann summarizes this argument writing that,

We may now continue by saying that socialization, as the concrete process in which such transcendence is achieved, is fundamentally religious. It rests on the universal anthropological condition of religion, individuation of consciousness and conscience in social processes, and is actualized in the internalization of the configuration of

meaning underlying a historical social order. We shall call this configuration of meaning a world view (51).

Thus the process of developing and internalizing a worldview is religious. Luckmann further explains that it is through the course of acquiring a self-identity we internalize systems of meaning and relevance. In traditional societies, religious institutions acted as the primary source for regulating worldviews. However with increased institutional differentiation and specialization in modern society, religion and worldviews become much more privatized and subjective as 'official' religions no longer provide an integrating source of meaning and regulation outside the 'religious' sphere and no longer hold exclusive claims to 'reality'. There are, increasingly, multiple sources of meaning.

From Luckmann's perspective, the rise in personal autonomy revolutionizes the organization of modern societies as individuals are no longer socialized into one overarching and obligatory worldview. Rather they exercise a great degree of freedom and choice in constructing their personal identities, social relationships and systems of 'ultimate' meaning. This in turn gives rise to the consumer orientation of modern societies, not only towards economic goods but towards culture as a whole. Luckmann explains that "To an immeasurably higher degree than in a traditional social order, the individual is left to his own devices in choosing goods and services, friends, marriage partners, neighbors, hobbies... even, 'ultimate' meanings in a relatively autonomous fashion" (98). As primary social institutions and 'official' religious institutions no longer exclusively mediate the realm of the sacred cosmos in modern society, Luckmann argues that secondary institutions come forward to offer an assortment of religious representations, themes and 'ultimate meanings' that respond to the needs of individuals (103-4). Ideas such as self-realization, self-expression, sexuality, the family and home, social mobility, unity and togetherness all become potential

symbols of 'ultimate significance' in the modern sacred cosmos. This does not mean that institutional forms of religion, such as churches, disappear. Rather, they too compete amidst a variety of themes of ultimate significance. Luckmann suggests that in modern privatized forms of religion individuals may look to "syndicated advice columns, 'inspirational' literature ranging from tracts on positive thinking to Playboy magazine, Reader's Digest versions of popular psychology, the lyrics of popular hits, and so forth" (104), as well as to institutional forms of religion to construct their personal system of ultimate meaning. While Luckmann sees all forms of ultimate significance as religious, within modern society the social forms of religion essentially become privatized, personal and a matter of consumer choice.

Luckmann's work has been instrumental in dislodging sociological studies of religion from their solely institutional bias. This has been an important shift in the sociological study of religion, countering many arguments that both the decline of participation in traditional religious institutions, as well as the decline of religious institutions' influence in the public sphere, signifies the end of religion. Rather, it points to the fact that religion is being restructured to fit the context of late modern society. Additionally, the idea of the religious marketplace, a term also used by Peter Berger (1967: 138), has gained great popularity within the sociology of religion. This term effectively captures the individualized and consumer orientation of late modern society, including how people relate to religion. The decline of institutional authority and participation in traditional religious organizations that occurred during the Post-World War II period was coupled with the rise of new religious and spiritual options. The emergence of new religious movements, eastern religions and philosophies, the plethora of new age and spiritual beliefs and practices, along with the continued presence of traditional religious institutions created an atmosphere of pluralism in

western societies. The increasing level of personal choice rather than the boundaries of traditional roles, obligations and social proscriptions over matters such as self-identity, relationships, occupation, lifestyles and beliefs increasingly contributed further to the consumer orientation of western individuals because people were free to browse, explore and choose amongst a variety of lifestyle options. Sociologists of religion began examining this situation through the lens of a marketplace in which religious goods and services competed for the attention and choice of individuals.

***Rational Choice and New Forms of Religion: Audience and Client Cults***

Rodney Stark<sup>12</sup> and William Simms Bainbridge (1985) took the marketplace analogy to an extreme level, offering an economic style analysis of religious behaviour. These authors suggest that religious markets functioned much like economic markets, continuously going through periods of increase, stability and decline, but that religion will never altogether disappear. Positing a substantive definition of religion as “human organizations primarily engaged in providing general compensators based on supernatural assumptions” (Stark and Bainbridge 1985: 8), Stark and Bainbridge argue that religion will always maintain a role in societies because humans will always have questions or needs that can only be met by supernatural explanations or guarantees. Questions such as the meaning and purpose of life, explanations for suffering and injustice, and justifications for one’s position in life including the motivation to persist even when life is filled with misery, according to Stark and Bainbridge, can only be satisfactorily answered in religious or supernatural terms.

---

<sup>12</sup> Rational choice theories have since been expanded upon by Stark and Bainbridge (1987), Bainbridge (1997) and Stark and Finke (2000).

Stark and Bainbridge further argue that many early scholars in the sociology of religion misread the decline in participation and authority of traditional religious institutions as marking the end of religion. Rather they propose that periods of secularization or decline are characteristic of the religious economy as established religion fail to provide suitable compensators or explanations for the population at large. As a result, people will either abandon their traditional religions and eventually seek out new ones or traditional religions will be forced to reorganize and renew their belief systems in order to meet the needs of the population. Stark and Bainbridge suggest that the religions in late modern societies are amidst such a change. Earlier trends towards secularization were in fact engendering a period of religious renewal and innovation. Evidence to support such claims includes the development of religious sects, the rise of fundamentalism, new religious movements, and the increased interest in supernatural and non-traditional spiritual practices.

However many of the forms of spirituality and religion emerging during the 1960s, 70s and onward did not fall into categories of religion as previously theorized. Thus Stark and Bainbridge proposed a new typology of cult movements in an attempt to explain how such movements were religious and how members functioned within them. In addition to the already established sociological typologies of religion, sect and cult<sup>13</sup> Stark and Bainbridge extend the descriptive functions of the term cult to include what they term “audience cults” and “client cults” and “cult movements” based upon differing levels of organization, modes of participation and types of compensators.

Stark and Bainbridge use the term “audience cult” to refer to the practice of learning about spiritual and supernatural ideas through “magazines, books, newspapers, radio and

---

<sup>13</sup> For further discussion of these terms see Troeltsch 1931; Weber 1965; Niebuhr 1925; Becker 1931 (McGuire 2002).

television” (Stark and Bainbridge 1985: 26), as well as through activities such as attending lectures, ‘fairs’, bookstores or taking part in informal discussion groups which feature occult, new age or spiritual topics (209). According to Stark and Bainbridge, while audience cult activities cover a vast assortment of beliefs and ideas, the common feature amongst them is that they offer a sense of “diffuse hope,” unlimited possibilities and potential as a general compensator (210). Audience cult activity is based upon highly individualistic and informal modes of participation generally inspired by personal interest or a sense of intrigue. There are no formal levels of membership within audience cult activity, rather participant involvement is based around consumption of supernatural ideas. Frequently, participation in audience cults is multiple in the sense that people often ‘consume’ or explore various spiritual messages or ideas at the same time or in sequence. Additionally because audience cult activity is not exclusive, participants may also be involved in other forms of cult or religious activity simultaneously.

The second term offered by Stark and Bainbridge “client cult” refers to a slightly more organized mode of participation but, like audience cults, rarely require any form of official membership or adherence to a specific doctrine. Generally participant activity in client cults mirrors the relationship between a “consultant and a client” or a “therapist and patient” (26). These types of movements tend to offer specific compensators, promises or rewards such as better health and well-being or improvements in financial, economic or social status (209). Within this form of cult activity there appears to be a wide range of levels of participation, ranging from attending a motivational seminar, to attending weekly classes on Kundalini Yoga, to visiting a chiropractor. Generally, client cults do not have specific membership rather they tend to have repeat clients or participants. Similar to audience cults, client cult participation is not exclusive. As in the case of audience cults, one

may participate in only one or multiple client cults as well as being a participant in completely different or separate religious or cult activities.

I use Stark and Bainbridge's theory with great trepidation. Their economic style of analysis and terminology is fraught with weaknesses, most notably the idea that people always pursue 'rational' goals and that all there will always be a demand for supernatural explanations, answers and rewards. Nevertheless, I do maintain that the concepts of audience and client cults are particularly useful categories for discussions of contemporary spirituality since they offer a way to conceptualize and categorize spiritual activity that often falls outside of traditional definitions of religion. Indeed much spiritual questing and exploration, and many of the resources that people draw upon when constructing their spiritual identities and worldviews occur through what Stark and Bainbridge term audience cult and client cult activities. Such categories help to define the spiritual marketplace in more concrete terms rather than relying on Luckmann's broad, functional understanding which effectively labels all meaning as religious. Studies such as those conducted by Roof (1999), Heelas (2002) and Woodman and Heelas (2005) and Besecke (2002: 2005) suggest that when people commonly use terms such as "religion" and "spirituality" it is clear that they have a specific form of meaning in mind. Moreover, the concept of 'audience cults' as a mode of religious practice characterized through consuming information about spirituality offers a great deal of insight into some of the ways in which contemporary forms of spirituality are negotiated and 'practiced'.

## ***Defining Spirituality***

In *The Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (1999), Wade Clark Roof also uses the metaphor of the spiritual marketplace to illustrate the changes that have been taking place in the religious landscape of the United States since World War II. Roof contends that the contemporary religious landscape functions much like a market or economic system responding to issues of supply and demand. Currently the religious market in the United States, as in other Western nations, is an open competitive market in which no one belief or meaning system has a monopoly; consequently numerous “suppliers offer a range of goods and services designed to meet the spiritual concerns”(78) of the population. Roof further argues that under the conditions of late modern society, characterized by a fragmentation of overarching belief systems, increased individualism, pluralism, consumer orientation and electronic media, religion functions as a cultural resource for the construction of identity and meaning. He explains that within this context “responsibility falls more upon the individual – like that of a bricoleur – to cobble together a religious world from available images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines, thereby exercising considerable agency in defining and shaping what is to be considered religiously meaningful” (Roof 1999: 75). This approach follows, in some ways, the thinking of Anthony Giddens who argues that the late modern context produces increased reflexivity at both the institutional and individual levels requiring a greater degree of critical conscious awareness and constant reorganization “in light of new information or knowledge” (Giddens 1991: 20). Roof argues that the late modern context generates increasingly complex and adaptable approaches to religion, as individuals become more aware of the plurality of worldviews and religious orientations and come to see their own perspective as one possible option among many. Such an approach, which Roof terms “reflexive spirituality”, requires

individuals to become more aware of their beliefs and practices in relation to others in society. Roof further argues that reflexive spirituality tends to “encourage a more open stance towards religious teachings and spiritual resources; more experiential and holistic views; and active incorporation of religious input into constellations of belief and practice, or greater agency on the part of an individual in defining and monitoring one’s own spiritual life” (Roof 75).

In his study Roof suggests that three main forms of reflexive spiritual orientation emerge in the United States, terming them “Born Again Christians” or “Evangelicals,” “Mainstream Believers” and “Metaphysical Believers and Spiritual Seekers” (178), making up approximately 73% of the population. However, reflexive spirituality is not the only religious response to late modernity. Roof readily acknowledges other counter-trends towards “dogmatism” and “secularism” for which the language or concept of religious quests or spiritual identity does not apply. Dogmatists tend to claim a religious identity rooted in traditional religious institutions yet do not identify as being ‘spiritual’ (178). Secularists neither self identify as having a religious nor spiritual identities (178).

While all of the five categories identified by Roof are important aspects of the religious landscape in the United States, what interests me here are the forms of reflexive spirituality, that is, the conscious activity of constructing a spiritual identity and worldview both within and outside of institutional religion. Roof’s discussion of the change in the legitimating vocabularies of the terms “spiritual” and “religious” are of great interest. Roof notes that since the late 1960s the word spirituality has come to the forefront of religious discussions in which it is generally used as a flexible term often in place of the term religious, which is often thought to have connotations of structure and conformity (90-1; 37). Roof describes spirituality as referring to “a source of values, and meaning beyond oneself, a

way of understanding, inner awareness and personal integration” (Roof: 35). Additionally, Roof asserts that spirituality refers to deeply held values, meanings, and ethics, as well as the quest for fulfillment, authenticity, transcendence or selfhood. At the core of the discussion of the term spirituality, according to Roof, is the question of how to construct a ‘self’ within the context of a highly fragmented, ever changing, mediated and consumer oriented society.

Paul Heelas similarly picks up on the theme of the quest for selfhood in his studies of contemporary spirituality (1999; 2002). In his research on the New Age Movement and growth in personal forms of spirituality, Heelas argues that Western societies are currently in the midst of a spiritual revolution which manifested in early forms with the New Age Movement, but now has spread into the broader culture (2002). In his earlier work with Linda Woodhead, the authors offered a typology of modern forms of religion based upon different understanding of the relationship between God, humans and nature arguing that at one end of the spectrum were ‘religions of difference’ characterized by a sharp differentiation between God, humans and nature, while the other end ‘spiritualities of life’ present a dedifferentiated and immanent relationship between humans, the divine and nature (Woodhead and Heelas: 2000: 2). In “The spiritual revolution” Heelas argues that spiritualities of life are “a growing force both within and beyond institutionalized religion” (2002: 369). In order to support this claim, Heelas cites the growth in popularity of New Age ideas and practices amongst Western populations; the increased participation in ‘theistic spiritualities of life,’ that is institutional religions with strongly experiential components and that emphasize an intimate and personal relationship with God, such as Pentecostalism, Charismatic Christianity and born-again Christians; and the diffusion of spiritual themes and products throughout mainstream culture, as evidence of the imminent spiritual revolution.

In his writing Heelas, like Roof, pays particular attention to transformations in the popular uses of the terms 'spirituality' and 'religion.' Heelas notes that religion has come to be associated with official and institutionalized models of belief and practice (Heelas 2002: 358). Religion is often used to refer to tradition, "prescribed rituals," "established ways of believing," adherence to a sacred text and external sources of authority including a transcendent God and established religious hierarchy (358). Furthermore Heelas contends that popularly religion tends to be associated with dogmatic, impersonal, hierarchical, patriarchal, and often alienating forms of belief and practice. Spirituality, on the other hand, tends to refer to a personal, experiential and interior relationship with the divine or sacred. The divine or sacred is often thought of in immanent, holistic terms, generally as both part of the natural world and part of the self. Woodhead and Heelas further explain that "the term 'spirituality' is often used to express commitment to a deep truth that is to be found within what belongs to the world" (Woodhead and Heelas 2005: 6). The popular use of the terms religion and spirituality mark a cultural transition in how people understand and find sacred meaning. Sacred meaning is no longer the exclusive terrain of religious institutions; for many contemporary spiritual seekers, in fact religious institutions inhibit access to sacred meaning. Instead the sacred or spiritual meaning is to be found in the world through learning, experience and seeking. The act of seeking and questioning therefore becomes the focal point. As in the case of the invisible religion, as discussed by Luckmann, and reflexive spirituality, as explained by Roof, it is the process that is central, as a religious or spiritual identity and worldview in the late modern world is not necessarily (and in fact rarely is) wholly unified, complete or conclusive.

As indicated by Roof, Heelas and Woodhead, the use of the term spirituality seems to point to a widespread cultural rethinking of boundaries between sacred and secular,

institutional and non-institutional. As individuals in late modern society are continuously presented with new knowledge, information and options, the reflexive construction of identity and worldview becomes nearly a necessity. However despite the increased level of autonomy and choice, this process is always social in that social institutions, publicly available meaning systems, family, ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status, all structure and inform how any given individual constructs meaning and identity. It is not a free-for-all as the concept may imply. It is at the intersection between personal autonomy and social structure that identity and meaning are formed. So, too, is the case of spiritual identities and meanings. Spiritual identity or reflexive spirituality is forged through the interaction and conscious engagement of individuals with the images, ideas and symbols available to them in the culture at large. While this may include reference to traditional religious institutions and meaning systems, as Luckmann pointed out, it also includes a wide range of symbols, beliefs and options offered through non-official and non-institutional culture, or what has often been referred to as secular culture. Therefore in both academic culture and culture at large there is a movement towards rethinking and redefining not only the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' and also the activity of creating religious or spiritual meaning is being reorganized.

The popular preference for the term 'spiritual' or 'spirituality' signifies this shift in the locations and sources of transcendent meaning from traditional religious institutions to culture at large. As Anna S. King explains, much of the appeal of the term spirituality is its flexibility and ambiguity (King 1996: 345). King argues that spirituality is used more as an expansive term, including both traditional religion and elements of what used to be thought of as secular culture. She explains that spirituality

indicates an engagement with, or valuing of human experience and expression through art and music, through a response to nature and to ethical ideals as well as through the great religious traditions. It can embrace secular therapies and

cosmologies as well as concerns with the environment. Thus it seems to include both sacred and secular, and to enable a fundamental rethinking of religious boundaries (345).

While spiritual meaning may well be found in churches and temples and through reading sacred texts such as the Bhagavadgita and the Bible, it may also be found at the bookstore, a fitness centre, a psychologist's office or a rave, and through popular books, film, television and music.

### ***Spirituality in the Canadian Context***

Canada is no stranger to such transformation on the religious landscape. Sociologist Reginald Bibby's documenting of religious trends in Canada since 1975 has demonstrated that Canadians' actual rates of participation in organized religion has been continuously declining from the 1950s, until 2001, when the decline seems to have a leveling-off period (Bibby 1987: 1992; 2002). While institutional religions appeared to be in decline, interest in religion amongst Canadians remained relatively high. However at the same time as Canadians seem to be losing interest in institutional religion, Bibby suggests that indicators of "latent spirituality" and interest in religious themes remains quite high. Such indicators include high levels of belief in God (81%) and in life after death (68%), prevalence of private prayer (74) %, and concern with existential issues (70%) (Bibby 2002: 97,119, 140, 158). In fact in his latest book, *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada* (2002), Bibby argues that Canada is on the verge of a spiritual renaissance due to the broad level of interest and demand for "religious products" by Canadians. According to Bibby, religious and spiritual questions are at the forefront of the minds of Canadians, citing the on-going "intrigue with mystery", "the search for meaning" and persistent "religious memory" as indicators of this trend.

A further reflection of such non-institutional interest in religion highlighted by Bibby is the movement towards personal religiosity characterized by fragmented beliefs. Contributing to discussions on the "Spiritual Marketplace" Bibby terms this practice "religion à la carte" wherein individuals increasingly mix and match ideas, beliefs and practices in order to form personal religions (Bibby 1987: 62-85). In the Canadian context, these forms of personalized spirituality are often rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions but are supplemented by a wide variety of beliefs ranging from other world religions, folk traditions, New Age ideas, as well as from aspects of secular culture. Bibby notes that rather than adhering to one comprehensive and unified belief system, increasingly individuals are drawn to pieces and fragments of spiritual and religious symbols, beliefs and practice which they tend to consume selectively. He further suggests that people pick and choose particular elements because they appeal to them or resonate with them in some way. Rather than fashioning such beliefs into an integrated or fully coherent worldview or belief system, Bibby observes that people often hold different fragments of beliefs or practices that may be incongruent or even contradictory. According to Bibby these discrepancies do not undermine the validity of the beliefs and practices, rather they work to fulfill different functions in peoples lives thereby helping to reduce some of the tensions and anxieties which often result from living in the complex, diverse and ever changing context of late modern society. Such fragmented beliefs make it easier for people to adjust and adapt to a highly differentiated society where individuals must often quickly and simultaneously move from one social role or psychological context to another. Therefore we have people selectively picking and choosing different symbols, belief and practices "à la carte," that correspond with their multiple needs, values and social realities, rather than trying to adhere to one static system.

Unlike Bibby and Heelas, I do not go so far as to suggest that the prevalence of personal forms of religion, latent indicators of spirituality, and the proliferation of New Age and spiritual themes in mainstream culture, are signals of a widespread spiritual renaissance or revolution. There simply is not enough evidence to support the claim that most segments of Western populations are about to embrace a spiritual or religious worldview as a primary source of meaning and identity in their lives. In fact such arguments are counterintuitive to the characteristics of late and post modern societies which rest upon diversity, plurality and change. One option or one universal trend will not, and cannot, respond to all of the needs, interests and requirements of all of a population. There is, however, evidence to support the argument that for a certain segment of the population constructing a spiritual meaning system and identity, and engaging in conversations and thought about transcendent meaning is an important and significant factor in their lives. The work of pollster Michael Adams is quite useful for illustrating this point (1997). In his research focusing on the social values of Canadians, Adams argues that the complex nature of Canadian society precludes making all-encompassing generalizations about 'Canadians' or trying to lump all Canadians into one overarching value set. Rather, Adams argues that where generalizations can be made they must still leave room for the significant differences in value-orientations, meaning systems and lifestyles of Canadians. Consequently, Adams offers twelve general categories or "values tribes" based upon a dual axis grid or values map, with one axis identifying traditional or modern values, the other identifying primarily a social or individual orientation in values (46). Adams further categorizes the population based on age categories, offering generational distinctions between "the Elders" those born prior to the mid-1940s, "the Boomers" those born between the mid-1940s and the mid-1960s, and Generation X, those born between the mid-1960s to early 1980s (58; 76; 101). When the results of his survey

data was analyzed in terms of this values map, it became clear that there are remarkable distinctions between the values-orientations of Canadians.

Keeping within the context of contemporary reflexive spirituality, Adams' 'tribes' that are of most interest are the Boomers "Autonomous Rebels" and "Connected Enthusiasts" and Generation X's "New Aquarians" and "Autonomous Post-Materialists" (55).<sup>14</sup> While members of all of these groups differ along the axis of individual or social orientation, all of them land on the modern side of the grid, in terms of the modern to traditional orientation. Autonomous Rebels, as the name suggests, tend to include those individuals who either reject or at least are suspicious of authority and traditional institutions. This group tends to display a concern for equality, human rights, freedom and the environment. They tend to emphasize individualism and value personal experience. Religiously, the values of Autonomous Rebels are often expressed in terms of personal spiritual quests and seeking outside of traditional religious institutions. On the other side of the individual/social axis, are the "Connected Enthusiasts" characterized by their values which emphasize interaction and engagement with family, community, the country and the world at large. This group tends to seek experience over belief or tradition, and stresses immediate gratification over delayed gratification, the here and now over the distant or far reaching future.

It is the Connected Enthusiasts that Adams identifies as being most likely to be interested New Age ideas, particularly those which offer a form of instrumental spirituality. In the Generation X category, the "New Aquarians" tend to emphasize egalitarian,

---

<sup>14</sup> I have deliberately omitted the Elders categories for two main reasons. First, none of the characteristics of the elders' tribes seem to correlate with categories of reflexive spirituality. Likely this is due to the fact that as Roof argues, as a movement reflexive spirituality developed from Boomer Generations. Additionally, with one exception, the research participants were all born after the mid-1940s, consequently My research data does not include this generation. The two participants born in 1932 and 1933, would likely fall under the heading of "Cosmopolitan Modernists." For further discussion of these categories see Michael Adams, *Sex in The Snow: Canadian Social values at the End of the Millennium*, Toronto, Ontario: Penguin Press.

ecological, experiential and somewhat hedonistic values. They tend to fall in the mid-range between social and individual orientations with a slight bias towards the social end of the spectrum. Religiously, the New Aquarians are most likely to reject traditional religious institutions but tend to be drawn towards spiritual experimentation, including the supernatural, divination, new age ideas, alternative spiritualities such as neo-paganism, Wicca, feminist and environmental spirituality. Further, Adams notes, this group tends to be “avid consumers of cultural products – movies, concerts, dance – and of television sitcoms” (116-17). Consequently many of the participants in this study would likely fall into this category.

The final category that I find of interest to this study is the “Autonomous Post-Materialists,” a group characterized by their emphasis on self-fulfillment and personal autonomy. Similarly to the other groups noted here, this tribe tends to reject traditional and institutional authority. They place a high value on human rights as well as individual personal freedom. Religiously, Adams asserts that this group tends to be the least religious of all twelve tribes. However as I shall detail later in this paper I include this group because, with the exception of Adams’ characterization of their religious attitudes, some of the Generation X participants in this study otherwise appear to fall into this category. While I do not fully apply Adams’ analysis to my study of contemporary spirituality, it does serve to illustrate the point that spirituality may be a significant factor in the lives of some Canadians but not in others. Nor does it have to be to make it sociologically significant. While Bibby may feel compelled to argue that religion is about to be revitalized in Canada on a large scale, I am more comfortable with following Adams’ assessment suggesting that for some Canadians religious and spiritual identities are one of the cultural resources that people

employ as they orient themselves and act within society, while others may value other types of cultural and personal options.

### ***Spirituality as Conversations about Transcendent Meaning***

Such data, as presented by Adams, helps to address the all or nothing tendencies that pervade sociological debates around secularization and religious revitalization. Simply put, in terms of reflexive spirituality, it matters to some people and not to others. I find Kelly Besecke's description of reflexive spirituality as "a societal conversation about transcendent meanings" (2005: 181) to be particularly useful here. Looking at culture using Besecke's metaphor of a large cocktail party, "with several ongoing conversations" in the room, reflexive spirituality represents one of those thematic conversations (Besecke 2002: 85). It is important to note that Besecke's approach does not argue for a complete religious transformation of culture nor does she envision religion as taking one monopolized form, rather she suggests that reflexive spirituality is one of the contemporary manifestations of religion, in Luckmann's sense of transcendent meaning, amongst multiple forms. From this perspective, Besecke counters current tendencies in sociological discussions of contemporary spirituality that either equate spiritual seeking with a spiritual revolution or as privatized phenomenon that will have little impact on society.

Expanding on her definition of reflexive spirituality, Besecke criticizes contemporary theories of non-institutional spirituality for relying on distinctions that classify institutional religion as public religion and non-institutional religion as a privatized. She argues that this tendency limits our ability, not only to identify non-institutional spirituality, but also misrepresents where and how transcendent meaning or reflexive spirituality occurs (Besecke 2005: 181). Turning back to Luckmann's theories, as well as Roof's, upon whom she

constructs her own approach to religion, Besecke argues that characterization of non-institutional spirituality as a privatized phenomenon primarily taking place within people's psyche's or even within small groups, such as families or friends, ignores the fact that images, symbols and discourses about transcendent meaning occur in public. At the most basic level, Besecke, following Luckmann, explains that like all meanings "transcendent meanings are products of interaction and communication; they do not emerge wholesale in people's heads (181). However, more than simply arguing that meaning is public because it is socially constructed, Besecke goes on to point out that reflexive spirituality, or conversations about transcendent meaning are frequently taking place in public. She uses the popularity of books, magazines, workshops and lectures about spirituality or what Stark and Bainbridge label as audience and client cult activity to illustrate this point. These mediums she points out are public mediums that are more or less accessible to all members of society. She further explains that approached from the perspective of privatization, books and magazines and so forth can be seen as indicators of a thriving spiritual marketplace where individuals can buy a range of spiritual meanings. However, "[s]een through this 'communicative' lens, the 'spiritual matters' section of the Barnes and Noble looks less like individualism in a narrow sense, and more like American society talking to itself about meaning" (181).

I find this idea quite thought provoking. Not only does Besecke argue that sociological approaches need to extend beyond the public-institutional, private-non-institutional classifications; but through offering the theory of reflexive spirituality as cultural conversations about transcendent meaning, she provides the essential link between sociological studies of personal spirituality (often based upon interview and ethnographic data) which identify the process with private, individual and autonomous acts of identity

construction with theories of religion and popular culture (often based on textual analysis and little empirical data) that argue that popular cultural texts, such as literature, movies and television, offer a hierophany of spiritual and religious symbols, images and scripts that people draw upon in the course of constructing spiritual worldview and identities. As I asserted in the introductory chapter, while there are numerous essays and analyses of popular cultural texts hypothesizing that religious and spiritual meaning is found within them, few of these studies move from hypothesis to concrete evidence. Although recently there has been a move to correct this, most notably research emerging from the University of Colorado's Center for Mass Media including Lynn Schofield Clark's research on youth, religion and the media (Clark 2003), there is still a significant gap between the theories and the data of research on the relationship between popular culture and contemporary spirituality. Part of this problem, I suspect was due to the lack of a well-grounded conceptual framework that could mediate both the private and public aspects of non-institutional spirituality. Through offering the definition of reflexive spirituality as a cultural conversation about transcendent meaning, Besecke links both the private realm of thought and action with the public sphere where cultural meanings are produced, negotiated, transformed and tried on.

### **Summary**

Based upon Besecke's concept of reflexive spirituality, I argue that television programs play a role in such cultural dialogues about transcendent meaning, offering a platform through which viewers reflexively explore a variety of spiritual themes, topics and issues. Within the specific context of this research, I look at the ways in which the participants in this study use television as source for learning, questioning, thinking and talking about transcendent meaning. Further I suggest that participants use television as a

resource for a particular form of spiritual consumption as they continuously seek out both new and more information, knowledge, and ideas related to an assortment of religious, spiritual and transcendent themes. Participants then draw upon these themes in the process of constructing, negotiating and reinforcing their personal forms of spirituality.

## **Chapter 3: Television as a Spiritual Forum?**

### **Interpreting Audiences: Developments in mass media audience theories**

#### **The Passive Mass: Effects of the Mass Media**

As with the advent of any new technology, television inspired both enthusiasm and fear amongst viewers, critics and scholars. From its early days audience research was particularly concerned with the media's ability to influence and persuade people. The communicative process of television, along with other mass media forms, was often perceived as a relatively simple interaction between the sender and the receivers – a message was sent via media images and discussions, and receivers automatically and uncritically ingested the message. Within these early perspectives audiences tended to be understood not as individual actors but as a relatively passive mass susceptible to manipulation and exploitation by media producers. Emerging out of the World War II contexts wherein media were consciously used as tools of ideological persuasion and propaganda, theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1993) and Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton (2000) were concerned with the effects of the media on the masses.

Observing the applications of the mass media used by the Nazi Party in Germany, and later Roosevelt's use of the media to promote war efforts in the United States, Adorno and Horkheimer (1993) theorized that the mass media functioned primarily as a source of social control. Within their Marxist framework, the mass media culture industry functioned as an opiate of the masses, pacifying and manipulating audiences. Through applying techniques of standardization and repetition, the producers of mass media function to standardize and naturalize media audiences' perceptions and experiences. Audiences come to accept and believe the ideology embedded in mass media forms. Further, Adorno and

Horkeimer argue that the power of media industries is so pervasive that the audience comes to regard the ideological claims as truthful, normative and inevitable. Thus they conclude that mass media industries discourage critical thought and encourage passive acceptance. Applying their analysis specifically to entertainment aspects of media industries, Adorno and Horkeimer asserted that entertainment and leisure, such as film, music and later television (in Adorno's writings) were tools used to "seduce, pacify and distract the masses" (Lull 2000: 116) into limited consciousness and critical awareness, and further reconcile the masses to participation in consumer commodity culture.

Lazarsfeld and Merton's theories of media and mass audiences bear many similarities with the opinions of Adorno and Horkeimer. In their 1946 article "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action" Lazarsfeld and Merton discuss their concerns regarding the impact of mass media (in particular radio) upon society (Lazarsfeld and Merton 2000). Unlike Adorno and Horkeimer, who believed mass media was inherently harmful, Lazarsfeld and Merton maintained that the power of the mass media could be used to influence society in either positive or detrimental manners. However, due to the lack of regulation and the domination of mass media by commercial capitalism Lazarsfeld and Merton believed it was more likely that mass media would be used in a socially dysfunctional manner. Based upon their analysis of the behaviour and opinions of radio audiences, Lazarsfeld and Merton initiated a theory of limited effects of the media, arguing that the media could have powerful effects on the public only under specific circumstances. Lazarsfeld and Merton argued that successful media propaganda could only work on audiences if there is "there is little or no opposition in the mass media to the diffusion of values, policies, or public images" (Lazarsfeld and Merton 2000: 21). That is to say the ideology must have a form of monopolization. Secondly, the media must draw upon and

reinforce preexisting values, attitudes, images and ideals, thereby reinforcing the status quo, and leaving little room for new ideas or generating new patterns of behaviour, a process they refer to as “canalization” (24). And thirdly, the media requires “supplementation” through face-to-face contact or discussions reinforcing what has been broadcast (27).

Lazarsfeld and Merton were particularly concerned that mass media was operating in a system in which these three effects were present, making audiences particularly vulnerable to manipulation. Lazarsfeld and Merton argued that the commercial capitalist interests of mass media owners maintained a “a virtual ‘psychological monopoly’ of the mass media” (27) producing and reinforcing the same ideology and interests through media programming. Further, they asserted the business interests that controlled the mass media were solely interested in “canalizing rather than radically changing basic attitudes; it seeks only to create preferences for one rather than another brand of product” (28). Such ideological perspectives were then further reinforced through social interaction with other members of society who had been socialized or indoctrinated into the same cultural mindset, thereby further reiterating the particular worldview. These observations lead Lazarsfeld and Merton to warn against the hegemonic power and narcotizing dysfunction of the mass media. The authors argued that the mass media controlled public perceptions, opinions and behaviour by repeatedly directing attention to specific concerns and calling attention to deviations from the norm (103). Further, by offering the same or similar norms and values, the mass media created a closed system stimulating little critical thought or change. Beyond this Lazarsfeld and Merton feared that audiences were being led into a state of passivity and apathy, as audiences were lead to confuse choice amongst brands and consumer products with the true freedom of choice not to consume, or to choose another socio-economic system. Additionally, the mass of information available leads audiences to confuse knowledge about

public and political issues with taking action to change them, thereby eliciting “only a superficial concern with the problems of society” (p. 105).

While Lazarsfeld and Merton were writing in an era prior to mass television availability, their theories offer insight into issues created by the domination of television in the mass media. Both the concerns about the social control exerted by mass media in terms of the setting of public agendas, maintaining and reproducing social norms and values, as well as their fear of the narcotizing effect of mass media, are particularly relevant to contemporary analysis of television audiences. As television has become embedded into the everyday structure of viewers’ lives, the ability of television to help create and sustain systems of meaning has become ever more powerful. Additionally, in this hyper-information era, in great measure generated through television, the tendency towards information overload and substituting information and knowledge with critical thought and action, is that much more likely.

### **Active Audiences: Integrating Social Context with Audience Interpretations**

Despite the important insights into the working of the mass media raised by Lazarsfeld and Merton, their theory fails to address the complexity of audiences’ relationships with the mass media. Most notably, as with Adorno and Horkheimer, Lazarsfeld and Merton analyze audiences as a passive mass, behaving and interacting in a uniform manner. These approaches, however, often fail to account for the individual, social, economic and racial differences of audience members, which may lead to different interpretations of and interactions with mass media messages. Similarly, their theories fail to acknowledge the agency of audiences to resist, reinterpret or subvert the dominant ideology of the mass media. In attempt to account for these weaknesses, later theories by Lazarsfeld,

this time working with Elihu Katz, attempted to integrate an understanding of the audiences' social context into their understandings of the media's influence. In *Personal Influence* (1955) Lazarsfeld and Katz argue that mass media effects were mediated through social relationships and social status. Media messages could be further enhanced or weakened based upon audiences' interactions with others. Lazarsfeld and Katz argued further that individuals were more likely to be influenced by their social relationships and the opinions of others in their social group, rather than being directly controlled by the media. Within this framework, Lazarsfeld and Katz argued that within social groups certain people function as "opinion leaders"; that is, people whose opinions are often trusted, followed and respected. Rather than a direct "sender to audience" influence, Lazarsfeld and Katz argue that the media influence followed a two step process wherein "ideas often flow from radio and print to the opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population" (Lazarsfeld and Katz 1955: 309).

Such a line of reasoning helped to advance discussion of the mass media by highlighting the role that the social environment of individuals plays in their willingness to accept mass media messages. However, as with the previous theories of Lazarsfeld and Merton, as well as, Adorno and Horkheimer, the theory advanced in *Personal Influence* continued to rest on a top down model of culture, with a small percentage of people or groups acting as leaders and the rest of society acting as followers. Consequently this theory was criticized for its inability to account for the individual choices people make with regard to the mass media as it continued to see audiences as passive or acted upon by the mass media. Eventually, later theories developed by Katz did come to address audiences' responses to the media.

Working with Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, Katz and his colleagues developed The Uses and Gratifications model of mass media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch 1974). This research moved from asking “what does the media do to audiences” to asking “what do audiences do with the media?” Whereas previous effects models tended to see audiences as passive and often victims of the mass media, Blumler and Katz argued that media audiences are not only active but they consciously use the media to their advantage. Building on theories from ‘third force’ psychology<sup>15</sup> Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch argued that audiences actively consume media texts in order to satisfy specific psychological and social needs. They identified four basic needs that are sought and satisfied through audience interactions with the media.

The first, diversion, where the audience uses the media as an emotional release or a way to escape from the everyday pressures and stresses of life; personal relationships, that is where audience members either use television programs and characters as a mode of companionship, or more often, use television content as the basis for interaction and conversations with others. The third use is for personal identity, wherein viewers explore, reaffirm or challenge issues related to their own lives and personal identity through comparing their lives and personal situations to characters or storylines in television programs; and finally audiences use the mass media for surveillance, that is as a means of information about the world, particularly events and experiences outside of audiences’ everyday interactions. The authors explain that “in the mass communication process much initiative in linking need gratification and media choice lies with the audience

---

<sup>15</sup> Term used to refer to the branch of humanistic and growth psychology developed by theorists such as Abraham Maslow (1964; 1970) Carl Rogers (1961; 1980) and Gordon Allport (1950; 1955). The term ‘third force’ is used to differentiate humanist psychology from the other two forces of psychoanalysis and behaviourism.

member”(Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch 1974: 16). While the media supply the material, the audience members actively choose what they do with that material – how they interpret, what they choose to watch, which messages they will absorb and which messages they will ignore. Therefore audiences are much more likely to use the media, than to be used by the media. Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch further support their theory of active audiences by pointing out that the media competes with numerous other “sources of need satisfaction” (16). Consequently, audience members actively choose how, when and if they will turn to the media as a source of needs gratification.

While the Uses and Gratifications model helped move discussions of mass media theory towards a more dynamic understanding of audiences, early work on this theory was criticized as being methodologically weak. Katz himself acknowledged the validity of such criticisms writing,

Early gratification research has leaned too heavily on self-reports, was unsophisticated about the social origin of the needs that audiences bring to the media, too uncritical of the possible dysfunctions both for the self and society of certain kinds of audience satisfaction, and too captivated by the inventive diversity of audience uses to pay much attention to the constraints of the text. (Katz cited in Kuby and Csikszentmihalyi: 28)

More recent research within Uses and Gratifications Theory has tried to incorporate work developed by critical theories of television, particularly looking at the interaction between individual viewer, mass media ideology and social structures, as well as paying closer attention to how viewers actually read or decode media texts in order to find or create meaning.

### **Refining ‘Effects’ Research: Cultural Indicators and Cultivation Analysis**

At the same time as the Uses and Gratifications Theory was challenging direct effects research, George Gerbner was working on the Cultural Indicators project which aimed to

expand effects research beyond its limited focus on “individual messages, programs, episodes series or genres and their immediate ability to produce immediate change in audiences attitudes and behaviors” (Morgan and Signorielli 1990: 16). Through combining content analysis of television programs with audience surveys, Gerbner and his colleagues developed Cultivation Analysis, aimed at understanding the long-term effects of exposure to the mass media. The Cultural Indicators research project addressed three overarching concerns regarding the mass media. First it aimed to identify the power, processes and ideologies that underlay the production and content of the mass media. Further Cultural Indicators research attempted to identify dominant meanings, messages and values expressed repeatedly through media messages. Finally, the Cultural Indicators project attempted to determine how or if messages presented through the mass media impacted upon audience members’ perceptions of reality.

Following the concerns of Adorno and Horkheimer and Merton and Lazarsfeld, Gerbner was particularly interested in the mass media’s power to promote and maintain specific ideologies. Gerbner’s analysis identifies the mass media as promoting a corporate capitalist ideology through its programming. However, rather than focusing on one specific program or genre, Gerbner argues that the media as a whole functions as a message system, promoting specific beliefs and themes through the repetition of imagery and ideas. Repeated exposure to aggregate patterns of images and symbolic systems will in turn produce changes in viewers’ understandings and views of social reality. From this perspective, television is often looked at as a tool for socialization, building upon and reproducing beliefs and values that are already present in culture. Through constant reaffirmation of specific values and attitudes, television functions to solidify and reinforce the status quo. While Gerbner acknowledges that there are many other variables that will influence individuals’ beliefs and

attitudes, he argues that television has come to dominate our “symbolic environment” and therefore is a particularly powerful cultural influence. Within this framework, however, Gerbner acknowledges that not all viewers are equally influenced by television. His theory distinguishes between the attitudes of heavy viewers, versus medium and moderate viewers, arguing that those that are heavy viewers of television are more likely to internalize the ‘television view’ of reality, whereas moderate or medium viewers concepts of reality tend to be influenced by other sources of information, including personal experience.

Much of Gerbner’s cultivation theory was developed in light of analyzing the effects of violence on television. Gerbner noted that the world represented by television has a much higher degree of violence and a higher representation of law enforcement professions than is present in reality. This in turn leads viewers, particularly heavy viewers, to over-estimate the actual amount of violence and crime in the everyday world. Gerbner refers to this effect as the “Mean World Syndrome” wherein heavy television viewers tend to see the world as being fraught by violence and danger, and therefore tend to be overly cautious and frightened by the world. Rather than arguing that violence on television is likely to cause aggressive behaviour amongst viewers, Gerbner asserts that images of violence on television are more likely to encode messages regarding law and order, good and evil, justice and punishment. Television crime shows, police dramas and action-adventures, for example, function to reinforce faith in the law enforcement and legal systems, presenting an overall message that justice will prevail in the end. Gerbner even goes so far as to suggest that the “Mean World Syndrome” may influence support for capital punishment. Gerbner explains that “Growing up in a violence-laden culture breeds aggressiveness in some and desensitization, insecurity, mistrust, and anger in most.... Punitive and vindictive action against dark forces in a mean world is made to look appealing, especially when presented as quick, decisive, and

enhancing our sense of control and security” (Stossel 1997). While the effects of violence have been the most cited applications of cultivation theory, further research has applied such analysis to the media’s influence upon attitudes towards gender roles, age, ethnicity, as well as social and political attitudes.

Cultivation theory has proved to be a rather successful model of media analysis; however, it has also been severely criticized for overly emphasizing the role that television plays in individual’s concepts of reality. Critics argue that Cultivation Analysis fails to adequately acknowledge or address the social, economic and psychological variances that influence viewers as well as the other sources of information and influence, such as education, face-to-face communication and life experiences. Further, critics have been quick to point out that although there may be a correlation between television viewing and the cultivation of specific beliefs and attitudes, there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that the relationship is causal (Livingstone 1998: 17-18). Additionally, Cultivation Analysis is easily criticized for presuming that there is only one possible meaning or reading of media texts, therefore leaving little room for audience interpretations of the texts.

### **Television as Storyteller: Addressing Television as a Symbolic System**

Such criticisms of Cultivation Analysis have lead researchers to further extend and refine their theories. More recent research into Cultivation Analysis shifts the focus from the “effects of television” to emphasizing television’s role as an overall system of storytelling (Shanahan and Morgan 1999: 28). From this perspective, researchers look at the patterns and themes that are reproduced via television storylines and images arguing that despite the multiplicity of programs that are available there is a remarkable consistency in their underlying messages. This line of Cultivation Analysis looks at how television as “the

premier story-teller of our age” functions to cultivate “shared conceptions of reality and common terms of discourse among otherwise diverse publics” (29). Gaining insights from rhetorical analysis as well as cognitive psychology, this area of research analyzes the role that story has historically and contemporarily played in socialization processes, working to shape conceptions of reality, imbue specific meanings, values and codes of conduct and provide basic information about the world and the people in it.

While historically story-telling used to occur through direct human interaction, today much of this process is mediated either through print or electronic media. This has had a profound impact upon the story-telling process. While on one hand, advances in mass media forms have made stories and information more accessible to a larger group of people and have vastly increased the number of stories that are available. But the role of story-telling has been placed in the hands of an elite minority whose objectives are largely motivated by economic interests (14). As television is such a pervasive medium and has come to function as one of our main forms of story-telling in the modern world television does come to play somewhat of a unifying and homogenizing role, bringing together vast sectors of populations to watch similar ideas and themes reiterated in a variety of television programs. While such an approach may seem to echo earlier approaches to media theories which treat the audience as a mass, this approach to cultivation research differs in that it recognizes that audiences members are diverse and have many different individual, social, economic and psychological variables that influence how they respond to media messages. As Shanahan and Morgan further explain from this perspective,

The world of television is best understood as a collective social endeavor in which every individual has his or her own chances to extract symbolic meaning individually, but within which the repertoire of lessons, morals, story structures and character behaviors is constrained at any given time by socio-narrative boundaries and material conditions (196).

Building upon communications theorist Walter R. Fisher's concept of the "narrative paradigm" this approach to Cultivation Analysis rests on the hypothesis that humans tend to rely more heavily on symbols, metaphors and stories to provide them with knowledge and inform their understanding of the world, rather than rational or logical methods and arguments (192-93). Taking into account elements such as culture, history, and socio-economic factors, Fisher further argued that people tend to "experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflict, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends." (Fisher, 1985). Fisher additionally explained that,

The narrative approach sees people as storytellers – authors and co-authors who creatively read and evaluate the texts of life and literature. It envisions institutions as providing 'plots' that are always in the process of re-creation rather than scripts; it stresses that people are full participants in making of messages whether they are agents (authors) or audience members (co-authors). (Fisher 1987 :13)

Narrative, according to Fisher provides humans not only with information about the world, codes of conduct and worldviews but in fact, provides people with the ability to structure and comprehend the world around them. Consequently narratives function in a dialogical process between individual actors and the social and communicative environment. Further, while Fisher does not deny the influence of reason and logic on human perception and action, he maintains that human communication also tends to contain elements of 'mythos' that is, aspects of life and reality that cannot be readily proven in an absolute manner but nevertheless appear to be true. Issues such as values, metaphors, symbols and gestures all fall into this category. Such issues Fisher asserts are often more aptly described, envisioned and apprehended through narrative form rather than in taking the form of explicit instructions, rational arguments or scientific discourse. However it is important to note that not all narratives are equally plausible. Fisher notes that human use and acceptance of

narratives tends to follow their own pattern of internal logic, that is, the world or argument presented in any narrative must show integrity and consistency in terms of the facts and information that it presents. Further, Fisher asserts that the 'truth' of such narratives must resonate with individuals and seem to offer some sort of common sense value for individuals to accept a particular narrative and use it a guide for further beliefs, actions and behaviour.

Shanahan and Morgan's approach to television as story builds on Fisher's arguments, examining television (both specific programs and the medium as a whole) as a narrative form, offering ways of identifying, understanding and organizing the world, and providing a basis for action. Not only do they assert that people learn through watching specific programs, but they assert that by consistently repeating particular narratives and messages through a variety of television texts, television as a medium functions to provide a "master narrative" or a mainstream view of the world (Shanahan and Morgan: 193-94). Further, Shanahan and Morgan note that television is particularly effective for cultivating particular worldviews or beliefs due to its use of the narrative form for both fiction and non-fiction. Taking insights from cognitive psychologists, Shanahan and Morgan argue that often, "the mental processes used for thinking about fiction are about the same as those used for reality" (195). As long as the narrative holds together in terms of its internal logic, people make little distinction at a cognitive level between what they learn from fiction or from everyday reality. This tendency is further compounded by the processes of storing, categorizing and retrieving information in the human memory; both consistency and repetition of stories and messages as well as the sheer volume of information that we encounter in our every reality and mediated reality, may lead to confusion over the sources of information that we acquire (187). Thus television viewing impacts on peoples' perceptions of reality both through the conscious appropriation of ideas and themes accepted as valid although they may not be

'real', and also through unintentional appropriation wherein fiction and fact merge in our memory and are often called upon and retrieved without being aware of the original source.

In addition to the recent interest in the narrative function of television, contemporary cultivation theory has also importantly turned its attention to the external variables that may impact upon viewing choices as well as audience interpretations (Shanahan and Morgan 1999). Continuing with the line of investigation focusing on dependent variables of viewing preferences such as hours of viewing and program choices, contemporary cultivation research combines this approach with focusing on independent variables such as age, sex, race, education, income and political orientations that may further influence the way in which viewers respond to and interpret media messages (150). While overall Cultivation Analysis still finds patterns of similarity in attitudes of heavy television viewers despite independent variables, moderate and light viewers tend to offer greater degrees of variance in their interpretations of television messages.

Such additions to cultivation research have shifted its emphasis from arguing about the unidirectional causal effects of television to looking at the dynamic interaction between television messages and those who receive and interpret them. As Shanahan and Morgan explain from this new perspective cultivation is perceived "more like a gravitational process. The angle and direction of the 'pull' depends on where groups of viewers and their styles of life are with reference to the line of gravity, the 'mainstream' of the world of television. Each group may strain in a different direction, but all groups are affected by the same central current" (35). Such an approach continues to acknowledge that television, as a whole, tends to offer specific messages, which more or less will be interpreted in a similar manner by the majority of viewers, but at the same time recognizes that there is room for variation. Rather than arguing simply that television tells viewers what to think, this approach to cultivation

theory suggests that television directs or tells viewers what to think about. The way viewers choose to think about topics and messages prevalent in the media, then may be significantly guided and influenced by the ideology of the media, but is not wholly determined by them. Such further insights and advancements in cultivation theory owe in no small part to many of the criticisms directed towards initial studies of cultivation theory. In particular, well-known scholars in cultural studies such as Horace Newcomb and Stuart Hall critiqued cultivation theory for its failure to address the role of difference and variation amongst audience members, programs and viewing contexts (60). Much of the progress in cultivation theory and techniques was stimulated by such criticisms from cultural studies theorists and further enhanced by taking insights of cultural studies theories about the media and audiences.

### **Multiple Meanings of Media Texts: Cultural Studies and Audience Studies**

Moving media studies towards more in-depth analysis of audiences, Stuart Hall developed an early model for reception studies first articulated in a position paper entitled “The Television Discourse - Encoding and Decoding” (Hall 1993). In this work Hall argued that in order for the media to have effects, uses or gratify needs, it must first be produced and received as meaningful discourse. Building upon semiotic linguistic theories, Hall argued that the meanings embedded in television texts, as with any sign or symbol, are not static or pre-given. The communicative process is discursive, though one communicator may intend a particular message the other may receive or interpret that message differently.

Within his theory, Hall identifies “determinate moments” of the communicative process which function to create discursive meaning structures. Hall explains that each aspect of the media communicative process represents a particular moment or context. For example the production of the text represents the specific ideological, institutional, economic

and political framework of the producers; the performance or representation of the text represents the shared communicative codes or rules of communication as well as topics, symbols and images that work to transform an event or idea into recognizable and meaningful story; while the reception of the text takes place within specific socio-historical, economic and ideological contexts of the viewers. Within each moment the meaning structure of the text is altered.

While Hall argues that the meaning of texts is not rigid or closed, he asserts that meaning of texts is also not random. Texts must conform to some level of shared meaning or at least follow basic rules of communication, such as rules of language, in order for them to be meaningful. The discursive element of television texts comes into play through the subtleties of meaning encoded and decoded in each sign. For example, a car may represent a mode of transportation, a status symbol, freedom, decadence, a desire, a cage or trap or a source of pollution depending on the context in which it is represented and the context of those interpreting the sign. Hall explains that the producers of the mass media usually attempt to employ meanings that are widely shared or appear near-universal in order for their message to be received in the preferred manner, often appearing as a taken for granted meaning. Generally, they work to maintain their ideological position through encoding their ideology, values and presuppositions within media texts, thereby reproducing the current economic and power arrangements. However, Hall further argues that although producers may intend a specific meaning, the interpretation or decoding of media texts varies according to viewers.

Hall identifies three ideal types of the decoding process: the dominant-hegemonic; negotiated; and oppositional, readings of the text. Within the dominant-hegemonic positions the viewer decodes the meaning of a text within the framework and “reference codes in

which it has been encoded” (Hall: 101). That is to say that the message that is sent is received and interpreted in the intended manner. This is the ideal situation for media producers. It is within this framework that the ideological position of media industries gets reproduced and internalized by viewers. Within the negotiated position, the viewer generally accepts the hegemonic codes of the text but may alter or resist it in a way that reflects their own social, economic, local or personal situation. Hall explains that “[d]ecoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situates) level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rule” (Hall 102). Frequently this position tends to embed contradiction between the definitive power of the elites and the personal situation of the viewer. The third position is the oppositional reading of the text. While the viewer fully understands the hegemonic meaning encoded in the text, she or he chooses “to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference” (Hall 103). Generally this occurs when the viewer’s social, economic or personal context has situated them in an oppositional relationship to the dominant structure, such as in the case of particular subcultures. It is within this framework where political and social change may occur as viewers begin to challenge dominant structures and elite control of meaning systems. However, it is important to note that within all three frameworks, Hall emphasizes the active role of the viewer whether or not the decoding of the text coincides with the preferred meaning of the text.

Critics of Hall’s theory have argued that the notion of preferred meaning is difficult if not impossible to find amongst the divergent interpretations of viewers (Corner in Livingstone: 186). While other critics warn that through emphasizing the dominant reading,

the model prioritized the importance of encoding over the process of decoding, thus transforming the cyclical model Hall proposes, into a linear transmission view of the communicative process (Livingstone 187). Finally, other theorists argue that Hall's theory lends itself to overemphasizing and romanticizing of the oppositional readings of texts. While it is possible for viewers to engage in oppositional readings often many do not. Within cultural studies applications of Hall's theory, there has been a tendency to emphasize subcultures and subversive interpretations of texts to a much greater degree than their actual presence in culture. Nevertheless, in spite of these criticisms Hall's encoding/decoding model of television communication was foundational for inspiring media studies to move towards a more dynamic view of the audience and place and emphasis upon using ethnographic and personal interviews for researching audience interactions with the media. Theorists such as David Morley (1980) and Janice Radway (1984) further contributed to the development of theories of 'active' audiences.

In *The "Nationwide" Audience* (1980) David Morley operationalized Hall's three concepts of decoding (hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional codes) by interviewing audience members of the "Nationwide" program in order to determine how media messages are interpreted and received (Morley 1992: 93). Morley then compared the audience interpretations of the program with a textual analysis of the "Nationwide" episodes. Morley's research determined that different audience members and groups do indeed employ dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings depending upon their social context. When interpreting media texts, individuals will draw upon their other meanings structures such as class, race and gender, which determine how they understand and interact with the world. For a viewer to accept the dominant position of a text, their personal context must in some way correspond to and reflect the code embedded in the text. If an audience member's

social context varies from the dominant code she or he is more likely to engage in a negotiated or oppositional reading of the text so that it corresponds with his or her own social reality. Morley argued that members of the subgroups, classes or subcultures were therefore more likely to share a similar cultural interpretation of media texts.

While Morley's research contributed to the growing application of fieldwork in the discipline of audience studies his method, as with most interview-based research, has been criticized for being somewhat de-contextualized from the everyday viewing scenario. Morley's research has been criticized for isolating aspects of media messages, emphasizing certain elements over others, as well as for isolating specific media texts from the overall viewing context (Morley 1992: 124). Critics further argue that audience interpretations of texts in interview settings may often generate a form of reflexivity and critical awareness that may not be present with day-to-day viewing. Nevertheless, Morley's research contributed significantly towards the development of grounded audience based theory.

Janice Radway's research presented in *Reading the Romance* (1984) circumvented some of the weaknesses found in audience based research which relied heavily on brief interview or survey data. Employing more traditional ethnographic methods to the study of romance novel audiences, Radway engaged in more participant-observation based research. Gaining access to a community of romance novel readers through a key informant who worked in a bookstore and wrote a newsletter for romance readers, Radway first surveyed readers and then engaged in focus-group style interviews. In terms of textual analysis, Radway employs a Proppian<sup>16</sup> style analysis in order to determine the narrative structure of

---

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Propp developed a structuralist interpretation of folklore through analyzing Russian folktales. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, 1928, Propp proposed that the Russian fairytales follow a similar narrative structure. Propp divided the structure of each fairytale into smaller narrative units, arguing that there 31 standard function sequences could be found in the tales. Propp argued that these 31 functions would appear in all tales in sequential order and that they constituted the fundamental elements of the tale. Additionally, Propp

romance novels. Using this model, Radway concludes that successful, popular romance novels all follow the same narrative structure. At a basic level romance novels can be seen to be telling the same story over and over, therefore can be seen to reproduce and maintain specific types of social, power and ideological relationships. While Radway does not lose sight of the ideological implications embedded in romance novels, her research data led her to identify the issues of salience for the participants.

Most notably, the romance readers in Radway's study emphasized the pleasure derived from reading romance novels, particularly because it offered a form of diversion or escape from the pressures of their everyday lives and domestic roles. Radway explains that for the participants in her study romance reading,

so engages their attention that it enables them to deny their physical presence in an environment associated with responsibilities that are acutely felt and occasionally experienced as too onerous to bear. Reading, in this sense, connotes a free space where they feel liberated from the need to perform duties they otherwise willingly accept as their own. At the same time, by carefully choosing stories that make them feel particularly happy, they escape figuratively into a fairy tale where a heroine's similar needs are adequately met. As a result they vicariously attend to their own requirements as independent individuals who require emotional sustenance and solictide" (Radway in Brooker and Jermyn: 224).

In this sense Radway's research echoes elements of Uses and Gratifications theory, however she moves beyond Uses and Gratifications theory by supplementing it with an in-depth analysis of the meanings found in texts and amongst audience members. Radway further analyzes the participants' motivations for reading romance novels in light of broader social, political and economic structures, thus uniting the micro level everyday uses of romance reading with a macro level analysis of gender relations and patriarchal societal arrangements. Radway's research is often cited as a foundational research in feminist studies, however, it

---

identified seven main roles or *dramatis personae* whose actions fulfill the functions of the tale. After being translated into English in 1958, Propp's model for identifying narrative structures of stories has been widely applied in the field of folklore, religious texts, fictional literature, films and television programs.

should also be noted that Radway's approach developed significant inroads for moving audience studies towards incorporating ethnographic methods with textual analysis in order to understand broader social patterns.

The work of scholars such as Morley and Radway helped establish an important link between textual and semiotic analyses of cultural texts and the everyday realities of audiences. Furthermore such research has countered previous understandings of audiences that conceived them as passive by looking directly to audience members and their interactions with specific texts and has demonstrated that audiences are active and engaged in the process of receiving and interpreting meaning. However, there also has been a tendency in some cultural studies theories to overemphasize difference, novelty and resistance in favour of examining the conventional, mainstream and normative tendencies of audiences. Certainly audiences do decode cultural texts in varying manners, with each individual interpreting them in light of their own personal, social, economic and cultural position and experience. Literature on subcultures, marginal groups and fandom has clearly demonstrated that readings of cultural texts do take polysemic forms and may involve quite divergent and creative interpretations. However, this does not necessarily mean that the majority of audiences' decoding or readings of texts will necessarily vary in a significant manner. Often what makes popular texts popular is their ability to convey some sort of shared meaning and to resonate with audiences' own interpretations on a large scale.

### **Active and Passive Audiences: Television Viewing Competencies**

Taking insights from cultural studies models of television use, as well as building upon contemporary studies of leisure, in *Television and The Quality of Life: How Viewing Shapes Everyday Experience* (1990), psychologists Robert Kubey and Mihaly

Csikszentmihalyi look at the degree to which television not only offers shared or collective meanings and also look at how television tends to produce similar types of experiences through viewing behaviour. Thus Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi investigate how audiences experience television and how this activity relates to other aspects of everyday life. In their research on television viewing and quality of life, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi highlight the diversity of viewing practices exercised by audiences en masse and in individual viewers. The authors take issue with reductive tendencies in television and audience studies which tend to assert that television viewers are either completely passive or are always actively engaged. Rather, their research examines different levels of interaction and involvement that viewers employ with television texts. For example, an individual viewer may at times take a relatively passive approach to watching television, mainly recognizing the content and images, while at other times may be actively engaged in viewing, reflecting on the content, and analyzing and integrating what is being watched with other television shows and also with other aspects of life experience and worldview.

Borrowing from John Dewey's insights into common ways "of processing visual information," Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi identify two primary modes of television viewing – "recognition" and "perception" (209). Recognition, being the most common form of viewing refers to basic identification and reception of images and messages. When viewing with recognition, a viewer may simply see a police detective interrogating a suspect and spends little time interpreting the complexity and subtlety of the images or messages, or integrating them into their consciousness. Perception, on the other hand, involves greater levels of interpretation and decoding of images and messages. In this instance the individual engages with the meaning of the information received, analyzing the subtlety, nuances, and complex relationships between images, symbols, characters and storylines, not only in the

show that they are watching or other programs that they have viewed, but also in relation to their understanding of themselves and the world around them. As Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi explain, processing through perception, information becomes part of “a complex universe of forms, colors, movements, and sounds, [that] might recall from memory into consciousness a variety of past thoughts, dormant emotions, hopes, and goals – a mass of information that can be ordered in new ways as a result of this one act of perception” (209-10). From this perspective a viewer might see a white middle aged police detective interrogating a young African American male who confesses to committing a crime only after being beaten by the detective, interpreting such images light of race, prejudice, violence, abuse of the legal system, issues of ethics and morality. While Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi’s research demonstrates that recognition tends to be a more common mode of television viewing than perception, both modes of interpretation are prevalent among viewing populations and maybe exercised at different times by the same individual viewer.

Further, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi note that in making their television viewing choices, people seek simplicity and redundancy as well as novelty and complexity, and they use television for relaxation and escape as well as to challenge and stimulate. Much of this choice tends to depend upon the psychological and social orientation of the viewers. Using both their own research and data gathered in similar studies on television and quality of life, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi note that “people who are reasonably happy and who possess greater cognitive complexity are more likely to seek out television programs that contain more complex and challenging information. Even watching the same program, a person more skilled in interpreting information can generally extract more complexity and order” (188). Moreover Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi argue that people who are accustomed to “shap[ing] experience with their own mental energy”(212) are more likely to interpret

television programs using perception rather than recognition and are more likely to seek out programs with complex and thought provoking content. Thus much of what viewers get out of television depends upon what they bring to their viewing experience.

When discussing quality of life, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi are referring to the development of “a positive inner state”(8) similar to Maslow’s concept of self-actualization. (9; 141). By this they mean cultivating creativity, curiosity and open mindedness; development of self-confidence, self-esteem, and respect for others; learning to think for oneself and fostering the desire to know and understand the world; the ability to problem solve and organize information and the competency to construct and reorganize meaning based upon surrounding information and experiences; the capacity to set and meet goals that contribute to personal growth and learning; as well as, producing feelings of satisfaction, enjoyment, happiness and personal well-being (1-10; 207-210).

Although Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi’s research findings indicate that the majority of television viewers use television as a means of escape and relaxation; desire simple and familiar storylines; and tend to employ recognition rather than perception when interpreting images, they did discover counter viewing tendencies. In terms of sex, race, age, marital status and income, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi found little variation in television viewing practices of different demographic groups. However, different approaches to television viewing were notable when measuring education variables. As Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi explain “[e]ducation enhances a person’s symbolic skills – the ability to derive information, meaning and pleasure from more complex forms of communication” (169). Thus people with higher levels of formal education and access to education or learning resources demonstrated higher levels of perceptive interpretation of television programs and tended to seek out or derive complex meaning and information from their viewing choices. Kubey and

Csikszentmihalyi further suggest that by choosing programs with innovative and complex information and storylines and using perceptive interpretation, television can foster personal growth, development of consciousness through “challenging the person to develop new skills in the effort of decoding it” and offering access to new information, providing different ways of thinking about a situation (214).<sup>17</sup> However, the authors also note that people who are likely to watch television in such a manner usually have had the opportunity to develop such skills in other facets of their lives. So it is not so much that television initially teaches such competencies, as it is that viewers apply those competencies to their television viewing, thereby using television to further enhance them.

Such theoretical developments in communication and cultural studies are indispensable for understanding the interactions between audiences and media texts at a micro-social level. The gradual shift from ‘magic bullet’ and mass audience theories to reception analysis has helped to identify the numerous ways in which individuals interpret, use and experience television texts not only with regard to their specific viewing activities but also in the context of everyday life experiences. The employment of ethnographic techniques such as in-depth personal interviews and participant observation have helped to distinguish both differences and similarities in viewing practices of individual audience members, and have further exemplified how individuals derive meaning from media texts in a negotiated and interactive manner. Additionally, insights from Cultivation Analysis of Gerbner, Shanahan and Morgan, as well as the work of Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi on experiences of viewing television help to identify how particular ideas, themes and patterns of meaning continue to be reproduced and sustained through the media while still

---

<sup>17</sup> Johnson (2005) has made similar observations and even extended his argument to suggest that the storylines of television programs, along with other forms of popular culture, are becoming increasingly complex and intellectually challenging, in turn this helps audiences develop greater cognitive skills.

recognizing the diversity of audience members. Such work offers initial insight into how television has come to be implicated in how people come to know, understand and interpret the world around them. Both the sheer pervasiveness of television and its mode of communication through narratives, images, emotions and metaphors give television a prominent role in how people come to construct and sustain conceptions of reality, worldviews and personal identities. Such interpretations of television hint at parallels with Luckmann's understanding of religion as the process whereby individuals construct and acquire meaning in relation to their social environment. Turning now to more specific theories of television, communication and reality construction, I shall highlight some of the ways in which television participates in the process of meaning and world building, and distinguish some of the ways in which television may be connected with contemporary theories on religion and spirituality.

## **The Meaning and Being of Television: Television and Social Construction**

### **Communication as Culture: Communication as the Social Construction of Reality**

I am often surprised by the lack of collaborative work between religion scholars and media theorists. While the body of research is beginning to expand, particularly with religious studies researchers examining the media and applying communications theories with theories of religion, scholars in media and cultural studies have been slow to apply insights from religion, or even take religion seriously as a normative cultural topic. Despite the lack of explicit work from communication and cultural studies dealing with religion, analyses and insights from these fields share much in common with contemporary theories of

religion. Furthermore, as this project deals with the construction of spiritual worldviews in reference to the television, the communications and media theories devised by James Carey (1989), James Lull (2000), Roger Silverstone (1994) and John Ellis (2000) form the basic framework for establishing that television acts as a carrier and creator of religious and spiritual themes.

James Carey's approach to communication shares much in common with social constructionist approaches to religion. Just as Luckmann understands religion as the process by which reality is constructed and maintained, Carey understands the act of communication as the key to reality construction. In *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (1989), Carey defines communication as "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed"(23). For Carey, like Luckmann, reality is not given; rather it is continuously constructed and produced through human activity. Carey critiques traditional approaches to communications and media studies for focusing primarily upon transmission views of communication, that is through defining communication as "imparting," "sending," "transmitting," or "giving information to others"(15). Transmission views understand communication solely as a representations and purveyors of knowledge and information. While Carey notes such approaches are essential to understanding communication, he argues that they only address part of the picture. Alternatively, Carey advocates analyzing communication from a ritual view which acknowledges the role that the act of communication has in producing and sustaining reality. Carey explains that "a ritual view conceives communication as a process through which a shared culture is created, modified, and transformed" (43). From this perspective communication is identified with "sharing," "participation," "community," and "communion" (18). Unlike the transmission view which Carey argues is directed towards imparting and maintaining information over

space and geographic areas for the purposes of power and control, the ritual view is directed towards creating, representing and maintaining shared beliefs in time. That is to say, communication is understood as the process of producing, sustaining and transforming our concepts of reality.

Carey maintains that both views of communication have their roots in religion, although each has a very different approach to understanding religious experience. The transmission view, Carey asserts, is rooted in the emphasis on using transportation and technology in order to expand migration and settlement. While Carey acknowledges such moves were also motivated by political and economic goals, he argues that the religious motives for using transportation and communication to expand religious ideals and establish religious communities are of utmost importance. He uses the examples of the Puritans in New England and Dutch Reform Church in South Africa in order to illustrate the use of transportation and technology as a means to establish new religious communities. Further, Carey sites the increase of travel via railroads and communication via the telegraph that helped to promote Christian proselytizing. The ritual view, far less prominent in communication scholarship, originates from understanding religion as the “construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action” (19). Carey takes cues from Durkheim who argued that the origins of religion are social, understanding religion as the sacralization of society. Religious systems are the projection of idealized collective beliefs, concepts and values, providing a source of meaning, conception of reality, structuring norms and values, and forming the basis for social cohesion and control. Through religious ritual, these collective representations are established, communicated, reaffirmed and maintained. These acts of collective affirmation act to socialize and regulate individual beliefs and behaviour, in turn reinforcing the unity

and solidarity of the society. Similarly, Carey looks at communication as the process of establishing and affirming collective beliefs, which in turn produce a sense of a meaningful ordered society. Looking at technologies of mass media in particular, Carey's ritual approach addresses communication as "presentations of the what the world is at root" (21).

Carey's theories are particularly useful for drawing a clear link between communications, mass media and religion, as they acknowledge the role that mass media plays in helping to create and sustain our worldview. However, one of the weaknesses of Carey's theory is his interpretation of power structures embedded in communication technologies. While Carey argues that reality is constructed by human activity, he acknowledges that certain individuals and groups have a great ability to control and affect how reality is created and interpreted. Carey explains that "[r]eality is above all, a scarce resource. Like any scarce resource it is to be struggled over, allocated to various purposes and projects, endowed with given meanings and potentials, spent and conserved, rationalized and distributed. The fundamental form of power is the power to define, allocate and display this resource" (87). He goes further to explain that in an age of mass media domination, reality is a scarce resource because only a limited number of people have access to the production and distribution of mediated images. He writes,

Some get to get to speak and some get to listen, some to write and some to read, some to film and some to view. It is fine to be told we are the species that actively creates the world and then simultaneously to be told we are part of the subspecies denied access to the machinery by which this miracle is pulled off. There is no irony intended in saying we have to accept both of those independent clauses. But it reveals as well—and the thought is deliberately allusive – that there is not only class conflict in communication but status conflict as well (87-88).

While Carey's analysis does acknowledge the power differential intertwined with electronic communications and recommends that communications theory must try to offer alternative

possibilities to this power differential, his theory fails to delve further into the topic or address how communications theory ought to do so. Carey's view of the power dynamic of media communications, with producers and audiences, senders and receivers, is somewhat oversimplified, and in fact echoes the transmission view he earlier critiques. This view does not account for the agency of audiences or nor the polysemic nature of communication.

### **Constructing Meaning with the Mass Media: Structuration Theory**

Communications scholar James Lull, however, includes a social constructionist framework in his research on media and communication, while also taking a more in-depth look at dynamics of power embedded in systems of communication. Lull argues that shared symbolic systems are produced and sustained through communication, which in turn is the act of producing culture. Lull defines the relationship between communication and culture through citing John Tomlinson who writes "Culture can be understood as the order of life in which human beings construct meaning through the process of symbolic representation ...[that is] by communicating with each other" (Tomlinson 1999: 18 in Lull: 10).

Lull argues that through human communication that is "the meaningful symbolic exchanges that constitute social interaction" (132) we construct culture – that is the values, beliefs and modes of being, and how they are constructed, interpreted and brought into consciousness. As we produce culture through communication, we also construct our personal identities and social groups. Lull further argues that as the mass media uses visual images, auditory cues, narrative structures and emotional stimuli in order to communicate its messages and ideologies, cultural forms in the era of electronic media have become more symbolic, mediated and transitory. In pre-modern societies symbolic systems were much more limited mainly to local influences and experiences and were often constrained by

dominant social institutions and groups, such as religious institutions and monarchical governments which offered more clearly defined and cohesive systems of meaning. Social roles, rules, and norms tended to be based upon traditional power and social arrangements, often due to ascribed status and expectations. In the late modern era (or postmodern era as Lull prefers) characterized by globalization, consumerism and electronic communications, symbolic systems are more fragmented, mobile and flexible. While dominant themes and ideologies do permeate social structures highlighting particular themes and encouraging particular patterns of activity, the agency of individuals to participate in and construct personal meaning systems is not only encouraged, but to some degree necessary.

Lull asserts that the culture that has been produced in the postmodern era often demands that individuals fashion their own sense of cultural synthesis, bricolage forms, and personalized ways of being from various cultural elements in order to gain a sense of “cognitive and social stability” (134). While meaning and identity construction in mediated culture are guided and structured by those who control the electronic media, the messages that are sent are not always interpreted or received in the intended manner. Lull further asserts that while attempting to present specific ideological themes and patterns, the tools and techniques used by the media actually empower individuals and collectives by providing access to cultural and symbolic resources that may be used in subversive and counter hegemonic ways. He explains that the use of symbols, images, emotions, idealization and fantasy in television media act to “routinely stimulate the imagination of audiences who put symbolic representations to work in their everyday living situations” (169).

Utilizing the work of Anthony Giddens, Lull applies structuration theory to the process of communications which emphasizes both the structure provided by social systems and values and the agency of individuals and collectives to reproduce, challenge, subvert or

transform the structure. Lull defines structure as “any force that systematically limits or contains people,” while he defines agency as “the energy, creativity, purposefulness, and transcendent abilities that individual persons and subgroups set in motion, even unconsciously, to make their lives meaningful and enjoyable” (Lull: 9). Giddens explains that structure “exist only as memory traces, the organic basis of human knowledgeability, and is instantiated in action” (Giddens 1984: 377). Through repetitive actions of individuals and collectives, normative conventions, codes of behaviour and meaning systems become stabilized, codified and institutionalized into social systems. These systems become naturalized through repetition and routinization, consequently as individuals communicate they draw from social structures in order to navigate and understand the social world, which in turn they reproduce and transform through their communication and action. Therefore social structures both enable and constrain individuals. While individuals do have agency to transform and change social structures, social structures are invested with power, and at both conscious and subconscious levels, influence and guide individuals and collectives to think, act and understand the world in particular ways. Those ideas, individuals or groups that most influence the social structure therefore have the power to influence society as a whole.

Lull argues that in the age of the media domination, those who control the media have enormous power to shape, popularize and reinforce particular meanings, ideologies and worldviews. Through directing attention to certain themes, routine transmissions and repetition, ideas present in the media “congeal to form ideological sets that overrepresent the interests of the powerful and underrepresent the interests of the less rich or simply less visible people” (Lull 16). This “saturation effect” is the idea that as the media highlights and reiterates particular images and ideas they become embedded over time in viewers conscious and unconscious meaning systems- even coming to form collective memory systems wherein

certain ideologies and beliefs are continuously evoked and passed on over time and space. Lull uses the example of commercial advertising to emphasize this point. He explains that advertising is not simply directed towards selling a particular product or service. Rather, advertisements work in a multi-layered fashion, selling both products and services as well as particular beliefs and ideologies, in this case faith in consumer based capitalist economy (Lull 18). Advertisements, even for different products, still draw upon and evoke the same underlying worldview – that is “to consume is good” (18). Within commercial television, “audiovisual cues, cultural values, and assumptions all work together to create an ideational image system” (19), which becomes naturalized through repetition and reiteration, in turn becoming embedded in individual and collective consciousness. The constant re-circulation of particular ideas and themes eventually come to be seen as self-evident, no longer a particular option but instead part of the structure of reality. However, unlike James Carey’s analysis which sees the viewer as a passive participant in this system, Lull argues that viewers (individuals, citizens, the non-elite, etc.) do have agency within this process. In order for ideological systems or worldviews to become dominant, they must also be reenacted in everyday lives and social units, such as in families, education, workplaces and so forth, thus there must be a degree of individual and social consent. While dominant ideologies and systems do significantly structure and guide individuals, Lull argues that acceptance and compliance are not guaranteed. The process of gaining hegemony for any group or ideology is in constant negotiation.

Mass media producers, particularly of television, are at a great advantage for gaining hegemony, not only because they deal in information, but also because they use audio and visual symbols to convey meaning, interpretations and emotions (Lull 172). Lull asserts that audiences not only watch or read television texts, they feel television. He explains that “the

popular media succeed when they are able to effectively connect symbolic imagery to human emotion and experience” (Lull: 170). Such ability gives the media tremendous advantages to gain dominance and persuade as people do not have to believe what they see, instead they come to ‘know’ through the emotional and personal experience that is generated. At the same time, the intended messages, beliefs and experiences are not always what viewers accept and receive. Lull, recognizing the agency and diversity of viewers, notes that individuals and social groups often creatively rework and reinterpret messages in order to fit with their own experiences, lifestyles and ways of thinking.

Lull further argues that in late (post)modern globalized societies in the North Atlantic individuals have a greater role in constructing meaning systems from the available cultural options. While social structures and institutions provide a framework for constructing meaning, individuals do have a degree of agency to create hybrid personal worldviews. These personally constructed cultures, Lull refers to as “supercultures” (Lull 268). He explains the process, writing that “they construct their supercultures when they assemble cultural synthesis by drawing from resources emanating in various cultural spheres. Supercultures are fusions of cultural fragments that become intelligible to the self and others in the constitutive construction of cognitive patterns, communicative interactions, and social practices that make up the impermanent cultural profiles of individual persons” (Lull 270). Media plays a significant role in this process as one of the main suppliers on cultural information and options.

While the media does have considerable power to direct our attention in certain ways, the societal move toward bricolage, do-it-yourself, or supercultures dictates that there will be more room for individual agency and resistance. However, Lull does not overly romanticize this point. While Lull argues that current social arrangements leave room for individual

agency, he continues to emphasize the many subtle (and not so subtle) ways in which dominant ideologies are embedded into our consciousness. For example, the pervasiveness of television as a medium and the degree to which it has come to structure everyday lives points to this power. Not only do the manifest messages matter, but the latent worldviews, power, political and economic ideologies represented by the dominance of television such as consumer capitalism, corporatism, and idealized social class structures, matter as much. Thus while we may have some degree of agency, even in making individual personal choices, the options are still structured and influenced in particular ways. Therefore individuals are still somewhat contained and constrained.

Lull's concept of supercultures relates closely to the personalized forms of religion discussed in the previous chapter. Just as Luckmann highlighted the process of constructing worldviews and belief systems from the available cultural choices, framing it within the context of sociology of religion, Lull addresses similar cultural trends, but frames it within a media and communications framework. Both approaches, albeit from different methodological perspectives, offer valuable insights into current social phenomena, particularly looking at how transformations in culture such as the rise of consumerism, advances in communications information technologies, changes in sources of authority, and the rise of individualism is influenced and manifested in various cultural forms. The parallels between Luckmann and Lull's social constructionist approaches to culture, along with their emphases on the reflexive relationship between individualized meaning systems and social structures serve as a useful starting point to draw together theories of religion and the media. From a broadly functional perspective, one could argue that Luckmann's concept of religion and Lull's understanding of supercultures, in fact point to the same phenomenon – that of constructing meaning. Yet, such an argument does not go far enough to illustrate the

specific trends highlighted in this study, namely the ways in which participants construct meaning systems that they define as spiritual in relation to their television viewing.

However, prior to moving into that discussion, I first wish to draw upon communications and media theories that further illustrate how television has come to play such a significant and signifying role in the process of constructing meaning.

### **Shaping Our Being with Television: Television and Ontological Security**

Roger Silverstone's analysis of television as an ontological system offers much food for thought for this project (1994). Silverstone locates his analysis of television within discourses of meaning and being. Not only does Silverstone offer a theoretical framework for understanding how television has become an integral part of late modern society, but his analysis offers many points of continuity with functional analyses of religion. In *Television and Everyday Life* (1994) Silverstone builds on the work on Anthony Giddens and D.W. Winnicott, in order to examine the embeddedness of television in the everyday lives of Western individuals and societies. Television, for Silverstone, functions both to tell us about the world explicitly through the content of the stories and information it provides, and implicitly structures our relationship to the world through abstracting our understanding of time and space. He argues that the habitual nature of television viewing, along with the repetitive content of television, helps to reinforce and structure how we organize time, space and conceptions of reality. Further, through applying Giddens' theory of ontological security and Winnicott's object relations theory, Silverstone argues that the media, and television in particular, work to produce the sense of trust and confidence in the world 'as it is' that is necessary for individuals and collectives to psychologically and socially function.

Applying Winnicott's theories Silverstone argues that television generates a level of primary trust and dependence (Silverstone 15). Silverstone argues that D.W. Winnicott's object relations theory offers "a potentially powerful explanation for the space that television occupies in culture and the individual's psyche" ( Silverstone 8). Winnicott theorized that an individual's sense of self and identity develops in early childhood years as a result of the individual's relationship with others and the surrounding environment. In particular Winnicott stressed the primacy of the relationship between an infant and the mother (or mother figure). In order for the individual to develop, the infant must learn to distinguish between the self and other; usually the first act is for the infant to recognize a separation between the self and the mother. However, in order to safely develop a sense of independence the infant must have a secure and trusting relationship with the mother – that the mother will persist, return and care despite the separation just as the individual will exist and persist despite the separation. Utilizing 'transitional objects' such as a sucking a thumb, a stuffed toy, or a blanket, the infant begins to transfer the dependence, emotions, desires and anxieties which were attached to the mother onto new objects in order to maintain a sense of security and comfort, even when the mother is away. Through such acts the infant learns to feel safe and secure while negotiating the space between self and other, known and unknown. Transitional objects therefore become symbols of both "the continuities of care but also the infant's emerging powers of creativity" (Silverstone 9). Winnicott argues that the distance or space that is created through the sense of separation of the individual, the recognition of subject and object, is where symbols are produced and recognized, acts of creation occur and encounters with culture take place. Therefore in order to imagine, create meaning, and establish relationships, an individual must have successfully developed a sense of security,

trust and self in relation to others. Winnicott further implies that it is in this potential space that culture is experienced and produced.

Building on Winnicott, Silverstone suggests that television shares the similar characteristics of offering a sense of security and developing a potential space in which to create. He proposes that television in late modern Western societies functions as a transitional object, through offering continuity of themes, images and sounds, and constant availability it generates a sense of comfort and security (Silverstone 15). Just as the transitional object helps to create stability for the infant as it negotiates the inner known world of the self and the external unknown world, Silverstone argues that television functions in a similar manner helping to mediate between the individual's sense of self and the external world, thus rendering that which is unknown safe and knowable. He explains that television programs offer organized and ordered interpretations of the world; they soothe and mediate anxiety and risk.

For example, the news structures, interprets and regularizes disasters and crisis situations, which limit our ability to feel secure in the world. Through reporting on the event, offering accounts and explanations for why an event occurred, news offers to smooth over and frame an otherwise threatening and anxiety-producing situation. The regularity of reporting, then the slow phasing out of coverage all function to create a sense that the world has now returned to normal, thus producing a sense of security (Silverstone 17). Further, Silverstone explains that television presents creative potential, offering contact with culture, producing images, symbols and meanings, which can be integrated, reworked and reinterpreted to produce new meanings and symbols. Similarly, just as the infant learns to trust that the transitional object will be constantly available and dependable, Silverstone argues that television also represents a similar type of endurance and dependability, making

it a useful transitional object. As Silverstone explains, television endures whether we turn it on or not, whether we accept its messages or not, therefore it offers a sense of permanency and reliability (Silverstone 15).

Further, Anthony Giddens' concept of ontological security plays a primary role in Silverstone's theory. Ontological security is closely bound with Giddens' argument that everyday reality is socially constructed and maintained. Consequently, reality is fragile in that it can be subject to many influences and events that challenge reality's legitimacy and pre-given appearance. In particular, Giddens cites existential questions related to meaning, existence, finitude, interpreting human action, and creating a sense of identity, as both helping to sustain reality and posing particular challenges to the structure of reality (47). In order to function successfully in the world, individuals and collectives must come to trust the answers and meaning systems they have and have confidence that their social interactions and systems they rely upon are somewhat predictable, stable and organized (Giddens 1991: 47). In fact Giddens defines ontological security as having "a sense of the continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individual" (243).

This sense of trust and security is developed through repeat experiences which engender a sense of basic trust in the other people, meaning systems and physical environments, ranging from the sense of emotional and cognitive security cultivated through early childhood experiences, religious cosmologies that provide a sense of order and meaning in the world, explanations for life, death and the purpose of being, to the day-to-day reliance on technological systems such as for heating, lighting and sanitation (Giddens 1991: 39, 50, 135). In the contemporary social context of late modernity (or high modernity as Giddens prefers), maintaining a sense of ontological security both individually and

collectively is challenging, as many of the traditional social structures which once provided a sense of security have been disembedded from local contexts. Consequently, people must invest a great degree of trust in more abstract relationships and systems.

Silverstone argues that television has come to play an intricate role in facilitating such trust in abstract systems, stimulating trust outside of traditional time-space arrangements and local interaction. According to Silverstone, while ontological security may be challenged by conditions of late (post)modernity, simultaneously there are also new ways of generating and sustaining ontological security developing to fit the context of late modernity. Although the media is often criticized for undermining our sense of security, Silverstone argues that it plays a primary role as in sustaining social reality as it presents and continuously reaffirms a sense of order structure and meaning in the world (Silverstone 19). As ontological security depends upon developing a sense of familiarity and predictability through routines, rituals and habits, the habitual and consistent practice of television viewing helps to create and sustain a sense of the ordinary. To this end Silverstone argues that television both mimics and structures patterns of time. He points out that television broadcast schedules are designed to reflect and reinforce daily household patterns, particularly as they relate to work patterns; reproduce calendar time, with specific shows appearing on certain days or particular times; highlight holidays and special events, such as Christmas, Coronations, and significant sporting events, such as cup finals and Olympic games; and breaking events, crises and catastrophes and regularized and mediated through news coverage. (Silverstone 20-21). Additionally, television emphasizes the narrative patterning of experience, through reinforcement of time and narrative based programming with a set beginning, middle and end; and the seriality of television calls for sustained or

repeat viewing, and reproduces a sense of the endurance of time (Silverstone 1994: 20).

Television thus becomes implicated in our relationships to and understandings of time.

Silverstone further asserts that television affects our relationships with space, ranging from the ways in which we organize our homes to include, exclude or permit certain patterns of television viewing, how people come together or separate to watch television in private or in public (such as a bar or pub), and how it alters our relationship to geographic spaces, through emphasizing and refashioning particular local and global contexts and situations (Silverstone 20). According to Silverstone television integrates with and reorganizes our conceptions of time and space, entrenching television into our routines, rituals and traditions, that is those things which provide a sense of ordinary and everyday reality.

However, television functions as a doubled-edged sword in this process. While television offers a sense of continuity, predictability, interpretations of the world and framing of reality, it also generates anxiety and stress through bringing into view crises, distant events, more images of death, illness, famine (those things that undermine our sense of ontological security). Therefore television also increases the demand for organization, explanation and trust. The sheer volume of information and the fragmented patterns through which television functions necessitate greater degrees of integration and organization in order for people to make sense of the world. Thus television both produces a sense of security and trust, while simultaneously increasing the demand for them. Silverstone refers to this process as the ontological cycle wherein the demand for ontological security is also produced by the institutions and agents which produce it.

## **'Working Through' Meaning and Being with TV**

Taking such arguments further John Ellis (2000) argues that television in late modern society offers specific frameworks for meaning and enables us with various modes of understanding of the world. In *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (2000), Ellis asserts that television has come to play a primary role in instilling meaning in the world. Like Silverstone, Ellis asserts that television has become embedded in everyday life through imitating and reproducing everyday lifestyle patterns such as meal times, work schedules, bed times, replicating "the rhythms of the year" such as sporting events, festivities, celebrations, political events (opening of parliament), and religious holidays, as well as, through, characterizing the familiar, such as family structures, workplaces, and current social events and issues (Ellis 2000: 44; 47-8). Consequently television has become a comfort zone and relatively safe medium for most viewers. The everydayness and relative sense of security engendered by television makes it a useful forum for learning about the world and exploring its uncertainties, complexities and hazards. Ellis further argues that the medium provides viewers with basic stories and frameworks through which people come to develop, think about and "work through" their personal concerns, as well as those of the society at large (74). Borrowing the term "working through" from psychoanalysis, Ellis theorizes that television, particularly news media, performs a similar cultural function of introducing and reworking concepts, testing ideas, and reordering conceptions of the world. He explains "television attempts definitions, tries out explanations, creates narratives, talks over, makes intelligible, tries to marginalize, harness speculation, tries to fit, and very occasionally anathemizes" (79).

Ellis explains that much of the appeal of television is derived from the fact that it is a relatively safe space in which the uncertainties and anxieties of the world and the individual

viewers can be explored, and in fact, made entertaining. He further argues that much of television's power and usefulness for working through is derived from fictional programming, rather than factual, in which societal issues and personal crisis are introduced and dealt with in narrative form, generating sympathy and emotional engagement with characters and their situations, without the real-life demands or pressure (Ellis: 87-88). Such a process stimulates viewers to think, feel and engage with complex or uncomfortable situations such as racism, abortion, and violence yet at a safe distance. Ellis's observations are particularly poignant for this study, as participants regularly mentioned using television programs as a way to think through existential questions, moral issues and personal crises. Television narratives offer possible options to think through. Further, the ideologies embedded in television promote the idea that choosing options and making individual interpretations of them are a normative and necessary function in late (post) modern world.

### **Forging a Link Between Television and Religion**

Both Ellis's and Silverstone's arguments that television plays a significant role in the basic patterns of understanding and interaction with the world and provides a sense of ontological security (a role once primarily held by religious institutions) lends credibility to the notion that television may play a primary role in introducing and sustaining particular concepts of religion and spirituality. The argument that television plays a key role in structuring our concepts of time, space, and reality connects closely with functional definitions of religion; that is, looking at religion as the process of constructing and sustaining a worldview and reality, and therefore, from this perspective one could argue that television is a form of implicit religion. However, my argument goes further than that.

While I work from a primarily functional definition of religion, the basic construction of self-identity and reality does not go far enough for me to define television as a religious process; rather I am looking for specific types of self identity and reality construction with explicit or self-defined connection to religion and spirituality. As discussed in the previous chapter, my definition of religion includes providing answers to existential questions and a source of ontological security. The mass of information provided by television creates an increased need for meaning, organization and assurance. Such needs easily lend themselves to the seeking of religious or spiritual worldviews as main ordering principles.

While questions of meaning and being are not the exclusive terrain of religion and spirituality, historically they have often been mediated through such systems of belief. If Bibby and Stark and Bainbridge are correct in their assumptions, then certain question and needs can only be satisfactorily met by supernatural explanations and guarantees. While I will not go so far as to advocate this view, I do assert that for some people (although certainly not all) supernatural or transcendent systems of meaning do provide the answers for or at least a starting point through which they can explore ontological and existential questions. As I will later explore, the content of television programs may in fact help to reinforce this notion since television programs present religious or spiritual quests or exploration as a possible option for organizing and explaining the world as it is.

Such programs function, then, as part of a wider cultural conversation about transcendent meaning and as cultural resources for spiritual worldview construction providing ideas, beliefs and questions for individuals and collectives to think through and think with. Thus through combining Ellis and Silverstone's approaches, television can be understood as both a latent and manifest element in contemporary spirituality. Reflecting the context of late modern societies, this form of spirituality is characterized not by offering

definitive answers but rather by encouraging personal quests for meaning, seeking and exploration. Television plays into this by raising questions and demands for ontological and existential meaning, but also by offering a wealth of options and ideas to draw from and explore in a relatively safe manner.

## **Conceptualizing the Relationship Between Religion and Television**

### **What Counts as Religion? Television as Religion versus Religion in Television**

The aforementioned analyses of communication, television and audiences point to implicit parallels between functions of communication and television, and functions of religion. Authors such as George Gerbner (1977) have picked up on these themes arguing that television is a new form of religion. Taking a functional approach, Gerbner made the case that television, like religion, repeats a series of narratives embedded with systems of meaning, codes of morals and imperatives for actions. However, he argues that television differs in that it offers new sacred myths, notably valuing consumerism and corporate dominance. While analyses of the similar functions of television and religion may offer first steps for theorizing the relationship between religion and television, for the purposes of this project, they take us in another direction, looking at new 'sacred' myths such as consumerism in contemporary society or address television itself as a form of religion.

As Gerbner's argument points out, theoretically and analytically it is easy for scholars to argue that elements of secular culture are similar to religion or function as religion particularly when working with broad-based functional definitions of religion. In those cases it is not just that anything can be interpreted as religious, but everything can be. While such approaches are useful in an attempt to understand some of the individual and societal ways in

which meaning is constructed and maintained, they do not necessarily shed much light on ways in which terms such as 'religion' and 'spirituality' are culturally defined or used.

Although, as Beyer (2002) and Beckford (2003) argue, such categories are neither static nor innate rather they are constructed and negotiated through various dialogues, there are at the moment some common characteristics that tend to relate to general cultural categories of religion. As Beyer states,

as a general observation, we can say that almost all those forms that make up religion in this way seem to be centrally concerned with one manner or another of supra-empirical or transcendent dimension, realm, or beings which contrasts expressly with the empirical, material, ordinary, or immanent domain of other spheres of life and is seen from the religious perspective to be determinative of them. Moreover, almost all those things that fall under the category of religion exhibit some range of, usually ritual, techniques and procedures that claim to render communicative access to that transcendent domain (Beyer 2002: 58).

Moreover, Beyer argues that many functionalist approaches to religion and characterizations of contemporary 'religious' themes, such as Sheilism, popular 'spirituality,' and 'secular' holidays such as Halloween or cultural celebrations of Easter, are recognizable as religion only through their reference or resemblances to traditional models of religion (57-58).

Outside of the academic realm, within mainstream culture the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' although somewhat varied in their definition and usage do tend to have specific meanings, generally correlating with Beyer's definition. As Chidester writes, "the determination of what counts as religion is not the sole preserve of academics. The very term 'religion' is contested and at stake in the discourses and practices of popular culture (Chidester 1996: 760). As such, popular understandings and meanings of 'religion' and 'spirituality' must be taken into account when addressing the relationship between religion, spirituality and popular culture. It is from this perspective that I approach this study.

## **Integrative Theories: Connecting Religion, Media and Culture**

Until relatively recently, television and cultural studies research on topics related to religion and spirituality has been quite limited in scope. On the whole cultural studies has tended to shy away from religion as an analytical category. Although there appears to be a growing body of research that combines cultural studies and religious studies theories (Chidester 1996; Hoover and Lundby 1997; Mazur and McCarthy 2001; Hoover and Clark 2002; Clark 2003; Forbes and Mahan 2005), religion and cultural studies has tended to remain somewhat of a sub-discipline within broader fields. Other than research on the electronic church and depictions of religion in the news, the body of work theorizing the relationship between religion and spirituality, as they are commonly understood, and television is still quite limited. However, the persistence of religion and spirituality in the lives of individuals, as well as, the recurrent representation of religion and spiritual themes in popular cultural texts necessitates that scholars continue to rethink and examine the multiple and often dialectical relationships between religion, media and culture.

Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby's volume *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (1997) has been foundational in the development of research on contemporary religiosity and media. Their volume is one of the few that offers theory and research linking media, religious studies, sociology and cultural studies. Consequently, I have been significantly influenced by the essays presented in Hoover and Lundby's volume for theorizing potential relationships between popular spirituality and television. In the introduction, Hoover and Lundby call for a "rethinking of media, religion and culture" in order to understand the "complex cultural dynamics that form contemporary society" (Hoover and Lundby: 3). Inspired by the lack of work integrating theories of religion, culture and the media, Hoover, Lundby and their contributors aim to link contributions from

studies of religion and culture, culture and media, and religion and media to gain a more comprehensive understanding of late modern society.

While the editors recognize the contributions each of these fields of research has made, they note that examining these areas in isolation fails to address how current trends towards dedifferentiation, the decline of participation and influence of religious institutions, the rise of the media in the public sphere, and the increased focus on individualism and personal autonomy, are interrelated. Based on this position the editors offer a series of essays addressing some of the complexities of the interaction between religion, media and culture in late modernity, focusing upon societal, institutional and individual levels of analysis. The editors situate the theoretical position of the volume as they write, “The intersection of media and religion must be studied through the processes and patterns of culture, and we begin our project of rethinking with contrasting within the overall cultural context of modernity” (5). Consequently *Rethinking Religion, Media and Culture*, serves as a useful resource for examining theories and research contributing to an understanding of the relationship between individualized spirituality and television.

In particular, *Rethinking Religion, Media and Culture* functions as a form of agenda setting, offering discussions of existing literature in the fields of religion, cultural studies and communications, in order to raise further research questions and areas for theoretical consideration. In their essay, “At The Intersection: A Bibliographic Essay” Lynn Schofield Clark and Stewart Hoover propose applying a more anthropological/cultural approach to religion, defining religion as “as the site of synthesis and symbolism of culturally meaningful belief systems” (17). Such a definition leaves room to recognize the various ways in which religion is being explored and realized inside and outside of religious institutions.

Clark and Hoover foreground their essay by pointing out shared concerns of both media and religious studies, emphasizing how both fields are concerned with issues of meaning and being. They explain “both are invested in communicating meaningful narratives and ‘truths’ using cultural capital of symbols, sounds, and subtle evocation of rational and emotional responses in audiences” (15). The authors then go on to review existing strains of research in the fields of religion, media, and cultural studies pointing out the contributions each field makes towards creating more dynamic theories of religion, culture and media, while also pointing out their limitations. Clark and Hoover identify three major themes underlying the study of religion, culture and media: the shift from modern to postmodern society, issues related to negotiating identity for individuals and collectives, and how audiences receive, interpret and rework media texts. Within these thematic contexts the authors suggest that research in religion, culture and media ought to further address studies of religion in the news and televangelism; examine the interaction between popular culture and religion; address the relationship between “new modes of spirituality” and the construction of worldviews and symbolic systems; examine the relationship between psychology, self-help, popular culture and religion; and delve further into the emotional aspects that emerge from interaction with the media and religion.

The questions raised by Clark and Hoover have been instrumental in helping me formulate research questions for this project. In particular, I examine the development of individualized forms of spirituality in light of shifting late modern, postmodern cultural context; spirituality from this perspective is intricately linked with the process of meaning making and identity formation. Further, I follow Clark and Hoover’s directive to examine the cultural resources, including television, which people draw upon as they construct their personal identities, their spiritual lives and worldviews.

Complimenting Clark and Hoover's literature review and agenda for research, Robert

A. White's essay "Religion and Media in the Construction of Cultures" offers a theoretical framework for approaching the dynamic relationship between religion, media and culture. White argues in order to understand the complex relationship between these concepts theorists must move beyond modern analytic categories which define terms such as sacred and secular, public and private, as mutually exclusive, to more reflexive and discursive understandings of how these concepts interact and enable each other. White points to the shared analysis of cultural patterns of meaning, the social construction boundaries, and interest in the interaction between the prefiguring and configuring social action, amongst religious studies and media studies as points to build integrative theory. White's analysis not only draws parallels between the shared concerns of religious and media studies but goes on to suggest that these cultural discourses are related.

Within the late (post) modern context, White argues, notions of the sacred are often evoked and manifested outside of traditional religious spheres such as counter-cultural movements, rock music and self-help movements. Similarly, White argues that categories such as leisure time and activities, which are often thought of as "secular," open up space where individuals and groups can prefigure and explore ideas, identities, and alternative worldviews. He further explains that

the media consciously create an ambience of exploration ...[using] narrative, symbolic languages, which are cast in archetypal modes connotative of the mythic culture, and which project meaning beyond everyday routines of life. Most important, the media are associated with festive times, which are redolent of the calendars of theological and civil religions," thus drawing the realm of the media into the realm of the sacred (White 48).

Noting the interpenetrating relationships between media and religion, secular and sacred, public discourses and private discourses, White proposes that research of religion and

media must look at how these spheres interact and act back upon each other to create cultural meanings and boundaries. White further argues that theories of media and religion ought to extend analysis of the sacred to focus on the multiple modes of sacralization that occur within and outside of explicit 'religious' discourses; and to shift media studies from a preoccupation with effects of the media, towards an analysis of "the media as a ritual space in which various actors are dramatizing their sacred symbols" (White 61). These theoretic imperatives, White hopes, will help to enhance understanding of the complex relationship between media and religion, recognizing both media and religion as interrelated forms of cultural negotiation.

Similarly, in Hoover's individual contribution to the volume reconstituting of dynamics between public and private spheres in light of changing modes of religious activity, "Media and the Construction of the Religious Public Sphere" Hoover argues that transformations in religion have necessitated a rethinking of traditional sociological boundaries between sacred and secular, public and private. While sociological literature has acknowledged the decline in institutional religion and the move towards personal forms of religion which have often been defined as the privatization of religion, Hoover notes that while new forms of religion do have a very personal and private dimension, this does not simply mark a shift from the public realm of institutional religion to the private realm. Rather he argues that within new forms of religion, categories of public and private as well as secular and sacred are merged into new forms.

Echoing Luckmann, Hoover argues that as religion has moved from the exclusive realm of traditional religious institutions, it has increasingly moved into the broader cultural marketplace of ideas, symbols and beliefs. Hoover argues that this new approach to "religion allows for the construction of religious culture out of a universe of symbols – an inventory if

you will – that may or may not include the symbolic class of historic religions, and that nonetheless result in legitimate substantive constructions” (Hoover 286). However, this new perspective necessitates that scholars look outside of traditional conceptions of religion to the previously defined secular sphere in order to understand how people are expressing and experiencing religion, as well as to determine what those religious and spiritual meanings are. Further, both the commodification of culture including religion and the primacy of the media as a way through which individuals are socialized and come to know themselves and the world brings the realms of sacred and secular together in new ways.

Where previous research on religion and the media tend to focus on televangelism, programs produced by religious groups for religious audiences, or characterizations of religion in the news, Hoover argues that ‘new paradigm’ research on religion challenges these understandings “as inadequate” (287) as they fail to address how both contemporary religion and contemporary media aim to address the “religious” concerns of meaning and being. To make this case Hoover notes that questions of religion and spirituality have become popular topics of discussion within various aspects of the media. Citing Roof, Hoover explains that “In the culture at large, questions of faith and spirit seem to have gone public; television programs, novels, magazines stories, and newspaper articles now give serious attention to the spiritual and religious questions of a generation that grew up suspicious of faith and morality handed down to them by their elders” (Roof in Hoover: 284). Within this context people are exploring and examining religion and spiritual belief through the media in reference to explicit discussions of religion and spirituality.

Moreover audiences are using media texts to explore various questions of meaning and being. While the preferred reading of certain media texts may point towards ontological and existential questions, more often such questions are raised by audience members as they

reflect on texts and apply their own interpretations and meanings. Thus the private uses of public media texts are given religious and spiritual meaning. As Hoover notes, such transformations in religion demonstrate new distinction and interrelations between religious public and private spheres. While the private sphere and personal legitimization of belief takes precedence over collective tradition and religious institutions, religion has far from retreated from public view or relevance. Hoover asserts that “In a curious reversal of the ‘conventional’ situation...we seem to be experiencing a ‘publication of the private.’ That is, privately legitimated religious practices and expression still find their way into public” (292). Consequently he argues that theorists need to rethink boundaries of private and public religion and further look at how audiences receive, rework and interpret media symbols in the production of culture and the production of religious meaning.

Following both White’s and Hoover’s line of argumentation, this research project aims to understand the varying modes and sites of religious worldview construction in light of individualized forms of spirituality and the domination of television as a form of public discourse. Specifically I look at ways in which traditional distinctions between sacred and secular spheres, public and private discourses, and individual and collective systems of meaning have become blurred, redefined, and interact within the context of popular spirituality.

Looking more specifically at the relationship between the modern ethos and religious and spiritual resurgence, Graham Murdock in “The Re-enchantment of the World” and Jesús Martín-Barbero in “Mass Media as a Site of Resacralization of Contemporary Culture” both analyze the relationship between media and religion in light of Max Weber’s prediction that the instrumental rationalism of modernity would lead to “the disenchantment of the world” (Weber in Murdock: 86). While both authors argue that the modern ethos has led to a loss of

the sense of the magical, mysterious and spiritual aspects of the world, they further contend that this has led to disillusionment with modernity because the myths of progress, science, rationalism, bureaucracy and consumerism have failed to adequately meet societal and individual needs for meaning. In turn, this disillusionment spurs renewed demand for religious systems of meaning.

Murdock explains that “the loss of faith in ‘progress,’ the intensified sense of meaninglessness at the heart of modernity, and the consumer system’s increasing inability to compensate – have enlarged the space through which religion can reenter the mainstream of public and private life” (Murdock 95). Murdock goes on to assert that the resurgence of fundamentalist religion within Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the popularity of televangelism, and the emergence of sects and new religious movements are responses to the crisis of modernity. He further argues that these trends signify a reassertion of religion in the public sphere. Murdock sees the media, particularly new media technologies such as video, satellite television, broadband networks and virtual reality systems as, offering new potential for religious expression and participation. Most obviously media technology offers access to large, more diverse global audiences for both established and new religions. Further, Murdock argues new media technology allows for the development of religious forms outside of traditional institutions and structures, opening doors for the expression and circulation of unofficial and vernacular beliefs and grassroots movements. Murdock’s observations are particularly useful for paralleling trends noted amongst participants in this research, particularly as these spiritual seekers look to television and other communication information technologies for information and insight into various religious belief systems – traditional and non-traditional. Such data may help to further support Murdock’s assertion

that communication and information technologies present new avenues for religious exploration and expression.

Following Murdock, Martín-Barbero similarly discusses television as a potential site for the re-enchantment of the world. In his essay Martín-Barbero examines the prevalence of televangelism and the popularity of telenovelas in Latin America to support his argument that people are using television as a means to bring magic, mystery and ultimate meaning into their lives. Looking at television from the perspective of myth and ritual, Martín-Barbero argues that “television is the place for the visualization of our common myths” (111) which offers people the opportunity “to come together to understand the central questions of life, from the meaning of art to the meaning of death, sickness, of youth, of beauty, of happiness, or pain “ (108). In this sense television works to articulate, circulate and sustain cultural symbols and meaning systems and further provides people with the opportunity to unite with others through watching the same television programs. Martín-Barbero also asserts that through television viewers come to identify with characters, storylines and events allowing for them to project their own concerns, fears, anxieties and hopes.

Contributing to an understanding of some of the religious uses of media, Goethals’ examines ritual dimensions of the relationship between the mass media and religion. In an essay entitled ““Escape from Time: Ritual Dimension of Popular Culture” Gregor Goethals argues that both ancient and modern societies use ritual to “escape from ordinary, often dreary, day-to-day realities into an extraordinary world” (123), further explaining that ancient ritual and contemporary rituals of sporting and entertainment events are liminal moments, in which everyday time and space can be transcended. Goethals maintains that in contemporary secular society liminal rituals tend to occur in our leisure and play activities, asserting that it is “through our games and our arts, we momentarily transcend social

structures to play with ideas, fantasies, words, paint, and social relationships” (124). These acts not only open the doors for exploration of meanings and ultimate values but also offer what is often provided by religious experiences – contemplation, freedom, happiness and completion (127).

Goethals’ offers much potential for understanding the relationship between religion and television in the late modern context, particularly through the emphasis on the uses of leisure as way to transcend everyday reality. Through transcending everyday structures, individuals and collectives are given the opportunity to explore and experience ultimate meanings, hopes and fears. In many ways, Goethals’ thesis parallels John Ellis’s theory that television provides viewers with a safe space in which they can think through various existential, moral and ultimate questions. Both theorists see popular culture as playing a significant role in the process of meaning making. Where the theories differ is in each theorist’s analysis of the how people access this space for exploring meaning.

Where Goethals see rituals of popular culture as creating a liminal space through which everyday reality can be transcended, Ellis sees the power of television resting in on its ordinariness, making television appear safe and familiar rather than extraordinary. In the case of participants in this study, both theories have merit. While participants indicate that the familiarity of television makes it easy for them to identify with specific plot themes, narratives and characters, the otherness of television and its connection with fantasy and creativity make television a promising site for moving beyond the boundaries of everyday reality and exploring new ideas, beliefs and possibilities.

Moving towards a discussion of the relationship between individuals and collective representations Alf Linderman’s chapter “Making Sense of Religion in Television” offers “a conceptual model for social and individual construction of meaning that is applicable to

empirical studies of mass media reception” (264). Linderman builds his model upon Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory, acknowledging the interpenetrating relationship between collective social structures and individual agency. Through the socialization process an individual learns the meaning of signs and symbols within a particular social system, as well as how to use them. Through this process individuals gain knowledge of the world and how to act and express themselves using signs and symbols. However, this process is more than a simple absorption and regurgitation of learned behaviour. As individuals internalize signs and symbols they also appropriate and change them.

Because contemporary postmodern society is characterized by pluralism and diversity, there are various and competing systems of meaning which individuals may or may not be familiarized with. As individuals experience and internalize different systems of meaning their interpretation and use of signs and symbols will inevitably change and shift in accordance with their social and personal experience. Acting upon or expressing these appropriated or personalized versions of symbols individuals then produce changes in the collective or social meaning of a sign as it is experienced in the world. The degree to which one person may transform the social meaning of sign varies greatly, depending upon the size of the network(s) and the access to resources that one may have. For example in a small closely knit network, one variation in the meaning of a symbol or sign may significantly challenge or transform the social usage of the term, whereas in a large network, one individual change in meaning may cause little impact upon the general meaning of a term. Similarly, if one has access to large scale cultural resources such as media technology, one individual reinterpretation of a meaning or use of sign may have greater impact as the sign is received by a larger number of people.

Paralleling arguments offered by Carey, Lull, Silverstone, Linderman explains,

Social meaning is the ever-changing result of on-going processes of human communication and interaction. As various signs are used, social norms and conventions are formed about the use of these signs. Social norms and conventions are also formed about relationships between these signs and other signs within the system. Such social processes create systems of interrelated signs. However, this human interaction takes place in many different contexts, through various means of communication, involving various individuals and groups in different constellations at different times, and so on (267).

The mass media plays an important role in this process as it is one of the significant points of reference through which people develop their signification systems, conceptions of the world, and value and belief systems.

The primary focus of Linderman's article is with decoding the interaction between the social meaning of television texts and how that meaning is actualized by individuals. Within Linderman's model of reception analysis, individual meaning becomes actualized through the interaction of the discourse of the television text with the individual's repertoire of meanings, and external and internal viewing contexts. With this in mind, Linderman suggests that television reception analysis ought to start with textual analysis in order to gain insight into how viewers are likely to interpret the meaning of the text. This information can further be used to develop guidelines for reception analysis, such as selecting respondents and developing research and interview questions. Linderman further advises looking at the external context that may impact upon how a viewer responds to the text. This includes analyzing the times and places in which viewing occurs, the level of engagement, if other activities occur, if there is discussion or some other form of social interaction while viewing, in order to understand how these factors may influence how an individual receives and interprets messages and texts.

Further Linderman stresses the importance of engaging with the internal complexes, such as emotions, motivations and personal concerns of the viewer, which will impact upon

the meanings that are received and applied to texts by individuals. Linderman asserts that this component is the link between the social meaning and individual agency. Linderman explains “if it were not for the individual’s responsive side, the individual’s ‘I,’ individually actualized meaning would be equivalent to, or a mere reflection of, social meaning and nothing more. With the inclusion of the reactive and reflective ‘I,’ we include the so-called conversation (and struggle) between the socially given side and the active side of the self” (278).

Through this approach we can look to the expected or conventional meanings and codes of texts and cross reference it with the social and individual context of the viewer in order to note the ways in which meaning is derived and inscribed to media texts, as well as the individual’s overall meaning system. The expected meanings as well as the cultural codes with which a viewer is familiar and the individual experiences and motivations of the viewer will shape the meaning that is found within a text. Thus it is both an individual and collective process. Drawing a link to Durkheim’s collective representations, Linderman accepts that in postmodern society the sacredness of the collective has acceded to the sacredness of the individual, however the process of building, internalizing and actualizing signification systems “are still formed in the process of social interaction and as a result of common uses in the media” (270). Within this process the individual plays an active and reflexive role in reproducing various signification systems simultaneously.

Linderman’s model for researching contemporary religion and media has played a central role in the development of this research project. Taking insights and recommendations from Linderman, this project has aimed at comparing various scholarly analyses of television texts as sited for religious meaning, with the ‘spiritual’ interpretations and uses of television by participants in this study. From this perspective we can look for

patterns of consistency in how individuals understand television messages and meanings as well as concepts such as religion and spirituality, with broader collective meanings and uses. Additionally this approach has been particularly useful for thinking about the various interactions and changes in notions of private and public spheres of meaning and activity. Much like Besecke (2002; 2005), Linderman argues that firm distinctions between public and private spheres are problematic as they fail to recognize the ways in which individuals and collectives interact in both. While Linderman does acknowledge the primacy of individualism in contemporary Western societies, he does not strictly align it with privatization. Rather his theory helps to emphasize how individualism as a concept in itself as well as individual agency and meaning continue to be dialectically related to collective and so-called public spheres of meaning. This, I believe is evinced in this project, as participants' individualized forms of spirituality are constructed and negotiated through interaction with publicly available meanings systems. Moreover as these individualized forms of spirituality and interpretations of television texts are so remarkably similar, it suggests that indeed collective meanings and ideas are at work.

As one of the few bodies of work offering theories of the relationship between religion, media and culture without reducing religion or the media to parallel functions, nor engaging solely with 'The Electronic Church' or media coverage of religion, I have drawn heavily from the contributions in *Rethinking Religion, Media and Culture* in my endeavors to research and understand possible relationships between contemporary spirituality and television. The contributions offer useful theoretical analyses for understanding some of the ways in which television engages with religion and popular spirituality.

Drawing on arguments made by Murdock and Martín-Barbero, I look at television as a site through which some viewers, notably spiritual seekers, re-enchant the late modern

world as they derive spiritual teachings and meaning from a variety of sources including the content of television programs. As Hoover's essay suggests media producers pick up on this interest in spirituality or re-enchantment as they offer a myriad of programs, books and magazines discussing spiritual themes in explicit and implicit manners. Thus the interaction between personal spiritual meanings and television narratives establishes a form of public discourse regarding religion and spirituality. Or in Besecke's terms, television becomes part of broader cultural conversations about transcendent meaning. This interaction, of course, is dynamic. As some individuals express an interest in spirituality television producers, always hungry for popular topics and themes, offer programs that respond to this cultural fascination with spirituality – in particular offering themes such as personal spirituality, individual religious quests, self-help style spirituality, as well as programs examining traditional and alternative religions and supernatural phenomena. In turn such programs generate not only further interest, they also help to create and sustain spiritual meanings and worldviews as individuals draw from the content of such programs in negotiating and constructing their own 'personal' spirituality. Since many of the programs offer personal spirituality as a theme, as Hoover asserts, personal spirituality begins to take on public and collective dimensions as particular forms of personal or private religion and meanings are circulated and reinforced as normative.

Further Goethals, Bar-Haim and Linderman all raise questions regarding the ritual and collective dimensions of television, looking at ways in which individuals interact with media to establish not only a sense of individual identity but also a collective source of meaning and identity. Goethals' ideas are particularly significant in terms of how participants actually watch television. The argument that television creates a liminal space that enables the transcendence of everyday reality which in turn allows for an exploration of

various new ideas, themes, and beliefs correlates with some of the data gathered in this research, as participants spoke of interaction between their ability to “suspend their disbelief” while watching programs and their ability to derive significant spiritual meaning from television texts. Notably, participants often claimed that while they are aware that most television programs do not offer accurate depictions of everyday reality, they nevertheless feel that (particular) television programs offer important insights, beliefs and commentaries on society, on the nature of humans and the world, and offer significant spiritual lessons and meanings. Thus as Linderman advocates, in order to understand the relationship between spirituality, mediated discourses, the specific messages of television texts, and individual and collective meanings, scholars must begin to examine each of the interactive processes between them. Importantly, Linderman’s theory raises questions regarding the specifics of how particular ‘signs,’ symbols or concepts have come to hold their particular cultural meanings.

Such questions are particularly important when looking at widespread cultural distinctions between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality.’ The rapid cultural trend towards the use of the term spirituality and the meaning applied to the term begs the question, what is the relationship between media and contemporary spirituality? How do people define what counts as ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ in relation to the media? What role has the media played in constructing and reinforcing the meaning and use of the term ‘spirituality’? And further, how do people construct their own sense of spirituality in relation to media? These are all questions that this research attempts to engage. Prior to moving to examining how the research data offers possible insights into these questions, I shall turn to examining some of the critical works analyzing how specifically religious and spiritual themes are manifest in television programs.

### **Identifying Themes: Applied Theories of Religion in Television**

In this research I am interested in is the recurrent depiction of substantively 'religious' or 'spiritual' themes in television programs, in particular themes that point to some form of transcendent meaning. Identifying these themes is both simple and challenging. One of my concerns as a researcher is that I am imposing my interpretation of what counts as religious, spiritual or transcendent upon television programs and audiences. To mitigate this concern I have taken two steps, first drawing upon the work of scholars who have also identified religious and spiritual themes, traits and symbols in television programs; and secondly, relying quite heavily upon the interpretations and ideas raised by participants in this study as they discussed the relationship between spirituality and the transcendent and television programs. This approach has helped to situate the idiosyncratic interpretations offered by participants and scholars alike in a larger cultural context identifying consistent and persistent themes, as well as, particular programs.

### **Non-Specific Religious Themes: Hope, Well-Being and Hints of the Transcendent**

*Channels of Belief: Religion and American Commercial Television* (1990) edited by John P. Ferré represents one of the earlier attempts to demonstrate a relationship between religion and popular television. Ferré notes that while commercial television does not have a specifically religious agenda or purpose, the content of television programs, ranging from the news to television talk shows, to dramas, actions and comedies, offers much in the way of religious content (1990: xiv). While Ferré and his contributors argue that the specific storylines and content may vary, on the whole, with the exception of specific religiously motivated broadcasts and networks, commercial television tends to present a message of a

diffuse, non-specific form of religion, frequently referred to in this volume as “democratic humanism”(xvi). In his chapter “Television Drama as Sacred Text” Quentin Schultz takes a functionalist position arguing that television is a form of secular religion. Paralleling work in Cultivation Analysis, Schultz frames his analysis of the relationship between television and religion with an emphasis on the narrative and mythic aspects of television (1990: 3-27). However, rather than simply drawing comparisons between traditional religions and functions of television, Schultz looks at ways in which traditionally religious themes permeate television narratives.

Schultz further argues that television offers a narrative script rooted in variations and combinations of three basic myths: “good will triumph over evil,” “evil exists only in the hearts of a few people,” and “godliness exists in the good and effective actions of individuals” (24-26). Schultz argues that television producers pick up on these themes which were once primarily framed in sacred religious or mythological narratives, offering a contemporary version of the same reassurance that good, in various forms, will win in the end. Although limited, Schultz’s arguments do have some degree of merit for this study. In particular, the myths that he highlights focus around the themes of ordering or organizing the world (or keeping chaos at bay) and offering a sense of hope. Whether it be through a police drama or a family situation comedy, television programs tend to end with a fairly tidy resolution – the criminal is caught or the family crisis sorted out- so that all things can go back to normal. Certainly these themes continue to appear in contemporary television dramas.

In reference to the data gathered in this research participants frequently spoke of the television program’s capacity to offer solutions, a sense of order, a feeling of hope and to confirm that good will prevail. Further, participants frequently claimed to enjoy programs

portraying people helping one another and opting to do the right thing in the end. Such themes are further evident in participants' conceptions of spirituality, with themes of goodness, hope and the imperative to help others. As such themes are reflected both in personal forms of spirituality and contemporary television programs, it does suggest that there is a possible link between them. However, Schultz's analysis, I think is somewhat limited perhaps due simply to the time period in which he was working, as it is important to note that Schultz's chapter was written prior to the creation of programs such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Joan of Arcadia*, *NYPD Blue* and *Law & Order*, although I suspect not as programs featuring supernatural content have been on television since at least the 1960s and popular dramas of the 1980s such as *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere* were recognized at the time for offering complex and challenging narratives. While certainly themes of goodness, hope and a notion that God acts through human action, rather than divine intervention are prevalent in television, these are not the only ones. In more recent popular programs, such as those mentioned, the battle between good and evil is often complicated. For example, in such programs goodness and justice are not always analogous. Sometimes evil appears not only in individual and institutional form but also in supernatural form. Further, in some such programs God and the supernatural not only act through humans but are feature characters. Consequently while Schultz offers some very useful starting points for addressing the relationship between the content of television programs and contemporary forms of religion (particularly regarding the theme of generalized non-specific religion), religious and spiritual themes in television programs seem to contain much more than he accounts.

In his contribution to Ferré's volume "Religion on Television" (1990: 29-44), Horace Newcomb offers a more apt and beneficial analysis of religious themes in television. While

his examples of course are dated, the analysis nevertheless remains timely. Agreeing with Schultz that television programs must be analyzed in light of the repetition of overall themes, images and ideas, Newcomb turns his attention to the way in which television programs across numerous episodes, series and genres regulate and somewhat erase issues of religious difference, thereby offering a general and non-specific version of the transcendent. Looking at specific programs from the 1980s Newcomb contends that television dramas do indeed make reference to God, depict religious characters or actions such as prayer, engage with complex issues of morality and even deal with the transcendent including out of body experiences, instances of psychic or telepathic phenomenon, and conversations with God. These images, he argues, not only tend to be very general and not specific but also, rather than offer a specific doctrine or creed, simply hint at a transcendent reality.

Newcomb explains that this tendency is quite deliberate on the part of producers. As religion continues to be a prominent feature in the lives of individuals, television producers cannot simply ignore it. Instead, television producers deal with religion by offering vague, universalized versions of transcendence. Newcomb explains, "Producers avoid specifics of beliefs, the words of faith, and concrete images of the transcendent like the plague. Such specificity would cost them the audience. In the meantime, we are given deeply, powerfully embedded notions of the good that must come from...somewhere" (41). Thus Newcomb argues that what television offers in terms of religion is a "theology of hope" rooted in a generalized belief that there is more or something else beyond the everyday, that there is meaning behind events and actions, and that human tragedy and suffering will inevitably occur but through love, caring and self exploration goodness and hope will remain. Perhaps even more so now, than when Newcomb wrote this article, television is rife with depictions of religious and spiritual themes, topics and storylines. Thus television can be seen to offer a

general and doctrinally non-specific version of religion, and presumably seeing that audiences continue to tune in they appreciate this version.

More recently, Clark offers similar findings on her research on teenagers and media depiction of the supernatural (2003). While there were some notable exceptions, Clark found that the teenaged participants in her study tended to reject media depictions of the supernatural if they were connected to a traditional form of religion or expressed as explicitly religious views. Instead, her participants seemed to be drawn to programs that dealt with the supernatural in religiously non-specific manners but nevertheless point towards the possibility of the transcendent beyond everyday reality. While particular programs with a specific form of religious content and message are popular amongst some viewers, Clark points out that these mainly appeal to people who are already a part of that particular belief system. Thus shows such as *Touched by an Angel*<sup>18</sup> or programs hosted by televangelists tend to appeal a particular subculture rather than the masses.

As both Newcomb and Clark suggest, mainstream programming that offers religious and spiritual themes tend to present generalized nonspecific and nondenominational concepts of the supernatural and transcendent; discussions about the meaning and purpose of life highlighting common human experiences such as joy, hope, sacrifice and suffering; and focusing on the similarities of religions rather than their differences. These tendencies parallel closely with trends in contemporary spirituality. Studies of contemporary personal religion and reflexive forms of spirituality note two simultaneous trends, one towards generalization, the other towards particularization. On the one hand, contemporary spirituality tends to reflect certain general vague themes about transcendent meaning: general

---

<sup>18</sup> *Touched by an Angel* was a CBS that ran from 1994 until 2003. The central characters were angels sent to earth to help people cope with their problems through bringing them the message of God. (<http://www.touched.com>; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Touched\\_by\\_an\\_Angel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Touched_by_an_Angel))

themes include the belief that the divine or transcendent manifests in a multiplicity of forms; that there is more to the world than what we see and experience through everyday, rational reality; that more likely than not, there is some kind of existence beyond death; the sense that there is a general purpose or plan for the world and each person in it even though this plan tends to remain unknown; and that there are certain innate 'golden rule' style codes of morality and behaviour, but they often require personal reflection and negotiation when they are being applied to complex issues. At the same time, however, these general themes are thought to have particular and personal manifestations for each individual.

Within reflexive spirituality there is a sense that underneath, behind or deeply within the world there is some form of universal truth and transcendent reality, and there are many paths that lead to it. In fact there is a further tendency to suggest that universal truth and the transcendent can only be discovered through personal experience and reflection, not through following a set code of guidelines or rituals. Consequently in addition to presenting generalized concepts of spirituality individuals also offer personal and idiosyncratic descriptions of the divine, the transcendent, the meaning and purpose of life, concepts of immortality and the afterlife, and concepts of values and morality. However they are not meant to be taken as universal descriptions or experiences.

### ***Television as Myth and Narrative***

As Schultz, Newcomb, Fisher and Shanahan and Morgan assert, narrative is a basic form through which humans come to know, understand and organize the world around them and their place in it. Consequently much of the appeal of television and the power of its messages come from its proclivity to use fictionalized narrative form. While stories have always been used to entertain and amuse audiences, at the same time they also function to

tell people who they are and where they come from; they inform people about the past, the present, and help envision the future; they tell people how the world works, how to behave, what is right and wrong, and essentially tell us how to be human. In his work on narrative, Fisher (1985) argues that people are more likely to learn through narrative rather than through direct instruction. This is a particularly important point when looking at individuals in late modern and postmaterialist Western societies.<sup>19</sup> As the work of Inglehart has demonstrated, many individuals in late modern (or postmodern) societies not only exercise greater degrees of personal autonomy and reflexivity over their belief systems, social roles and codes of conduct, but there is also a tendency for such individuals to resist or reject prescriptive or obligatory modes of belief and practice. As a result the subtlety and suggestion that television narratives tend to present is often more appealing to these people than overt orders or directives. In such instances, the message and themes of programs may be interpreted as hints, advice or possibilities rather than stipulations or facts. Andrew Greeley further supports this idea arguing that “shows rarely draw explicit moral conclusions for us. Usually they do not insist on hammering home ethical principle. Rather they hint lightly at the skills and traits that sustain love” (Greeley in Newcomb: 39). Thus television drama has come to function as the contemporary version of morality plays.

Continuing the theme of depictions of morality in television Elijah Siegler argues that, “television best expressed religious and moral concerns through police dramas” (2001: 214). In his analysis of three recent police dramas, *Law & Order*, *NYDP Blue* and *Homicide: Life on the Street*, Siegler suggests that these programs offer complex negotiations of issues related to religion and morality, not only through offering narratives that deal with explicitly religious characters or storylines, characters’ personal struggles with faith, and depict

---

<sup>19</sup> See Chapter One page 7 for further discussion of this term.

religious themes such as redemption, forgiveness and confession, but also as these shows pose the essentially religious question ““how can one act morally in a fundamentally immoral world?” (209). Looking at the plot convention of the interrogation and confession, Siegler goes on to argue that within these dramas the interrogation room functions as a liminal space where a form of “ritual confession” is enacted (213). Such narratives, Siegler argues, act to maintain the idea that truth, redemption and absolution can be gained through confession. Beyond this Siegler asserts that each of these programs continually grapples with moral issues, juxtaposing concepts such as the difference or similarity between “what is right” and “what is just” and what constitutes a moral or immoral act, illustrates the moral complexity of humans as ‘good’ characters sometimes shown to do ‘wrong’ and the ‘bad’ characters sometimes do ‘right.’ Siegler further explains that what makes these illustrations of morality, truth and redemption in such shows significant is that through relating and sympathizing with characters and themes viewers can connect such narratives with their own

In his analysis of television crime dramas, John Sumser makes the additional point that television narratives offer tangible examples, offering stories demonstrating how particular people in particular situations negotiate and implement codes of morality (1996). Rather than offering abstract ideals or decontextualized sets of rules and codes of conduct, television illustrates morals and codes of behavior through situating them within a concrete storyline. For example, Sumser highlights one episode of *Homicide: Life on the Street* in which characters are forced to negotiate various moral issues when “the friend of one the police detectives shoots his father in a clear act of euthanasia” (156). While on one level the program can be seen to reflect a broader societal move from “moral absolutism” to “situational ethics” (157), on another level, Sumser argues, that such narratives function as concrete examples “boundary-forming encounters” that work to reinforce and sustain cultural

norms and morals. While Sumser limits his analysis to morality and crime dramas his argument holds for television programs in general; like other types of narratives, they give us something to think with and through. John Ellis (2000) and Ron Lembo (2000) make similar arguments in their analyses of television maintaining that television narratives offer audiences the opportunity to 'think through' abstract or complex issues, to encounter new ideas, and to explore various meanings, possibilities and outcomes, through offering specific examples which viewers can then apply to other areas of their lives.

When it comes to themes of religion and television, perhaps the most frequently examined genres are science fiction and fantasy programs. Such programs seem to point towards transcendent themes on multiple levels. On one level, they tend to feature characters and storylines featured in traditional myths and legends such as other worldly beings, aliens, mythical creatures such as vampires and werewolves, magic and psychokinetic abilities. Yet on another and perhaps more significant level such programs tend to deal with questions of meaning, purpose and being. In their examination of Star Trek, Lundeen and Wagner suggest that because fantasy and science fiction narratives function outside of everyday reality they have opportunity to pose large scale questions of 'what ifs' and 'whys' about humanity and culture " and then pursue its consequences [asking], What if a god had to give accounts to other gods for bestowing humanity with culture? What if people were offered immortality in exchange for unquestioning obedience?...What if a race of humanoids existed whose gender were alternately female, neuter, and male?" (Lundeen and Wagner 1998: 7) Such themes offer varying explorations of what it means to be human; how humans understand themselves and the world around them; and how social change, technological advancement and new discoveries transform how we conceive the world, know ourselves and interact.

Jon Wagner and Jan Lundeen argue that the various Star Trek series trigger the mythical and religious imagination as its narratives and themes continuously pose existential, ontological and moral questions (1998). The authors further argue that Star Trek series reflect and maintain contemporary negotiations between modern and postmodern paradigms by exploring the tensions between modern myths of progress, science, and expansion and the postmodern questioning of these narratives, examining 'new' scientific approaches such as chaos theory and exploring contemporary concerns about the environment and ethical issues raised by technological advances (183-201). The authors trace the various depictions of religion through the history of the series, from one that favored scientific rationalism over religion to one that negotiates and unifies the realms of science and religion suggesting that often they raise the same questions and sometimes can even offer the same answers. Other notable themes reflecting contemporary spirituality that Wagner and Lundeen highlight include Star Trek's emphasis on the human quest for knowledge and self-transcendence, a rethinking of the nature of the cosmos, and belief in the "liberating power" of the imagination and possibilities (220).

The following paragraph points towards many parallels between themes in contemporary spirituality and the messages of Star Trek emphasizing topics such as the quest for meaning, knowledge, freedom, pluralism, expansiveness and personal growth. The authors write,

Star Trek defines humanity not by static primordial essences but by a dynamic quest for self-transcendence. It is the act of seeking and questioning, the assertion of freedom, the free expression of compassion and sacrificial love, and the refusal to be bound by biology, chauvinism or custom or worship or fear or hate or compulsion, that defines the human in the most idealistic Roddenberrian, sense of the term. In the trek mythos, the ultimate and definitive trait of humanity is its impulse to learn, to discover, and to grow. Humanity in this view is not a condition or category, but a process. (61).

While Wager and Lundeen offer a theoretical analysis of how Star Trek programs reflect and reinforce contemporary negotiations of transcendent meaning, their arguments resonate closely with themes expressed by participants in this study. Many of the research participants made reference to various versions of Star Trek as they discussed the relationship between their spirituality and television. Like Wagner and Lundeen, the participants in this study mentioned the significance of themes such as the quest for knowledge, self-discovery and transcendent. Additionally, they spoke of Star Trek's depictions of religion particularly in the series *Voyager* and *Deep Space Nine*. Some spoke of gaining specific spiritual lessons from the show such as meditation. Others claimed to feel inspired by the programs' messages of hope and faith in possibilities.

Jennifer Porter and D'arcy McLaren offer a similar analysis of the Star Trek series (1999). While early versions of Star Trek offered narratives that frequently juxtapose religion and science, suggesting that "rational scientific humanism" will, and ought to, replace traditional religions, Porter and McLaren argue that more recently Star Trek "series and movies contain many religious and mythic themes, including themes of resurrection, sacrifice, immortality, faith and the spiritual quest" (3). Porter and McLaren suggest that the Star Trek: *Voyager* series reflects an individualized, New Age style spirituality (1999: 101-115). They explain that the program depicts various narratives about characters on their own journey of self-discovery. For example the character Commander Chakotay represents a version of New Age Native spirituality, with his character engaging with "spirit guides, vision quests, soul travel, healing rituals, and environmental concern" (102), while the character Captain Kathryn Janeway is depicted as struggling to reconcile her scientific worldview with her personal spiritual experiences. The narratives of this version of Star Trek, unlike earlier versions, offer the message of open mindedness both towards science and

religion further suggesting that each worldview has something important to offer, and rather than being in opposition they can exist in concert. Such ideas are particularly pertinent when looking at the relationship between contemporary spirituality and television. As the authors argue “television shows both shape and reflect the socio-cultural concerns of our time” (2), this becomes quite evident as the show reflects contemporary spiritual themes such as personal quests, rediscovery and reworking of traditions, and questioning and possibly reconciling science and the transcendent.

These ideas are hardly revolutionary. Myth, symbols, metaphors and rituals have long been recognized to perform such functions – offering concrete ways to envision, acknowledge and have faith in abstract concepts, intangible ideas or experiences beyond the realm of everyday life. What is new is the way in which television programs are raising religious and spiritual themes outside of traditional religious frameworks and traditions. As Roof argues, television programs rarely deal with religion as comprehensive systems rather they offer fragmented and fleeting examples of the divine, transcendence, moral struggles, questioning of faith, and acts of sacrifice, healing or redemption which are “framed more as a moment or encounter arising out of personal experience or crisis arise primarily” (1997: 66). Initially in this article, Roof sees these tendencies in television to be a limitation in televisions’ ability to offer significant religious meaning, arguing that while television may parallel certain functions of religion, such as myth and ritual, “at best” its illustrations are only “quasi-religious” (66).

While Roof’s observation is somewhat accurate, his interpretation is only partially complete as he alludes to two important correlates in television’s depictions of religion and personal spirituality which he neglects to discuss. One being that television offers only glimpses of the transcendent or instances of spiritual depth, the other that religion or

spirituality tends to emerge only out of personal experience or crisis. In this article Roof implies this is a weakness in television's portrayals of religion but I suggest that it is perhaps a fitting depiction of the way in which many people actually experience and engage with spirituality. Spirituality is not necessarily a fulltime pursuit or preoccupation rather it is one aspect of individuals' lives and experiences. It may be used a resource that is called upon at times of crisis; or the transcendent may be only be glimpsed or experienced during particular situations or in particular settings. Thus related depictions resonate with viewers much more so than programs that offer a consistent and explicitly religious storyline. Furthermore, while these images and themes do not necessarily serve as central frameworks for specific programs, the repetition of these themes and messages throughout television as a medium do reveal a larger pattern of generalized/particularized belief structure that is characteristic of personal, reflexive spirituality. Consequently these can well be understood as illustrations and perhaps even lessons in non-institutional spirituality. However, later writing by Roof does accord the media and television more significant roles for inspiring religious or spiritual meanings on the part of viewers (1999: 67-72). Rather than holding to his argument that the lack of consistent and definitive religious or spiritual interpretations of television programs undermines their potential for inspiring significant spiritual meaning, Roof reinterprets the textual openness and multiple decodings in a positive light, suggesting that "they create a sense of liminality, of in-betweenness, and thereby open up opportunities for the sacred to come alive at the boundaries between life as experienced and visions of its greater possibilities" (71).

Roof's observation highlights another important element for studies of television, religion and personal spirituality. Just as personal and non-institutional forms of spirituality produce a methodological challenge for scholars because of the diffuseness, attempts to

identify and analyze religious or spiritual themes in television programs are faced with similar difficulties. Although certain programs and genres tend to offer more frequent or more explicit examples of religious and spiritual themes, such as in *Joan of Arcadia* and *The Simpsons*, or science fiction and fantasy genres, many more programs offer occasional spiritual themes or storylines making them much more challenging to systematically track and study.

### **Television Depictions of the Divine and Transcendent**

Teresa Blythe's essay "The God of Prime-Time Television" (2002) illustrates that such themes do proliferate in the medium as a whole. Blythe notes that over the past fifty years of television history, numerous television shows from numerous genres offer "glimpses into humanity's longing for God" (194). Blythe cites such diverse programs as, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, *Highway to Heaven*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Northern Exposure*, *The X-Files*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Homicide: Life on the Streets*, *Seinfeld* and *Everybody Loves Raymond* as examples of programs that have offered storylines dealing with God, the transcendent or religion. An accurate list of all programs with such themes would be practically immeasurable. In fact near the beginning of her essay Blythe quips that "it would be a mind-boggling task to document comprehensively the history of religious subject matter on television" (194). However, identifying religious and spiritual themes on television is neither hopeless nor a fruitless task. Rather than taking one expansive definition of religion and applying it to all of television, Blythe chooses to work with a narrow definition, looking for specifically Christian imagery and applies it to four different programs, specifically *Ally McBeal*, *The West Wing*, *ER* and *Touched by an Angel*.

Blythe assert that these programs tended to focus on the negotiation between immanence and transcendence of God, often simultaneously characterizing God as above, beyond and aloof from humans and as personal, active and involved in individuals lives (213). Blythe identifies the images of “the guiding hand; author of the law; Christ; forgiver; call to action; pursuer; healer; short-term therapist; religious authority figure” as examples of how God is conveyed in these programs (213). The benefit of an analysis such as Blythe’s is that it offers a discussion of concrete depictions of religion and spirituality in specific shows. The down side of course is that documenting such examples is a laborious task.

Despite the specificity of her study, Blythe’s study can be extended to make more generalized observations not only regarding religious and spiritual images on television but also regarding the relationship between television and contemporary spirituality. Most notably in Blythe’s findings is that God is portrayed as having many forms and many expressions, sometimes represented through supernatural or celestial forms and events such as an angel or a miracle, other times represented as acting through or manifesting in human forms such as a religious figure or an act of human kindness. Additionally, Blythe notes that such programs and themes point towards larger societal trends towards the search for the transcendent and the quest for meaning that is occurring outside of traditional religious institutions.

As shall be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, the CBS series *Joan of Arcadia* presented a similar message and image of God in which God manifests to the main character through a variety of forms, providing her with specific instructions to follow. As the programs website explains “One minute it's a cute boy her own age, the next it's the lunch

lady or a little girl (www.cbs.com)<sup>20</sup>. While the show presents God as being divine and transcendent, it also shows God to have multiple manifestations appearing in a variety of forms; further God is shown to operate through humans and human actions. Beyond this, the show presents the common themes of questioning, self examination and doubt often reflected in contemporary spirituality as Joan and other characters are depicted as grappling with issues regarding beliefs, faith, ethics and morality. Most notably, Joan is shown to have great doubts about her encounters with God, questioning whether these experiences are real or hallucinations.

These observations are particularly pertinent for this study. Importantly Blythe's analysis suggests that while images of God in television have specific forms, none of them are given a privileged status as offering the only possibility. Rather the overall message offered through the varying depictions of God in television suggests there is some sort of transcendent reality and divinity in the world but it manifests and is experienced in different forms which is often only realized through in-depth seeking, questioning and personal reflection. Such images correspond closely with the already mentioned generalizing and particularizing concepts of the divine and transcendent meaning found in personalized forms of spirituality. Equally important to this study is Blythe's suggestion that depictions of God on television be taken as cultural artifacts indicating a cultural concern with transcendent issues and meaning (217). Much in the same way, this research originated from the suspicion that depictions of religious and spiritual themes in television represent broader issues regarding non-institutional religion and spirituality in North Atlantic culture. Consequently this research is geared towards investigating how such religious and spiritual themes are interpreted and employed by individuals who define themselves as spiritual.

---

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.cbs.com/primetime/joan\\_of\\_arcadia/about.shtml](http://www.cbs.com/primetime/joan_of_arcadia/about.shtml)

Taking on a different genre of programs, Massimo Introvigne argues that popular programs such as *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reflect and perpetuate transforming discourses about God and the transcendent (2000). He explains that such programs work to confirm popular beliefs in a Higher Power and supernatural universe by offering images of a world filled with magic, mystery, saviors, demons, aliens and vampires, as well as human heroes and villains. What is most notable about these shows, Introvigne suggests, is that the transcendent is rarely conceived in traditional religious terms. Such programs tend not to depict a “sovereign, omnipotent, transcendent God” and often make little mention of “God called by that name.” Rather they tend to envision humans and the transcendent as part of the same universal force or energy. As such, gods in their varying forms are subject to the same rules and limitations that govern the universe and all things in it. Introvigne points out that this change in God imagery reveals a growing tendency to see God, not as separate and different from the world but as part of it. According to Introvigne, in this sense *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The X-Files* offer a new, holistic god concept. Introvigne’s argument ties in the previous discussions of God concepts in television, as it similarly points to a concept of the transcendent that is both one thing and many things expressed in particular form and general form.

Continuing with the theme of the supernatural on television, in his article “Oprah, Phil, Geraldo, Barbara and Things that Go Bump in the Night” Leonard Primiano argues that television functions as an electronic tradition bearer participating in the age old act of telling folktales, legends, superstitions and vernacular religious beliefs (2001: 47-63). Further, Primiano contends that depictions of the supernatural on television programs offer ways through which viewers negotiate and explore aspects of vernacular religion of America. Borrowing from the work of folklorist Linda Dégh, Primiano suggests that television plays a

key role in creating and transmitting non-official folk religion. Focusing his attention on television talk shows and prime-time specials Primiano looks at the prevalence of 'real life' or reality based narratives presenting supernatural themes. Topics highlighted by Primiano include stories about ghosts, haunted houses and poltergeists, near death experiences, angel visitations, Marian apparitions, alternative religions, Satanism, demonic possession, exorcisms, UFOs and alien abductions. Primiano explains that "These shows exemplify... a religiosity brimming with interpretation and negotiation of ultimate questions of the supernatural, of alternative belief systems, and of creative expressions of belief and practice" (Primiano: 48-9). Primiano argues that while television is often thought to be a secularizing force in culture, it also acts as a conduit for various religious, spiritual, mystical and supernatural beliefs. He argues that television producers are building upon preexisting dialogues and traditions in culture that express a widespread interest the paranormal, the supernatural and spiritual phenomena and thus "continue discussions that viewers are already having with each other" (57). Through repetition of supernatural stories and themes television programs both reflect the beliefs of viewers and further influence them. Primiano further explains that this in turn ties in with contemporary non-institutional spirituality as individuals are given a forum through which to explore a variety of religious and spiritual ideas. From this perspective then, television helps to reinforce and perpetuate cultural scripts about religion.

Offering a different take on the talk show genre, Kathryn McClymond (2002) argues that *The Oprah Winfrey Show* mirrors and disseminates a form "of lifestyle spirituality" oriented towards "integrat[ing] all of the dimensions of one's life: spiritual, relational, financial, physical, and intellectual (186). Examining the messages of Oprah through focusing on "Oprah's Book Club" McClymond asserts that Oprah offers a brand of

spirituality based around cultivating the values of love, particularly self-love, self-worth, personal growth and diversity. Novels chosen by Winfrey include Ernest J. Gaines *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), *White Oleander* (1999) by Janet Fitch, and Morgan Roberts' *Gap Creek* (1999). While the stories presented in these novels are diverse the common theme amongst them is learning to grow, develop and love in the face of obstacles, adversity and suffering. Viewers and members of the book club are invited to read and then discuss the book on her program, through the book club's website and network, and with people in their day-to-day lives. Readers are encouraged to reflect upon these books and take meaning and lessons from them, using the messages and themes of the books to help them grow, develop and make sense of their lives. Through the televised aspect of Oprah's Book Club, McClymond asserts, "Winfrey successfully encourages readers to internalize these values by guiding discussions so that they link themes and story lines with the readers' own experiences" (185). McClymond notes that while these novels often do not engage with traditional forms of religion or use explicitly religious language, they offer a message that relates with and further engenders contemporary concepts of spirituality such as love, growth, pluralism and connectedness. Oprah Winfrey functions as a particularly powerful conduit of such messages as her program is broadcast in 109 countries with a viewership of 21 million per week. Oprah Winfrey's message of "lifestyle spirituality" seems to connect with broader societal movements toward spirituality. While certainly not all of her viewers hold or adopt the same spiritual belief system nor do all people engaged in personal forms of spirituality turn to or accept Oprah Winfrey's version of spirituality, there are significant correlations between them. Within this particular study, discussions of Oprah Winfrey figured prominently, with participants claiming to acquire and learn about spirituality

through her program, of being inspired towards spiritual growth and development and some going so far as to proclaim Oprah as a spiritual leader.

### **Section Summary**

This discussion represents only a small sample of the literature analyzing the prevalence religious and spiritual themes in popular television programs. Just as it would Blythe observes that it would be difficult to offer a comprehensive analysis of the religious themes in television programs (Blythe 2002); it would also be challenging and laborious task to review the countless articles, papers and books discussing how religious themes are presented in television programs and how television programs function as a 'form' of secular religion. Consequently, I chose to highlight some of the more influential theories and to focus on the analyses of programs that were frequently mentioned by the participants in this study. Such theories and examples help to identify some of the potential religious and spirituality meanings, symbols and themes that are presented throughout a variety television programs. Moreover, I used these theories as points of reference for designing the initial survey and research questions regarding the relationship between television and spirituality. The next two chapters offer detailed presentations of the interview data in order to demonstrate how research participants define themselves as spiritual and how they employ television in their spiritual practices.

## **Chapter Four: Spirituality as Universal and Particular**

### **Interpretive Categories**

This chapter further synthesizes the theories presented in preceding chapters and offers a qualitative exploration of the relationship between television viewing and personal spirituality. Two of the research areas I have highlighted within religious studies, specifically sociological studies of non-institutional spirituality and the field of religion and popular culture seem to reach similar conclusions – that people are constructing spiritual belief systems, meaningful worlds and identities from a variety of cultural resources. The point of this research is to begin to draw together two sets of theories that seem to highlight the same phenomena, yet often fail to intersect.

The ‘spirituality’ literature, often empirically based, tends to look at the substance of beliefs – what people do, think and experience. This line of research offers valuable qualitative and quantitative data that help to define what people mean by the term spirituality and what that meaning signifies. Further, this work demonstrates how non-institutional forms of religion are manifest and expressed in the lives in individuals. This body of work, as in the case of Bibby’s “religion a la carte,” Roof’s “bricoleurs” and Bellah and his collaborators “Sheilas”, clearly illustrates that individuals are developing individual, personal beliefs systems through drawing on a wide variety of beliefs, symbols and practices. However, this line of research needs to further address the interaction between individuals and resources that they employ. How do cultural texts and symbols function in a religious or spiritual manner? Specifically what resources are people drawing from? What do they take and use in a spiritually significant manner?

The ‘popular culture and religion’ literature is useful here as it tends to offer rich theoretical analyses and insights into various ways in which cultural texts address, express

and raise spiritual and religious themes. Frequently, as in the case of Schultz (1990), Wagner and Lundeen (1998) and Seilger (2001), these studies look at the various ways in which aspects of popular culture may parallel elements, functions or roles of historical forms of religion, employing myth, ritual, morality and so forth as analytical categories. Such approaches have been instrumental in identifying how religious themes and symbols permeate culture in implicit and explicit ways; further, they illustrate how seemingly secular aspects of culture may be employed in functionally religious manners. As theory, these approaches tend to work well. However, as with the work of Thomas Luckmann, religion and popular culture theories can potentially demonstrate the religious nature of everything. On one level I find the idea that religion is to be found everywhere quite enticing and intellectually stimulating, and in fact, I do agree. However, as Gregory Erickson warns in his essay “‘Sometimes You Need a Story:’ American Christianity, Vampires and Buffy” “the danger in a writing like this is that it is easy to relate *anything* to religion in ways that do not really accomplish much” (2002: 109). Thus such theoretical work must eventually say something about what is actually occurring within a culture. While the language of researchers and the general public may differ, and even the analysis or meaning attributed to beliefs and behaviour may greatly vary, (insiders or participants do not necessarily know why they do or think certain things, similarly outside observers may not know or understand why insiders behave or believe as they do, both offer potentially useful vantage points and insights), the research and theory must at some level correlate with the actions, beliefs or experiences of individuals within that culture.

## **Academic and Popular Categories of Religion and Spirituality**

In analyzing the information gathered during interviews, I divided the data into three general categories: 1) Participants' general definitions and conceptions of spirituality and religion; 2) Participants' general uses of television, viewing habits, choice of genres, and how participants conceptualize the relationship between television and spirituality; and 3) specific examples of how participants use television as a resource for constructing, negotiating and maintaining their personal sense of spirituality.

At the academic level descriptions of the terms religion and spirituality indicate that they are separate but related categories. However, as an outside observer working from a sociological perspective I have tended to conceptualize spirituality as a form of non-official and non-institutional religion. This approach is built upon Luckmann's basic definition of religion as transcendent meaning. But rather than take Luckmann's concept of religion in its broadest sense, that is, the human act of transcending biological nature to create meaningful worlds, I follow Beseske's reworking of Luckmann's definition as conversations about or constructions of meaning that make reference to the transcendent. Consequently, the underlying question motivating my research has been what happens to religion once it is removed from institutions; when there are not obligatory modes of belief, practice and codes of conduct; when there is no longer one official and exclusive model for conceptualizing the divine, the world and transcendent reality, and when there are no clear external sources of authority or regulating bodies? Or to phrase it in the language of the participants in this study: what, if anything, remains of religion once it is stripped of its doctrine, dogma, ritual and community of believers? Personal forms of spirituality, as individual bricolage style systems of ultimate significance, seem to be one result.

While participants emphasize the difference between religion and spirituality, they nevertheless concede that they are related in some way. Participants' differentiations between religion and spirituality are often an inverse of sociological understandings. For example, scholars such as James A. Beckford (2003) and Peter Beyer (2003) argue that concepts such as implicit religion, invisible religion and personal spirituality only make 'sense' when they are compared with official or traditional models of religion. While religion is by no means conceptualized as having inherent or intrinsic values, rather it is understood as a socially constructed and discursively defined concept, it is taken as a primary definitional category upon which concepts regarding religious functions, implicit religions and invisible religions are built. For participants, on the other hand spirituality is thought to be the root or model category upon which religions have come to be constructed. While participants prefer to use the word spirituality, precisely because it is a flexible and expansive term, their discussion of what spirituality is and explanations of how they are spiritual indicate that at the core there is something they consider to be innate, inherent and universal, namely a form of transcendent reality.<sup>21</sup> However, this core truth or ultimate reality is thought to have many forms and expressions.

Despite the diversity and multiplicity of forms that participants attribute to spirituality and its manifestations, three central themes of transcendent reality, meaning and morality constant. First, the belief in a transcendent reality, discussed and envisioned in various forms, but often described as God, the Divine or the universe (as an interconnected force that has some level of consciousness); it is also manifested or glimpsed through various events and beings including supernatural or paranormal phenomena, nature, particular forms of

---

<sup>21</sup> The term 'transcendent' as it is used in this context refers to the postulation by individuals or collectives, that there is some form of reality and meaning outside, beyond or underneath every day, objective reality (Luckmann, 1967: 58; Berger 1969: 53; Wuthnow 1976: 71; Dawson 1987: 228; Besecke 2005:183).

'new' science or quantum physics, and feelings of interconnectedness and unity. Secondly, that there is some sort of ultimate meaning and purpose, not only for the world, but for each individual. The ultimate meaning is discovered and revealed in multiple ways, however common threads include a sense of purpose, fate and destiny, reflecting upon the meaning and purpose of life generally and in relation to their own lives specifically, and ideas about death and the afterlife. Thirdly, the belief that there are certain intrinsic values and morals, often rooted in 'the golden rule' such as helping others and not causing harm (the details of these, along with other values are thought to be culturally and individually negotiable).

These three basic components of spirituality interact amidst two interrelated dynamics. At one level, spirituality is defined in generic, universal and nonspecific terms of ultimate reality, ultimate meaning and ultimate values. From this perspective, spirituality or the transcendent simply 'is'. At the other, spirituality is very precisely defined in terms of each individual's personal experience, personal beliefs and reflections, and personal connections with the transcendent. From this perspective, spirituality is something that is realized, explored and discovered within specific personal, social and historical contexts. The elements of the personal quest, seeking and reflexivity, interact within this dynamic as participants attempt to define, give shape, find meaning and further connect with this sense of ultimate transcendent reality. This dynamic between universal and particular closely parallels Luckmann's understanding of the relationship between the anthropological conditions of religion – transcendence and the historical forms of religion – manifestations.

A further dynamic engages between what participants would characterize as the personal to connected dimensions; or using the analytic categories of Giddens, Lull and Linderman's frameworks between individual agency and social structures. For participants this dynamic engages with the interaction between how individuals' experiences and

meanings are apprehended, defined and actualized in relation to other people and collective ideas, beliefs and meaning systems. The relational component or social structure enables personal meaning to be formed based upon the social meaning with which the individual is familiar, as people draw upon their previous experiences and modes of interpretation that they have apprehended, shaped and internalized from the world around them.

Within the late modern context, of course each individual has many different potential meaning systems available to her or him. Thus the individual has some degree of agency in terms of what meanings will be derived and accepted. Nevertheless collective and social meanings provide a basic framework through which personal meaning can be actualized. Such meanings are given further personal significance as they are interpreted in light of the specific experiences and contexts of each individual, which in turn potentially affects broader social meanings as individuals further communicate and interact with others using their 'personal' systems of meaning and signification. To put it in terms of the participants in this study, social and collective meanings help form, shape and define personal experience and meaning through interacting with and reflecting upon broader social meanings, interpretations and experiences, and then ultimately 'choosing' which meanings and beliefs 'resonate' with them. In order to shape their experiences and meanings, participants draw upon a wide range of sources, including their own previous life experiences, their personal environment and direct interaction with other people, as well as larger publicly available social systems of meaning including traditional religions and the media.

An example taken from interviews with Liz, a 50year old mother of two near-adult children who had recently returned to university, illustrates this dynamic. Liz, who defines herself as spiritual, but was raised without direct religious instruction explained, "I felt a

really strong sense of my spirit, and I knew that, but I didn't have any words to articulate it.... so there was this sense of feeling something that I couldn't articulate. I didn't have any language for it... That's why when I left school, I was definitely on my quest." Liz further described her quest to give meaning and form to this initial sense of 'spirit' involving a great deal of reading 'spiritual,' 'religious' and philosophical texts, attending lectures, workshops, retreats on meditation, alternative healing, reiki, and drumming circles, traveling to different countries to meet new people and have new experiences, and engaging in personal conversations and private reflection upon all of these experiences and ideas.

Commenting further on her reflections about her various experiences and interaction with different belief systems, Liz said,

Well that's what I came to realize at this meditation weekend. That religions do give form to experience.... It – Buddhism or Christianity – were all different you know, and it was that they were coming from the same source and they all were just manifesting in different cultural ways and really just a different cloak for each one of them... As a human you have to interact, you have to have all these images, you have to make creations so other people can identify with them and it just seems like in the beginning those manifestations were broader and now they are becoming smaller and more personal, but they are all the same.

Through this explanation Liz made reference to all four aspects of these interacting dynamics: the transcendent – or her sense of spirit, the manifestations of the transcendent – various specific cultural explanations, descriptions and experiences of the transcendent, the relational – interacting with other people, belief systems and cultures, and the personal – deriving personal meaning and beliefs based upon her experiences and interactions.

Certainly not all participants articulated this dynamic in such an obvious and concise manner, nevertheless, their discussions regarding their personal spirituality, how it is defined, explored and made meaningful tended to allude to the same four aspects of the dynamic, that

is interactions between the self and the social, the 'universal' transcendent and the 'particular' manifestations of it (the universal transcendent).

It is with this dynamic in mind that I interpret the relationship between personal spirituality and television. First I begin by turning my attention to the dynamic between concepts of the universal transcendent and its specific manifestations through looking at how participants define and explain the concept of spirituality. A significant aspect of such definitions rests on participants' distinctions between spirituality and religion, with religion being defined as a limited and restrictive attempt to explain and regulate the transcendent, and spirituality defined as simply as an awareness of the transcendent. Further, as participants discussed their specific spiritual beliefs and practices, they oscillated between offering general, universal characteristics of the transcendent and specific and personal ways in which the transcendent is manifest, experienced and interpreted. In particular I look at the specific discussions and definitions of transcendent reality, and the often interrelated concepts of transcendent meaning and transcendent values and morals. Drawing back upon) concept of "signals of transcendence"<sup>22</sup> (Berger 1969; Bibby 2003) I suggest that participants' discussions of spirituality echo the themes raised by Luckmann (1967; 1990) Berger (1970) and Bibby (2003) in their discussions about levels and signals of transcendence pointing towards the belief that there is 'something' beyond the everyday reality, the desire for meaningful order in the world, faith in a cosmic plan, a sense of hope and destiny, justice, and feelings of awe, wonder and joy.

Following this examination, I move on to examine the dynamic between individual meanings and agency and collective meanings and social structures. In particular I look at

---

<sup>22</sup> Berger defines signals of transcendence as "phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our 'natural' reality but that appear to point beyond that reality" (Berger 1969: 53).

how personal spiritual beliefs are negotiated and formed in relation with cultural and social categories of (spiritual and religious) meaning presented through television. Initially I look at ways in which television acts to create, convey and reinforce particular types of spiritual and religious meaning. Specifically, I highlight how participants conceptualize the relationship between television and spirituality, namely television as a direct learning resource, as offering signals of transcendence, as implicit models of transcendent reality, meaning and morals, and as a source for reinforcing their beliefs (or plausibility structure).

However as most of the participants explain, while the general framework of their spiritual belief systems remains consistent - that is belief in a universal form of transcendent reality, meaning, and morality - the specific details of their belief systems often transform and grow with the introduction of new information and ideas. Usually this does not entail major revisions or reorganizations of their belief systems rather it tends to result in an expansion of beliefs. For example, Liz described her process of developing a spiritual belief system as “making a necklace and finding all the beads. It was like finding all the same beads in all the different places and just stringing them along.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Dhakir a 21 year old

---

<sup>23</sup> Liz, as well as approximately half of the participants in this study, found the characterization of personal spirituality as form of spiritual consumption to be highly offensive. These participants felt that the terms ‘consumer’ and ‘consumption’ implied that their beliefs and form of spirituality were inauthentic and devalued. During our interviews Liz and I discussed this topic at length. The following excerpt from one of her interviews highlights the concerns and criticism that many of the participants had in regard to the concept of spiritual consumers. Liz: “When you think of consuming you think of the purely materialistic. When you think of spirituality you think of having more depth and the idea of putting this overlay on top of what you are doing it suddenly makes it seem meaningless or cheap. That is part of the difficulty that I had before, am I just picking out what I want and just kind of pilfering these thousands of year old traditions and just rummaging through them and picking out the things I like and leaving behind the hard discipline stuff of it? And in some ways that is what is happening. Like Buddhism there definitely seems to be an American version of it that has none of the discipline of it. But at the same time, that is how religions go through other cultures. I mean to me when I think of it ‘as am I just doing this as a consumer?’ it really does bother me. And because it feels superficial to me, but what I have experienced wasn’t superficial. But I think when I kind of stepped far enough back from it, it wasn’t that I was kind of picking and choosing as it was that I was looking for places where I resonated and they were often the same thing. I was finding common threads rather than I will take this and take this. It was like I was finding just similar patterns and that was what made more sense to me. It didn’t feel like I was just randomly picking... and that was never

Shi'ite Muslim student who defined himself as both religious and spiritual explained that his faith in Allah does not preclude his any of his other beliefs in Qi, paranormal phenomena, heaven, hell and reincarnation, rather he sees them all as different manifestations of one universal divine reality. During one of his interviews, Dhakir commented, "I think that there is one divine power and everywhere in the world it is experienced differently. To one person what Qi is, is what Allah is to us. Maybe it's just a way of getting in touch with it that we, like the Muslims don't know about.... Different manifestations of the same thing."

What participants' approaches to spirituality seem to indicate is the process of exploring different spiritual beliefs and themes is equally important as the actual spiritual 'products' (personal belief systems) that participants create. Even in cases where particular spiritual ideas and themes are not incorporated into the individual's personal belief system, but are acknowledged as a possibility or someone else's 'truth' or 'path,' considered an interesting topic or even rejected, the process of learning, thinking, talking and acknowledging them constitutes a spiritually significant activity. It is primarily within this context that television acts as a significant spiritual resource as participants use television programs as rich and readily accessible mediums for gathering ideas, information and stories about spirituality and the transcendent. In turn, many of the participants draw upon the content of such television programs to negotiate, construct and reinforce their personal

---

my intention either. The things that I have been involved with in the past it was never a sense of disrespect.... You know it was like I really need this and when I stopped needing it there were other things that I did instead. So for me it wasn't so much being a consumer, you know I kind of reject that in a way, but I do know people who have gone from one thing to another, to another, just – but it is almost in despair. Where as my personal feeling that I was finding something that resonated and then being with it for as long as I needed to be. It is almost like being in a relationship. Like when it is over, it's like you are kind of grateful that you had it, but you kind of move to something different. It was kind of that sense and not a despair that I was trying one thing and not finding it then moving on to the next thing.

You know it is like making a necklace and finding all the beads. It was like finding all the same beads in all the different places and just stringing them along. So to me.... that's kind of what it was like.

systems of belief. However, even for those participants who do not use television in that manner, it nevertheless functions as resource for exploring spirituality. Prior to examining participants' uses of television in relation to their spirituality, I will offer a presentation of participants' discussions regarding their concepts of spirituality, what they mean when they describe themselves as spiritual, and some of the specific aspects of their spiritual beliefs.

### **Defining Spirituality and Religion**

I usually began interviews by asking each participant general questions about their background, life history and current life circumstances. Following this discussion, I shifted the interviews to focus more specifically on questions related to religion and spirituality. In particular I was interested in discovering how participants defined the terms "religion" and "spirituality" and how, or even if, they interpreted their lives in relation to these concepts. The initial questions that I used to explore this topic included a broad open-ended question asking respondents to "tell me about your religious life history"; I then asked respondents what the terms "religion" and "spiritual" or "religious" or "spirituality" mean to them; followed by asking if they considered themselves "religious or spiritual or both?" (as respondents often made a clear distinction between religion/religious and spiritual/spirituality); then offering a series of general, as well as theme and topic oriented questions intended to draw out some of the details of how they are religious, spiritual, both or neither. The series of questions served as an entry point for comparing my academic use and understanding of the concepts of religion and contemporary spirituality, with the everyday uses and understanding of these concepts by respondents. Further, it gave me the opportunity to situate the responses of the specific participants in this study within the larger context of studies of reflexive spirituality and non-institutional religion. Most importantly,

the discussions initiated by these questions began to provide answers to one of the two principle research questions, that is, if indeed people are constructing their own personal systems of ultimate meaning drawing from a variety of aspects of culture.

My interest in the analytic categories of “religion” and “spirituality” stems from the research conducted by Bibby (1987; 1993; 2002), Roof (1993; 1999; 2003), Wuthnow (1998), and Heelas (2002) on transformations of the religious landscape in late modern North Atlantic countries. Across the board, the studies of these researchers demonstrate that the decline in participation and membership in traditional religious institutions, along with the loss of public authority, is part of a larger trend of a societal restructuring of religion, rather than intimating its demise. As anticipated by Luckmann, sociological studies of religion indicate a shift towards more individualized forms, often interpreted as part of the wider cultural trends of increased reflexivity, growth in personal autonomy over institutional authority and consumerism. While Bellah and colleagues’ “Sheilaism”<sup>24</sup> and Bibby’s “religion à la carte” emerged as sociological buzzwords in the mid-1980s to characterize emerging forms of religious individualism, within mainstream culture the increased preference for the term ‘spiritual’ as a designation of beliefs, practices and experiences, revealed the burgeoning of new non-institutional forms of religiosity. The popular distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ signifies an important cultural shift towards the rethinking of ultimate meaning outside of traditional religious institutions. As noted in Chapter One the popular use of the term religion tends to refer to organized, institutional forms of religion, or what Luckmann refers to as “historical forms of religion” (1967: 22). Spirituality, on the other hand, has come to be used to indicate personal explorations of

---

<sup>24</sup> Sheilaism is a term used by Bellah et al., to characterize trends towards religious individualism or trends towards constructing personal, privatized forms of religion (Bellah et al., 1985: 221; Greer and Roof 1992: 346).

transcendent meaning, purpose and connection with God or the divine outside of or in addition to traditional organized religions.

### **Categories of Self-Identification: Spiritual, Religious, Both or Neither**

Within the context of this research project, largely participants' definitions of 'spirituality' and 'religion' corresponded with current research on popular usage of the terms. While it became evident that although participants felt that religion and spirituality were affiliated with one another, they drew clear and distinctive boundaries between the two terms. Upon being asked to discuss their religious life histories and define the term religion, participants were quick to interpret religion as related to institutions, conformity, prescribed belief and practices and community, while their definitions of spirituality tended to be much less precise and required more lengthy explanations. Whereas religion was thought to be a limited and clearly defined concept, spirituality was treated as a much more expansive and inclusive term. Correlating with the observations of Roof and King, participants tended to find both the term 'religion' and the specific beliefs and practices of organized religions to be restrictive, opting to use the term spiritual either as a distinction from religion or as a qualifier along with their self-definitions as religious.

All of the participants in this study defined themselves as being spiritual, save one person, who self-defined as neither religious nor spiritual. With all of these participants, the designation 'spiritual' was tantamount to Bibby's concept of "religion à la carte", indicating that their beliefs and practices were not confined to one religious tradition rather they included a bricolage of ideas and themes drawn from a variety of sources. Of participants identifying themselves as spiritual, twenty self-identified as being spiritual but not religious, while nine defined themselves as both spiritual and religious. Out of these nine, eight used

the term religion to designate participation and membership in an organized religious institution, while one person used the term religion to refer to their own personal systems of beliefs. For those who defined themselves as spiritual and religious, the designation of spiritual was used often used to imply that their beliefs and practices transcended the 'official' models of belief and practice as prescribed by their specific denomination or institution. All of the participants who described themselves as spiritual and religious supplemented, reworked or rejected certain elements of 'religious' traditions. For example, Kelly, who self-defined as a practicing Catholic believes both in heaven and reincarnation, has attended meditation groups based on Buddhist and Hindu teachings, prefers using alternative health and healing practices to conventional medicine and reinterprets her Catholic faith in light of popular psychology, contemporary spirituality and scientific frameworks. Similarly Dhakir, a practicing Shi'ite Muslim, spoke of his belief in heaven, hell and reincarnation, as well as incorporating aspects of Qigong, Tai Chi, Taoism and traditional Chinese medicine into his spiritual worldview. While Lydia who self-identified as a practicing Greek Orthodox explained that, "although I truly believe in mine [religion] I pick and choose different things from other religions that I really like and make my own, or follow my own type thing." Lydia further spoke of looking to other forms of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam and New Age Movements, as well as popular literature and television programs featuring supernatural themes for sources of meaning and beliefs.

With the exception of two people, Liz and Serena, all of the participants made reference to being raised with at least some connection to traditional organized forms of religion. Not surprisingly then, for the most part participants described their religious life histories and defined the degree of their 'religiousness' within the context of their relationship to specific religious institutions and organized belief systems, most often

Christian denominations or generalized conceptions of “Christianity” or “the Church.”

Further, one participant, Sudesha, discussed being raised within various Hindu traditions and another, Dhakir, described his upbringing as a “casual” Shi’ite Muslim, meaning that his family was not particularly strict or orthodox in their traditions. Generally, participants’ accounts of their religious life histories included details about their attendance or participation in organized and communal religious rituals and ceremonies, celebration of holidays within official religious traditions; narratives about having rejected, abandoned or drifted away from a specific religious tradition; descriptions of being raised within a ‘cultural’ context of Christianity, not members of a specific denomination or church, but following certain Christian beliefs, practices and rituals, such as God concept, Bible, Jesus, Christmas, occasionally attending Christian Church services, using traditional western Christian methods of prayer, and so forth.

Interestingly, the two participants who explained that they were raised ‘without a religion’ did not respond by saying they had ‘no religious life history,’ rather they tended to discuss the way in which they experienced having ‘no religion’ compared to people around them that were or are religious. Serena spoke of being very curious about organized religion and during her early teen years even felt deprived because she had not been raised within a specific religious tradition, as so many of her peers and extended family were ‘religious’. She explained that as a result she did attend a small number of number of Catholic, United Church and Christian Evangelical religious services with friends and members of her extended family to learn more about them. However, in the long run Serena felt that it was more beneficial to have been raised to be ‘spiritual’, including her involvement in various New-Age type practices, as she felt it encouraged her to be more reflective, aware and authentic in her beliefs and practices. Similarly, in responses to the question about her

religious life history, Liz said that she “was not raised to be religious”, explaining that her parents were not members of a church and did not attend any sort of religious service; further they did not offer formal religious instruction or make reference to any specific type of religious beliefs or practices, such as God or prayer. However, the wider religio-cultural surroundings for Liz differed greatly, as she recounted being raised in a small town in Ontario during the 1950s and 1960s where most of the people were members of particular organized religions. After describing this context, Liz commented on this experience explaining,

that’s the way my religious upbringing was, knowing when I was eight that I was different. Why didn’t I have a religion? Why did most of the world have a religion and why didn’t I?... But I always had spiritual questions and I could never figure out why I didn’t have a religion.

For both Liz and Serena, their religious life history narratives included descriptions of being raised ‘without a religion’ within social contexts where involvement in organized religious institutions were the norm. While Liz and Serena’s religious life history narratives were noticeably different from other participants, everyone involved in the study defines both religion and spirituality in a similar manner.

### **Spirituality versus Religion**

For the majority of participants, the designation ‘religious’ implies involvement with organized religious institutions, usually connected to group participation or a community joined together by shared beliefs and practices. Further, participants tended to associate ‘religion’ with adherence to official beliefs and practices centred around a sacred text(s) or specific teachings, such as catechism, sermons, Bible studies or Sunday school, prescribed rituals and modes of worship, all of which are regulated by a religious hierarchy and clerical

authorities. It is important to note that participants often argued that religions are human constructions and as such they tend to be fraught with human short-comings or agendas.

For example, Austin, who regularly attends an evangelical Associated Gospel Church stated that,

Religion is a man made thing. Religion does not come from God. Religion is the structure that is created by people to conform other people to their own kind of belief system. Or how they think God should be worshipped and then through tradition it is passed down. Religion is actually the part that Jesus fought hardest against.

Austin's sentiments were echoed by other participants, many of whom suggested that the 'truth' of religion was often obscured by rigid dogma, authoritarianism, and imposed beliefs and practices. This was further related to participants' tendencies to associate 'religion' with boundaries, limitations, self-righteousness, close-mindedness and ignorance, all of which participants took to be negative attributes. Gregory, who defined himself as spiritual, rather than religious, exemplified this approach to religion as he asserted,

Religion to me, this is where I am today, is dogma. It's not thinking. It's listening to somebody who is giving you their interpretation and not thinking.... I don't care whether you are talking about Judaism, Islam, Christianity or anything. To me that's what religion is. It's somebody's very restricted belief system that you are supposed to accept.

Even for those participants who self-identified as members of specific religions, religion was overwhelmingly characterized as something to be approached with suspicion and a high level of critical thought. As Kelly, a self-identified Catholic explained,

I find the term religion a bit limiting in that it makes me think of specific groups of people that have certain beliefs and rites of passage. And that there's a huge variety of those. But it also brings up negative ideas like war and bias and prejudice and ignorance. That some religious groups have some religious beliefs that are not inclusive of others, and I find that very unappealing or sad. So those are the things I think of with religion, it's limiting.

Furthermore, whatever truth and wisdom religions are accredited are defined as "universal truths" such as an awareness of the divine, love for humanity, kindness, honesty, to help

others and harm none, and are thought to be found in all religions. Moreover, participants explained that these “universal truths” could easily be accessed outside of religious traditions, and in fact, suggested they were more likely to do so.

Participants’ characterizations of ‘religion’ were further compared and contrasted with their understandings of spirituality. Although religion and spirituality, for participants, refer to different concepts, they are not fully independent or categories; rather, religion was often defined as a possible manifestation or an attempted representation of spirituality. Simon described spirituality as “someone who has a connection to some form of thought that is religious, but isn’t exactly deemed a religion. Spirituality means more the individual where religions are more organized on the whole.” Justin, who equated religion with ritual and habit, felt that religion represents an attempt to access spirituality. He suggested that “religion is more like an action and spirituality is more like the inside. Like religion is outer and what you do to obtain spirituality.” Similarly, Liz, who defined spirituality as “the essence or the life force,” explained that religion “means simply a hook. Simply a cultural manifestation of the life force. And again just a way to articulate what isn’t spoken.” David reiterated this idea claiming, “I have this personal philosophy that different cultures interpret things differently. God is many or singular or whatever the culture can define it as and interpret it to make it simple for them. But it all boils down to one universal force.” Religion therefore was related to spirituality in the sense that it represents the human attempt to experience and explain the ultimate reality of spirituality. Whereas participants tended to see religions as human inventions, spirituality was often described as something natural, innate and authentic – regardless of belief. Serena exemplifies this attitude proclaiming, “Spirituality I think of it as more individual and, oh I know this is unfair, but I think of it as

more true. Like I think religion a lot of the time is imposed, but spirituality can't be imposed.”

Across the board, participants used the term “spirituality” to refer to a sense of connection with one’s self, others, nature and God or the divine. Further, participants defined spirituality in relation their sense of transcendent meaning and purpose, which is manifested both in individual lives and in the universe as whole, as well as in reference to their sense of morality and values. Perhaps most importantly spirituality was identified with questioning, self-reflection and ultimately choosing what one holds to be meaningful and true. For participants, this marks the major difference between religion and spirituality, and often was the source of criticisms of religion. Religion tended to be associated with blind faith, following obligatory beliefs and practices regardless of what they are, and lack of personal meaning and reflection; for many participants, this in turn creates hollow and insincere traditions. Nora tried to explain this difference stating that “religious tends to be you are following the doctrine of a specific faith. You know you are being led down the path and spiritual is walking down the path. Spiritual is believing, not just going through the motions. Spiritual is wanting to believe. Spiritual is finding pleasure in everything and knowing that everything is linked.” Thus spirituality was linked with personal agency, conscious choice and experience, unlike religion which was linked with conformity and meaningless rituals and being told about ultimate reality, rather than have direct knowledge or experience.

Moreover, the lack of awareness and blind faith attributed to religions were thought to contribute to intolerance, extremism and hatred. Spirituality on the other hand, for participants, was synonymous with pluralism, diversity, and open-mindedness. In his discussion of the difference between spirituality and religion, Justin equated spirituality with

the quest for knowledge, constant questioning and thinking about transcendent meaning, whereas religion was equated with close-mindedness and righteousness. Throughout his interviews, Justin harshly critiqued religion for offering absolute truth claims that discourage critical thought and debate, and encourage complacency and stagnation. Justin claimed,

Spirituality it's like a quest for ultimate knowledge. We can never stop our thirst for that and so it's always on-going. And everybody is spiritual to a certain degree. But religious, it's like the way in which you do your spirituality. I can't really identify, personally, with a certain religion, but I am still spiritual because I think. You know, people who don't think, they're not spiritual. Someone could be Mr. Religion and have a hundred thousand crucifixes and read the bible every day, without spirituality because he's not thinking. He's stopped wondering. If you stop thinking and you're just like I don't care 'cause I read my bible everyday and I got my guaranteed next to Yahweh. So are you really spiritual? Are you just going to stop at that conclusion? Yup that must be it. You know, like where did the truth come from? What is God? You know, like if you always point to the ultimate answer no one can debate with you.... You're not on a quest for anything anymore. You want to live in your house with two cars and your dog, your wife, whatever. You know like I just can't... I can't just settle down and be like ok this is what I believe today and that's it. That's the end of my quest.... 'Cause I mean it's what makes you hate in the end, is your religion.

Wendy: Why is that?

Justin: Because you're so quick to judge others about how they're wrong and you're right.... I'm going to paraphrase a little thing that I read. It was about an atheist sailor who came to a dock and this Christian lady came up to him and said 'Do you believe in God?' And he said 'No.' And she said 'Why don't you believe in God?' And he said 'That's exactly the reason why I don't because as soon as you mention it your eyes fill with hate.' You know what I mean. So they're so in tuned to loving everything that they hate some people.

Justin's quotation illustrates the differentiation that he and many other participants make between spirituality and religion. Throughout the interviews, participants defined spirituality as a continuous quest for knowledge, regular self-reflection and evaluation of their beliefs and practices, and as a lifelong journey for meaning. While religion could potentially involve spirituality, that is questioning and reflecting, more often it was thought to inhibit reflection and learning through offering one exclusive and unflinching truth.

However, Justin's critique serves to highlight another common tendency with

participants' approaches to spirituality. While participants spoke of spirituality as promoting tolerance and diversity, claiming that spirituality is about individuals finding their own paths for transcendent meaning and connecting with the divine, this tolerance usually did not extend towards any fundamentalist religious traditions, to any individuals or groups holding exclusive truth claims, nor towards any form of infallible knowledge. When asked if they saw a discrepancy between their ethic of tolerance and diversity, and their criticisms or even dislike of fundamentalism and exclusive religious claims, participants maintained that they did not, as they were open to considering the those perspectives. What they were against was the condemnation of others for not holding identical views. Margaret a self-proclaimed post-Catholic explained, "Rightly or wrongly if people want to live according to that, that's fine, I don't have a problem with that. But it's when I see it damning other people that I find it difficult." Thus tolerance and respect for diversity extended mainly towards other liberal or pluralistic traditions and individuals. What is of critical importance for spirituality, according to participants, is that no single religious tradition or worldview is privileged as the one source of truth nor is any one individual's path to ultimate meaning the sole path to travel. Furthermore, as Justin's previous quotation suggested, transcendent meaning and purpose is not to be found in one single, definitive answer, rather the truth and meaning of spirituality are discovered through the on-going process of questioning, reflecting upon and experiencing the world.

While most of the participants expressed reservations about organized religion, they tended to feel that at their core most religions say the same thing. Nora exemplifies this attitude as she stated, "Most are like, live a good life, don't do bad things. Most religions say that, and I think it is such a simple decent message and I think only if people would actually obey. It doesn't matter what faith pretty much all of them are like don't hurt each other, be

nice. Be cool.” Lydia similarly commented, “The different religions, they all seem to make sense and even seem to correlate, they work with each other.....most of them cover the same things, they just say it in a different way.” This reflects a common tendency in contemporary spirituality as adherents tend to emphasize the universalities and commonalities they see in various belief systems and traditions rather than emphasizing the differences and variations.

Within this framework participants suggest that at their core religions may indeed contain spiritual or transcendent truth; the problem with religions stems from the attempt to regulate and codify the transcendent. As religious traditions tend to offer very specific explanations of the transcendent and how to order life and codes of conduct in reference to their interpretation of the transcendent, participants feel that they are too limiting. Moreover, they feel that as religions tend to offer exclusive truth claims, they do not leave room for or recognize other experiences and beliefs as legitimate. In this sense it is the organization and institutionalization of specific explanations of manifestations of transcendent reality, meaning and values in a rigid, narrow and exclusive manner that are perceived as the problem or flaw in religion. For participants in this study, it is not that religions or traditional religious meanings and symbols are fully rejected or excluded, in fact seven of the participants defined themselves as members or affiliates with organized religions, and more still draw upon particular religious symbols or traditions such as Jesus, Buddha, and The Bible as they construct and explore spirituality. Rather, they see these specific traditions as offering possible insight, explanations or ways to access the transcendent. However, there are many ways to do so, as the transcendent is thought to become manifest and experienced in multiple forms.

## **Universal Transcendent Reality and its Specific Forms**

### **Conceptualizing the Divine**

Once again looking at the dynamic between universal and particular definitions of the transcendent,<sup>25</sup> participants tended to suggest that spirituality, while taking a multiplicity of forms, ultimately leads to the same reality; it is just that different people need to take ‘different paths’ to find it. For example Sudesha, who defined himself as spiritual and religious as Hindu and an adherent of Radha Soami teachings, claimed, “there is one God and whomever that you, whether you’re a Christian or a Muslim or Sikh or Hindu or whatever, we are looking for the same God whatever you call it. The names could be different. So that’s one thing. In a way you could say all these different roads lead the same way.” Kelly offered a similar idea, explaining that as she has become more aware of different traditions and belief systems she has come to realize that “There are a lot of paths you can take and it doesn’t matter which one you take, it’s how you get there.” Similarly James, a practicing Catholic who defined himself as spiritual and religious, expressed the idea that all belief systems are valid, noting that different people require different modes of belief and practice. He proclaimed, “I basically believe if you have a system of beliefs where you believe in a God or you know – anything, then I think everyone is correct in their own special way... I really respect other peoples beliefs and opinions, so whatever works for them.” Another important concept that Sudesha, Kelly and James’s quotations illustrate through their use of the terms “road,” “path” and “way” is the conviction that spirituality is essentially an on-going journey and process. It is not simply that one discovers the ultimate truth or attains enlightenment; rather truth, wisdom, knowledge are thought to be continually

---

<sup>25</sup> For further discussion please see Chapter Four pages 127-131.

revealed and discovered. Thus for participants, becoming 'spiritual' is not the end of the road, it is the beginning.

Upon being asked "what does the term spirituality mean to you?" and "what does it mean for you to be spiritual?" each participant tended to give a detailed response encompassing a wide range of ideas. Despite their diffuse answers, participants' explanations were remarkably similar. Generally, participants used spirituality to refer to a personal connection to the divine or ultimate reality, a belief in the transcendent nature of individuals and reality, a quest for meaning, significance and purpose in their individual lives and the world at large, and establishing and living by a code of values, morals and ethics.

The following quotation is characteristic of participants' definitions of spirituality including references to and definitions of God, the soul or spirit; a sense that spirituality is personal and internal, but also collective or relational; a concept of life after death; belief in a divine plan or purpose; and the combining or synthesizing of various religious and 'secular' symbols, beliefs, and traditions. I chose this example taken from an interview with Kelly as she so concisely and articulately captures themes and topics raised by other participants in this study. At the time of the interview, Kelly was 35, living with her common law husband of eight years and step daughter, and working as a psychologist. Kelly was raised in a small city in Northern Ontario, moving to Ottawa in early adulthood to attend university. Having lived in Ottawa and later in Montreal for graduate school, Kelly greatly appreciates the diverse and multicultural environment offered by both cities, seeing it as an opportunity to be exposed to new people, cultures, ideas and ways of life. While Kelly was raised Roman Catholic, she currently defines herself as both 'spiritual' and 'religious.' Through the survey, interview and subsequent discussions, she revealed a personalized form of spirituality

synthesizing a variety of beliefs and practices. Kelly offered her understanding of spirituality, explaining:

Kelly: It [spirituality] encompasses this positive energy this light energy that everyone can access or can access in their own way. That is what we are trying to achieve. I guess that is what I like about Buddhist teachings, they don't, they are not, they don't keep any groups out. They tell you if you want to envision Mohamed or envision Jesus, it doesn't matter who....

Spirituality for me is just a feeling of opening up things and love no matter what your beliefs and your past is..... It sounds kind of corny but God is love and I think that we are more than just our physical selves and our cognitive selves there is part of us that continues to live on after death and we are all part, we are all connected in a very special kind of way. And I think that interconnection is God and that spirit part of us, that part that feels love is God. It's more of a force or an energy. Sometimes when I think of God I picture Jesus because he is a symbol of what being part of God is.

Wendy: Is he a manifestation of God?

Kelly: Yes. I think all people are....I think all living things have a soul. It's that part of us that makes us unique and the part of us that gives us a purpose, the part of us that has something to accomplish during this lifetime. And I think that part of you, like I said earlier, goes on. I believe in reincarnation that people come back and that part of you is always the same but in different manifestations. To learn lessons, to teach others, to learn about love.... Life is not just about your job, your car, your house, it's about the relationships you have with others. The relationship you have with God. The relationship you have with yourself and that those are the things that matter and guide what you do in your life. You base your decision on those things and not on the more physical things.

As with the majority of participants, Kelly's concept of spirituality involves a belief in God which is simultaneously defined as immanent and transcendent, as universal force or energy, as an individual being, and as a part of every person and nature. She emphasizes a relationship with God that is both personal and inner-directed as something to be accessed and achieved by individuals, and that is relational and external as something to be experienced through connection and interaction with others. Further, Kelly's explanation exemplifies many participants' belief that there is a divine purpose or plan for all individuals and for the cosmos at large. Also much like other participants, Kelly draws on traditional religions, humanistic psychology, alternative healing, self improvement literature, popular

novels, television programs, as well as conversations with other people in her life to construct a meaningful, coherent worldview and code of moral conduct.

Gregory, a 52 year old husband, father of three children and doctor of alternative and holistic healing, offered a concept of spirituality similar to that of Kelly. Greg stated:

Greg: "Spirituality is getting in touch with your divine."

Wendy: "What's the divine?"

Greg: "It's God. I guess I believe in a Christian God in that sense, but a Jewish God, a Buddha God, it's all the same.... But anybody who is spiritual, you are touching the same divine. The creator, God. Whether it's a guy or girl, I don't think it is such a thing. I think it is a force.... It's everything. To me everything is God. It's like a force that permeates through everything and that's what God is... God is in us all. You are a drop of water in the sea. Are you the ocean? You are a drop of water. But you are part of the ocean. That's how I see it."

Gregory, who defined himself as 'spiritual, but not religious', sees spirituality as manifest in individuals and in all aspects of the universe. Gregory further explained that spirituality is a guiding principle in his life. He felt that all aspects of his life, including his career, marriage, leisure activities, and views on current social, economic and political issues are all a reflection of his interaction with God or the Divine. While not all participants interpreted their lives in such an explicitly spiritual manner as Gregory, most did have a similar perception that spirituality and their sense of the divine, was integrated with their self-identity, their life choices, their values and morals, their treatment of others and their orientations towards social, political, economic and environmental concerns.

The examples taken from Kelly and Gregory both illustrate a common tendency amongst participants to interpret spirituality in general, and God, the transcendent or the divine as both universal and particular. At one level participants defined spirituality in a generic manner including belief in a transcendent reality, an awareness and sense of connection to the transcendent or divine, the quest for meaning and purpose and living by a

code of morals that are thought to reflect this meaning, purpose and transcendent reality. However, being spiritual was thought to take very particular forms and expressions for each individual. Spirituality, from this perspective, is how one personally experiences and understands transcendent reality. Similarly, God and the transcendent tended to be defined in non-specific manner, such as a belief that there is something more, as the universe, a force, energy or light. Beyond this, participants described the transcendent in very specific forms and recognized in specific manifestations, as a “Christian God”, as Jesus, The Buddha, as reiki guides, as ghosts or spirits, as angels, as trees and rocks, in acts of kindness, generosity and forgiveness, and through experiences of joy and grief. However, for participants these specific expressions of the transcendent are defined as personal experiences and interpretations of the universal transcendent, rather than the only or the correct way to experience it.

While spirituality refers to a multiplicity of things for participants, at the root lies the common assertion that there is more to the world than everyday reality – essentially that there is a transcendent aspect of the world and themselves. As William explained, spirituality is knowing that there is “something above and beyond just the world itself”. Being spiritual for these participants means becoming aware of the transcendent, learning to connect with or access it, and then using what they have discovered from those experiences to guide them in their everyday behaviour and perspectives. While explaining her sense of spirituality Aurora Leigh claimed, “to me it is just that spirit. The feeling of the energy, the soul, that sort of thing. It is sort of about how you treat other people almost. How you perceive other people.” Margaret provided a similar description, asserting, “I think it [spirituality] is just the way you are, the way you live. It’s your attitude towards people and

life and what ever. It's not being "me-first" kind of person. And it's building a conversation with God into your life."

Becoming aware of and accessing the divine or the transcendent is not simply an act of turning inward, rather it has a strongly relational and interactive component. The transcendent is to be accessed both through self-reflection and inner growth and through the world, through relationships with other people and through continuous learning. Certain types of activities and experiences tend to be interpreted as evidence, possibilities or in some cases manifestations of the transcendent. Certainly, as with all the information gathered in interviews, participants' accounts of such signals and experiences were idiosyncratic; nevertheless very common themes and types of experiences did emerge. Consistently throughout interviews participants described spirituality and their spiritual experiences in relation to experiences of nature, to paranormal or mysterious phenomenon, experiences of joy, childlike delight and "silliness," to witnessing or feeling compassion, hope, kindness, as well as injustices, tragedy and grief, through feeling a deep sense of connection with other people, and through facing personal challenges and great accomplishments. Correlating closely with Luckmann's concept of levels of transcendence,<sup>26</sup> often participants described individual moments or experiences when everyday reality was briefly transcended (little transcendences), which in turn acts as reminder or confirmation that there is something more (great transcendences). Reflecting themes found in other studies of contemporary religion and spirituality, many of the participants expressed concerns about the disenchantment of the world and worried that many people in general feel alienated from the world. For example,

---

<sup>26</sup> In the article "Shrinking Religion, Expanding Transcendence" (1990) Luckmann distinguishes between "little," "intermediate" and "great" transcendences. Cf Luckmann (2003).

Dakhir suggested late modern western lifestyle often prevents people from experiencing the transcendent. He explained,

I mean when I am walking in Shirley's Bay there is just a magical feeling about it. I don't think people do that as much anymore. Like, take time to feel the beauty, that sense of magic. People are living in the cities and there is work and no time for horseplay or silliness.... There is no time to think about entire things, there is only living in the now. The rational thinking I guess.... When you are that detached from normal life you realize that there is something more. There is more to life. It's a fabulous feeling! You are in awe of that sort of thing. It is just so cool! I think cool is a good way of describing the mythical, the magical.

During his interviews, Dhakir stressed the importance of being able to experience the world beyond everyday reality suggesting that it is through nature, playfulness and joy that people can gain a sense of awe, wonder and magic in the world. For Dakhir, such activities bring a sense of meaning and connection with the world, and further act as confirmation that there is a transcendent and divine reality.

Discussions of experiences in nature figured prominently in participants' descriptions of spirituality. While Jennifer was explaining the reasons why she feels she is spiritual one of her comments was "like nature, like on a beautiful day you have this feeling that there has to be more than what we see right now." Similarly, Stacy reiterated this idea stating, "I definitely believe in something. When I look at certain things, even the sun on a really nice day and I really appreciate it, it is just so gorgeous, it makes me think that, I am somewhat spiritual." During his interview when I asked Alex what spirituality was he responded by describing his experiences while sailing. He recounted,

We would always come back at sunset. And you would always have, like every time, I would look at the sunset and just be like there has to be something else. There has to be some kind of divinity and it's always at moments like that, that it hits me. There has to be something.... It's like an epiphany. Like it hits you. Those moments... Spirituality, it's like when I am on the boat. And it always happens when there is some kind of beauty around me.

Similarly, Stephanie related her spirituality to feelings of grace, joy, confidence and transcendence that she experiences when she is in a more natural as opposed to urban environment. Further describing these feelings, Stephanie stated, "I always feel the most spiritual or most close to spirituality when I am in nature or near water. There is something about water that makes me feel connected to energy or that big source of energy or power or whatever....there's the fact that all this was created. I feel uplifted. I feel I am at my best. That I could do anything and be forgiven of all my bad deeds. I feel free."

For Jennifer, Alex, and Stephanie, as with many other participants, what they see in nature and how they feel when looking at the natural world inspires them to believe in a transcendent realm and a divine force behind nature. Other participants, such as Margaret, explained that nature is a reminder not only that God exists but that people and nature are an expression of God. Margaret said, "When you look out the window and see the beautiful tree that was created. And I love the way that they build the sky and the trees and the water, that's all part of it. And that's what we are. To me those are, it's the natural things that we are."

While Camille claimed that the complexity of systems in nature including the human body act as confirmations of a Divine creator, stating "I just think that the human body is so complex it could not have just started from the seed of something, it has to be more divine than that." Such experiences of and contemplations about nature and the relationship between nature, humans and the transcendent, for participants, help to establish a sense of connection with the divine, with other people and with the world, and function as evidence that there is a meaningful, transcendent order.

## **“Little” and “Great” Transcendences: Paranormal, Supernatural and Science?**

Just as nature acts as a reminder and source of connection to transcendent reality, participants also tended to discuss “supernatural” “paranormal” or “anomalous” phenomena in relation to their spiritual beliefs and experiences. One of the important aspects of spirituality highlighted by participants is being open to possibilities and potential in the world. This attitude tends to carry over into their discussions about paranormal and unknown phenomenon such as ESP, telepathy, precognition, divination, belief in ghosts, spirits, angels, aliens, as well as aspects of alternative healing, concepts of energy, “Qi,” and ideas about life after death. For participants being open minded about paranormal or other phenomena that cannot be explained by conventional science is connected with their spirituality in the sense that these ideas point to the belief in a spiritual world beyond the realm of traditional scientific rationality. Thus, the supernatural and paranormal are thought to be manifestations of the transcendent reality beyond everyday reality. With two notable exceptions, Margaret and Sudesha who did not express much interest in paranormal or supernatural phenomenon,<sup>27</sup> most of the participants saw their interest in the supernatural, the unknown and the uncanny as another expression of their spirituality.

For example, Trish, Peter, Camille and Tanya suggested that their lifelong interest in supernatural and paranormal phenomena was simply a manifestation of their sense of spirituality. Trish explained that her interest in paranormal and psychic phenomenon is part

---

<sup>27</sup> Sudesha and Margaret are the two participants born during the 1930's. While my sample is far too small to extrapolate data based on age cohorts, this may in fact be further examples of trends noted by Sjödin's research into the paranormal and religion in Sweden (1999: 75-85). Sjödin's investigations indicated that people in the age category of 60-74 tended to express significantly low levels of interest in the paranormal as compared to people in 16-29; 30-44; and 45-59 age cohorts. However, Sjödin does not provide in depth interpretation or explanation of this data, rather suggests two potential explanations: either interest in the paranormal simply seems to decline with age or this trend may be indicative of value and belief differentials amongst different generations.

of her general interest and beliefs in “New Agey kind of spiritual things. Things like reincarnation, ghosts, opens up the idea of life after death...and another realm of spirithood.” Further as Trish spoke of her belief in paranormal activity such as ghosts and spirits she suggested that “maybe they just are there to let us know that there is something more.” Tanya reiterated this idea claiming that her sense of spirituality is directly related to her belief in (and experiences with) precognition, ghosts and guardian angels. Moreover Tanya’s definition of spirituality was directly connected with her experiences with such events. Tanya stated that she has been interested in spirituality as well as paranormal phenomena since she was young. However, she explained that she did go through a significant loss of faith and spiritual crisis for a few years following the death of one of her children. Tanya explained that this tragedy caused her to lose, question and then regain her faith in spirituality, particularly as the result of her direct experiences with paranormal or unexplained events. While Tanya, a social worker studying to become a psychologist, admitted that her experiences might also have psychological explanations as she was going through the process of grieving, she nonetheless felt that they provided her with a sense of hope, well-being, confidence that there is a deeper meaning in the world and faith that there is a supernatural and transcendent dimension to reality. When I asked her what she means when she says she is spiritual, Tanya replied,

Inner instinct I have experiences with that all the time, like ESP things where I think something is going to happen and then it does. I believe in the spiritual world and think we can connect with it...I also had experiences with ghosts or guardian angel or ghost, I’m not sure what.... So things like that really opened my eyes, because my faith had been ruined at the time. I was so mad at God [because of the death of her daughter]. It made me see the advantages of believing still, like I still have two healthy kids, and maybe that maybe I will connect with her in the afterlife.

While Tanya’s specific life experiences were unique amongst participants, her sentiment that spirituality is directly connected with the paranormal was quite common. Part of spirituality

for participants rests in the awareness that there is more to the world than meets the eye. Quite similarly Simon's discussions about his spirituality focused almost exclusively on his interest and belief in paranormal phenomenon. Again much like Tanya and Simon, Eric explained that he defines himself as spiritual because he believes in "things like telepathy," "energy," "Qi," "a spirit or soul," "other dimensions" and thinks that all such things are interconnected or united in some way. In a slightly different manner, David claimed his interest and belief in paranormal events and psychic phenomena act to "give me evidence to believe in something larger than life." While not all of the participants firmly believe in such mysterious phenomena and realize that there are many fictional and fraudulent accounts, most still believe that some instances of supernatural events and occurrences are quite likely possibilities.

Beyond this, participants often suggested that such phenomena point to the fundamental interconnectedness of the universe. For example, Jennifer claimed that paranormal and unknown phenomena help to provide her with a sense of connection with other people and with the divine. While discussing phenomena such as ESP, precognition and telepathy Jennifer said, "Like when you meet someone for the first time and you have a connection with them but you can't really explain it at all. It's like a higher power working through you or something. That connection immediately." As she further discussed her belief in psychic phenomena, as well as her interest in the supernatural Jennifer claimed, "there are definitely connections... I think there are people that have deeper spiritual connections to the other world... Like just there are things around you that you can't explain and it just makes you think a little bit more. Uh I don't know, like there are things like death, really and things associated with death.... It just makes you think there is something more."

Similarly, Ewan also suggested that the paranormal and the unknown point to a transcendent reality and are instances of connecting with that reality. During one of his interviews Ewan said:

I just think the fact that we know so little about the universe and yet ordinary matter constitutes less than 10% than the actual physical matter in the universe and our bodies – we can only sense a small portion of that. There have to be different planes one can experience and there have to be different receptors in the brain that could allow communication with some sort of supernatural forces or communication with a different height of energy that we are not aware of.

Like many of the other participants, Ewan further connected his belief in “other planes of energy” and “supernatural forces” with quasi-scientific interpretations. Ewan suggested that while current scientific experiments and worldviews cannot support such claims, eventually “science will prove the existence of spirituality and an afterlife.” This was a common theme amongst participants. Certainly none of the participants refute the validity of science, however, much like their opinions on institutional religion, they tend to see traditional science as being limited. Many like Ewan suggested that further advances in science, particularly quantum physics will eventually confirm many of their spiritual beliefs.

In a related manner both Aurora Leigh and Dhakir both offered remarkably similar explanations of God and the universe, rooted in their interpretations of spirituality and science. When asked how she came to her spiritual conception of the world, part of Aurora Leigh’s response was,

Molecular theories, energy theories. It’s kind of weird and they all sort of fuse together. It’s like if God is everything, that means that God equals everything equals all existence. And if we are a part of existence that means that all of us equals existence so all of us equals God. So every person that has lived or ever will live is part of this big equation. Since we’re all attached that means there is some sort of dynamic going on between us.

Likewise, when Dhakir was asked why he believes in the interconnectedness of the universe and has faith in a transcendent reality, he replied,

Physics. It relates back to the book [the Qu'ran] where it says that God is everything. It is possible. So if something can exist everywhere at once, is that what God is? That's why I think God is light. Light is everywhere. So that might help explain what it is. So Qi would be like moving with the light.

Participants' discussions of the relationship between spirituality and the paranormal, as well as their ideas about the connection between spirituality and science tended to highlight two common themes within contemporary forms of spirituality: the first being that while transcendent reality was thought to manifest in specific ways, it does so in variation; furthermore, the manifestations of the transcendent are not specific to one tradition or system of belief rather they are thought to be universal experiences or events that may simply be interpreted differently by different individuals or cultures. Nevertheless, such examples were thought to point to the underlying truth that there is more to the world than everyday experience. The other theme raised by these discussions is the notion of plausibility. Personally constructed belief systems are particularly vulnerable to doubt and uncertainty as they do not have a clearly established form of social support or means of substantiation confirming their beliefs are indeed true. While participants did tend to claim that ultimately what mattered was that they felt or knew their current beliefs to be true, they nevertheless looked for some level of assurance. Both aspects of the paranormal as well as scientific (or quasi-scientific) theories seemed to offer additional evidence that their concept of transcendent reality was at least possible. Thus, both the paranormal and new science are thought to point towards the reality of the transcendent.

### **Feeling Spiritual: Emotions as Forms of Transcendence**

Beyond seeing the transcendent expressed in nature and paranormal phenomena, participants also tend to see expressions of happiness, joy, passion and playfulness as an

important aspect of spiritual life. Part of the critique of religion offered by participants was their tendency to see religion as being “too serious,” “too strict” and “oppressive”; further, many do not see organized religions as offering opportunities to inspire joyful feelings, have a sense of playfulness or celebrate positive experiences. Margaret explained that her decision to leave the Catholic Church was motivated in part by the negative feelings and ideas that she felt were entrenched in Catholicism. In our conversation she stated, “it was all about sin, guilt... I remember as a child being told to do the rosary – and it was always an order do this or God won’t be happy or you won’t go to heaven and that’s a terrible thing to put on a child... it took me years to crawl out from under all of that guilt.” She further explained that one of the problems with her experiences of Catholicism was that it prevented her from acknowledging her feelings. Much of her recent spiritual development was centred around learning to develop and acknowledge her feelings of all sorts including anger, grief, joy and self-confidence. She attributes her development in these areas to numerous experiences, including her use of psychology, acting classes, volunteer work, reading authors such as Thomas Moore and learning from various television programs including *Jean Vanier in Conversation*. Margaret explained,

It helped me develop my own personal being...my self confidence. It’s all part of it because it helps you bring that out and express it. That’s just whether you are expressing it to yourself, when you are alone or you’re expressing it to other people and you’re talking about whatever you are talking about that’s all part of it. So isn’t it wonderful how we progress?”

Later on in the interview Margaret explained that one of the great accomplishments of her spiritual development was learning to that it was not only acceptable to feel good, happy and proud, and realizing that these feelings are part of an expression of what it means to be spiritual. She mentioned that she has come to see birthdays as an opportunity to celebrate such feelings. She stated:

I think birthdays are really important. I love to celebrate my birthday and the older you get the longer you need to celebrate. And I keep telling people that. It's really important and special to do that. Celebrate that [you are turning older]. I think other peoples' birthdays are really important. I will make as big a fuss about other people's birthdays as out my own....It's the day you were born. I mean hell we came into the world. We're special! Celebrate your own uniqueness. It's like Jean Vanier says 'Celebrate who you are. Celebrate your own unique self.' And we need to do this!

Other participants offered similar commentaries, explaining that they felt that organized religion do not leave enough room for laughter or enjoyment, while spirituality was thought to manifest and encourage such feelings. Throughout the interviews with William, he repeatedly mentioned the importance of laughter, making jokes and not taking life too seriously. He connected this value to all aspects of his life including his personal relationships, his education, his outlook on life, as well as, to spirituality and television. As William so consistently raised the theme of joking and laughter I asked him if his appreciation for joy, laughter and poking fun at things was part of his 'ultimate concern?'

William replied,

Absolutely! Yeah! I think that is one of the things that I have a problem with in organized religions, like Catholicism for one, they just don't have a sense of humor about themselves... You can't take yourself too seriously. I tried that and it doesn't work .... I like to laugh. I find anger and depression and sadness while they are integral parts of being human, they are negative emotions and I want to keep them as subdued as possible. I love to laugh....Laughter is very, very important. I find life to be hysterical sometimes and for the most part just relatively amusing. I try not to take life in general too seriously because if you start dwelling on some thing it invariably leads to dwelling on everything and while it's still important to keep a realistic perspective on life you can't let yourself become consumed in seriousness. It's not conducive to good health and physical or mental health. It doesn't work for people.

This is not to imply that William was flippant or dismissive about the 'more serious' things in life, particularly as William also spoke of his great concern for the well-being of his friends and family, his interest in social, political and environmental issues, as well as his

thoughtful reflection on various philosophical, religious and spiritual systems. Rather, he suggested that humor and laughter could and in fact should be part of all of these things.

While humor and laughter were significant for some participants, others such as Nora explained that spirituality is integrally connected with the ability to experience passion and pleasure in life. In one of our conversations Nora described her spirituality claiming,

Spiritual is finding pleasure in everything and knowing that everything is linked....  
The whole joie de vivre thing, I think it should be in everybody, whether it is spiritual or not. I think for me it is spiritual because I spent so much time dealing with the problems and to me it is the backbone of my faith.

Further, Nora often discussed her spirituality in relation to overcoming severe depression, explaining that there was a reciprocal relationship between her spirituality and her ability to experience the world in a positive light. Nora attributed various influences in her life to teaching her the value of feeling joy, happiness and inspiration including her experiences with depression, as well as seeing acts of cruelty, greed and tragedy on a global scale. Nora further explained that such negative experiences remind her how essential it is to treasure life, to use her life experiences to help her grow and develop, and motivate her to try to work for social and political change in the world.

As with Margaret, William and Nora, participants felt that certain personal experiences of joy, pleasure and laughter had greater spiritual significance and meaning. This is not to imply that participants exclusively interpreted such feelings in a spiritual light. Everyday reality was usually thought to focus around everyday experiences. Nevertheless, certain experiences and feelings seemed to work as little transcendences pointing to something deeper and greater than everyday reality.

Participants' descriptions of their concepts, signals and experiences of transcendent reality frequently moved between general universal, non-specific ideas such as the feeling that there

is “something” more, deeper or greater than everyday reality, and particular personal interpretations and experiences of what that something more may be. However, when offering detailed descriptions, definitions or experiences, beyond generalized notions of “something more” or “energy” or “universal life force” participants usually strongly emphasized that these were personal interpretations or possibilities, not to be taken as exclusive or totalizing accounts. This quickly became evident through participants’ tendencies to qualify their responses to certain types of questions, such as “What is spirituality?” or “What happens after we die?” using phrases such as “to me it means” or “that’s just what I think” or “someone else might not think that.” In fact in some cases, participants would offer a range of possibilities. However, while responding to questions such as “How are you spiritual?” or “Do you believe in...” participants were much more comfortable speaking in particulars. This further coincided with participants’ understandings of spirituality as something for people to access through their personal experience, learning and reflection. Consequently while the details of their experiences and particular manifestations of the transcendent are thought to be inherently diverse, nevertheless they are all thought to be expressions of the same transcendent reality. This belief was further reflected in participants’ discussions regarding ‘universal’ or ‘innate’ morals and the meaning and purpose of life. Participants suggested that while there are certain fundamental moral and life principles, and there is a transcendent meaning and purpose to each individual life and universe at large, they must be negotiated, reflected upon and discovered within the context of each person’s life and environment.

## **Reflections on Morality, Meaning and Purpose**

### **Morality: The Good, the Bad and the Flexible**

Participants' conceptions of morals, ethics and values also tended share common characteristics and themes. Generally, while participants felt that certain morals, values and ethics are personally and culturally defined and therefore somewhat relative, they also asserted that some are universal and innate. In particular, truth, honesty, helping others, harming none, love and the value of relationships or 'connection' were identified as aspects of ultimate reality or ultimate morals and values. Moreover, these morals and values were interconnected with participants' ideas about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. While these general concepts were thought to be universal and fundamental features of humanity, participants further explained that such concepts are expressed in different and specific manners depending on personal and social context and circumstances. Further, just as participants draw from traditional religions, teaching from popular spirituality, aspects of secular culture, as well as personal experiences and interactions with others as they conceptualize and understand transcendent reality, they similarly draw from these sources as they define and apply transcendent moral and values to everyday reality.

While some participants suggested that they based their sense of morals and ethics upon traditional religious teachings, all of the participants claim that their sense of morals and values ultimately comes from an inner sense of what is right and wrong, and they further reflect upon how to implement that in their lives. Trish claimed "I think there is a definite right and wrong. It's not just a social construct. People don't kill people because it feels wrong. It is considered immoral in every culture. But where does that come from? It has to be something in us to know it's not right. So I think there are intrinsic values. You know in

your soul what is right and wrong.” While explaining his sense of God and the universe

Ewan made direct reference to his belief in absolute morals. He stated,

I believe that there is order in the universe. There is order in our structures. I also believe there is a moral order, but I don't think it has to do with physical sins like lust or anything, I think it has more to do with principles, pertaining more to humans. I think certain principles, certain moral principles. I believe that there is a truth. I believe that there is a truth somewhere. I don't think that it doesn't happen for a reason. Everything comes together so well that there has to be an answer. There is truth. I believe that there are definitely absolutes.

The intrinsic sense of morality generally described by participants tended to be based upon a “golden rule” sense of morality and values. Frequently when asked what constitutes their sense of morality, participants quoted variations of the “golden rule” such as “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” or “treat others as you would like to be treated.” Upon further explaining what their morals consist of participants usually associated morality with being “a good person,” “not harming others” “helping people,” “being truthful and honest,” and “knowing right from wrong.” Kelly’s description of her sense of morals and values once again succinctly characterizes themes raised by other people in their interviews.

During our conversation Kelly said:

I guess what would make someone a good honest person is someone who is kind, who is honest, someone who treats others with respect, who use their life in some way in the service of others. Even for people that are the opposite I still feel a sense of compassion for them because they just haven't found their way yet. Maybe they haven't had anyone to love them or show them the way....The big thing is the golden rule. Treating someone like you would want to be treated. Being honest. One of the biggest ones is maintaining a sense of integrity with what I say and do. That's really powerful.

Similarly when asked if there was such a thing as ultimate values and morals Aurora Leigh replied, “Respecting the golden rule... Truth is a big thing. Honesty, kindness. I don't know.

To me it's all kind of the same thing.” Andrew repeated these same ideas, with Andrew stating that “Treat other people the way they want to be treated, with equality and respect. ...

doing things for others without expecting something in return” constitute “good, moral behaviour.” Descriptions of immoral behaviour, on the other hand, was often described as harming others, carelessness or lack of awareness, prejudice, discrimination, and social injustice. Andrew replied that immorality involves “harming another person.” Likewise, Stephanie defined immorality as “Causing other people pain. Deliberately doing so, but also just through not paying enough attention to other people to even notice that you are doing it.” Camille and Peter both discussed immorality or acts they considered to be considered inherently wrong or evil in terms of social and political injustices. Peter suggested that immoral acts often resulted from a combination of ignorance, close mindedness and the inability (or refusal) to empathize with others. Such acts manifest both in the actions of individuals and social institutions through social, economic, and political policies and decisions.

In terms of the application of those ‘transcendent’ morals, most of the participants explained that these morals do require a great degree of personal reflection as behaving morally is not always a clear-cut issue. This was often the case when I pressed participants to talk further about honesty, asking if they felt that honesty was always the best policy or if it was ever acceptable to tell a lie. As Trish claimed, “Lying to some extent can be wrong, but there are times when it is necessary. Lying and honesty – that’s tricky. It’s a lot less black and white. You have to weigh out the consequences.” She further explained that sometimes telling the truth can cause more harm than good, that in some situations it is acceptable to lie or omit the truth because a greater good can come from it or because telling the truth can cause lead to someone being harmed or hurt. Sudesha repeated this idea during one of our interviews when he was asked to describe his ultimate values. He responded,

Don't harm things.... Do the best to others as you would have them do to you. Help everybody.... Tell the truth number one. That is an easy thing to say, but practicing it in daily life is something else. But it is not always practical. My way of following it is you tell the truth so long as nobody is hurt by it. If my telling the truth means this guy is going to be crucified, then I'd rather keep mum, right? But will not tell a lie, but I will keep quiet about it, which in a way goes to telling a lie, but anyway that is my way of doing it.

Generally participants tended to feel that there are some inherently correct values and morals. However as illustrated by Trish and Sudesha's quotations, at the same time they also tend to exercise a great degree of situational ethics as well.

### **Spiritual Meaning and Purpose**

Beyond this, participants also tended connect both their sense of meaning and purpose and their sense of morals and values in relation to their professions (or future professions) and their overall place in the world. Most of the participants have a high degree of economic and physical security, of which they are very aware. Consequently, many of them feel a sense of responsibility to use their positions of advantage to help others and to work to improve the world. Thus their sense of what it means to be spiritual, their ultimate morals and values and the meaning and purpose of life are interwoven with their overall life orientations, including their professional and leisure activities. Often participants evoked notions of 'a calling' or a vocation as they discussed their careers and further tended to relate such work to their overall spirituality. For example, many of the participants are involved in some sort of caring or helping profession. Participants included a nurse, a psychologist, a social worker, a doctor of chiropractic and holistic medicine, public school teachers (or student teachers), and a small business owner specializing in environmental and ecologically sound services and products. Also participants spoke of their involvement with volunteering, social justice movements, and grassroots political and social activism.

For example, Peter, a primary school teacher, explained that while he does not explicitly approach his profession as a 'spiritual person' his sense of purpose and spirituality does come into play. Peter spoke of having to fill many roles as a teacher, not only as an educator but also as a psychologist, counselor, care-giver and friend. While Peter certainly does not provide direct religious or spiritual instruction of any kind, he explained that his overall spiritual values which include helping others, kindness and sharing, valuing diversity, and fostering self-respect, self-confidence and respect of others do come through in his approach to teaching. On the other hand, Kelly, a psychologist, defined her professional life in a more explicitly spiritual manner. Kelly defined her spirituality as connecting with God, connecting with others, and embarking on quest for self-awareness and self-improvement so that you can "be the best that you can in your service to others." Consequently she explained that she felt her career was part of her spiritual life. During one interview she stated,

Having a vocation that is in service of others is very important. Very, very. I feel very lucky that way. I think it is [part of a calling or something bigger] because I walk into where I work and automatically I feel this positive energy take over. I feel like every time I meet a new client and I feel like I can't wait to spend more time with them and work on these goals with them. I just think if you love what you do that much and you see it not just as a job but connecting with other human beings and making a small change, If you can help them make a small change it is huge! Every client I have ever met has had a huge impact on me, I have probably learned more from them than they have from me.

As in true 'lifestyle' spirituality form, spirituality and purpose in life was further intertwined into other aspects of participant lives rather than remaining a separate or distinct part.

Moreover, it is also illustrates the relational component of personal spirituality as participants defined and manifest spirituality as connecting with themselves, others, nature and the divine; showing care, kindness and compassion for others; being concerned with the state of the world – socially, politically, economically and environmentally, and working towards improving it. This is not to suggest that participants take an ascetic or self-denying approach

towards helping others nor is it the only aspect of their spirituality, rather it is meant to highlight the fact that personal forms of spirituality and transcendent meaning are not simply privatized or inner directed phenomena.

Coinciding with common tendencies found in other examinations of popular spirituality, participants expressed the idea that the goal, purpose and meaning of life is to learn, teach and grow. In fact, as participants spoke about the relationship between their spirituality and television viewing it became quite evident that learning, thinking and talking about spirituality, even when particular beliefs and topics are not part of their own systems of belief, is thought to be part of the process of being spiritual. Thus, learning for participants is not simply an intellectual pursuit as it is seen as having spiritual and cosmological significance. Frequently participants expressed the idea that learning is tied to each person's ultimate purpose and destiny, suggesting that each person or soul has specific lessons to learn in life in this one or in others. Explaining that once those lessons are eventually acquired and understood, the process of rebirth will eventually cease, was an idea Stephanie expressed during one of our interviews. She began by stating "The point of life is to learn new things." She further expanded on this claiming,

I believe that your soul comes to earth, so obviously I believe that they are above us other than here and come down and take human form to learn lessons before they die. If they haven't learned all of the lessons they need to learn they will come back. I believe in reincarnation, as well, until you have learned all the lessons.

Wendy: what lessons?

Stephanie: I don't know, the lessons of life. Patience, giving and love and tolerance.

The lessons that Stephanie mentioned further connected with her sense of morality as she later used the same terminology to describe her system of morals and values.

Michelle and Nora echoed similar sentiments suggesting that all people have their own specific purpose to fulfill in life that is some way divinely inspired and points to a deeper meaning of existence. Nora explained,

I sort of feel that everyone has a purpose. Like [my friend Janine] she is so giving and loving, I am pretty sure that she was put on this earth to make other people feel comforted. She is a blessing. And I feel that everyone has a purpose in this life. Certain criminals they show you were the path of vice leads. And I think if you get to the Promised Land and you haven't fulfilled your purpose and you haven't lived the life that you should have then you get reincarnated again and again and again until you get it right. And it is not a punishment, it is another chance. And you can have as many times as it takes and when you have finally lived the life that is acceptable or you have met your purpose, you go to the Promised Land.

While Michelle stated, "I think that you have your own purpose. My purpose is not going to be yours. We all quest for the same thing, but I am meant to do it this way.... I mean maybe you just sit on your couch and vegetate and its' your purpose. But I like to think there is something more." Such ideas connect further with participants' sense of destiny, purpose and fate. Generally, participants suggested that each individual has some sort of destiny or purpose to fulfill in their lives. Usually participants felt unsure of their specific purpose or destiny but felt that it was somehow connected with helping people or improving the world in some way.

In 'religion à la carte' fashion, participants often tended to synthesize their belief in destiny with a belief in reincarnation and heaven. Rather than seeing these beliefs as contradictory, they see both heaven and reincarnation as likely. Some like Stephanie try to fashion them into a plausible belief system. Others such as Alex and Jennifer had not quite developed such a comprehensive system, rather they maintained that they believed in heaven, reincarnation and ghosts but were not sure how such concepts fit together into a larger picture. Moreover, it did not really matter. What was important was that they considered these beliefs to be possibilities and found them to be appealing and useful concepts.

Beyond this, participants tended to express the sense that there is some kind of a “grand plan” or universal meaning and purpose in the world. However, none claimed to know or understand what it was. Further, they expressed the idea that each person has a specific role to play and lessons to learn which relate both to the meaning and purpose of their individual lives and relationships, and also relate to the larger cosmic meaning and purpose of the world. Moreover, spirituality was defined in part as an attempt to discover and fulfill their own purpose or destiny while also gaining insight and further connection with the universal purpose and meaning of the world. Generally, participants explained that the meaning and purpose in the world and of their individual lives was a combination of predestination and personal choice. For example Serena referred to this concept of the purpose and destined aspect of life as “co-creation”. She explained,

What I believe, First of all, like you know that there is a divine plan and the whole co-creation kind of thing...I believe that co-creation, when I make a decision the universe kind of meets me half way, so that is the one level, sort of the human level to work with. It makes it so that I can live my life and make decisions and know that I am always being supported. But on top of that I think that everything is determined, but I don't want to say that it is determined because then people will say so why should I bother doing something. So there is the co-creation, but above, above, above, above, above, there is the determinism, so the co-creation falls into it... Yeah and even my free will to me it is free, I am going to decide if I am going to go to sleep or stay awake that is free will on human terms, but above human terms it is already determined even what I consider free will.

Wendy: What determines that?

Serena: I just say the universe.

Stephanie offered a similar explanation stating, “I have sort of, I find I am changing all the time. It's like a fifty-fifty kind of thing. You have your destiny but you still have choices, so you can choose your destiny. It's like there is a map laid out, but you still get to choose which road you take... You can choose how you will react to a certain situation.” Likewise Camille asserted,

I believe you do have some things fated but at the same time if I just let myself drift, I don't think that destiny will take care of everything. I can't be lazy about it, I have to participate completely. But I think some big things, mainly because I think some people are meant to meet each other, whether it's a mate, or a mother or a great co-worker, so I think there are something that people have no choice about, but as to what happens with it, that's up to the individual.

While not all participants offered such clear explanations of the relationship between predestination and choice, across the board they seemed to think that there is a dynamic interrelation between them. Certainly, as people who value choice, autonomy and freedom, some level of choice and free will in the matters of purpose and destiny is desirable. At the same time however, most did not feel that their experiences and purpose in life was simply random or a matter of choice rather they felt that God or the universe had a hand in all of these things. This I suggest points to a particular tension felt by participants, and I suggest a more common tension experienced by others living in the ever changing and highly autonomous nature of late modern society, as they look for a degree of certainty and reassurance amidst such diverse choices and change. William exemplified this attitude claiming,

One of my favorite saying is 'everything will work out in the end' and no matter what your beliefs are they will. I think if there is any aspect of predestination that I believe in, it's that eventually it will work out for people. Everyone has a different thing. Everyone is completely different and it will work out for them.

Attitudes such as William's, including the statement "everything will work out in the end" were commonly expressed during interviews. Generally participants held a general sense of hope and well-being and further tended to believe that all things, even negative or tragic events occur for a reason. While the reason may not be readily apparent, or in fact may never become known, they tended to rest their assurance that there is a greater meaning and purpose behind them.

Frequently this was connected once again to most of the participants' belief that they are meant to learn (or teach) particular lessons during their life. Some of these things are discovered by personal effort, while some other experiences and lessons are thought to have a fated, divine or synchronistic element to them. For example Dhakir commented,

Occasionally you get that weird kind of sense.... This is going to sound silly, but I kind of have this sense that things just work out for me. Like if I have a plan, it usually works out. There are some really, really long shot brain bending, twisty ideas and they rely on other people being there when I need them to be and they just kind of happen. It just falls into place. Like I will be thinking I need to meet this person and then I will. And it happens a lot..... It's more like a sense of certainty. Like you know it is going to happen. You just know it will work out.

In a related manner Liz suggested that the universe or life force offers up opportunities to learn and grow as they are needed. She explained, "I was talking with someone the other day about synchronicity and I think that is a lot of what it is when the need gets so strong to know something, if I am aware enough, it [the life force] will answer. And there is almost a trust in that." Such examples highlight participants' tendencies towards a transcendent sense of hope and well-being. Once again drawing upon references to the transcendent, participants often felt that their purpose, path and road to well-being was guided or at least influenced by a force greater than themselves, thus their own meaning and purpose was connected to the transcendent one. This was thought to manifest in different ways. Some felt that the universe or God offered them signs, pushed them in a certain direction or offered particular opportunities to learn. Others felt that this was manifest and signaled through guardian angels (sometimes described as otherworldly, divine beings, other times described as other people who do good or were put in the right place and the right time), ghosts, divination, ESP and precognition, or an inner knowledge. All of such instances recounted by participants contained the underlying themes that there is a transcendent reality, that it makes itself known in various ways, it guides them towards their life's purpose, that there is greater

meaning in their actions and experiences and that regardless of what happens the outcome will always be the right one.

Gregory offered numerous examples of the apparent interrelation between the transcendent, his life's purpose, and his well-being. During his interview Gregory described four particular situations in his life where he felt that divine intervention was involved. In two instances he explained this intervention kept him safe from dangerous situations.

Regarding one of these events, Gregory recounted, "then a voice told me 'get the hell out of there and go home'"; in the other he felt that divine intervention was sent in the way of another person, helping him evade a violent conflict. In two other situations Gregory felt that the divine intervened through offering him signs and opportunities that lead him to his career path and to meeting his wife, both of which he sees as intricately connected with his spiritual path. After recounting these experiences Gregory proclaimed, "To me it was more than synchronistic. It was like Divine intervention. I mean divine intervention doesn't have to be a fire bolt. It can be things like that. I mean how the hell I did it..... But I survived somehow. It happens, it works, I don't know how."

Other participants such as Tanya, Nora, Margaret, Kelly and Alex suggested that they have gained a sense of meaning, purpose and general well-being as the direct result of situations of crisis, tragedy and suffering. Alex explained that,

I feel like someone is looking over me. I don't know who it is. I'll feel protected in way.... bad things like my Dad being in critical condition in the hospital, my aunt having breast cancer, bad things do happen but they always come out of it. It makes me feel stronger and them stronger. And it just feels like there is something there watching over me and my family. Like bad things have happened but I feel safe. I always feel that I will live a long life.

While Margaret speaking about the death of someone close to her stated "I always think that whether, if something isn't right in your life or you are having difficulty, yes but you have to

go through those, you always come out on the other end. They always resolve themselves somehow.” For both Alex and Margaret, such situations of crisis were interpreted as important experiences in personal growth and understanding. Moreover, while they had ‘negative’ or challenging experiences both felt that such experiences provided them with further assurance and trust that things will work out for the best. While described in various forms, participants’ discussions of spirituality, the meaning and purpose of life and the transcendent tended to be related to a general sense of hope, goodness and well-being. Further the specific applications of these ideas manifested in terms of their personal experiences, whether it be through signs and divine intervention, through relationships, through learning or life experiences, and through actively trying to improve their lives, the lives of others and help make the world a better place.

## **Summary**

While the definitions and descriptions of spirituality provided by each participant did contain much in the way of unique details and idiosyncrasies based upon their own personal experiences of spirituality, for the most part their overall characterizations of what spirituality is and how they are spiritual remained remarkably similar. Spirituality, according to participants in this study, is most basically a personal awareness, sense of connection with a transcendent reality beyond everyday experience, that there is meaningful purpose to existence and each individual life, and that there are certain innate principles of human behaviour. These characteristics are thought to be fundamental realities, however as demonstrated in their discussions, at a universal level they tend to be only vaguely defined. Participants by and large argued that while there is one ultimate transcendent force and reality, it is expressed and experienced in many forms and manifestations. According to

participants, by its very nature, transcendent reality is diverse. Reflecting (at least implicitly) an awareness of the relationship between personal agency and social structures, participants explained that experiences and expressions of the transcendent are shaped by personal experience, as well as social, cultural and historical context. Personal biography and culture are thought to help give form to the raw experience of the transcendent reality, providing framework of language, symbols, concepts and meanings through which experience of the transcendent can be apprehended and understood.

The majority of participants, with the exception of Sudesha and Dhakir, were raised within some form of Christian context, even Liz and Serena the two participants who spoke of being raised 'without' a religion spoke of the influence of being raised in a Christian cultural context, cultural celebrations of Christmas and Easter, family members that were involved in Christian denominations and occasional participation in Christian religious services, and even attending a Catholic school. For the other participants, while the degrees vary regarding their level of direct involvement with Christian denominations and adherence to various Christian beliefs, symbols and practices, such cultural and religious environment is certainly influential upon participants' beliefs and practices. Notably, those participants who describe themselves as 'post-Catholic' or have rejected their Christian upbringing often continue to incorporate some Christian imagery, beliefs and practices into their own personal forms of spirituality, including envisioning God as a 'Christian God,' making occasional references to Bible stories and their concept of Jesus as a historical teacher and philosopher offering a message of love, peace and rejection of organized, dogmatic religion, and drawing from the work and words of contemporary Christian thinkers such as Jean Vanier and Thomas Moore, celebration of Christian cultural holidays and for some, occasionally going to Christian ceremonies or visiting churches or cathedrals. However, it is important to note

that these aspects of Christianity that have been incorporated into the personal spiritual beliefs of participants have been significantly reworked and reinterpreted from their original religious background. Nevertheless a Christian religious and cultural framework has influenced the way in which participants envision and describe their spirituality. However, they are not bound by it and in fact are quite comfortable (and feel it requires) much supplementing, reworking and reinterpreting Christian traditions and beliefs to fit with their spiritual worldview.

Beyond a general or quasi-Christian framework, many other cultural influences clearly impact upon ways in which participants construct their personal forms of spirituality. Most notably the extreme reflexivity characterizing late modern western societies is embedded within personal forms of spirituality, as each individual becomes responsible for constructing her or his own model of spirituality and spiritual meaning. Participants have a plethora of ideas, symbols, and meanings, both from traditional religions, new religions, and aspects of secular culture, as they construct their spiritual worldviews. What is most interesting, however, is that despite the myriad of options available, the participants in this study seem to be choosing many of the same ones. I suggest this is for two main reasons. One, that certain beliefs and options seem to make sense or resonate with the late modern and postmaterialist social context of participants.

As Inglehart (1990; 1997) has argued societies in which material and security needs have been met, tend to emphasize cultural values such as self-expression, personal well-being, flexible rules and situational ethics, emphasis on the meaning and purpose of life, declining respect for political, religious and institutional authorities, the rise of participatory democracy, increased environmental concerns and tolerance of diversity and plurality. In terms of religious orientations postmaterialist values tend to coincide with a decreased level

of involvement in established religious traditions, but an increased concern in personal spiritual matters such as the meaning and purpose of life (285). The spirituality of participants in this study tends to reflect such postmaterialist values as the search for meaning and purpose in life, valuing of diversity and pluralism, personal involvement and agency over deference to institutional or external authorities, flexible and changing beliefs, and concern with personal well-being. Consequently, the participants in this study are choosing 'spirituality' and constructing the spiritual worldviews that resonate with this specific cultural and personal context. The second reason, somewhat intertwined with the first, is that participants are choosing certain options because they are more frequently circulated in 'cultural conversations' about transcendent meaning. As late modern western societies for the most part hold a high level of material and economic security, the cultural and social context increasingly reflects and further develops postmaterialist style values. Consequently, ideas and beliefs reflecting postmaterialist values are increasingly circulated throughout culture.

Turning to the specific focus of this research, media, particularly television serves as one of the primary sites where ideas, worldviews and beliefs are constructed presented, reshaped and reinforced. As suggested in Chapter Three particular spiritual or religious themes and ideas tend to be circulated in television programs more frequently than others, as television producers both respond to and further engender interest in a particular form of spirituality. Such common ideas include a universal, denominationally non-specific God, Divine or higher power that manifests in many forms, belief in some form of life after death and in the possibility, if not the reality, of supernatural or paranormal phenomena; the importance of reflecting upon the meaning and purpose of life and further the trust that there is in fact meaning and purpose, as well as a sense of fate or destiny; values of love, kindness,

hope, knowledge, personal growth and personal agency, a 'golden rule' form of morality that often requires some degree of negotiation for their application; and belief in the interconnectedness of the universe and the beings in it. These ideas not only resonate with participants' personal and social context, but they are reiterated and repeated in programs that they watch both reinforcing the beliefs and ideas of participants and offering some new ideas or ways of interpretation. Television from this perspective acts as a reservoir of religious and spiritual themes and ideas providing possible frameworks for forming, transforming and thinking through concepts of spirituality. Or to phrase it slightly differently, television programs become a medium for participants' consumption of spirituality. The data offered in the following chapter further demonstrates how the participants in this study use television programs in the process of negotiating and constructing their personal forms of spirituality. In particular the chapter examines how participants' general and specific concepts of spirituality, as previously described, directly interact with their uses of and engagement with television texts.

## **Chapter Five: Television as Conversations about Transcendent Reality, Meaning and Morality**

### **General Approaches to Television Viewing: Viewing Preferences and Competencies**

One of the things participants repeatedly expressed during interviews is that they are looking for opportunities to explore and discuss spirituality. To borrow Peter Berger's term, they are often looking for 'signals of transcendence', things that trigger a sense of meaning and purpose, signs of ultimate morals and values, and the idea that there is more to the world than everyday reality (Berger 1969). This is one of the reasons many of the participants agreed to participate in the study, as they enjoy the opportunity to reflect upon such issues and discuss these topics with others. It is also one of the reasons why they turn to television and draw upon television programs as a spiritual resource. As a powerful and pervasive medium conveying multiple images, stories, themes and depictions of the world, participants find that television offers a wealth of opportunities to explore transcendent meaning. They find television to be rich in symbolism, offering various depictions of humanity, struggles between good and evil, redemption, sacrifice, meaning and purpose, death and the afterlife, consequences of actions, the nature of the world, access to other worlds, planes of existence or possible realities. Prior to examining the data demonstrating participants' descriptions of the relationship between television viewing and their spirituality, I will highlight aspects of participants' general approaches to television viewing. The chapter will then move on to present participants' discussions of how they conceptualize the connection between television and spirituality, followed by specific examples of how they use the ideas, beliefs and stories presented through television programs in relation to their own sense of spirituality. Through the presentation of the data gathered during interviews, specifically emphasizing participants' interpretations and examples of how television programs are

related to their personal forms of spirituality, the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how participants use television programs as a spiritual resource. In line with Besecke's reworking of Luckmann's theory of 'invisible religion,' as "evolving societal conversations about transcendent meaning" (2005: 179), this chapter examines how the topics and themes presented in television programs are employed by participants as they learn, think and talk about ultimate reality, meaning and morality.

### ***What Are Participants Watching?***

As with the descriptions of their personal spirituality, each participant's discussion of their television viewing choices was idiosyncratic and contained a diversity of programs. Nevertheless there were some common programs and genres that were often mentioned during the interviews. In terms of discussing television viewing choices, I first asked participants to tell me about the programs that they regularly watched. Common favorites included various legal and crime dramas such as *Law & Order* (and its variations), *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (and its spins offs), and *Oz*; medical dramas or emergency dramas such as *ER*, *Third Watch* and *Grey's Anatomy*; science fiction and fantasy programs including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, *The X-Files*, and *Star Trek* (in its many forms); animated satires such as *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* and *South Park*; *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Dr. Phil*; as well as various prime time and critically acclaimed programs including *Six Feet Under*, *The West Wing*, *Medium* and *Joan of Arcadia*. While less common, some participants also mentioned regularly watching Canadian dramas *Da Vinci's Inquest*, *Cold Squad* and *This is Wonderland*. In addition to citing these programs as favorites, most of the participants also mentioned these programs when asked to discuss the relationship between their television viewing and spirituality. Other programs or genres

raised in light of their discussions about spirituality and television included various documentaries and edutainment programs exploring the paranormal, UFOs and aliens, mysterious phenomenon, angels, demons and possession; shows examining various aspects of religion and culture, such as specials about sacred texts, the history of religions, new religious movements, programs on ancient civilizations, non-Western religions and cultures, as well as news magazines and talk shows such as CBC's *Sunday Morning*; various shows or features on alternative healing, prayer and meditation; and programs about the natural world, science, and technology. Additionally, many of the younger participants referred to cartoons that they watched as children, citing *The Care Bears*, *He-Man*, and *Road to Avonlea*. Only three participants reported enjoying programs with explicitly Christian themes and messages, such as *Touched by an Angel*, *Twice in a Lifetime* and *Doc*.

### ***How Are Participants Watching Television?***

Once again, much like their attitudes towards spirituality and religion, most of the participants held varying interpretations about television simultaneously. For example, most of the participants felt television has a negative influence on individuals and society, at the same time they also spoke of finding very positive images and ideals on television and using it as an opportunity for personal reflection and growth. Similarly, while participants spoke of using television purely for its entertainment value, as a way to 'tune out,' and as being fictional and untrue, nevertheless they also maintained that television programs offer valuable commentary on human nature, on society and on reality and stressed the importance of thinking through and reflecting upon the images, values and stories that television presents. As Jennifer said, "Mindless entertainment is good. Sometimes that's what you need, but too much of that sometimes – you have to stimulate your mind and think about

things and TV can help with that too.” Corresponding with contemporary television theorists such as Fiske (1991), Morely (1992) and Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) participants suggested that much of what they take from television – whether good or bad, mind-numbing or mindful, silly or serious depends not only on what they choose to watch, but how they choose to watch it.

Participants regularly engage in self-reflection, questioning and critical thought, applying these skills to most aspects of their experience and daily lives. Further, they tend to place a high value on learning and education, both in formal settings and informally. This is further reflected by the level of formal education of participants: of the thirty participants, six hold post graduate degrees, seven hold undergraduate degrees, fifteen were either attending university or had some university education, one had some college education, and only one person had no formal education after high school. Consequently based upon their education and training, most of the people involved in this study are used to interpreting the world through, what Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refer to as, perception.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, they tend to approach life experiences and activities as potential learning opportunities, television viewing included.

While the participants in this study certainly acknowledge that at times they simply ‘watch’ television without giving great attention or meaning to what they are viewing, using television for escape, relaxation and frivolous entertainment, at the same time participants also frequently seem to engage in perceptive viewing, as they spoke of reflecting upon the meaning and significance of television texts, not only decoding the dominant messages of the programs, but also offering their own interpretations. To generalize, these are people who

---

<sup>28</sup> Process of actively engaging with and interpreting images and storylines in television programs in relation to other storylines and programs, as well as in relation to one’s self perception and worldview. For further discussion please see Chapter Three pages 62-67.

like to think about things. They look for opportunities to learn, to be challenged and inspired. Moreover, as exemplified through their attitudes towards religion and spirituality, they do not simply want to accept what they are told at face value or follow prescribed rules, trends or belief systems without thinking them through and deciding if it is what they truly believe and feel. Television is no exception. Participants not only report critically and reflexively analyzing television programs but they also claim to consciously use television as a resource for exploring new information and ideas and thinking through complex issues such as ethics, morality, the meaning and purpose of life, and mortality.

Further, the data on participants' views regarding spirituality and television correlated with the quality of life attributes and the optimal viewing competencies highlighted by Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi. Much like Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi's concept of quality of life, participants related spirituality to a quest for knowledge and meaning, self-reflexivity, personal agency and conscious thought, open-mindedness, tolerance and diversity, questioning and choices, self-development, personal growth and learning, a sense of the overall connection with their inner selves, with others, and the meaning and purpose of the world. It is important to note that these are not just surface parallels as the majority of participants reported consciously using television as a means to explore transcendent meaning, existential questions and think about moral and ethical issues. Therefore participants themselves draw a direct link between their television viewing choices, the way in which they interpret television, and their concepts and practices of spirituality.

While participants (with the exception of two) said they use television to learn about the world and for sources of deeper reflection, they did not claim to do this all of the time. Additionally, they often made distinctions between programs that inspired them to think and programs that they simply watched. Peter offered a good example of this. In our interview

Peter pointed out that he often watches different programs in different ways, sometimes simply watching for pleasure, akin to what Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi refer to as viewing with recognition, other times watching in a more reflective manner, or perceptive viewing as they would term it. Peter made a strong distinction between programs that he watched simply for entertainment, such as the British soap opera *Coronation Street*, and the programs he watched for entertainment as well as information and insight, such as the CBC drama *This is Wonderland*. He explained that while he thinks about the plotlines of *Coronation Street* and talks about the program with friends, it inspires little meaning or reflection beyond the surface storyline. On the other hand, he explained that part of the reason he enjoyed *This is Wonderland* was due to the fact that it depicts characters from a diversity of backgrounds, offers stories related to contemporary social and political concerns, and highlights moral and ethical issues. He further claimed that this program causes him to reflect further on issues such as poverty, homelessness, abuse, gender inequality in the work place and problems with the Canadian justice system, which in turn fosters his sense of compassion, morality and concern with social justice- all things that Peter further associated with his self-definition as a spiritual person.

In addition to highlighting the theme of viewing competencies that emerged from the interview data, Peter's reflections on his television viewing habits also point to the demonstrated participants' tendencies to use some programs as a means of "working through" or "thinking through" television as John Ellis (2000) and Ron Lembo (2000) term it. As discussed in Chapter Two, theorists such as Ellis(1990), Fisher (1985) and Shanahan and Morgan (2005), argue that through offering fictional narratives television serves as a particularly useful site for reflection on various personal issues and life concerns, particularly ones that are challenging, painful or difficult to confront in everyday reality. This was quite

a common theme raised during interviews, since participants spoke of reflecting on storylines or events on television programs in relation to their own personal beliefs and experiences.

### **What Do Participants Think About the Medium of Television?**

In terms of their general attitudes towards television, most of the participants felt that television has both a negative and positive influence on individuals and society. For example when asked about the influence that television has on society Justin commented,

Like everything there is good and bad to it. Some people take all their life lessons from TV. Some people just like it for the entertainment value. And some people just don't believe at all. I like all aspects of it. I like the entertainment but I also like the messages people are trying to portray in different ways, like visual ways or let's say like dialogues. So, it's different. I can appreciate more than one function of it.

Often echoing the arguments of early media theorists Lazerfield and Merton and contemporary critics such as Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi, most of the participants suggested that television has much potential for offering positive images and ideals, but often it does not. Some participants such as Nora connected media depictions of violence, crime, warfare and disasters with her critique of capitalism, suggesting that capitalism is dependent on creating a culture of fear. She argued, "They don't want to inform the public, they want to inform the public about what is shocking.... People who are afraid will buy. People who are afraid will tune in because they need to find out if something else will go wrong." Other participants reiterated this idea, suggesting that television programs (fiction and non-fiction) sensationalized violence, disasters and focused on negative stories in order to draw viewers and ultimately make money. When asked if television has a negative or positive influence on the world, Gregory replied, "I think it is negative, but I think it could be both....It's mind numbing and it's conditioning. It conditions you that it is 'collateral damage' and people

aren't really being hurt, and about profits for this – it's conditioning too – I think there is a hidden agenda there.”

In a similar vein Sudesha suggested that news coverage of violence and disasters acts as a double-edged sword. On one hand it informs people about important world events and may even stimulate people to take action but on the other it engenders a sense of helplessness and frustration. Sudesha commented,

I wouldn't say I am not concerned about it [the news], but what am I going to do about it? That is – the only news on TV these days is about how many people were killed in Iran, how many were killed in Iraq.... but this senseless killing by the USA for what reason is it justified? I don't find it of any – initially I was interested, a year ago I watched the news a lot, but I just got so fed up. So I don't want to watch the news.... There is just too much negativity and violence...

A moment later he added,

I could say the one thing – people are more caring and giving and willing to help. Because of the communication and the media to be so quick to report, we know more about it, we hear more about it. So let's say there was a famine or people dying for some reason or other in some other part of the world, we didn't know so much about it, but today, there is an earthquake or something in China or Haiti or someplace else, we know about it. We get very graphic pictures as well as reports and everything, so things are being reported and so you hear a lot more about it. In many cases there is information overload. But in some cases people are more active they will use this as an opportunity to do more in terms of help.

Stephanie and Liz similarly said they choose not to watch television news because they found it too negative and focused on things they felt they could not change. Other participants suggested that television does still offer valuable information and ideas, even if it does tend to be sensationalistic and have ulterior motives such as profit and advertising. Once again this suggests that it is up to the viewer to decide how to interpret the images and information they receive.

All of the participants agreed that it was important to think critically about what they see on television but they seemed to exercise this in varying degrees. Brent described his approach to critical thinking, proclaiming,

I don't take anything at face value. No matter how credible the news source is, I don't take it as face value. I read as much as I can about each subject and I just convince myself that everyone is lying and then I find out what truth runs through all of them, what everything has in common and from that you can normally discern what the true reason for it was. You can't just take one source.

Justin described using a similar strategy, trying to look at ideas and concepts from as many different angles as possible, including a range of both 'credible' and 'dubious' sources.

Other participants described their approach to critical thinking as a combination of common sense, logic, education, plausibility, and identifying the sources, possible intentions and perspectives of producers. This was by far the most common approach to critical thinking, suggesting that it is important just to stop and think for a moment about what they watch and be aware of the fact that no program or message is neutral. Participants often suggested it was particularly important to think critically about the biases and motives of television news, documentaries and other non-fiction formats, as such programs claimed to offer 'the truth,' 'facts' and depictions of reality. Austin maintained that it is more important to think critically about news and non-fiction programs than fiction, explaining that,

with those [dramas, situation comedies] you know they are not real. It's more entertainment. You can try to get something useful out of it.... But with the news I know that they are not showing the real news on news shows. I will go to websites. I will look for independent sources.... Once you start having independent sources of information, you very quickly realize that there is a whole lot more going on than the weather, the fires in California and the latest flood.

Like Austin, most of the participants were quick to point out that they clearly distinguished television programs (both fiction and non-fiction) from 'reality.' However, even though participants feel that television is 'not real' and see it as a form of entertainment most

suggested that it offers more than simple amusement. As Trish argued, “the point of anything fictional is to get something out of it. They wouldn’t give you anything if they didn’t help your shape reality.... It bothers me when people watch TV without reflection. Sometimes it is entertainment, you take it at face fashion, but other times you should reflect on it.”

Despite their concerns with television, all of the participants felt that television also has positive uses. Most notably, television was seen as a source of useful and necessary information. Participants tended to see this as working on two levels. First that television provided basic information about the world that rarely caused them to reflect deeply, but nevertheless was useful or important to them, such the weather forecast or sports scores. The second that television provides them with important information that informs them about the world in a manner that shapes them, motivates them and causes them to reflect. Margaret explained how she sees television as having value, asserting,

Maybe what it’s done is that it has opened up the world for us. It has let us know about people who live differently than we do, but they are still people. And they are raising children and they are trying to get on with their lives and maybe it’s made us a little more compassionate about other people because other people don’t have it as good as we do...A lot of people watch the news and you’re getting news that’s telling you about some devastation that has happened, I think from that perspective yes. We have no excuse to be ignorant now.

Other participants reiterated Margaret’s sentiments, suggesting that both fictional and non-fictional television programs makes them more aware of what is going on in the world, about different challenges and struggles that people face, bringing a more personal and human dimension to world events. Participants further explained that such awareness causes them to reflect upon discrepancies, inequities and injustice in the world, but also gives them the opportunity to think differently about things that they see as challenging or in opposition to

their values and beliefs. It is through these approaches to television viewing that participants utilize television as a spiritual resource.

## **Television as a Spiritual Resource**

### **Separating the Spiritual from Religion in Television Programs**

Living in an age of digital and satellite television, at any given hour a viewer has hundreds of programs to choose from. Even those with standard cable are still offered choices well into the double digits. Unlike the “Golden Era” of television where channels were few and broadcasters tried to offer programming that would appeal to the largest sector of the viewing population, today choice and options are the name of the day with specialty programming designed to target niche markets or respond to the specific interests of different sectors of viewing populations. Channels dedicated to golfers, science fiction junkies, home decorating enthusiasts, Bollywood movie fans, Christian audiences, and history buffs proliferate- offering a myriad of ideas, information and stories. Choose any topic and chances are there is a channel or at least a television series dedicated to that specific interest.

In the realm of popular spirituality there are both specific channels and programs designed to cater to spiritual seekers, including *One: The Body, Mind and Spirit Channel* and *Vision TV*. Further there is often a blurring of genres and mixing of genres, such as *Divine Restoration* a decorating show featuring decorating makeovers of churches, *Recreating Eden* a spiritual gardening program, and lifestyle programs such as *Dr. Marla Shapiro's Balance: TV for Living Well* advertised as “a fresh, authoritative guide about the best ways to lead a healthy life: physically, spiritually and socially.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover even outside of the realm of

---

<sup>29</sup> [www.balancetv.ca](http://www.balancetv.ca)

such specialty programming and channels, as the work of theorists such as Newcomb (1990), Primiano (2001), Wagner and Lundeen (1998), Blythe (2002 and McClymond (2002) suggests religious and spiritual themes proliferate in television programs.

Turning on the television at any given hour one can easily find programs dealing with such images and themes. This in fact was how Newcomb conducted one of his textual analyses – not by looking at specialty programs, but by choosing to watch three hours of prime time television on a Thursday night (Newcomb 1988: 88-112). While certainly this thesis does not suggest that all programs contain such content, it does suggest that if one is seeking religious or spiritual themes and ideas, they can easily be found. Despite the array of specialty programs explicitly catering to the spiritual or religious interests of viewers, few of the participants in this study choose to watch these options.<sup>30</sup> More often the programs that participants discussed in relation to their spirituality are ‘secular,’ in the sense that they do not offer deliberately religious or spiritual messages, nor are they affiliated with any specific religious tradition. However, within the context of the participants (and in the view of some of the aforementioned media and religious studies scholars) these secular programs tread into the realm of spirituality as they deal with symbols, themes and storylines that often fall into our cultural categories of religion and spirituality, presenting various images of supernatural, the transcendent and otherworldly beings; raising questions about death and the afterlife; dealing with issues of ultimate meaning; and offering complex discussions about truth, morals, ethics, right and wrong, good and evil.<sup>31</sup> Such themes and topics respond well to participants’ spiritual needs and are particularly suited to the personal spirituality of these

---

<sup>30</sup> Both Margaret and Sudesha reported regularly watching programs on Vision TV because they offer information, ideas and themes specifically dealing with religion and spirituality, however these were the only two participants to do so. Similarly, only Margaret, Sudesha and Kelly reported watching programs such as *Touched by an Angel* or *Doc*, both of which have strong Christian undertones.

<sup>31</sup> See discussion in Chapter Four.

participants – one that is rooted in exploration, question, flexibility, diversity, reflexivity and most of all choice. In much the same way that most participants chose not to turn to organized religions for their spirituality, they do not turn to deliberately religious or spiritual programs because they find that their spiritual interests and needs are better met elsewhere.

Michelle exemplifies this tendency as she compared her preference for “spiritual” shows over ones that offer “proper religion” such as edutainment programs focusing on the history or traditions of an organized religion or fictional dramas such as *Touched by an Angel*, *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*. Michelle explained,

If a show is trying to persuade me to one religion, I won't watch it, because I don't want to be pushed to it... But if it's like join our religion, then it's bad. But on shows like the A&E specials, they give you, like the spiritual stuff. And I'll just eat it up like candy. I like them because I don't know about them. I want to learn more about them. Just say take a show with one religion, I don't really want to learn about it, not because I don't like that religion, just because I have no particular interest in it. But shows related to the supernatural stuff are a lot more interesting because it's not just attached to one religion. And it [the supernatural] could always be there. It is so much bigger.

While some of the participants, unlike Michelle, claimed to enjoy watching programs detailing history, traditions and culture associated with different organized religions for interest, knowledge and education, most of the participants, like Michelle, turn away from programs that they feel are preaching to them or trying to persuade them towards a particular religious perspective. Further Michelle's comments highlight the common distinction made by participants, seeing religion and religious television programs as specific, limited and proselytizing, and spirituality and spiritually themed programs as open, expansive and pluralist.

It is this “spiritual stuff” alluded to by Michelle that has captured my attention – those symbols, images, stories and things that hint at the transcendent and ultimate meaning without identifying it with any specific religious institution, organization or belief system.

As illustrated in Chapter Four, it is the spiritual that participants find interesting, stimulating and meaningful, not the religious as they define it. And in seemingly secular television programs, participants find a wealth of opportunities to explore this type of spiritual theme.

### **Conceptualizing the Relationship between Television and Spirituality**

Of the 30 individuals who participated in interviews, 28 participants indicated that there was a relationship between their spirituality and the television programs that they watched.<sup>32</sup> Throughout their interviews, these participants largely supported the hypothesis that television plays a role in cultural conversations about transcendent meaning in general, and the negotiation of personal spirituality in particular, both directly and implicitly as they discussed spirituality, television viewing and the potential relationship between the two. During the interviews I specifically asked whether or not participants saw a relationship between their spirituality and television programs. Some participants claimed that television absolutely was related to their spirituality, others were more reserved in agreeing that it did—often feeling embarrassed to say so, while some participants simultaneously offered yes and no as a response, and two of the participants said there was absolutely no relationship between television viewing and their spiritual beliefs.

Participants not only discussed their spiritual interests and beliefs making direct reference to television programs but many described various ways in which they reflected upon television shows in a spiritually significant manner. Further, participants spoke of using television programs to explore and develop spiritual beliefs; about using television as a teaching tool or springboard for new spiritual ideas; and of drawing on television programs

---

<sup>32</sup> See Appendix III for a discussion of the data presented by the 2 participants that indicated there was no relationship between spirituality and their television viewing.

as a means to reinforce particular beliefs and values. All of these instances indicate that for the most of the participants in this study television programs do play a role (along with other aspects of secular and religious culture) in the ways in which they negotiate and explore transcendent meaning.

For the most part, participants suggested that the relationship between television and religion worked in a dialectical fashion, explaining that they tuned into certain programs as they responded to their interest in spirituality and resonated with their beliefs. Television further influenced their sense of spirituality as they watched programs with spiritual themes and reflected on their content, sometimes adopting and integrating the beliefs with their own, sometimes rejecting them, and sometimes simply through becoming more open-minded towards the beliefs and practices of others. None of the participants felt that television was responsible for initiating their spirituality. Rather they tended to feel that their sense of spirituality or interest in spiritual themes is an inner motivation. However, as illustrated through their discussions about spirituality and religion in Chapter Four, while participants suggest that spirituality is intrinsic they nevertheless recognize to varying degrees the socially constructed and mediated nature of beliefs and practices, explaining that people must interpret – give shape and content – to such spiritual feelings through the creation of symbols, beliefs, rituals, myths and stories. Consequently, participants suggest that television responds to their spiritual interests and needs by offering a wealth of programs, images and themes that not only resonate with their personal experiences and beliefs, but also shapes, fosters and further expands their spiritual beliefs and interests.

When asked if there was a relationship between her spirituality and television viewing,

Trish replied,

Elements of it for sure. Whether it reinforces your beliefs, if it challenges your beliefs you might be fascinated by it too. Whether which one is shaping the other I am not sure. Maybe I have these intrinsic beliefs and TV just reinforces them. They appeal to me because I already am.

Gregory made similar claims explaining,

*The Outer Limits* was the one that used to get me. Or sometimes shows about psychics or healers, I used to watch and I used to be drawn to them like a magnet....I think it was inside me looking to find it... I think it kind of opened me up.

In a similar manner Aurora Leigh explained that television programs both stimulated and fostered her interest in spirituality and the supernatural. However, rather than simply accepting anything that television presented she would reflect upon and try out ideas to see if they made sense to her or were applicable to her life. Aurora Leigh stated,

I would say it responded to a need. I didn't go to church or anything, a little bit, but nothing really big. So I had this, what do I do with my time? I need something to think about, that's just sort of relational things. What life thoughts can other people give me?....I would read my books, I would watch TV, I would watch movies and they would give me all of these cool ideas. Once I got into the world, then I could test them and the ones that could work I will keep and the ones that didn't I could just discard them... So yeah, I think that's how I form things."

Other participants repeated this idea suggesting that their spirituality was inherent in them and as a result they were interested in watching programs with supernatural, spiritual and religious content.

### **Key Differences and Similarities**

While most of participants did see connections between their spirituality and their television viewing, it is important to note that their interpretations of this relationship were not always uniform. As previously suggested, individual participant's relationships with and uses of television did differ to some degree. Some participants clearly appeared to draw heavily from the content of television programs as a source of knowledge, information and as a source of reflection. In these cases television along with other popular culture resources

were of primary significance both in terms of their processes of worldview construction and identity formation. Others, however, tended to suggest that their worldviews and sense of identity as well as their spirituality were developed primarily through other spheres and contexts such as their families, organized religions, formal education, and 'real' life experiences (as opposed to mediated or virtual experiences). In these cases, participants often suggested that their viewing choices were influenced by their religious or spiritual worldviews (that were formed 'elsewhere') often choosing to watch programs that reinforced or enhanced their beliefs. While such participants suggested that they use television as a source of information and ideas as well as for entertainment, they usually interpret what they watch in light of their pre-existing belief systems. This was usually the case for participants who had a strong identification with organized forms of religion (regardless of age), as well as, for the participants born prior to the mid-1960s. In particular, the participants Sudesha, Margaret, Liz, Gregory, Austin and Lydia<sup>33</sup> all seemed to express this perspective. Within

---

<sup>33</sup> Sudesha was born in 1932 and Margaret 1933, thus falling into Michael Adams' demographic group "The Elders," likely in the "Cosmopolitan Modernists" category (Adams 1997). Further both of these participants tended to show affiliation with organized forms of religion. Liz and Gregory were both born in 1953, thus falling into "The Boomer" generation; both seem to express a combination of values, which would locate them near the middle of the "Autonomous Rebels" and "Connected Enthusiasts" axis. While both Liz and Gregory define themselves as spiritual, but not religious and would fall into Roof's category of "Metaphysical Believers and Seekers" (Roof 1999: 203-212), they both tended to show affiliation with more organized forms of spirituality, particularly what Stark and Bainbridge term "client cults" in addition to audience cult-type material and sources from popular culture. Since her teenage years Liz has been involved in a variety of client cult and cult movement activities, including spiritual retreats and seminars, classes on natural healing, reiki, spirit guides, Transcendental Meditation, and so forth, in addition to exploring spirituality through books, personal experience and conversations with others. Gregory, similarly has been involved in "client cult" activities and in his role as a holistic healer could easily be described as a purveyor. Gregory described exploring his spirituality through a variety of sources, including formal education, seminars, and various types of literature on spirituality, natural and alternative healing practices. In a slightly different vein, Austin, a member of "Generation X" cohort and Lydia a member of "Generation Y" or the "Echo" Generation, both describe their spirituality in relation to organized forms of Christianity. Austin, affiliated with an Evangelical Church and Lydia, Greek Orthodox; both tended to interpret the relationship between television and spirituality in light of their religious perspectives, seeing television as way to reinforce and supplement their religious beliefs (as well as a source of information, entertainment and relaxation) rather than forming the primary structure or content of their beliefs. For example, Lydia, who has a fascination with ghosts and paranormal phenomena such as telepathy, ESP, divination, and miracles draws upon television programs as a source of inspiration and information, but interprets them in light of her religion. She suggested that such ideas help to strengthen her faith in God and God's presence in the world. In other instances, she draws upon such programs to further

these cases, participants' involvement or affiliation with organized religions or clearly defined systems of belief tended to function as primary interpretive structures shaping their personal spiritual beliefs which likely accounts for this differing perspective. Additionally, it is also quite likely that generational differences come into play in terms of how participants relate both to their spirituality and to television viewing.<sup>34</sup> As, Beaudoin has argued, popular culture, in particular mediated popular culture, often serves as a primary source of meaning for generations born after the mid-1960s (Beaudoin 1998: 21-23). Consequently, it is of little surprise that participants from Generations X and Y appear to rely more heavily on popular culture sources for the construction of their worldviews generally and their ideas about spirituality in particular, and tend to feel quite comfortable doing so.

Despite some differences in their primary systems of significance, the 28 participants who did see a connection between their spirituality and television tended to highlight two, often overlapping, themes which correspond both with scholarly approaches working from more of a substantive approach, addressing religion and spirituality *in* television, and with analysis grounded in functional definitions of religion, often analyzing television *as* religion. One theme being explicit depictions of spiritual and religious topics and images in television programs such as themes and characters dealing with the divine, conceptions of God, supernatural beings or entities, paranormal and psychic phenomena, depictions of new age, new, alternative and in some cases traditional religions, and religious or spiritual rituals and practices such as prayer, confession, meditation, spell casting, and alternative or holistic healing. The other, calling attention to role of television programs as a contemporary form of

---

explore ideas that may either be prohibited or simply not addressed within the formal structure or theology of the Greek Orthodox Church, yet appeal to her nonetheless. Lydia explained that such additional or contravening beliefs do not undermine her faith or self definition as Greek Orthodox, rather they add to it.

<sup>34</sup> As this project utilizes a very small sample, developing inferential theories is impossible. Consequently, I did not significantly explore potential generational distinctions or differences. A larger scale study on this topic, however, would not only benefit from such an analyses, but would likely necessitate such inquiry.

myth, dealing with issues related to the meaning and purpose of life, human nature, negotiations of morality, codes of behaviour, and discourses regarding the structure and organization of reality. While these two approaches were distinct to some extent and sometimes were discussed separately, they frequently overlapped and merged.

Notably, participants' discussions of what counts as spirituality in relation to television, did tend to emphasize programs with more explicit depictions of spirituality and religion, in line with more substantive definitions of spirituality and religion; however, their discussions often extended to include programs without any (or very infrequent) explicit or substantive spiritual themes and images which nevertheless were thought to inspire spiritual reflection or meaning, such as *Law & Order* and *CSI*, thus expressing a more broadly defined approach to spirituality, akin to functional definitions. Such approaches correlate closely with Besecke's restricted functional definition of reflexive spirituality as "a societal conversation about transcendent meanings"(2005: 181), as participants indicate that spirituality, in terms of its relationship with television, is not strictly limited to the realm of the supernatural or substantive features, but it also is not inclusive of all types of meaning. Rather, for a program to function as a spiritual resource or "outlet" as both Trish and Aurora Leigh termed it, it must at some level engage with participants' concepts of transcendent reality, meaning and/or morality.

Further, Besecke's definition of reflexive spirituality offers much insight into participants' discussions of the relationship between their spirituality and their television viewing as they almost exclusively focused on using television as spiritual resource for thinking, learning, and asking questions related to the transcendent. One important difference between participants' discussions of spirituality, versus their discussions of the relationship between spirituality and television did emerge. Participants' discussions of

spirituality in general tended to focus on both beliefs and practices, although beliefs and attitudes tended to dominate their discussions. However, while discussing the relationship between television and their spirituality, participants' discussions focused predominately on beliefs, attitudes and ideas, rather than specific spiritual or religious rituals, practices and techniques. This, of course, is not to suggest that participants do not engage in any form of spiritual practices or rituals since most of the participants claimed to engage in activities such as private prayer, meditation, casting spells, and practicing different forms of divination, either on a regular basis or at least on occasion. While participants in a few instances claimed to derive certain spiritual techniques and practices from things they have seen on television, for the most part television was much less influential in this area, than it was regarding beliefs.<sup>35</sup> Rather, it appears that when it comes to specific rituals or techniques participants gain their knowledge and practices from other sources, such as organized religions, family traditions, and 'client cult' activities. However, in the realm of beliefs, ideas, possibilities and questions related to spirituality, television was not only described as a useful source of information, ideas, inspiration, and reflection, but was often described as one of the primary sources. Thus watching programs about different types of spiritual and religious beliefs and practices is thought to contribute to their spirituality, insofar as learning, talking and

---

<sup>35</sup> The following examples are the only two clear instances in which participants described specifically deriving spiritual practices or techniques from watching television. For example Aurora Leigh claimed to have first tried channeling, holding séances, and as a direct result of watching television, citing the programs *John Edward's Crossing Over*, television infomercials for psychics and specialty channel programs about psychic phenomenon as the source of her inspiration. Although Aruora Leigh said she doubts that many of the television presentations of such practices are real, and in fact thinks many TV psychics "are a scam," she explained that seeing such practices caused her to question whether or not they were real and possible, as a result she tried them herself and found that they did indeed work. So while she doubts that all instances of psychic abilities or paranormal activity are genuine, she nevertheless believes that in some instances they are authentic as she has now experienced them herself. In a similar manner Alex, although rather embarrassed to say so, explained that his occasional use of mediation techniques, which he described as trying to quiet his mind and focus on "feeling his aura," were largely drawn from television program, most notably *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Deep Space Nine*.

thinking about spirituality (even when it did not involve actually adopting any specific beliefs and practices) were defined as a spiritual practices or reasons why they define themselves as spiritual. In this sense, television functions as spiritual resource because it participates in ongoing dialogues and reflections on transcendent meaning, purpose and reality.

### **Cultivating Open-mindedness Through TV**

As was evident in their discussions about spirituality, participants place a high value on open-mindedness, curiosity and questioning, exposure to new ideas and constant learning. Such values similarly permeated participants' discussions about the relationship between television and their spirituality and, in fact, seem to form much of the basis for it. Upon being asked if there was any connection between their television viewing and their spirituality, by and large participants began their responses with comments about how television exposes them to new information and ideas, encourages them to consider various options and possibilities, and piques their curiosity, raises questions and stimulates further interest in 'spirituality'. William frequently expressed this idea in our interviews. He proclaimed, "I really enjoy knowing things a lot. That is a fundamental ultimate concern," and he went on to add, "I think television is really good in that it certainly exposes people to different ideas and different sides of the story. Things that would generally be considered kind of archaic or just different." William further asserted that, "The whole idea of being open is an important thing and it was books, video games and TV shows that opened my mind." William credited numerous television programs and genres with helping to foster his attitude of open-mindedness, including various science fiction and fantasy programs, documentar

religious traditions, as well as the satirical animated series' *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*. He was certainly not alone in this assertion, as other participants frequently reiterated the idea that television exposed them to new ideas, encouraged them to be open-minded and to consider "possibilities." Some other representative responses include,

Camille: "I think it has opened my eyes to certain things that I would not have known otherwise"

Stephanie: "It has a huge influence, in the sense that it will open my mind to a lot more things... *Oprah*, *Law & Order* all of them raise things and guide me with my direction in life." Later she added, "Obviously they are going to open up a discussion about things."

Simon: "I'm a big TLC nerd. It's something, it's a gateway or a doorway."

David: "I used it as a jumping board to do my own research into it, so I could learn more about it [spirituality]."

Aurora Leigh: "Like, television is a way of experiencing the world."

Justin: "TV is the guide to the possibility of questions. It allows us to ask questions.... then you can go somewhere else to find the answer. So there is definitely a connection between my spirituality and television."

Two important themes stood out amidst participants' descriptions and examples of the relationship between their spirituality and television viewing. The first was the degree to which participants seem to seek out constant exposure to new or more information, ideas and stories related to spiritual themes and the extent to which participants use television to respond to this desire. In fact, these desires and demands are closely connected with participants' problems with organized religion, in which they see truth, explanations, rules and myths as having become institutionalized and codified therefore leaving little room for diversity, new possibilities or different manifestations of the transcendent. Television, as one amongst many cultural mediums, offers a readily accessible and steady stream of stories,

possibilities and options. As Trish noted, “As a society now we read less, reflect less. TV is much more accessible for people to watch an hour long show about spirituality.”

Second, that the exposure to or perhaps more aptly the consumption of not only new but more ideas, information and stories is a spiritually meaningful activity. As participants tend to view spirituality as a process rather than a product, meaning comes to lie in the act of learning, thinking and talking about transcendent reality, the supernatural, the purpose of life, concepts of life after death, mythology, different religious traditions and morals and values. In subsequent sections of this chapter, I present specific topics that were raised by participants as they explained how television is related to their spirituality. Such discussions cover a diversity of programs, a range of themes, and various uses of television reflecting the unique interests, tastes and idiosyncrasies of each participant. Through each example participants’ discussed various ways in which different programs and genres and specific beliefs and concepts are related to their own sense of spirituality, generally suggesting that television does so through presenting new ideas, reinforcing certain beliefs, and offering a forum for exploring numerous existential and moral questions.

However, it is important to note that none of these examples on their own form a comprehensive system of belief or function as a source of ultimate truth; rather, they can be as seen as pieces of the puzzle, specific manifestations of the transcendent, individual aspects of spiritual beliefs, or traces of evidence that often point towards ultimate reality, meaning and morality. In this sense, the data is closely akin to Luckmann’s (1990) concepts of “little,” “intermediate” and “great” transcendences, where in the examples, ideas and possibilities presented through television programs function as “little transcendences,” that is

break through points that offer glimpses of a reality beyond the everyday.<sup>36</sup> For example, a program about ghosts such as *Canada's Most Haunted* or communication with the spirit world offered by psychic Sylvia Browne, were often interpreted by participants' as evidence that there is more to the world than we know through everyday reality. Such individual pieces of evidence or little transcendences do not in themselves constitute ultimate reality, rather they are examples, single manifestations or signals of transcendence that point towards an ultimate reality, usually demonstrated by participants' offering variations on the phrase 'it gets you thinking there is something more.'

Quite frequently participants explained that watching programs with supernatural content further encouraged them to be open-minded because they were challenged to look beyond normative conventions and to consider a variety of options, ideas and possibilities. For example, Dhakir claimed to enjoy watching edutainment programs on *The Learning Channel* and *Discovery* featuring supernatural or mysterious content as he feels they challenge rational scientific conceptions of reality and lend credibility to seeing the world from a more enchanted, spiritual perspective. He explained,

I saw this on TLC or the Discovery Channel or something and apparently... there was this girl who could astral travel and she couldn't see and she could dance with her partner, perfectly in sync and no one could figure out how she could do it. Stories like that I'm not going to be like, pshhhh it's just TV....lots of people do because it's safer to. If you just dismiss it, it doesn't challenge you. It's like ah it's nothing.... But there are so many weird coincidences....I love learning about things, that just because society tells you it should be one way, doesn't mean there aren't other ways. There are other ways.

Kelly made similar statements suggesting that such programs not only challenge people to see that there is more to the world than everyday reality, but also act as reminders of how

---

<sup>36</sup> For further discussion see Luckmann 1990; 2003.

limited human knowledge is. Asked if she enjoyed edutainment programs about supernatural or unexplained phenomena, Kelly exclaimed,

I love those shows! There are some on TLC, the Top Ten Unexplained Mysteries or The Top Ten – paranormal phenomenon. I like those a lot. I guess the unexplained mysteries, I like them because you have a certain perspective about what your life is and how the world works and there are these things that are not explained, like crop circles or spontaneous combustion and all these different phenomena and I find it very intriguing. Okay, like there is obviously more than what we think there is going on in our world. We're not all knowing as human beings. There are things that we haven't figured out yet.

Such comments made by Dhakir and Kelly were often echoed by other participants, explaining that depictions of mysterious or unknown phenomena tend to appeal to them as they hint at a transcendent reality or at least encourage them to question everyday conceptions of reality.

Similarly Tanya differentiated why she enjoys programs such as *Beyond Midnight*, *Mostly Urban Legends*, and specialty channel programs about ghosts, psychics, and possessions claiming, "I just like them because they're different than all the riff raff....It's the spiritual that's the difference. It's not the everyday, humdrum stuff....It also shows that there are different things in life that could happen." Tanya who offered numerous examples of times she felt she had experienced paranormal phenomena and, in fact, defined herself as spiritual specifically because of her belief in these things claimed that she had always had odd or strange experiences throughout her life that she could not explain or even identify. She explained that she turned to watching programs and reading books about the supernatural in order to help explain and contextualize some of her experiences.

Justin explained that such programs respond to his intrigue with mysterious phenomena, his quest for knowledge and his constant desire to question things. He commented,

I am fascinated by them because it is so mystical. Because it is so mysterious. Like I like the mystery.....it ties into the whole questioning of religion thing. All these things tie into that. More and more because of my whole fascination with human behaviour..... It's possibly real. I mean vampires stemmed from the whole Vlad Drucule thing. Or like every culture had their version of it. Same thing with fairies, elves or whatever, monsters....I mean there are so many things we don't know.

Throughout his interviews, Justin offered a particularly extreme approach to the idea of spirituality as learning, thinking and talking about transcendent meaning. Justin, while frequently engaging in learning, talking, reflecting and questioning issues related to meaning, ultimate beliefs, spiritual and religious traditions, presented a rather different approach to spirituality than other participants in that he rarely claimed to 'believe' anything. Whereas other participants would offer specific beliefs or explanations when asked questions such as "Do you believe in God or any type of higher power?" "What do you think happens when you die?" Justin tended to offer a list of options and beliefs held by other people or offered by various religious traditions. When asked if he actually believed any of them, he would usually offer "not really" or "I'm not sure" or "it doesn't matter" as responses. Instead Justin explained that for him being spiritual meant learning about spirituality, learning about traditions and asking questions, rather developing a specific belief system or ascertaining definitive answers.<sup>37</sup> Justin cited drawing from a variety of sources in his quest for

---

<sup>37</sup> Had Justin not approached me after a filling out a survey, enthusiastically asking if he could be interviewed, it is likely that I would have not have contacted him for an interview because his survey responses related to issues of belief and practice usually were "Who cares?" "Does it matter?" . During my first interview with Justin I quickly discovered that my tendency to locate spirituality in the realm of 'belief' and 'practice' did not correlate with Justin's own definitions of spirituality which he defined as constantly questioning and learning, although it did admittedly take much clarification, explanation and repetition on Justin's part for me to understand his perspective. Thankfully he was quite patient and often quite humorously pointed out that I was trapped within my own limited definition of spirituality. I asked "would you ever describe yourself naturally as a spiritual person, or is it because I am asking?... Would you say to your friends 'I am spiritual'?" Justin replied "Yeah why not?... I always bring it up." Consequently, Justin's approach forced me to expand my own definition of what 'counts' as spirituality. While Justin's form of spirituality was somewhat unique amongst participants in that he would rarely claim to 'believe' anything per se but would neither outright reject the possibility of many beliefs, most of the participants did share a similar perspective on learning, thinking and talking about spirituality, further suggesting that part of being spiritual meant taking many different ideas and beliefs into account, even if they

knowledge about religion and spirituality including reading various spiritual texts, reading academic books discussing various traditions and watching a variety of documentaries, edutainment and fictional programs related to religion, spirituality, and the paranormal. During one of our interviews Justin proclaimed, "I need to watch everything about religion or anybody who is a prophet or says he's a prophet or whatever...." Citing watching programs such as, "All the *A&E* specials. Or like they will have on *Biography* the biography of Satan or God or Mohamed or whatever. I will always watch all that." When asked how that is related to spirituality, he further explained "Spirituality equals quest to me. Spirituality and quest is the same thing to me. Like you know what I mean? To unlock all those mysteries. So like if you're on a quest for knowledge. That's basically what spirituality is. And we all have our different ways of interpreting."

Further, Justin claimed that humans will never know the right answers or the truth and, in fact, he does not feel the need to have them. For Justin, unlike other participants whose sense of spirituality also included developing particular beliefs and on occasions practicing particular religious or spiritual rituals or techniques, his sense of spirituality was almost exclusively defined in terms of learning, talking, thinking and asking questions about issues related to transcendent meaning and reality. While Justin's example offers a more radical approach to spirituality as 'conversations' about and consumption of information and ideas about transcendent meaning, it does draw attention to a common approach to spirituality in general, as well as the relationship between their spiritual and television as learning about different spiritual and religious themes, even if they do not integrate that information into their belief system. Again, the process of reflecting upon themes related to

---

were not adopted or integrated into their own belief system.

transcendent meaning, the divine, the supernatural, different religious and spiritual beliefs and traditions, and issues related to values, ethics and morality are seen as a form of spirituality.

For example, participants Sudesha, Margaret, Liz, Justin, Kelly, Aurora Leigh, Lydia and Eric all suggested that watching programs about different religious figures, traditions, customs and beliefs contributed to their spiritual development even though they did not usually integrate any of these traditions into their own spiritual beliefs and practices. Rather, they explained, the contribution was mainly through adding to their overall learning and cultivating an attitude of open-mindedness and global awareness- all of which they saw as being an integral part of their spirituality. Margaret, whose sense of spirituality was strongly intertwined with the values of kindness, open-mindedness, social and political awareness, and sense of social justice suggested that learning about different forms of religion and spirituality helps broaden her perspective on the world, makes her more understanding of differences, and has also led her to believe that all religions have some degree of truth to them. She commented, “The thing I realize is that we don’t have a lot of differences. So why is there so much? Why do people make the differences? It is all the same belief – in a God, whatever you call it.” Further Margaret explained that watching programs about different types of social and economic justice movements and volunteer work sometimes featured in the documentary series *The Passionate Eye* or on various programs on TV Ontario, CBC *Newsworld* and Vision TV provides her with a sense of spiritual inspiration and hope, reinforcing her belief that it is through small individual acts that large transformations are accomplished.

In a similar manner Sudesha explained that he appreciated learning about different religious traditions and perspectives as they to help him become more knowledgeable about

the world, encourage him to be open-minded, and occasionally cause him to revise his own attitudes and actions. As Sudesha reflected on ways in which his spirituality is influenced by television, he offered the following response,

I watch that show that comes on Monday nights. I can't think of the name, with the old CBC reporter, she has a group of people and they talk on different topics. Religion or helping people around the world.....Yes Valerie Pringle, *Test of Faith*. That is a beautiful show. I love that program. What I enjoy about that show is that she is not giving her opinion or anything at all. All she is doing is picking 3 or 4 people from different parts of society, different groups, we can call them. Whether it is about language. Whether it is about religion. There are people in there in that show that say 'No everything should be just Christian and nothing else' and there are people like that and they are just presenting their own point of view and that is what I like about it. It brings about different points of view. It does influence me in the sense that I am more aware of what is going on. In some cases there are things that I was not aware of, that I didn't know about, which I know now. So it might affect my choices or actions in that way.

This was quite similar to the perspectives offered by Kelly, Lydia and Eric.

Other participants, such as Jennifer and Alex, claimed that they became aware of certain beliefs such as karma, reincarnation and meditation through television programs, including *Star Trek* and *The Simpsons*. Although both programs may be unlikely and possibly dubious sources for direct instruction about spiritual techniques, both programs have been widely recognized for their characterizations of religion and spirituality.<sup>38</sup> As Dalton, Mazur and Siems claim "*The Simpsons* represents both a model of and a model for contemporary American society, not only because it reveals contemporary attitudes about religious institutions, morality, and spirituality, but also because it functions in the time-honored way of religious satirists." (2001: 244). Further the program has been noted, both for its critique of religious systems, and for promoting the values of family, how to find joy and pleasure amidst the selfishness, folly and hypocrisy of the world, belief in the underlying

---

<sup>38</sup> For further reading on StarTrek see Wagner and Lundeen 2005; Jindra 2005; Kraemer et al. (2000); Porter and McLaren (1999). For further analysis of *The Simpsons* see Irwin et al (2001); Pinsky (2003)

goodness of people, pluralism and tolerance of diversity, and the importance of questioning, reflexivity and critique. Participants such as William, Gregory, Liz and Dhakir all frequently spoke about *The Simpsons* during their interviews. Dhakir explained he enjoyed *The Simpsons* because “it makes fun of society, it slanders the things you hold dear, in a sense because it’s a cartoon you let it and you can laugh with, but it makes you realize society is full of stupidity and culture and religion – there is a lot of stupidity in religion and that’s why they are fun to watch.” Like Dhakir, William also explained that he appreciates the satirical approach taken by the producers of *The Simpsons*, as well as, *Family Guy*. William stated,

Shows like *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* they bring everything into the show and they expose the audience to everything. It’s great because they don’t put more stock into anything. Everything is fair game. Everything is to be mocked. In a sense it gives the audience the sense that everything should be considered equally.... Somewhere in the random satire and slapstick, all the crazy stuff going on in that show, there are important messages. Like the importance of family and friends. Different ideas about how to live life, being open to different ideas.

As William’s example demonstrates those participants who watch such animated programs tended to relate them to religion and spirituality in three main ways. Most obviously, participants claimed to appreciate the critique of all forms of religion including traditional religions as well as New Age Movement and contemporary spirituality. Additionally, participants felt that the program reflected, reinforced and further encouraged them to think critically and reflexively about the world, about their beliefs and their actions. Further, *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* were both interpreted as promoting values such as kindness, commitment to family and diversity that further correspond and reinforce their own similar spiritual values.

As authors such as Newcomb, Primiano, Wagner and Lundeen, Blythe and McClymond all have argued, television offers a wealth of programs, themes and topics both reflecting and catering to widespread interest in religion, spirituality and the transcendent.

While some programs cater to a specific religious or spiritual subculture, or offer explicitly religious and spiritual messages, the programs that tend to have larger mainstream appeal are ones that seem to offer information and opinions, rather than exclusive truth claims and proselytizing, that offer options rather than obligations, and that offer a diffuse generic form of spirituality rather than denominationally or doctrinally specific symbols and narratives. The participants in this study see television as an accessible and undemanding medium that caters to and further inspires their interest in “all things spiritual” (Primiano 2001) through offering a wealth of different ideas, themes and storylines. Within this perspective neither television programs nor the process of viewing are by any means interpreted as spiritual on their own or sacred in any manner, rather participants draw upon television as way to access, think about and negotiate concepts of spirituality, the sacred and the transcendent.

### **The Appeal of the Supernatural**

One of the more obvious places to look at the relationship between television and popular spirituality is with the numerous depictions of the supernatural, the unknown, uncanny and paranormal in television programs. Angels, vampires, aliens, witches with supernatural powers, and God in many guises have frequented as television characters in recent years, not to mention the presence of ‘non-fiction’ shows dealing with themes such as ghosts and haunted places, spirit/demon possession, UFOs, psychic phenomena, near death experiences, reincarnation, and alternative healing. Such depictions are hardly new to television. *The Twilight Zone*, *One Step Beyond*, *The Outer Limits*, *Dark Shadows*, *Bewitched*, *I Dream of Jeanie*, *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters*, all popular during the late 1950s and 1960s serve as examples of the presence of such paranormal and

‘unexplained’ themes in television programs even during television’s “Golden Era.”<sup>39</sup>

Further, as Primiano argues, such programs are in fact a continuation of long-standing fascination with the supernatural, occult and paranormal that has been part of North American culture since at least the Sixteenth century .

On one level such themes in television are hardly religiously or spiritually significant as they may primarily function as novel or different types of characters and images aimed at generating audiences. Television producers and executives are always looking for programs that are new and a little different that will capture audiences’ attention but that are not so new and different as to be truly challenging or disconcerting. However, even such mundane motivations may point to greater cultural significance and meaning within the text –often regardless or in spite of the producers’ intentions. As Forbes notes,

creators and producers offer new television series to the public every year, but their manipulation of publicity and time slots cannot automatically guarantee that a show will be a hit; the public decides, sometimes surprising the pundits. ‘We’ make something popular when it touches a chord in us, perhaps expressing our assumptions and values, portraying our yearnings, or providing moments of escape. There has to be a reason (or reasons) why great numbers of people choose to watch one television series and not another (Forbes 2005: 5).

Consequently, Forbes asserts that while research into the motivations and inspirations of the creators of television programs may offer some interesting information and textual analysis of popular culture artifacts, such as specific television shows, offer important insights into the potential meanings of texts, it is through understanding audiences using such tools as

---

<sup>39</sup> In many cases it is quite likely that programs featuring supernatural characters or storylines particularly in a comedic light such as *The Addams’ Family*, had little explicit spiritual or religious significance for viewers, just as the more recent comedy *Third Rock From the Sun*, featuring aliens likely does not foster belief in extraterrestrials amongst viewers; however, beyond their surface entertainment value, the use of supernatural or otherworldly beings functions may act as a useful vehicles for social critique and commentary . For example, *The Addams’ Family* could easily be interpreted as a satirical commentary on American attitudes towards “the other,” and “foreigners,” or depicting conflicts between traditional and modern beliefs and values. While, *Third Rock From the Sun*, similarly could easily be read as a satirical commentary of human nature and behaviour in general, as well as, American popular culture specifically.

reception studies to address how audiences, as individuals, subcultures and masses, interpret and produce meanings in relation to television texts and why particular themes and ideas resonate with the viewing public, that much of our insight into the meaning and function of popular culture can be gained. Thus for Forbes, “the central question for popular culture analysis is why and how... [particular programs become] popular. What attracted the audience? What does its popularity say about the audience? How does it influence the audience?” (Forbes 2005: 7).

Television shows dealing with themes of the unknown and supernatural ranked high in the viewing habits of interview participants. I asked participants what appealed to them about television shows with supernatural content and depictions of alternative spirituality, and if they saw any connection between such shows and their beliefs and practices. Correlating with the three main themes raised in their discussion of spirituality, participants tended to highlight ways in which shows with supernatural content are related to their sense of transcendent reality, meaning and morality. In particular, participants explained that such TV shows resonate with their desires to find ‘little transcendences,’ inspiring or confirming their sense that there is more to the world than mundane reality; present different or alternative god images; provide opportunities to think about meaning and purpose of life; to contemplate ideas related to death and the afterlife; to offer possible answers or explanations to questions that neither science nor traditional religions answer satisfactorily; and to reflect upon values and morality. In accordance with Bibby’s theory, such data suggests that the interest in such television programs among participants corresponds with their desire to seek supernatural explanations (2002: 28-29).

However, it is important to note that programs with supernatural and spiritual content appealed to participants for more than just spiritual reasons – the most obvious being that

they find them entertaining and titillating. Both Michelle and Lydia explained that being frightened or 'freaked out', as they both described it, is part of the reason that programs, films and books with supernatural content appeal to them. Commenting on why she enjoyed watching *The X-Files*, Michelle enthusiastically proclaimed, "I liked it because it freaked me out! I like getting freaked out, as long as I know I can get some comfort after. That thrill of being freaked out. I don't want it to happen to me, but I like to see it!" As two of the younger participants in the study, aged 18 and 19, their explanations correlate closely with trends noted by Clark wherein teenagers' interest in the paranormal was often related to the thrill, fun or entertainment that exploration of the supernatural provided, rather than using it for religious or spiritual purposes (2003: 226). However, differing from Clark's findings, Michelle and Lydia as well as the majority of the participants also claim to be drawn to programs with supernatural content as part of their interest in spirituality.

Participants do see a 'pure' entertainment as being valuable in and of itself, but they also frequently demand more than relaxation, amusement or distraction from the programs that they watch, looking to be stimulated, challenged or informed. Further, the pleasurable and entertaining aspects of television far from undermine the values or meanings often derived from programs, rather it is precisely because shows are entertaining that they 'work' (Miles 1996: 21-22). While elements of the supernatural, unknown or paranormal phenomenon often garnered the attention of participants, they also applied their regular viewing criteria to these programs looking for engaging storylines, credible characters and good (or at least plausible) acting. For example, Camille and Peter both stated that while part of the appeal of the program *Medium* was due to the fact that it featured a main character and storyline dealing with psychic abilities, they also enjoyed the program because they both felt it featured talented actors, offered interesting and well written stories, and presented complex

and 'imperfect' characters. Peter explained that while he was initially attracted to show because of the psychic element, he became a regular viewer because "it is a good show." Camille expanded on this point while comparing *Medium* to the show *Ghost Whisperer* also purported to be loosely based on a 'real-life' psychic. She explained, "For example, [*Medium*] compared to *Ghost Whisperer*, I cannot buy into this one, although I know who it is based on and I like him, I can't recall his name, it's Van something, [James Van Praagh], the one with the big neck. He's one of those psychics that shows up on talk shows. But I don't like this show. The acting is very, very weak... it's superficial how she deals with things... [and] the visuals are a bit gruesome sometimes." Consequently, while Camille claimed she is often drawn to programs with supernatural content, that element alone will not sustain her viewing – the program must appeal to her on other levels as well.

Similarly, other participants suggested that programs must maintain some sort of narrative consistency if they were to become regular viewers even if they were purely of fiction or fantasy genre. While participants freely admitted that some of the programs they watched such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* were implausible in terms of everyday reality, they were often quite willing to suspend their disbelief (a phrase recurring frequently during interviews) provided the program adhered to its own pattern of internal logic. As David commented, "It doesn't matter so much that it's not something that can occur in everyday reality, but you better make damn well sure that it fits into the whole universe that has been created!... As long as it is consistent it is okay, but there has to be some logical progression." Thus despite the many incredible or supernatural events or characters that might occur within a program, participants still felt that programs must be organized, coherent and consistent, not simply inserting the supernatural in a haphazard or chaotic manner.

In a slightly different vein participants, such as Justin, Aurora Leigh and Ewan, who all claimed that they frequently seek out programs with supernatural content explained that they stopped watching certain programs because they felt the emphasis shifted from focusing on the supernatural elements toward human relationships. Justin recounted,

The *X-Files* when it came out, like the first couple shows were awesome! I was, like, I want to be Mulder. I used to watch it religiously! And then I guess they ran out of uncanny things or the supernatural and they had to put more of a story behind it. Someone in the show got cancer and Mulder and what's her name fell in love, and so I stopped liking it. I watched it more for all the stuff that I read about, the supernatural stuff, instead of the story. That goes for anything that I watch, I don't watch for the whole dramatic, and the acting or whatever, I like it more for the underlying messages.

Similarly, Aurora Leigh declared,

I did start watching them [*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*] but what turned me off of them eventually was that they seemed to degenerate, in my opinion, into soap operas. They stopped exploring the 'what ifs' and they started exploring 'what if' Buffy starts seeing this person, 'what if' Willow is gay. I just thought it didn't change who they are. Who cares about the characters, give me situations.... [The] *X-files*, I also liked that before it degenerated into a soap opera as well. Because it did! Scully suddenly had this kid and it was like what's the relationship between those two people and – .... A lot of what The X-files dealt with originally was questions of religiosity, sort of the whole alien things, it sort of ended up being, like these were gods before. Like this explains this cult or this explains that cult, and I was like this is pretty interesting.

Later on in the interview Aurora Leigh remarked, "Like the ones that I like to watch [are] those 'what if' things. I am sure that if I had watched soap operas that I would be a completely different person. That I would have preconceived notions of how people would deal with me."

Ewan made similar criticisms. He further illustrated the importance of the appeal of mysterious, unexplained or supernatural elements in programs as he explained that he lost interest in watching *The X-Files* and *Buff the Vampire Slayer* as the storylines became more focused on worldly rather than supernatural issues. While Ewan was drawn to *The X-Files*

because it featured stories about the paranormal, aliens, and even conspiracy theories to an extent, he felt that that evolution of the government conspiracy storyline was “too much” of an emphasis and taking away from storylines featuring investigations of what he termed “anomalies.” Similarly, Ewan said he lost interest in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as it began to focus on different aspects of Buffy and Willow’s sexuality and sexual identity. Ewan joked that while as a young male who is “all about sex” he should have found such elements appealing (and he did admit that he found the idea of a female warrior and female vampires “a turn on”) but he felt there are better places to watch sex if that is what he is looking for; rather his attraction to the show stemmed more from his interest in the supernatural. As the program offered more in-depth explorations of issues related to self-identity and personal relationships, themes that Ewan associated with soap operas, he began to lose interest in the show. For both of these participants, the unexplained and the paranormal elements of programs were the main source of their appeal. Justin, Aurora Leigh and Ewan all claimed to turn to programs such as *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* because they offered opportunities to envision and explore ideas related to the supernatural, a central feature in their concepts of spirituality. Without the emphasis on the mysterious phenomena or with the addition of storylines that dealt with more mundane everyday situations, the programs failed to meet such spiritual needs and were no longer “worth watching.”

### **Reenchanting the World With Television**

While participants’ preferences for programs with supernatural, paranormal and unexplained phenomena differed in terms of the programs that they watched, some preferring science fiction and fantasy type programs such as *Buffy*, *Angel*, *Charmed*, *Supernatural*, *The X-Files*, and others enjoying dramas which featured paranormal elements such as *Medium*,

*Joan of Arcadia*, *Mysterious Ways* and *Lost*, and others opting to watch talk shows such as John Edwards' *Crossing Over* and *The Montel Williams Show* featuring well-known psychic Sylvia Brown and edutainment style programs such as *Psychic Detectives*, *Most Haunted*, *Creepy Canada*, *Unexplained Mysteries*, or various programs on specialty channels such *The Discovery Channel*, *The Learning Channel*, *The History Channel* and *A & E*, a common thread throughout all of such programs is that they entertain the possibility that beyond the world of everyday reality, and sometimes even within everyday reality, is another world brimming with magic, enchantment, mysterious entities and supernatural forces. Participants explained that this theme is a significant part of the appeal of such programs. As indicated in Chapter Four, the spirituality of participants is rooted in the belief in a transcendent reality that manifests in multiple ways. Supernatural and paranormal phenomena, for many of the participants, are thought to be such manifestations or signals of transcendence which function as a confirmation or reminder that there is more to the world than everyday reality. Correlating both with Max Weber's thesis that modern ethos was characterized by "disenchantment of the world," as well as observations made by other studies of contemporary spirituality, participants often commented that late modern society lacks opportunities to acknowledge or express aspects of the transcendent. Programs with supernatural and paranormal content act as one of the few venues that encourage or inspire such a sense of enchantment.

The following comments made by Alex concisely express the sense many of the participants spoke to, that the late modern world is lacking a sense of wonder and mystery. Responding to a question asking why he enjoys programs about the religion, mythology and practices of ancient societies, Alex explained,

Because there is no science, like – the time when everything is still new. I don't know, like we explain everything. How the light works. We explain, like the rotation of the earth around the sun, sometimes it pulls away from the wonder of the world.

Wendy: Do you think it is important to live in a time when there is still wonder or mystery?

Alex: Definitely. The whole fantasy part of television and movies, Lord of the Rings and stuff like that, it definitely it just takes me away from the logic of our world and like everybody being rash.

Liz similarly critiqued the privileging of scientific worldviews stating, “The whole idea of using scientific method to prove those kinds of things just seems to me completely – I don't know. I don't see science as the God anyway, if something can't be scientifically proven, it doesn't matter.” While few of the participants outright reject science, rationalism or logic, many do suggest that overemphasis on these ways of thinking makes the world somewhat “degenerated spiritually” and “impoverished,” as William claimed. As illustrated in Chapter Four most participants suggested that a richer and more fulfilling approach integrates both scientific and spiritual concepts.

Similarly, while discussing both the personal and popular cultural appeal of programs with magic, mysterious and mythological content, such as *Hercules* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* when they were on the air and Discovery and Learning Channel specials about ancient societies, Dhakir suggested that television is responding to a cultural need. He asserted,

It is something to fill that void, because we are missing depth.....I guess people are just fascinated with hearing stories about love or tragedy and to have these mythical characters. And it kind of gets you thinking about other worlds, like maybe they are living in the spirit world. Like there is an invisible world of spirit. And we are lacking in stuff to motivate our thinking in that direction.

While traditional religious institutions, historically and contemporarily, have often mediated and accounted for supernatural phenomena and spiritual experiences to some extent (even if

it has been labeling them heretical, erroneous or evil), non-official and folk religious traditions have often existed alongside of official modes of belief and practice.

As the majority of participants are not involved in institutional religious traditions and those that are feel that it they do not fully respond to their spiritual needs and interests, participants are turning to other institutions and aspects of culture, including television, to find spiritual options, explanations and ideas. Camille a regular viewer of fiction and non-fiction programs with paranormal and supernatural content exemplified this approach when asked about the significance that such programs held for her, as she commented, “it kind of fills the gap that the lack of religion has created. I think people have to believe in something bigger than themselves – something unexplained, something misunderstood, and I think it fills that gap. I think it serves the same role.” Such comments correlate closely with Primiano’s observation that television producers pick up on the widespread cultural interest in the paranormal, supernatural and spirituality and respond by offering shows with supernatural content and spiritual themes. Thus television becomes a rich and easily accessible medium through which such interests can be developed and explored.

In addition to feelings of enchantment that programs which the supernatural inspire, many participants also suggested that programs with paranormal and supernatural content offer different ways to conceptualize the divine, present different ideas about how the transcendent may manifest in the world and give them the sense that there is “something more.” Some participants asserted that the God images offered on television are more accessible and plausible than the ones they believe exist in institutionalized religions. The program *Joan of Arcadia* particularly stood out in this capacity. Stephanie, Kelly, Nora, Camille and Jennifer all showed a great deal of enthusiasm for this program. These participants all indicated that the main appeal of the show was specifically the

characterization of God, the depictions of struggles with faith and the reoccurring themes of fate and destiny. When asked to discuss television programs that she watches regularly, Kelly stated,

*Joan of Arcadia*, that's the other one I love. I like that God manifests him or herself in anybody. It could be an old person that is just walking by, or it could be some goth teenager and I like the idea that God is everywhere. And what you do in your life has a ripple effect around you that you might not even notice. That everything is interconnected and by you doing something that you don't necessarily understand at the time is going to be beneficial, you have to trust your instinct, trust the messages that you get from God. And I like that it is a regular family, another family that I really admire and wish that I had. I guess that's why I like programs like *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*, where the father is a minister. *Joan of Arcadia* because God is in it in different shapes and *Touched by an Angel* with the angels in that.

Similarly, Jennifer explained, TV shows such as "*Joan of Arcadia*," "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" and "*Six Feet Under*" act as reminders that God and other supernatural beings exist. She further explains that TV depictions of God, such as shown on "*Joan of Arcadia*," make God more believable and approachable. She explains that, "In that show [*Joan of Arcadia*] God appeals to me. It's really interesting because God is different every time. It could be anybody. I think it 's appealing because it He makes Himself more accessible." According to participants, while the God of organized religion is distant and even unrealistic, the God of television is available, immanent, and sometimes even referred to as cool.

Beyond specific God images, participants' discussions about depictions of the supernatural and paranormal in television suggest that television acts as a type of plausibility structure supporting their beliefs in a transcendent reality. For example Ewan indicated that various depictions of the supernatural and paranormal in television point towards the validity of transcendent reality. He connected this spiritual worldview to his television viewing by suggesting that television programs featuring unknown or supernatural phenomena help to

reinforce his idea that there is more to the universe than our basic understandings of everyday reality. Ewan further explained,

I guess shows with mysterious elements interest me. I don't like ones that are just common, like I won't watch a soap opera. Just dealing with people's lives strictly I don't find that interesting. I guess there has to be that element of mystery, the unknown for me to find it interesting....I always watch shows that give you that creepy feeling – ghosts, possessions, UFOs, crop circles. They leave you with that kind of feeling in your stomach.... I guess I like to know there is something else out there.

Beyond drawing from television programs to construct and reinforce his belief in paranormal phenomenon, Ewan explained that these ideas in turn point toward his beliefs in a transcendent reality and that there is a meaningful order to the universe.

Similarly Andrew, as with most of the other participants, tended to identify ghosts, angels, aliens, vampires, werewolves, divination, psychic abilities and faith healing as part of the same general category. Likewise Dhakir proclaimed, "Angels, aliens, ghosts, it's all the same thing." Despite the differences between each topic, participants interpret them in the same manner, that is, as evidence that there is more to the world than everyday reality.

During his interview Andrew stated, "I'll watch the TLC or Discovery, talking about, like I don't know, a werewolf in Siberia or something. And the shows are out there just to, give you a change from the everyday. To give you something that you weren't thinking about. And I think that can be very powerful." He went on to explain that programs about supernatural and mysterious events appeal to him because, "It is universal. It doesn't have to be aliens or angels or ghosts or even with conspiracy theory, just that there is more going on in the world than we are led to believe."

Aurora Leigh and Peter suggested that ESP, precognition, telepathy and contact with the spirit world all point to the interconnectedness and unity of all individuals, the divine and

the world as a whole. As Aurora Leigh discussed her belief in psychic abilities, much of which she was exposed to through television, she explained, “If we are all part of the same thing, it follows that we are all connected. So when something is meant to be, when something is decided, it’s in the cards, you can sort of see that it’s meant to happen, but you can’t see that far in advance. Because some things can change.” Similarly, while discussing the characterization of psychic abilities in the program *Medium*, Peter commented, “It shows that there are different levels of connection.” He then referred back to his earlier discussion about the nature of the divine and the universe when he explained that, “it’s all one big thing. I see the world as, almost as refractions of the whole. I think of it as a prism refracting light. As the light shines through the prism it breaks into different beams of light... it is light at the source, but you see each colour individually through the prism.” Consequently Peter suggested that as all things in the world are interconnected, including past and future, individual and whole, nature and spirit, what we term psychic and paranormal phenomena are really the result of a moment of transcending the boundaries that we have created in order to live in everyday reality and experiencing a moment of connection or unity with the whole.

Both Austin and Lydia, two of the participants who self-identify as members of Christian denominations, interpret programs with supernatural content as more evidence God’s manifestation in the world. Austin, who also used to watch documentary and edutainment featuring paranormal and unexplained phenomena when he had cable, suggested that such shows are valuable because they inspire thought about the transcendent realm. Asked what he gained from watching these programs, Austin commented, “Something out of the physical world, that at least presents – that wants you think, that wants you to examine, that presents a case – even if it is slightly skewed.” As he went onto discuss psychic abilities

such as ESP, telepathy, precognition and astral projection, Austin stated, “Well they are tributes of God, so why shouldn’t we have them? Or at least as far as I think.”

In a slightly different manner Lydia said, “With God sometimes I have that problem where it is harder to relate to him because it is such a perfect being,” going on to explain that her preference for fiction and non-fiction programs about ghosts, possession, apparitions, stigmata, psychic phenomena, and mystical experiences, as well as edutainment programs about the origins of Christianity, the life of Jesus and the Bible are simply different ways of making the divine and religion seem more accessible. Lydia revealed,

I don’t go reading the bible or that sort of thing, but if there’s like the *The Life of Jesus* on TV or I’ll go on TLC and I see that, I’m like Yes! That’s the stuff I like! It really gets me. How they can relate actual biblical stories to real events that happened historically. When they do that there are certain things that just instill my beliefs even further. And it’s cool that people will take time out to research that with forensics. And it is confirmation that it’s not just a lunatic writing all this stuff down at the time. I mean it’s so hard not to think that sometimes. Like with people speaking in tongues and stuff like that. Did this person just go crazy and write all this stuff?

Lydia went on to offer a lengthy list and description of topics in various edutainment programs that she has watched, including ones about ghosts, possession, apparitions and stigmata, suggesting that each one is further indication of the reality of the transcendent.

For example,

Like there’s just thing all over the world, like the Virgin Mary is crying or like apparitions. Why? why her? Not many people are seeing apparitions of Jesus, they are seeing apparitions of the Virgin Mary and she is crying, like she is the mother of humanity and they can’t prove where this blood is coming from. Like I watch these TLC things – I’m like that’s crazy I love that stuff! The stigmata stuff, those types of things. It just says a lot...You hear about experiences like that and nothing can explain it. Science can’t explain it. Nothing. It just throws you for a loop. It makes you think about it...There is a lot of evidence of it. ....

Comparably, Stephanie, Nora and Dhakir reiterated similar ideas, suggesting that television presentations of paranormal and supernatural themes reinforce the validity of their

beliefs. Stephanie expressed this idea while we were watching an episode of *The Montel Williams Show* featuring psychic Sylvia Brown. Stephanie explained that she does not usually watch *The Montel Williams Show* nor does she appreciate most of the topics or the format of the program, but will watch episodes featuring Sylvia Browne as a guest if she comes across them. When asked why she likes watching Sylvia Browne, once again Stephanie stated, “It provides confirmation for me. It assures me about the experiences that I’ve had<sup>40</sup> – that I’m not crazy, I’m not the only one out there. Also her descriptions of things, the ‘other side,’ that there is something good there, there’s something after death, that assures me too.” Nora made a very similar statement when she explained the popularity of shows with supernatural themes help to confirm the plausibility of belief exclaiming, “It shows that I’m not just some random crazy person out there just making this stuff up!” Likewise while generally discussing reflections of spirituality on television, Dhakir stated, “On one hand it makes me seem less unique, but it’s also good to know that people are thinking the same kind of things.” Conversely, Brent explained that he avoids watching television programs with supernatural content precisely because they seem to confirm that such events are real, an idea he finds quite discomfiting and frightening. Further, he suggested that watching such shows and expressing an interest in the paranormal might actually prompt a supernatural or paranormal occurrence.

Such comments raise two interrelated points, the first being the issue of plausibility. As Berger (1967) has argued, for beliefs to remain plausible over a duration of time, they tend to require some form of reinforcement. Generally this function is performed by

---

<sup>40</sup> Here Stephanie is referring to three ‘mystical’ or paranormal experiences that she had: two where she encountered ghosts (along with other people in each situation); the other when she saw three angels or small cherub-like beings, with no other witnesses. While Stephanie described these as spiritual experiences and generally interpreted them in a positive light, repeatedly during our interviews she also indicated she found them somewhat troubling. Much of this was related to her concern about the social acceptability and credibility of claiming to have experienced ghost and angels.

establishing communities or groups that share the same belief system or worldview. Through various forms of reiteration of the belief structures and living 'as if' those beliefs are ultimately real, the community is able to maintain the continuity and plausibility of its beliefs. As personal forms of spirituality are constructed by the individuals that hold them, individuals are faced with the constant challenge of maintaining their plausibility. Without established sources of social support and reinforcement for their beliefs, they are vulnerable to doubt and uncertainty. While participants in this study maintain that they build their own spiritual worldviews, none of them (usually) feel that they are simply making things up or constructing their spiritual worldviews in a random manner. Rather, they hold the spiritual beliefs that they do because they believe them to be true. However, it is not surprising that, at times, participants such as Stephanie and Nora might have doubts about the reality of their beliefs and consequently look for some sort of affirmation that what they hold to be true is, in fact, plausible. Secondly, these comments further relate to the idea that television programs (amongst other aspects of culture) are not only drawn upon as resource for constructing and negotiating spiritual worldview but in fact are looked to as a system of evidence or a form of plausibility structure helping to maintain and support the credibility of certain belief systems.

### **The Mythic Function**

While participants explained that they regularly draw upon both fictional and non-fiction programs as resources for constructing their beliefs, to work through different questions and experiences, as a frameworks or guidelines for behavior and opinions, it is important to note that they usually pointed out that television does not often present accurate depictions of reality. Nevertheless, participants suggested that 'skewed' depictions of reality presented through television programs still offers valuable commentary on society and offer

some truth.<sup>41</sup> For example Alex, who regularly watches programs such as *The X-Files*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (as well as a variety of programs outside of science fiction and fantasy genres including *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* and *Boston Public* when it was on the air) was particularly concerned with establishing his awareness of the difference between fiction and non-fiction in television, as well as the distinction between television and reality.<sup>42</sup> Throughout his interviews Alex continuously emphasized that he is aware that most of the television shows that he watches are fiction or fantasy, nevertheless he suggests they may still offer valuable ideas and concepts. As Alex proclaimed, “it is absolutely not reality. Fictional television is an escape, but they can have truths or commentary of our society, but they certainly do not depict reality. But the ones I watch all have some kind of truth to them.” Later, Alex similarly stated, “Television is an escape. [But] I do relate myself to it and I do see reality in things, but at the end of the day I don’t go Star Trek is totally real.... but there is something in there.”

As with Alex, other participants often tended to approach such programs as fairytales or myths recognizing that although they are not meant to be accurate representations of everyday reality they nevertheless communicate important social, psychological and spiritual truths. Further, participants’ own analyses of the role of the supernatural in television correlates closely with Berger’s notion of “signals of transcendence,” as participants often explained that such programs inspire deep emotional responses, which they further relate to their sense of transcendence or spiritual feelings. In particular they cite feelings of hope, inspiration, passion, joy, a sense of purpose and meaning, compassion, grief, despair, and

---

<sup>41</sup> See Green et al (2004) for further discussion.

<sup>42</sup> Throughout his interviews Alex regularly expressed concern that this research would present him as a delusional “Trekkie” unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. Consequently, he often prefaced many of his comments about the relationship between television, his beliefs, worldview and sense of spirituality, with qualifiers, saying things like, “it is purely fictional, but...” or “it is purely for entertainment, but...”

desire for justice and equilibrium or order in the world. For example, commenting on why he enjoys *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, David explained, "It's a view into a world, where I wish things like that could happen. It gives me a possibility of things like that. And it's entertaining and slash [sic] hopeful."

Even in the case of non-fiction genres such as edutainment programs and talk shows, participants tended to express some level of skepticism suggesting that such programs are often sensationalized and may even be mistaken or fraudulent accounts. For example, participants often suggested that well-known psychic John Edwards is likely a fraud, or at least supplements his psychic gift with various psychological and technological tricks. Yet they are still prepared to entertain the possibility that such paranormal or supernatural events may indeed be possible. For example, Camille explained,

There was a time when John Edwards had a show and although I have read that he had mics in the audience and he could eavesdrop on people's conversations and they would say "Oh, I hope he talks about my little puppy" or things like that and then he would know that somebody had a puppy named whatever and they would go 'that's me!' I still think that he has the power, but maybe for television he had to use something else, he really think he does...It becomes live and yet people don't believe and so you have to have that instant gratification, really for these people, they have to be convinced when they are sitting down waiting for that moment. And you are dealing with human behaviour, like if the people that are coming back are human then you can't always predict it.

As was highlighted in their discussions of the difference between religion and spirituality, most of the participants are not usually looking for absolute or definitive truth or proof; in fact they tended to criticize 'religions' for making such claims. Rather for most of the participants, their spirituality is rooted in as a sense of possibilities, potentiality and plausibility. Further, as participants tended to evaluate spiritual 'truths' on the basis of whether or not they resonate with their own experience and beliefs, and whether or not

something is meaningful or useful, the issues of scientific validity or empirical reality become somewhat inconsequential.

Within the contexts of such discussions about the differences between fact and fiction and reality and truth, participants often drew comparisons between television and myth. Reflecting arguments made by Shanahan and Morgan and Wagner and Lundeen, some participants such as David, Dhakir, Serena, Aurora Leigh and Jennifer spoke about television programs functioning as a form of contemporary mythology.

For example David proclaimed,

All shows are myths so there is always some element in there – no matter how poorly the written the myth is – there is always some base element in there. And I just have to separate the trash from the good stuff...I think they do deal with ultimate human values and experiences but there are only so many times that they can rehash it and put it out there in a way people will like. People forget that Homer wrote the exact same stuff before.

In a similar manner Serena suggested that television programs perform a valuable function for viewers that was once provided by traditional myths. She argued that, like myth, television programs provide viewers with the opportunity to think through their own experiences. She stated,

I think there are a lot of positives too. Cause we don't have, people don't read myths and that sort of thing, so – I remember one of the questions asked do I compare myself with the characters and I do. I think that's like myth. I say this person is going through this, I am going through this too, you know. So I think it is important.

Usually participants suggested that television programs work as myth through offering potential ways to conceptualize the world, to ask questions about meaning and being, to explore possibilities, as well as implicitly teaching and reinforcing concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, justice and truth. Notably, the programs containing elements of science fiction or fantasy, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The X-Files* and *Star Trek*, stood out in participants' discussions about the mythic functions of television but they were by no means

the exclusive genres that they referenced in this context. Participants also mentioned other programs such *Law & Order*, *CSI*, *Six Feet Under*, *Oz*, and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* when they mentioned various ways in which television influences their worldviews and provides opportunities to explore ultimate questions.

Both Justin and Aurora Leigh drew comparisons between television, myth and religion as they argued that the basic format of most fictional television programs is based upon the age-old struggle between good and evil. Reflecting upon the relationship between spirituality and television, Justin commented, “There are so many shows on religion. And well they all do in a way.... Because religion deals with the aspect of good and evil and every show has that in it. There’s a bad guy. It’s always a struggle with power. With good and evil.” Frequently participants referred back to programs that they watched as children or teenagers as having a significant impact upon shaping their worldviews and concepts of morality.

Aurora Leigh offered a lengthy discussion of such themes, in particular explaining that much of her worldview, concepts of morality and current spiritual beliefs were influenced by programs that she watched as a child. She claimed that television introduced her (and continues to do so) to a variety of ideas and beliefs which she has come to reflect upon and decide which ones make sense to her and which ones do not. In the following excerpts from one of our interviews, Aurora Leigh explains how she understands the connection between television programs, mythology and her current spiritual beliefs and practices. Speaking of television programs, Aurora Leigh asserted,

It’s all a bunch of worldview creation and you can choose to accept it. Sometimes I accept it. It has a lot to do with that open-mindedness thing. I think a lot of that came from the things that I used to watch.... I think the cartoons started it out. I would say that it gave me the whole interest in magic outside sort of spiritual forces. Like *The Care Bears* they had little magical powers. They had this sort of communal

kind of outlook that had this very spiritual involvement. They were 'everyone is good' but everyone is not. They had this little magical being that put the goodness in everyone.... And still most things [I watch] will actually have that sort of content in it. That sort of religious or spiritual element in it or a religious trial....I do believe that they influenced what I considered to be good and evil. I got the 'truth' and 'justice' and being good to people in general from all these heroes. I thought 'wow they're paragons of excellence I should try to be just like them. Cause they're good and they're not evil.' It was very basic... It is still God and Satan, you know just in different terms. It's always been about good versus evil. There was light and there was dark and it's like, 'oh my god this is scary' or 'oh I love this place.' It must have come out of that. Fear being evil and safety being good. And then the sort of auxiliary feelings that arose out of that. Good is when you are safe, justice and truth and whatever. Fear is like when you're fearing lies, fearing hurt and whatever. That's what those particular programs tune into. That sort of fundamental dichotomy, you know?

Aurora Leigh's comments exemplify discussions raised by other participants, particularly younger participants between the ages of 18 and 24, as they reflected upon the relationship between their spirituality and television. Participants in this age demographic frequently referred back to cartoons and children's shows that they watched when they were younger attributing much of their interest in magic, mystery and the supernatural to such programs. Further, just as with Aurora Leigh, they claimed that such shows helped form their basic concepts regarding human behaviour, codes of conduct and conceptions of the world.

While some participants such as Aurora Leigh, Justin and Dahkir focused on the impact of cartoons, others such as Ewan and Kelly discussed family dramas such as *Road to Avonlea*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Walt Disney* and *Little House on the Prairie*, as providing basic frameworks for conceptualizing right and wrong, good and evil, morality and immorality, and for reinforcing a sense of trust and security in the world. Kelly explained how she sees the interconnection between her sense of spirituality, concepts of morality and television viewing, as she commented,

I think for some reason I have always had this part inside of me that has yearned for more knowledge about the part of you that is spirit. I learnt a lot through reading... [and] through some of the programs that I watched growing up. I have always been

attracted to programs with a strong morality behind them. One of my favorites growing up was *Little House on the Prairie*. I liked the family and how one of the most important things was family and the other most important thing was God. No matter what the episode was good always won over bad in the end. It was always about people coming together to help as a community and as a spiritual community.

Such themes of good triumphing over evil and order over chaos were common amidst participants' comments about viewing preferences. Further such ideas were frequently connected with participants' definitions of good as helping others, evil as harming others, as presented in their discussions about spirituality in Chapter Four. For example, Jennifer, Nora, Ewan and Andrew all suggested that the science fiction and fantasy programs that they enjoy offer messages about helping others, fighting for what is right, and the forces of good prevailing over evil. While discussing why she enjoys *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Jennifer commented,

Buffy is kind of spiritual. There is the whole religious aspect of the cross and everything. But I think it's more the fundamental truths and being overall a good person.... Willow being a Wicca, they explore that. There's little things going on all over the place. Through out the first seven season, they say Buffy is THE one slayer, when she really isn't.... and the end comes and she just blows that right out of the water. It deals with the whole destiny thing again. Like it was her destiny to be the slayer, but now every girl's destiny.

Jennifer's comments express a common tendency amongst participants as their discussions about the underlying themes of programs often implied that there is connection between working for good or change in the world and individuals' fate, destiny and purpose in the world.

Other participants, such as Nora and Andrew, tended to interpret the storylines dealing with battles with supernatural and cosmic evil presented in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as metaphors for personal, social and political struggles. During part of her interpretation of the show Nora commented,

On the literal level they are fighting demons and stuff but on the other level they are battling things that people fight with everyday, like apathy and hatred and discrimination. They cover huge issue and things that really help a person in their daily life. I think too many people looked at *Buffy* on the literal level....I think the role of the supernatural in that show, like the vampires and demons were more a medium for the message. So it is not necessarily that the fact that they are vampires or demons, but the fact that they are tangible symbols of what is wrong with the world. And they are something physical that you can fight. I mean you can't just go up and start punching the capitalist system because there is nothing to lay your hands on.... But yeah I like the fact that the demons and stuff are evil, but they are tangible evil, they are manageable.

While Nora interpreted the program in light of her opinions regarding current political and social situations, Andrew interpreted the program as metaphors for the struggles faced by teenagers as they move towards adulthood. He explained,

She's the slayer. She goes out at night and slays vampires and she saves the world from evil. And I think in a lot of ways teenagers can feel like they're carrying a burden all by themselves. I can personally say that I found that a lot of times in my life. You feel like you're really pulling your own weight and you feel like you have to fight for your way to survive and it's obviously not going out and slaying vampires, but you're slaying your own inner demons. So I think it's a really good depiction.

Later in his interview Andrew went on to discuss what he felt were the positive messages and themes in the program *Charmed*. Andrew stated,

I really like the show earlier on, I think the only difference is that it has moved from the good wholesome issues to maybe revealing more skin on television to get better ratings. But earlier on in the season I definitely believed it was a good image to portray – people working together to defeat evil. And evil being in whatever terms – people that harm other people, people that try to negatively influence people. And I think that's a good image to portray to society.

In a similar vein, Ewan explained that he appreciates the Superman series *Smallville* because he feels it emphasizes human potential and overcoming challenges. Further, he suggested that the underlying theme of the program emphasizes personal, social and cosmic struggles for good to prevail.

Offering a different variation on the themes of goodness, kindness and helping others, participants such as Alex, Kelly, Tanya and Stephanie drew connections between programs that they watch and their ideas about the meaning and purpose of their lives. Quite often such ideas were centered around personal growth, helping others, and were often tied to their concepts of work as a vocation. For example, Kelly a psychologist, Tanya a social worker, Stephanie a nurse, and Alex a university student working toward his teaching degree all believed that their work is related to their destiny; therefore they see their jobs as part of their spirituality. All four of these participants suggested that their ideas about work as a calling or vocation have been fostered and reinforced through programs that they watch on television. Alex explained that he often feels inspired by characters that he sees on television, in particular he referred to the program *Boston Public* which he used to watch regularly prior to its cancellation. When asked why he enjoyed the program, Alex exclaimed,

*Boston Public* I love it!... I could relate to things.... They tackle some tough issues like teen pregnancy, guns in schools, the whole safety issue. Also the teachers are very eccentric and interesting. Just trying to keep order in a school like that.... Also because it shows trying to do good in the world. The teachers sometimes go into very freaky situations and I'd like to do that – become a teacher.... Television kinda helps me in that way because it bombards me with all these different ideas, way of life. Definitely the free spirited things. Having a career is good but, like on *Boston Public* the teachers actually go out and help and are concerned. I want to do that.... To go beyond.

Tanya similarly spoke of feeling inspired through watching programs featuring characters in various helping professions, particularly medical and police dramas. She stated, “Like stuff like *CSI*, *Third Watch*, I like because I want to help people. So I like watching them. I used to want to be a paramedic, before social work and now psychology. So I watch stuff like that, I admire [people] doing that kind of stuff.”

In other examples, participants in this study frequently referred to Oprah Winfrey as an inspiration and role model, as well as mentioning *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and “O, The Oprah Magazine” while discussing the relationship between spirituality and television. Even those participants who did not watch her show nor even particularly ‘like’ Oprah Winfrey, with the exception of Brent, agreed (with the people who admired her) that she offered a spiritual message and was contributing to the world in a positive manner. Brent explained that while Oprah does much good work and promotes a certain type of spiritual beliefs and practices, he does not consider Oprah to be a truly spiritual person nor does he see such forms of spirituality as authentic because he thinks she promotes greed and selfishness. He remarked, “Is she doing it to help people or is she doing it for herself? She may be helping people, but she is in it for herself, not for the helping people and in order to make money and she is telling people to only care about themselves [sic].” However, Brent was in the minority. While both Nora and Aurora Leigh did critique Oprah for being “too capitalist” and felt that the type of spirituality offered by Oprah is not as deep as spirituality ought to be, they nevertheless claimed to respect her and appreciate that she is offering what they feel are positive spiritual messages and values such as helping others and cultivating self-awareness, self-esteem and empowerment. Justin, who said he is not a regular viewer of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* but does tune in occasionally, claimed to like Oprah as a role model. He stated,

I don't know what her religion is, but she's really a 'God' person, but not in a bad way. I just like her because she is a really good person. She's generous. We need more of that. Like, I don't watch that much. But I just like her as a role model specifically as an African American woman. She is strong. She wasn't rich when she was a kid. She worked hard for what she got, She is so generous with her money. I mean she's not Job or anything. She still lives in a big house and has lots of money. But she does give her time and her money to people that actually need it. She will go to Africa, she won't just donate money, but she will go to Africa and will help people

to build a school there and that's awesome. As for the whole celebrity interviews, I am not into that."

Additionally participants Kelly, Tanya, Stephanie, Serena, Alex, Jennifer and Michelle all cited *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as contributing to their ideas about spirituality, the meaning and purpose of life, and personal growth and development. For example, Kelly explained that popular spirituality authors such as Deepak Chopra, Marianne Williamson, and Gary Zukav all of whom she was introduced to via *The Oprah Winfrey Show* have transformed the way in which she thinks about the meaning of life. She explains that these authors taught her "[that] life is about the relationships you have with others, with God and the relationship you have with yourself." Kelly believes that her role in life and in fact the whole meaning of her life is to help others and make a positive change in their lives. She again cites Oprah Winfrey as a source of motivation for reminding her of her life's spiritual purpose and meaning,

The 'Angel Network' that she brought up, that is another example of how just one person can make a significant change in just one person's life. If you stop and think about it 'what's my gift?' 'How can I make the world a better place?' .... When you look at it, how they talk about it on the Oprah show, you can figure out what you're good at and use it to help even just one person.... It is definitely spiritual.... So, I think that is something that I have learned from her, to listen to that force within you to help make your life better and use your life to help others.

For Kelly and other interview participants *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in particular has significantly contributed to their belief that each person has a special role to play, a destiny or specific lessons to learn in life. Stephanie, another regular viewer of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, expressed similar ideas explaining that she watches the show because it resonates with her beliefs and values, in particular, an emphasis on helping others and development of her self-esteem and further provides her with additional information and inspiration.

Commenting on why she enjoys programs such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and how they might be connected her sense of spirituality, Stephanie explained,

I think I watch a lot of things like Oprah and read her magazine because I find that they are focused on values and good and the good in people.

Wendy: What kinds of values do you see in Oprah?

Stephanie: I think it's mostly about doing good for others and being the best person you can be and giving yourself to others. And empowering yourself and empowering others.... They always make you think. It always really challenges me. Each issue gives me something new to think about from a different perspective.

Wendy: Are they, like empowerment, self-esteem connected to spirituality?

Stephanie: I think they are connected. I am always trying to put myself in situations that make me happy and feel more like myself and feel in my happy place. And to know who I am makes me feel spiritual.... Oprah focuses on that too being your own individual.

As with Kelly and Stephanie, other participants also suggested that Oprah's spirituality is expressed through her emphasis on personal growth, connecting with oneself, and finding one's purpose in life – which invariably involves helping other people. Beyond this participants like Kelly and Stephanie claimed to have used Oprah Winfrey herself, as well as guest authors, as direct learning resources for further cultivating their spiritual beliefs.

As suggested by both Newcomb (1990) and Clark (2003), television programs offering non-specific spiritual messages of goodwill, hope and transcendence tend to be more favored by general audiences. Participants overwhelmingly demonstrated this tendency. Drawing upon their differentiations between religion and spirituality they often claimed to appreciate Winfrey's approach because she offers 'spirituality' rather than 'religion.' Jennifer's comments serve to highlight this theme, as she explained, "I do like Oprah because she is spiritual and she doesn't preach one religion. I think she appeals to everybody. She grew up poor and made it big. She's a feel good story. Whatever she tells you, you kinda believe it....She tries to help people. She has her angel foundation. She has so much money but gives some of it away. I think she's a moral person."

## Death, The Afterlife, and Grieving

Another prominent theme raised by participants was the degree to which television shows provide them an opportunity to think about morality and immortality. Reflecting arguments made by McIlwain (2005), participants suggested that dramas, edutainment programs and talk shows act as forum for exploring various ideas about death, assuage fears about dying, offer comfort to the living and help work through feelings of grief and loss. For example, participants Andrew, Serena and David explained that part of the appeal of the show *Six Feet Under* is that it depicts different forms of grieving and responses to death, as well as offering various images of life after death. Asked what she finds appealing about the show, Serena replied “well it deals with death, so that is interesting, just because it is far away from me. I, but I think death is interesting because some part of me might be kind of afraid of it.... I think there is meaning in it and I think that’s what it is with *Six Feet Under*, like it is just showing how people live through that meaning.” Andrew correspondingly commented on how *Six Feet Under* presents different attitudes about death. He stated,

It can vary from different circumstances, for example if a man loses his wife on the show and he’s going through a terrible time of loss and he dies holding his wife’s casket. That can show you the one extreme of death, but on the other side you can have someone that wants the cheapest funeral, they want the wooden casket. They just want the body cremated, which is fine, but they want the cheapest available solution. It really talks to what our society believes in. As a society, like the main person at the funeral home, he has an intense fear of death, so you’re wondering how can this happen? Again it deals with the complexity of the characters and how our society deals differently with death. The different ways we can see it. David thinks of death as a regular occurrence.... You also deal with different companies the Kroehner Company that believe assembly line funerals. And they see no human aspect to it. They actually do buy out other funeral homes in the area, and the funeral homes just give up and lose their vision of the humanity aspect that they are trying to bring to their customers..... It brings a multi-dimensional image of how our society and individuals deal with death.

Similarly, Simon, Justin, and Dhakir explained that they enjoy watching programs on *Discovery* and *The Learning Channel*, specials about ghosts, the paranormal and ancient cultures because they illustrate different ways that people have historically conceptualized death and the afterlife. Explaining why he is drawn to such programs Simon proclaimed,

I like to learn a lot about religion and spiritual things... I think it is healthy. It allows you to see more to the world. Why people do things. How they do things. I like the little things, facts about things, like beliefs on certain things, like the way people view death I like that's cool or like some people believe in heaven or some people believe in reincarnation, I think it's cool why people believe that.

Explaining why he finds programs on Egyptians fascinating as well as commenting on their widespread popularity, Dhakir exclaimed,

If you are working for *The Discovery Channel* and you want to make money just put something on about the Egyptians and Mummies.... I think it's popular because it speaks of a time where you can the craziest monuments coming out at this time, like the tombs and the mystery behind them that's the appeal. With each show you are waiting for them to uncover the mystery and then they say well we still don't know. It's the mystery that drags you in. There is also a fascination with death involved there. It's got everything in there! It's a blockbuster! It's got everything. Humans I think should be fascinated with death since it will happen. But seeing what another culture believes, like an ancient idea of how to do it. It was crazy and elaborate, the gold boats, like how the heck do you do that when you are thousands and thousands of years behind us supposedly? We still haven't figured out how they got the pyramids up and running.

Likewise, Justin and William both offered very lengthy and detailed descriptions of programs focusing on different traditions regarding death and the afterlife ranging from discussions of ghosts, mummies, zombies and demons, to Ice Age, Iron Age, Christian, First Nations and Hindu burial and funeral rituals, to near death experiences, past lives, reincarnation, and heaven and hell. Echoing the sentiments of Simon and Dhakir, Justin and William both explained that while they may not necessarily adopt any of the beliefs about death and the afterlife presented on television, just watching programs on such topics (as well as learning about them through other capacities) is integrally connected to their concepts

of spirituality which they both define as learning, thinking and talking about the transcendent.

In a slightly different manner Stacy suggested that television programs, along with other popular culture mediums such as novels, movies and music videos, provide different possible explanations regarding death and the afterlife. While Stacy rarely specified particular programs or sources of information, and often spoke about popular culture in general, rather than differentiating particular mediums, she nevertheless indicated that, for her, popular culture was a primary source for exploring spiritual and existential questions. Speaking about the relationship between her views on death and the afterlife and television, books and popular music, Stacy remarked, "Like that, it's sort of an answer for the question I didn't have an answer for before, like what happens after you die." She went on to explain, "I kind of like the idea of reincarnation, I don't even like, I really like that idea as opposed to all the other options that there are.... I really don't like the nothingness thing. I don't like that one at all. And I don't really like the idea of going to heaven and chilling there for eternity. I don't like that either, it doesn't make sense and hell doesn't make sense either."

During her interview Stacy said that her views on death, as with most of her ideas about spirituality, change regularly. Like many of the participants, Stacy was not particularly concerned with the lack of consistency in her beliefs, explaining that some days certain ideas make more sense to her than others and that further exposure to new or different ideas also may cause her to alter her beliefs. Television, along with other popular media, provides an assortment of options and explanations which can be pondered, accepted or rejected concurrently. Such a perspective once again illustrates participants' tendencies to conceptualize spiritual ideas, themes and beliefs as flexible and changing, and further define spirituality as a process rather than a clear product or structure.

In a different vein, both Camille and Tanya developed further interest in programs about ghosts and the afterlife in response to the death of members of their immediate family.

Asked if she watched programs with supernatural content Camille responded,

“Well every time I can. Okay, like if there is a haunted house – yeah I am aware that it is very easily manipulated, so although I believe in that a house is evil or something I also know that TV can make it look like something, and often it looks very rubbish, although maybe it stems from something real, just the way they presented it is rubbish.

Wendy: what’s the appeal of shows like that?

Camille: I think it is seeing the different forms that ghosts can take. Or the different ways that people will manifest themselves, the way that they do it. Also the reason why, what’s the link? Is it the house that is the link or the people the link? But I am not into the shock value of things like Poltergeist or things flying, it’s just something that really will move me... Now that my mom is dead things about ghosts, I think maybe oh that’s the way she is going to come to me or that’s they way I can see this, or maybe she tried to do this and I am not responding.

While Camille claimed to have “always believed in ghosts ever since I was a little girl,” she explained that her interest in such topics was renewed after the loss of her mother. Further, Camille suggested that her belief in ghosts and communication with the dead provides her with an immanent sense of connection to her mother and gives her a sense of trust and comfort that her mother is “okay wherever she is.” Likewise Tanya explained that she was further drawn to programs, books and websites featuring supernatural content after the death of her daughter. Tanya revealed that at the time of her daughter’s death she was visited by her “ghost” or “angel” and since then feels she has been contacted by her daughter in her dreams. Tanya explained that, “So it’s sort of like a flash, to say ‘hey I’m here.’ ‘It will be okay Mom.’ ‘You can go on.’” While Tanya did suggest that these experiences may well be psychological coping mechanisms in response to her grief, she also feels that the experiences are very real, and in fact prefers to think of them as real, even if they are “just me [her] doing it.” Consequently she is particularly interested in programs and books featuring guardian

angels, ghosts and communication with the dead, both to help contextualize her experiences and provide further confirmation in their validity.

In a related manner Margaret, Nora and Jennifer all mentioned ways in which television programs may help people work through the grieving process. Margaret, who believes that psychic phenomena are possible, is somewhat skeptical about John Edwards' abilities but she suggests that the program nevertheless can be useful. Margaret stated, "I watched John Edwards. I'm not convinced that it is true, but I think it is good because if people believe and it helps them with their grief, is there anything wrong with that?" Offering more personal examples, Nora and Jennifer, both having recently experienced the death of relatives, claimed that certain television storylines gave them the opportunity to think about death, the meaning of life and immortality in order to help them work out which ideas make sense. Jennifer indicated that seeing how characters in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Six Feet Under* reacted to the death of a loved one helped her understand her grieving process. Similarly, Nora explained that reflecting upon the storyline in *Buffy the Vampire* of the death of Buffy's mother actually helped her work through her feelings of grief. She explained,

I think certain types of TV can be cathartic. You know the episode where Buffy's mother dies was so emotionally charged. And that episode aired about a month before my grandfather died and then I saw it on a rerun and it was just, you know, kinda like not feeling alone because someone else felt the same way that I did. Just the numbness. Because everyone on TV when someone dies they are just so sad, the weeping and everything, but when my grandfather died I was for one relieved because he had been in terrible pain for a long time, but I was just numb. I didn't cry for quite a while. I just walked around in a sort of – well that's over –daze. And I feel that certain shows can have that affect on people. You sort of release your emotions into the show. You know you are crying with them, you are laughing with them. You feel better.

Such examples vary greatly in terms of the programs and the specific types of ideas and concepts as well as in each participant's use of television programs in relation to death and

the afterlife. Nevertheless they are united through the common assertion that television programs provide a forum for exploring and negotiating beliefs about mortality, immortality and the responses of the living in the face of death.

### **Hope for the Future**

Coming close to what Berger (1969) and Bibby (2003) define as signals of transcendence participants often spoke of using particular television programs to provide them with a sense of inspiration and hope as well as ways to imagine the future. In their interviews, Gregory, Alex and Ewan all discussed their preference for science fiction programs such as *Star Trek Voyager*, *Deep Space Nine* and *Stargate* because they felt these programs offered a message hope for a better future. Speaking about variations of the Star Trek series Alex claimed, “It just portrays a better future..... It put Janeway a woman in charge of a starship. It put Benjamin a black man in charge of a space station. It’s like always creating new role models as well....There is something in there, it all gives hope in a way. Most of the stories or television shows that I watch give hope for the future or, you know, well being.” Gregory offered similar comments. When asked what programs he likes to watch and why, Gregory replied, “*Voyager*, I like [*Star Trek*] *Voyager*. I’m real deep aren’t I?... It’s doing something to us that we don’t even realize, I think. It is opening up your mind – to new existence, to hope, to future. So I like that kind of uplifting stuff.” Beyond this, Gregory explained that science fiction programs often appeal to him as they present new ideas, options and ‘undiscovered,’ yet to be developed or currently unproven realities. After describing the storyline of *Stargate*, Greg commented,

It’s just really fun. But it also gives you the idea that we are not alone. That’s kind of a neat idea. I always tell my kids you should watch this! This is how we’re going to travel [laughs]. Well the universe is full of other beings. Just because we don’t have

the technology to travel or communication, doesn't mean they don't exist. It's like acupuncture. It didn't exist because the American Medical Association couldn't figure it out. Now they can figure it out, so they should only do it.

Once again, with these comments offered by Alex and Greg as well as similar discussions offered by other participants, the themes of open-mindedness, possibilities and potential are of essence. While participants do not suggest that such science fiction or fantasy programs are 'real,' they do see them as offering certain types of truth, ways to imagine and possibly shape the future, and point towards realities and worlds beyond our current everyday rational reality and explanations.

In a slightly different manner, Ewan and Eric suggested that they use some of the television programs they watch as an opportunities to reflect upon ethical and moral issues related to technological development and scientific advancement, as well as on the future of humanity. Ewan stated,

I think that there is science fiction dealing with technology and all that and then there is science fiction dealing with a statement about humanity, like 'where are we going with this?' and that's what is more interesting to me, not about aliens. If it deals with a possibility of things happening, that's what interests me.

Ewan's comments exemplify many of the ways in which participants use television as a way of raising questions and exploring possible outcomes in a safe, secure and imaginary context.

Eric offered a different take on sci-fi, fantasy and popular science programs. During our interviews Eric regularly mentioned his fears about global environmental devastation and unrestrained technological development. At one point in our interview he reflected, "Our technology surpasses our morality. We use it to destroy each other and ourselves. We believe people who make up lies just to advance themselves. We don't learn from ourselves or learn from the past." Eric further suggested that science fiction programs, movies and books, as well as popular science programs such as *Daily Planet* provide a forum for thinking through

the consequences of technology and its uses. Commenting on why he enjoyed science fiction, Eric stated,

I really like science fiction stuff. It's like different ideas. Different ways of living. The whole utopia and – what's the opposite of that?... Yeah, dystopia thing. Just the fantasy of a whole different society, different norms.... It brings ideas into your head and you're like 'hey that's true.' It brings up points in society that you see all the time without thinking about it... I watched *The X-Files* all the time. Just the whole sci-fi something beyond the norm. It is fantasy. It makes you use your imagination. To think that there are different ways to be. Not to be so narrow minded. It [contributes] to opening your mind.

Eric's discussions express the common late modern (post) modern inclination towards questioning modern paradigms of progress, technology and expansion, as well as, traditional religions. Part of Eric's fear is that contemporary individuals and society as a whole have not been questioning or reflecting upon our actions; further he expressed concern that modern traditions have come to be naturalized to the point that we conceive them as the only possible option. Science fiction, he felt, offers possible alternatives through encouraging people to see other options and ways to rethink our use of and attitudes towards technology and development in a constructive, safe and ethical manner.

Drawing upon themes of science and science fiction in a different manner, the majority of participants integrated their ideas about science with their concepts of spirituality. Frequently participants' sense of spirituality is conceptualized within a framework of popularized (and sometimes slightly muddled) understandings of quantum theorists such as Stephen Hawking, David Bohm, Fritjof Capra, and Amit Goswami combined with popular spirituality authors Gary Zukav and Deepak Chopra, as well as contemporary spiritual themes of energy, interconnectedness of the universe, and merged further with ideas taken from science fiction genres. Within this framework they tend to understand spirituality and 'new' science as intrinsically connected, theorizing that such

scientific paradigms will eventually prove their spiritual beliefs. Thus popular television programs on science, science fiction, supernatural phenomenon, as well as lifestyle shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* which feature topics and authors such as Deepak Chopra and Gary Zukav offer general popular spiritual worldviews and are all thought to point a reality beyond every day understandings.

Ewan offers a typical example of such tendencies. Throughout his interviews Ewan often spoke of his belief in a transcendent reality which he conceives as the ordering principle or force behind the universe, as well as his belief in paranormal phenomena such as ghosts, spirit possessions, telepathy, precognition and ESP. However he framed all of these beliefs within scientific language. Ewan claimed, "I think that science in a lot of ways justifies religion. The more that people learn about science the more that you tell yourself answers why things happen, but the more questions you answer, the more questions arise from it. I think science will prove the existence of spirituality and an afterlife." Ewan explained that he has come to this conception of the world (which he admits he is still trying to figure out) from an amalgamation of sources including university courses in science and philosophy,<sup>43</sup> science fiction literature, fictional and edutainment style television programs, his conversations with people, and his life experiences. Participants often felt that television programs, both fiction and non-fiction, provide them with spiritual ideas and ways to structure some of their beliefs, encourage them to be open-minded about alternative possibilities and explanation of the world outside of traditional rational scientific frameworks, and inspire them to reflect upon the ultimate meaning of the universe, human

---

<sup>43</sup> Notably Ewan did not include his university religious studies course in here as he felt that it offered mainly method and theory rather than philosophical or spiritual ideas that he could draw from.

existence and the future. Furthermore, the content of certain television shows acts as a signal, reminder or proof of supernatural phenomena and a transcendent reality.

### **Reality TV as Morality Plays or Moral Degeneration**

During participants' discussions regarding television and morality Reality TV emerged as a particularly hot topic. Whether they were viewers of it or not, all of the participants had particularly strong opinions on Reality TV. Some reported being fans of reality television shows such as *Survivor*, *Wife Swap*, or *What not to Wear*, while other participants vehemently criticized reality television as a genre. Participants seemed to be in two camps regarding their opinions on Reality TV. One group- the fans, while recognizing that Reality TV is fabricated, suggest that it does offer insight into human nature and behaviour as well as valuable commentary on contemporary society. Correlating with arguments made by Johnson, arguing that Reality TV deals with social and emotional intelligence, participants who are fans suggest that reality programs challenge them to think about human behavior, motivations underlying actions, the complexity of interpersonal ineffective communication (Johnson 2005: 90-109). For example, Aurora Leigh explained,

A lot of it is about communication or miscommunication in general and so I try to think about that and I can kind of understand how people can be that way. I can see the relevance to real life and I think that is really why I watch those kind of shows because a lot of the time I don't get that kind of exposure. Just because obviously it's like you're watching a man and a woman in a bedroom, you don't normally see into someone's bedroom.

Likewise Brent argued that Reality TV programs such as *Survivor* implicitly teach values. In Brent's interpretation, the winners of the various *Survivor* series are always people who have a communal outlook, build positive relationships with other players and focus on helping others. Brent suggests that this approach is not only an effective strategy for winning the game, but offers important life lessons and social values. Other participants, such as Alex

and Trish, look upon Reality TV as a form of contemporary morality play, highlighting good and evil aspects of human nature. As Alex claimed, “They’re great. It just has everything to do with sin, lust, temptation.” Trish further suggested that Reality TV gives viewers the opportunity to think about human nature and human motivations including greed, intolerance and maliciousness, which can ultimately lead to a greater understanding and tolerance of others. Corresponding with Sumners’ (1996) arguments about television and moral boundary setting, Trish suggested that such programs help draw attention to issues of morality and codes of behaviour by highlighting such “unacceptable” attitudes.

In the other camp are the participants who made a point to denounce Reality Television during the interviews. Like the fans, they think Reality TV offers a commentary on society but they see Reality TV as reinforcing and perpetuating negative social values, such as greed, selfishness, dishonesty and deceit. For example, Margaret declared,

I hate shows like *American Idol*. They are so superficial and people that would allow themselves to be put in that position and to be insulted. And somebody who sets themselves up as the perfect man or the perfect husband or whatever. I just don’t understand the mentality that would want to be placed in that position. I find it really hurtful. It really upsets me so much I just can’t watch that. They are not reflecting any values. Well the value of greed I guess.

Liz expressed similar sentiments, stating, “I don’t watch much Reality TV, but I am so boggled why so many people are so interested in them. Maybe they need a life, a real life.... it just seems so un-reality to me.... I find that the values are so superficial, and it just seems to perpetuate people’s superficiality.” Likewise, Camille criticized reality programs for emphasizing sexuality, looks and appearance as sole sources of value and worth. She declared,

I really don’t like Reality TV a lot. Actually I don’t like it at all! The one with the, which one is it called? In French it was *The Loft*, and I find that it makes people be okay with public shows, not of affection, but of sex or talking about anything.... I think they are all wrong because they focus on looks, like *America’s Next Top Model*

or *The Swan*, or whatever, *The Biggest Loser*, these are all negative! Like if you are overweight you are a loser! Or the ugly versus the beautiful and it is very fake and I am a confident person and I have achieved certain things. But for people who don't or come from families where they have been told that they are losers, how does that affect them? I am pretty confident and sometimes I go 'oh?' and it makes you think about yourself, if you didn't have a very good support system or felt weak or if I was surrounded by people who told me I wasn't good enough it would not be good at all. So I think it is pretty wrong all around.

Whether reading Reality TV programs as negative, as in the cases of Margaret, Liz and Camille, or positively as Aurora Leigh, Brent, Alex and Trish, across the board participants argued that such programs are deeply encoded with messages about human behavior and social conventions. Regardless of opinion, participants' often passionate discussions about Reality TV do share one common theme – more than mere entertainment, these television programs play a significant role in cultural conversations about morality and values.

### **“Working Through” Morality**

As with their discussions about spirituality in general, topics related to morality permeated participants' comments about the relationship between spirituality and television. Participants were often quick to point out moral discourses featured in many of the television programs that they watch, particularly various crime, legal and medical dramas, science fiction and fantasy programs, and animated satires. Frequently drawing parallels between television programs and myths, parables and morality plays, participants suggested that fiction-based programs particularly offer a wealth of opportunities to engage with questions of morals, values and ethics. As illustrated in Chapter Four, participants often draw upon 'the golden rule' for constructing their concepts of morality emphasizing ideas such as being “a good person,” “helping others,” “being truthful and honest,” and “knowing right from wrong.” Further, they tended to suggest that translating abstract morals and values into

everyday life situations requires constant evaluation and negotiation depending on the particular circumstance and context, as they feel that sometimes values and morals conflict and boundaries between good and evil, morality and immorality cannot always be rigidly defined or applied to all situations in the same manner. As well, while participants generally suggested that they enjoy seeing examples of morality, goodness and justice prevail and immorality, wrongdoing and injustice atoned, they do not want the categories of morality and immorality, good and evil, justice and injustice to be too rigidly defined, preferring to see such concepts and issues explored with an air of ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity. Such observations correlate closely with Ellis (2000), Lembo (2000) and Goethals' (1997) arguments that television narratives offer safe space for viewers to work through various personal and social dilemmas, challenges, and contradictions.

Quite notably, with a few specific exceptions, most of the participants tended to reject programs that deal with moral and ethical issues in a simplistic manner. In particular, the Christian based programs *Touched By An Angel* and *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*, were often criticized by participants for addressing complex issues in an unsophisticated manner. After complaining that she felt that *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* was "too preachy," Jennifer explained why the show does not appeal to her. She commented, "I've watched that [*Seventh Heaven*] a couple of times and everyone is so good, or else doing something so wrong that you just have to fix them. It kind of turns me off." Nora offered a lengthy discussion of the distinct approaches different programs take to similar topics as she compared and contrasted the programs *Joan of Arcadia* and *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*. Nora pointed out that both programs deal with many similar issues such as mental illness, disabilities, drug addiction, abortion, poverty, prejudice and struggles with faith but she feels that they do so in very different manners. Nora argued that *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* presents an overly simplistic view of the world as it does not deal with the

ambiguities and uncertainties of life, rather it presents the world in clearly defined terms of right and wrong, moral and immoral, and faith as salvation, doubt as damnation.

Further, she asserted *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* inappropriately frames all human problems, failings or challenges as moral issues resulting either from improper (immoral) behaviour or lack of faith in God, and consequently the solution to these problems is to simply realize the error of one's ways and have faith in God. To underscore this point, Nora described an episode of *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* that dealt with self-injury in which a character was discovered locked in her friend's bathroom slashing herself with a razor.<sup>44</sup> The friend reports this behavior to her father, a pastor, who counsels the self-injuring character as well as her family and quickly the problem was solved – or as Nora sarcastically stated “By the end of the show she has seen the error of her ways, just like that – because God can save you from a mental disorder!” Nora's description of the episode was interspersed with her criticisms of the programs for offering a very simplistic depiction and resolution of self-injury, for framing mental illness in terms of moral discourse and for presenting what she felt is a naïve understanding of God and faith. She complained that the show simplistically addressed self-injury as an example of “bad teenage behaviour” and “making bad choices” and quickly resolved the problem through the intervention of family and friends, pastoral counseling and, of course, belief in God, rather than offering a more in-depth and realistic depiction of self-injury as a form of mental illness and portraying the challenges faced by individuals and their family and friends when they are confronted with mental illness.

On the other hand, Nora felt that *Joan of Arcadia*, which deals with similar topics and offers a similar message, not only offers more realistic depictions and is much easier to relate

---

<sup>44</sup> The description of the specific episode “Cutters” is based solely on Nora's interpretation of the program which differs significantly from the description offered in the *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* episode guide.

to as it highlights the conflicts, challenges and ambiguities in life in general and with issues of faith and belief in God in particular. Nora explained that part of the appeal of the program is that it depicts multi-dimensional characters, none of whom are completely virtuous nor completely deplorable, that are shown to be grappling with various personal, psychological, spiritual and social issues, as well as triumphs and joys. After describing an episode in which a teenaged girl abandons her newborn baby in a trash can, Nora explained that she appreciated the complex portrayal of the situation, since the program examined the contributing circumstances, the motivations and the consequences of such an act. Nora claimed that while the program still clearly censured such an act, it did not simply portray the teenage girl as purely evil or immoral, rather it demonstrated how and why someone might commit such an act. Nora further explained the difference, stating,

*Joan of Arcadia* lives in reality. There is drugs, there is alcohol and there is pain and it is not something that is going to be wiped away with a quick fix or with belief in the divine or whatever. It is something that has to be worked on in a human reality way. I don't think those shows [*7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* and *Touched by an Angel*] deal with reality, I think they deal with band-aid solutions. I think *Joan of Arcadia* ends up with the same message, you know? Be good, believe in God, work towards being a better person. Except they do it in a way where more people can relate to it. *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* or *Touched by an Angel* I am sure is great for the 'born agains,' but not everyone is so full of what would Jesus do!

For Nora, much of the attraction to the program *Joan of Arcadia* and other programs that she watches, such as *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* and *Special Victims Unit*, *CSI*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, is that they engage with moral and ethical issues within the context of life's uncertainties, ambiguities and complexities, demonstrating that good and evil, morality and immorality are not always clearly defined, nor is it always easy to act in a moral or righteous manner. Further, Nora found the characterization of the relationship between God, faith and morality in *Joan of Arcadia* much more appealing than that of *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*, observing that in *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*, faith in God is the ultimate solution to any moral issues or life problem, whereas

in *Joan of Arcadia* faith in God *may help* individuals find solutions, work through problems and negotiate what constitutes morality and immorality.

The ways in which they negotiate such concepts of morality through television programs varied amongst participants. In many cases participants suggested that television narratives provide guidelines or act as touchstones for what constitutes acceptable moral behavior through offering both positive and negative examples. For example, Michelle proclaimed, “There is a lot of morality in shows. They show you the right and the wrong things. They won’t necessarily put it ‘don’t do that because you’ll make the baby Jesus cry.’ But they’d be, like don’t do that because it’s morally wrong. And I think you get more.” Often participants asserted that they work through various moral and ethical issues raised in programs as they compare and contrast themselves with the characters. The following statements by Jennifer and Sudesha exemplify this tendency, and all of the participants in the study made comparable remarks. Asked if they reflect upon the situations and behavior of characters depicted in programs, Jennifer commented, “I always think how I would react if it was my life. If a character does something I don’t agree with, I put myself in their shoes, would I be able to do that?”; while similarly, Sudesha asserted, “ You think about it and sometimes you think if you were in that situation, what would you have done. That is a natural consequence of viewing. But they will make it more complicated just for fun.”

In some cases participants described how particular programs, storylines or episodes helped them to resolve or at least think through various issues and challenges that have confronted them in their everyday lives. For example, Stephanie a nurse claimed that programs such as *ER*, *Third Watch*, and *Scrubs*, all focusing on medical professionals or medical emergency scenarios gave her the opportunity to reflect on some of the ethical and moral dilemmas that she is faced with every day in her job, and cause her to further consider

her role as a nurse in light of her own personal system of meaning, values and morality. She explained, “Definitely with medical dramas, stuff like that. I think about what my duties are as a nurse – my personal ones, not like my tasks. They talk about death and euthanasia and stuff like that. I am faced with similar decisions everyday. But when a baby is coding<sup>45</sup> you don’t have time to think, you just react...” Stephanie further claimed that for a show to be worth watching “usually it has to engage my thoughts somehow.” For Stephanie, as with other participants, television does perform the task of entertaining, curbing boredom and sometimes sedating, it also often serves to stimulate reflection on complex moral issues, challenging them to evaluate their own positions on these subjects and to consider consequences of actions, through identifying with particular characters, storylines and scripts. For Stephanie, television serves a particularly important function of providing moments to pause and reflect upon issues that she often does not have the time to think about during her daily routines and activities.

Similarly, Trish commented that the societal emphasis on immediate responses and instant reactions tends to devalue thinking, careful consideration and evaluating consequences. While she noted that television, particularly the sound-bite style of television news programs, greatly contributes to this condition, she also suggested that fictional television programs often offer opportunities for deeper thought and reflection through bringing significant societal and personal issues into view. However, it is up to the individual viewer to decide how or if they will use television in such a manner. For most of the participants in this study, they do choose to use television in this manner, and while they

---

<sup>45</sup> Stephanie explained that the term ‘coding’ is used to refer to a patient’s health condition quickly shifts to critical or life-threatening status.

admit that television does entertain them, they usually look for more than surface pleasure or amusement.

Participants' attitudes towards Reality TV mentioned earlier highlight two different approaches to television viewing exhibited by participants in general. While most of the participants do not necessarily agree with or approve of the behavior, morals or values portrayed in Reality TV or in other genres and programs, some of the participants express their disapproval by choosing not to watch them, while others express their disapproval through watching and then critiquing the behavior. For example, participants such as Ewan, Margaret and Sudesha reported preferring to watch programs that reflect a moral and value system similar to their own. Ewan claimed to watch only TV shows that depict the goodness in people and provide a sense of hope for the future. He explained that shows such as *Smallville*, *Everwood* and *Star Trek* reflect how he wants to live his life and provide him with a sense of what is fundamentally good and true.

In the same way Margaret claimed that she tends to favor watching programs that offer a value structure that is similar to her own. She suggested that some of her favorite programs such as *Doc*, *Da Vinci's Inquest* and *Cold Squad* all offer similar messages about helping people, hope, goodness and truth. Describing the content and themes of *Da Vinci's Inquest*, Margaret explained that she enjoys the program because it is based on a real person who has been significantly involved in helping resolve some of the problems associated with poverty, substance abuse and prostitution. She further claimed that part of the appeal of the show is its moral implications, in particular the values of helping others, fighting for social justice and standing up for one's own values even in the face of opposition. Beyond this Margaret explained why she enjoys these programs stating,

I like shows that show the good and the bad and... Somebody helps somebody else... for me I guess the message is, it's good to be good. And to help others, that's the main part of the message, what the program is about. Someone is less fortunate, or there is a mishap, or it teaches a message to a child, or that kind of thing.

While describing her personal form of spirituality Margaret particularly emphasized the importance of helping others, kindness, standing up for what is right, and faith in the general goodness of humans. Such themes resonate with Schultz's (1990) argument that television offers three general myths. In particular Margaret's viewing choices help to reinforce her notion that good and truth will prevail, that wrongdoing or evil is often the result of unfortunate circumstances and that goodness (and in fact moral and spiritual values) are expressed through the concrete actions of individuals. Further, Margaret suggested that watching such programs that reflect her values not only helps to reinforce her faith in such themes but also reminds her that despite the many negative attributes and influences of television, it can teach and reinforce positive values as well. Margaret further underscored this point at the conclusion of our interview advising me "don't forget when you are thinking about this to think about the things [on TV] that are really good."

In a related manner, Sudesha explained that he avoids watching programs that glorify and sensationalize violence because practicing non-violence is an integral part of his spirituality. Asked about his viewing preferences Sudesha replied, "The types of shows that appeal to me are ones talking about how people are being helped, educational programs. Any programs that contain any kind of violence I will just turn it off." Sudesha further commented that one of the reasons he enjoys watching reruns of *M\*A\*S\*H*, beyond the obvious humorous appeal, is for the moral, social and political commentary embedded in the programs. Sudesha maintained that while *M\*A\*S\*H* does contain elements of violence, it offers a strong anti-war sentiment which corresponds with his spiritual and political

worldview as it illustrated the harsh realities, tribulations and consequences faced by people living amidst violent conflicts.

In a slightly different vein, Kelly, who does not exclusively limit her viewing choices to programs that reflect her own values, explained that while the programs that she watches such as *Oprah Winfrey*, *Dr. Phil*, *CSI*, *Law & Order*, *Touched by an Angel*, *Twice in a Lifetime*, *Joan of Arcadia*, *Survivor* and *Canadian Idol* feature a range of values and behaviors, they are often tied together through common underlying themes. In particular, Kelly suggested that all of these programs feature narratives of transformation in which characters or guests either have an epiphany compelling them to change their evil, immoral or unkind ways, or else they portray goodness, skilled effort, justice, and righteousness triumphing in the end.

As with Ewan, Margaret, Sudesha, and Kelly most of the participants suggested that they enjoy seeing examples of morality, goodness and justice prevail and immorality, wrongdoing and injustice atoned although they also indicated that they do not want the categories of morality and immorality, good and evil, justice and injustice to be too rigidly defined, preferring instead to see such concepts and issues explored with an air of ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity. Participants explained that they often use programs depicting characters or situations that they see as morally ambiguous or corrupt, such as *Law & Order*, *CSI*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Six Feet Under*, as a ways to “think through” various moral and ethical questions. Such observations correlate closely with Ellis, Lembo and Goethals arguments that television narratives offer safe space for viewers to work through various personal and social dilemmas, challenges, and contradictions. For example Andrew explained that he often reflects upon the moral and ethical themes presented in the television

programs that he watches and compares them with his own life and his own conceptions of reality. At one point during an interview Andrew remarked,

Definitely I think about how it compares to right and wrong, like how it compares to the actual show. It is a lot worse in shows than it is in the real life....I definitely think it is a form of entertainment, like most TV is, but I think you can relate to it. I think my personal struggle for what I believe in is definitely reflected in the shows that I watch. Even just disagreeing with shows that you don't watch is a reflection of what you believe....I really think that the drama shows, challenge you to think critically. They challenge you to, perhaps, change your perspective. They challenge you to broaden your horizons, for example.

During his interviews Andrew offered very detailed summaries of some of the programs he watches or past favorite programs including *Oz*, *Boston Public*, *The Practice*, *Six Feet Under*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*, independently highlighting how each program discusses or raises particular questions or issues related to values, morals and ethics. In one instance, for example, Andrew explained that he enjoys *Six Feet Under* because it depicts characters that are morally and spiritually conflicted. He stated,

The characters are very complex. You are not going to see any one sided "Friends" figures on the show. You are going to see people that are conflicted with themselves. Conflicted with the way they have an influence on other people. Conflicted with the relationships they have with other people. They are all multi-dimensional, which I think is a good thing to have in shows....  
The show deals with that [conflict] on different levels. You see the brothers conflicted on whether or not they do have a sense of purpose running their own funeral home. Is there somethings that money can't buy? It talks to the corporate society that we are living in now. It definitely does have some real world issues.

Similarly in another instance, Andrew reflected upon some of the conflicts that may arise between acting from a moral stance and following the law or enforcing rules. After recounting a storyline from *Boston Public* dealing with a controversial school policy to dismiss visibly pregnant students, Andrew explained that he enjoys the program because it challenges him to think about the complexity of moral and ethical issues. He commented, "You have to think about how do you use rules when you know that she is a good person?"

How do you apply rules that you know are wrong? That is really what draws me to the show.”

This theme of conflicting values and the difficulties associated with trying to reconcile morals and values with the realities of everyday life was a common source of discussion amongst participants. In line with the consumptive approach to viewing demonstrated by participants, participants often expressed a hunger for stories that raise different and new ethical and moral questions. Such programs appeal to participants as they provide them with the opportunity to compare and contrast their own position with prevailing societal attitudes. Further it allows them to explore a range of human emotions, beliefs, actions and motivations. Nora exemplified this tendency while discussing why she enjoys *CSI* and *Law & Order* as she stated,

The human animal is very complicated. And I think not enough people delve into that. I think *CSI* confronts things like what would you do? Who cares about Jesus! What would *you* do? Sure Jesus may have turned the other cheek, but what about you?... I think that that is scary for most people and they don't want to think about it and so they think of psychopaths and murderers as a sideshow, whereas, you know there but for the grace as God goes I. I think *CSI* confronts that. Like the sweet little businessman and the adorable old lady. Nothing is just as simple as that....Put in the right circumstances I could kill. I know I could if it came down to it. If someone was threatening my boyfriend or my mother or me, I would kill and I think that a lot of people would if someone were physically threatening, but to someone else maybe character assassination would be horrendous to them or they would kill for that. So it all depends on perspective. I think *CSI* and *Law & Order* approach that perspective....I think it shows a lot of morality, but different views on morality. And again what would you do? What if it came down to doing the easy thing or the right thing? And I think shows like that have a lot of depth to them.... I would like to hope that I would do the right thing. If it came down to me or someone else I'd hope that I would help them.

Other participants offered similar discussions of such programs often comparing and contrasting the characters actions with how they believe they would react in a particular situation. In most cases, participants suggest that morality is often dependent on

circumstances and context. The following comments by Michelle highlight this tendency as she described an episode of a crime drama,

I don't know if it was *Law & Order* or *CSI*, one of them, had this show about some girl and her family got murdered and she was the one who had set it up because her Dad had abused her and what was seen as her sister, was really her daughter, which her Dad was abusing too. She was like "I'm not going to let that happen to my daughter" and then all the intricate details, blah, blah, blah. So it brought up another thing, like she did a bad thing, but for a good reason. I'm confused. Yes sometimes it puts you in a situation, like if I had been an investigator or a lawyer, I would, I wouldn't know what to do. To me, in a way it was right. They were being punished. Maybe death was a little harsh, but still. She did a bad thing, she got people to have her parents killed, but yet they were abusing her and her sister, so like it just brings up the whole issue that there is context around everything. It makes me think I'm so glad I am good. I think about my life and sometime you just feel "oh my God I am so lucky!" Especially with those show, cause there are, are so many bad, awful things

As implied through Michelle's comments, and as with those made by other participants, the relationship between the law, justice systems and morality often come into conflict. In his discussions about *CSI* and *Law & Order*, Justin pointed out that the shows depict examples of moral ambiguity in which good and evil are not always so clearly defined. He explained,

*Law & Order, CSI* there is always good and evil. There is always the good guy who is portrayed as a police officer and the bad guy portrayed as a criminal. But then it's not always like that, like we said last week, like Horatio, say he does a good thing, but he has to go through some loopholes in order to pass the justice system or the legal system. Well like if somebody does something bad enough it's okay for you to bypass a few little legal things. That's what it is trying to tell you. To catch the greater evil you can do a few little bad things. It's the lesser of two bad things. It teaches us, is it okay to let this guy walk or does he pay off buddy to get whatever?

Such examples resonate with Seigler's argument that the underlying themes of crime and police dramas ask the questions 'How does one live morally in an immoral world?', 'what serves the greatest good?' and 'what is the lesser evil?' (Seigler 2003). Participants frequently reiterated such themes reflecting upon differences between what they feel is legally right and what they feel is morally right and often suggesting that the uniformity of laws and penal codes prevent circumstances and context from being taken into account.

In his interview Austin was quick to point out the difference between agreeing with the values or behavior depicted in a show and seeing the value in their depiction. When asked why he enjoys the program *Oz* Austin replied,

I cannot say that I enjoy it. *Oz* strangely enough I both like and dislike. I appreciate it for, I think, they paint quite an honest picture, but the brutality in there no, I do not like it. Anybody ever considering crime should watch *Oz* and they would not do it! It made a good portrayal.... I mean sure, it's not real life, but it is far more realistic. None of those guys have much to hope for.

Austin went on to explain that he felt that *Oz* offered much valuable social commentary and continuously raised numerous moral, social, political and spiritual questions, through its characterization of incarceration, punishment, the justice system, extreme violence, accountability, vengeance, corruption, redemption, compassion, survival instincts, interactions between ethnic, religious and social subcultures, and the religious and spiritual struggles of inmates and prison staff. In particular, Austin explained that the often disturbing images and storylines have caused him to reflect upon the effectiveness, purpose and morality of contemporary justice and penal systems, asking such questions as 'how should justice be served?' and 'what purpose do jails serve?'. Austin commented further that he feels that jails do not serve justice rather they further propel people into criminal behavior. For him, more effective solutions include work programs and community service, as well as, capital punishment. Additionally, Austin said that for him, the program raises interesting questions about faith, God and the meaning and purpose of life. While discussing the depiction of religious conversion and struggles with faith presented in *Oz*, Austin stated, "I also know that in jail it is very much that people proclaim redemption. It fits into what it needs to take, I do think God will lead people through different waters to get something to sink into them, if jail is it, then jail it's going to be."

While crime and legal dramas were prevalent in participants' discussions of television and morality, they certainly were not the only programs that participants interpreted within the context of morals and values. Quite commonly, participants also highlighted the moral and ethical implications raised by fantasy, science fiction and science edutainment programs. For example Jennifer indicated that *The X-Files* raised significant questions about the ethics of cloning. After describing a storyline from the show dealing with cloning and genetic engineering, Jennifer remarked, "Like, *The X-Files* it gets you thinking about stuff like that. Like you are an individual and cloning kind of takes you away from that.... Well in general I think it's cool that we got here, but that doesn't mean that we should." Other participants raised similar questions regarding ethics, morality and applications of technology. Frequently participants suggested that science fiction programs in particular allow for an exploration of the potential consequences or outcomes both of human inventions and of current lifestyle orientations. Aurora Leigh, paralleling comments made by Lundeen and Wagner, suggested that science fiction and fantasy programs allow her to explore the "what ifs and whys."

Although these examples described various ways in which participants discussed the relationship between television and concepts of morality, they reveal how television functions as a disseminator of norms, values and morals – whether they are consistent with the viewer's or not. Such data demonstrate how participants use television as a way to negotiate and work through their own concepts of morality, and also as a way to evaluate different moral perspectives, possibilities and outcomes and a way to explore human emotions, motivations and values.

## Summary

Within this small sample there is a great diversity in terms of the specificity of participants' spiritual beliefs and practices as well as their patterns and preferences in television viewing. Although the range of individual preferences, specific beliefs, and personal interests and tastes creates a rather large and unwieldy data set it nevertheless points to some unity within the diversity. As participants' discussions about spirituality in Chapter Four demonstrated, diversity, difference, and variety are not problems, in fact, they are embraced. It is because the concept of spirituality is flexible and expansive that the term appeals to participants and is deemed a fitting label to describe themselves. Moreover, participants' specific concepts of spirituality are rooted in the belief in a universal transcendent that manifests in many forms, dependent upon the context of each individual. Consequently it is fitting that their discussions about spirituality in general as well as their examples of the relationship between their spirituality and television covers a vast assortment of topics, themes and programs.

Additionally, as the participants in this study engage in a particular form of spiritual consumption, that is: they are continuously seeking out both new and more information, knowledge, ideas, questions, topics, themes and examples of the transcendent, the supernatural and paranormal, religious traditions, new age practices, holistic spirituality, existential issues, ultimate meaning, and fundamental human values, their discussions about spiritual themes and topics reflect the diversity and assortment of knowledge, ideas and themes they have gained along the way. Within this framework, television functions as a spiritual resource by providing countless examples of spiritual themes. Participants use the information and ideas garnered through television programs in different ways. Most notably, they tended to use television shows as way to help define what counts as spirituality; to shape

and inform their spiritual beliefs, general worldviews and concepts of morality; to foster curiosity, learning and open-mindedness; as an outlet for working through different possibilities, options and potential forms of ultimate meaning, as evidence of transcendent reality; and importantly, as a way to satisfy their interest in spirituality. Throughout their discussions detailing the relationship between their spirituality and their television viewing, participants demonstrate that television programs play a significant role in their dialogues about transcendent meaning.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

This chapter offers a summary of the key methods, findings and contributions of this study. Additionally, this concluding chapter aims to situate the research data within a theoretical framework developed in relation to studies of contemporary religion and the media. And, finally the chapter brings this to a close, not by offering conclusive arguments and theories, but by identifying future research questions that have been raised through pursuing this thesis topic.

### **Summary of Argument**

In preceding chapters I have suggested that participants draw from the content of television programs as they negotiate and construct their personal forms of spirituality. In order to support this hypothesis, I have combined research and theories from the disciplines of religious studies and communications with primary qualitative data gathered through a series of in-depth interviews with 30 research participants discussing the relationship between their spirituality and their television viewing. The overarching argument presented in this dissertation is presented through four main steps. The first two steps involved building a theoretical framework for defining and interpreting spirituality and television as related cultural processes, while the second two steps offered in-depth examinations of interview data in order to illustrate how participants define and describe how their spirituality is related to their television viewing.

Chapters Two and Three present the key definitions and concepts for theorizing the relationship between spirituality and television. In particular, Chapter Two reviews key sociological theories examining non-institutional religion and personal spirituality in late modern North Atlantic societies. My presentation of the literature in this chapter highlights

three central themes. First, the chapter emphasizes connecting the definition of religion to transcendent meaning. Second, the chapter identifies the trend of 'personal spirituality' as a particular social form of non-institutional religion, where individuals construct personal systems of meaning from a variety of cultural resources, including traditional religions, new religious movements, and various aspects of 'secular' culture. And third, the chapter addresses spirituality as cultural discourses about transcendent meaning thereby challenging traditional understandings of spirituality as essentially private and individualized phenomena. Based upon these three central themes, I hypothesize that spirituality is a process of negotiating and constructing personal systems of transcendent meaning in relation to publicly available beliefs, practices and symbols.

Moving from sociological theories of religion and spirituality, Chapter Three presents the second body of literature connected to theorizing the relationship between spirituality and television. Specifically, Chapter Three offers a lengthy review of a communications, television and cultural studies theories in an effort to establish analytic categories that illustrate the underlying connections between spirituality and television.

While the theories presented in this chapter cover a broad range of topics and research, it never the less, centres around three main themes. One, the chapter highlights theories that illustrate how communication is tied to the social construction of reality, namely how we socially construct and maintain shared systems of meaning. Two, it demonstrates how television has come to play a central role in North Atlantic societies functioning one of the primary sources of knowledge, information, and entertainment. And three, this literature review demonstrates some of the ways in which popular television programs act as carriers of religious and spiritual meanings. In particular, I review a sample of theories analyzing specific religious, spiritual, mythological themes in particular television texts. Based upon

these arguments and theories presented in this section, I hypothesized that television programs may function as carriers and creators of religious and spiritual meaning.

Further drawing the two hypotheses and theoretical frameworks presented in Chapters Two and Three into dialogue with each other, I argue that television functions as a resource for negotiating and constructing personal forms of spirituality. In order to substantiate this argument I use data gathered through in-depth interviews demonstrating how the participants in this study use television programs in relation to their spirituality. To this end, I offer a detailed examination of participants' definitions and descriptions of their spirituality, as well as, a detailed presentation of how participants' conceptualize the relationship between television and religion, and finally, offer concrete examples of how participants use television as a way to learn, think and talk about transcendent meaning.

Through interpreting participants' discussions of their spirituality in general, as well as the relationship between their spirituality and their television viewing, I have argued that for these participants, spirituality is both product and process. That is, the term spirituality describes both their beliefs and practices and the process of learning, thinking and talking about spirituality (i.e. transcendent reality, meaning and morality). It is the form of spirituality, as consuming information, ideas, narratives about spirituality, religion and the transcendent, that establishes a palpable link between participants' personal spiritualities and their television viewing.

### **Situating "Seeking Through The Small Screen"**

Since Luckmann proposed his theory of 'invisible religion' in 1967, it has become somewhat self-evident in the sociology of religion to state that increasingly late modern individuals construct personalized systems of ultimate significance from a variety of cultural

sources. Alongside of the spiritual marketplace analogies, terms such as Sheilaism (Bellah et al., 1985), 'religion à la carte' (Bibby 1987), spiritual seekers (Wuthnow 1998), and reflexive spirituality (Roof 1999), have all been coined in an attempt to identify and define this particular religious response to the characteristics of late modern society. Studies such as those conducted by of Roof (1993; 1999), Wuthnow (1998), Heelas (2002) and Woodhead and Heelas (2005) have all contributed to a greater understanding of the cultural phenomenon of personal spirituality. These studies have not only provided conceptual models for identifying and defining this form of religion but have also offered much in the way of qualitative data illustrating characteristic beliefs and practices within such movements. In particular, they have demonstrated how personal spirituality reveals a broader cultural pattern of ways in which some late modern individuals forge identities and meaning within a social context characterized by a fragmentation of overarching belief systems, increased individualism, pluralism, consumer orientation and electronic media. This form of spirituality responds to the anxieties created by living in a context of fragmentation, difference and diversity, not by trying to erase them, but by embracing them and in some cases elevating them to ultimate status. Within the context of this research data, this trend is evident both through participants' comments about the values of diversity, pluralism, and gaining more, rather than fewer, options and possibilities and information, as well as through their characterization of the transcendent as universal, but at the same time diverse, multiple and changing.

Further, within this cultural context the media, and specifically television, becomes a logical site for the negotiation and construction of meaning and spiritual identities. The most obvious reason for this is its sheer pervasiveness. Television often appears to be 'just there', it is accessible, and it is often an everyday activity. Further as Silverstone (1994) and Ellis

(1990) have demonstrated, television functions as a comfortable or safe medium to work through issues and anxieties faced by individuals. Beyond this however, television has become one of the primary ways of communicating, reinforcing, and transforming shared systems of meaning that individuals draw upon as they construct their worldviews and identities. As much as meanings and identities in late modern society reflect high levels of individualism and personal autonomy, meaning can never be forged alone. Using Giddens' 'structuration theory' both Lull (2000) and Linderman (1997) address the role that television plays in communicating shared systems of meaning, that are in turn renegotiated and reinterpreted by individuals as they interact with the symbols and meanings that are expressed. Neither theorist suggests that the meanings that are expressed are rigid or monolithic. In fact both recognize the multiplicity of meanings that are communicated through media texts, as well as the various interpretations that individuals may construct. However, as both Lull and Linderman reiterate, for meanings to be meaningful they must be shared and commonly understood at some level.

Thus television is one of the ways in which meaning systems in general are shared and communicated, which in turn provides the structure, the codes, symbols and options that individuals can then employ as they create and sustain their systems of meaning and identity. However, it is not just meaning in general that television offers. One of the types of meaning that programs are presenting is spiritual meaning. As Primiano (2001) and Forbes (2004) both argued, television producers respond to the widespread interest in spirituality through offering a wealth of programs dealing with such themes. In turn, the presentation of spiritual ideas, themes and meanings provides further content, meanings and symbols which individuals may draw upon as they develop personalized belief systems.

In the context of this research data, television can be seen to provide some of the basic structures and shared meanings through which the participants negotiate and construct spiritual meanings and identities. As the participants themselves suggested, television provides them with access to various ways of thinking about transcendent reality, meaning, and morality. Further, it both expands and reinforces many of their ultimate values such as open-mindedness, diversity, pluralism, awareness and learning as it continuously provides new and more sources of information. As was highlighted in Chapter Five, throughout their interviews participants stressed that the main value and use of television in relation to their spirituality is that it provides them with *more* ideas, *more* possibilities, and *more* ways of thinking about the transcendent. As one participant, Trish commented, “As a society now we read less, reflect less. TV is much more accessible for people to watch an hour long show about spirituality.” In this sense television serves as both a rich and readily available source for exploring spirituality.

While the descriptions of personal spirituality offered by each participant reflects her or his unique personal biography and particular idiosyncrasies and tastes, the style of spirituality and the general themes that are raised are not only common to other participants in this study, but also consistent with patterns and descriptions observed in other studies of contemporary spirituality. Moreover, participants’ discussions about their processes of negotiating and exploring spirituality in relation to television programs seem to be a further expression of postmaterialist values (Inglehart 1997). As discussed in Chapters One and Four, Ronald Inglehart has observed that high levels of prosperity and physical security engender a transformation of values from ones emphasizing survival and security to ones that emphasize well-being, quality of life and self expression. He identifies further postmaterialist values orientations with a declining respect for political, religious and institutional

authorities, valuing of diversity and pluralism, flexible rules and situational ethics, and an emphasis on the meaning and purpose of life. Participants' uses of television in relation to spirituality echo many of these themes, most importantly the choice to use a medium such as television as way to negotiate spiritual meanings and identities. Television programs offer much in the way of potentially spiritually meaningful beliefs, symbols and information, however none are obligatory. Participants are free to choose what to watch, what not to watch, and to freely explore spiritual themes and ideas. Further as participants suggested, television provides access to new information and ideas, in turn encouraging them to be open-minded, consider possibilities and accepting of diversity. Additionally, participants described using television programs as a way to think about transcendent meaning and reality, raise existential questions and engage in various dialogues about morality and ethics, all of which seem to be expressions of postmaterialist values. Examined through this lens, the individual narratives and personal forms of spirituality expressed by 28 of the 30 participants in this study can be seen as part of a broader societal pattern.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This research project offers only preliminary steps towards understanding the dynamic relationship between personal spirituality and the medium of television. As one of the few studies attempting to bring sociological theories of contemporary non-institutional religion, analyses of popular culture and religion, and communications and cultural studies theories examining television as a cultural practice of negotiating and maintaining shared systems of meaning, into dialogue with ethnographic examinations of personal forms of spiritual, this research tends to pose more questions, rather than offer conclusions.

Throughout this examination of theory and data, I have raised a number of hypothesis and

issues that warrant further detailed research. Most obviously, as the ethnographic portion of this project involves data gathered through only 30 in-depth interviews, the investigation into ways in which individuals employ television as a resource for constructing and negotiating their personal forms of spirituality would benefit from drawing upon a much larger sample of research participants. However in addition to replicating this study in a larger version, future research projects ought to address some of the specific observations and hypotheses that have emerged through analyzing participants' interview data.

In particular this data has demonstrated how participants' definitions and descriptions of their spirituality tends to use the term spirituality to refer both to a product, their specific beliefs and practices, and to a process, the act of learning, thinking and talking about transcendent meaning. It would be quite interesting to see if other individuals outside of this group of 28 participants employ the term spirituality in a similar manner. Such a study could help to extend the definition employed within the context of this specific research project, to broad. Additionally, my assertion that participants in this study engage in a form of 'spiritual consumption' also calls for further theoretical refinement and qualitative verification. While popular and academic discourses about consumer culture often tend to simplify and denounce consumption as a "dirty word"(Goss 1999), indicative of waste, superficiality and lacking authenticity, I use the term 'spiritual consumption' to refer to the act of continuously seeking out and engaging with materials, ideas and texts dealing with transcendent meaning (Goss 1990; Borgmann 2000; Lyon 2000). That, is to say participants engage in the act of consuming or ingesting knowledge, information and ideas about spirituality. Following the approaches of Jon Goss (1999), Albert Borgmann (2000), and David Lyon (2000), I suggest that these forms of spiritual consumption are evidence of individuals reworking, renegotiating and redefining the consumer orientations of late modern societies in creative

and autonomous ways that enable them to construct new identities, lifestyles and meaning systems that further reflect and reinforce postmaterialist, rather than materialist values.

Furthermore, the ways in which participants negotiate such beliefs in relation to their television viewing, as well as, the underlying similarities in themes, beliefs and topics addressed by participants' may actually suggest that there is a sort of "tradition of TV spirituality." The preliminary theories and data gathered throughout this study suggest this form of TV spirituality could be characterized as both a response to and a reworking of the predominantly Christian heritage and culture of North America in light of the conditions of late modern society. For example, in one sense, it appears that the content of television programs tap into to preexisting notions of the sacred, religion, morality and meaning. Consequently, the television shows and beliefs that the participants in this study choose resonate both personally and culturally with their notions of what constitutes religion – belief in God, the supernatural and life after death; a sense of divine purpose, fate and destiny; and a golden rule style sense of morality. In fact, part of the reason they choose to watch the television shows that they do is because they appeal to a sense of memory and tradition – albeit fragmented.

However, in another sense, the tradition of TV spirituality attempts to recast spiritual themes as inclusive, generic and separate from any one specific religious tradition. As such, the tradition of TV spirituality seems to offer a 'generic' form of spirituality rooted in a universal, denominationally non-specific God, Divine or higher power that manifests in many forms, belief in some form of life after death and in the possibility, if not the reality, of supernatural or paranormal phenomena; the importance of reflecting upon the meaning and purpose of life and further the trust that there is in fact meaning and purpose, as well as a sense of fate or destiny; values of love, kindness, hope, knowledge, personal growth and

personal agency, a 'golden rule' form of morality that often requires some degree of negotiation for their application; and belief in the interconnectedness of the universe and the beings in it. Further research combining detailed content analyses, with cultivation analysis and a large sample of sample of ethnographic interviews examining the relationship between personal spirituality and television viewing, may well reveal consistent pattern and form of spiritual belief emerging in relation to television texts.

However, the aims and intentions of this project are quite modest. Rather than attempting to draw generalized conclusions or translate the arguments presented throughout this thesis into a 'theory' of religion and the media, I remind readers that the ideas and hypotheses presented in this dissertation apply only to this specific research project. Nevertheless, I contend that these ideas hold much potential for developing additional research and theories aimed at understanding how individuals negotiate, construct and maintain meaning in late modern social contexts. As such I present this dissertation both as an individual project and as a prolegomena awaiting future research.

## Bibliography

- Adams, M. (1997). Sex in The Snow: Canadian Social values at the End of the Millennium. Toronto, Penguin Press.
- Adorno, T. and Horkheimer. (1993). "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." S. Doring. The Cultural Studies Reader. London and New York: Routledge. Pp. 29-43
- Allport, G. W. (1950). The individual and his religion. New York: McMillan.
- Allport, G.W. (1955). Becoming: Basic considerations for a psychology of personality. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ammerman, N. T. (1997). Golden Rule Christainity:Lived Religion in the American Mainstream. Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice. D. D. Hall. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press: 196-216.
- Ammerman, N. T. (2003). Religious Identities and Religious Institutions. Handbook of the Sociology of Religion. M. Dillon. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 207-224.
- Bal, M. (2001). Mission Impossible: Postcards, Pictures and Parasites. Religion and Media. H. De Vries and S. Weber. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press: 241-268.
- Beardslee, W. A. (1990). Stories in the Postmodern World: Orienting and Disorienting. Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy and Art. D. R. Griffen. Albany: New York, State University of New York Press: 163 - 175.
- Beaudoin, T. (1998). Virtual Faith: The Irreverant Spiritual Quest of Generation X. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Beckford, J. A. (1989). Religion and Advance Industrial Society. London; Boston; Sydney; Wellington, Unwin Hyman.
- Beckford, J. A. (2003). Social theory and religion. Cambridge, U.K.: New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Bellah, R., R. Madsen, et al. (1985). Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life. New York, Harper & Row.
- Berger, P. L. (1967). The Sacred Canopy. Garden City, NY, Anchor Books.

- Berger, P. L. (1969). Rumor of Angels. Garden City, NY, Doubleday.
- Besecke, K. (2002). "Rational Enchantment: Transcendent Meaning in the Modern World." Ph.d Dissertation. University of Wisconsin Madison, Wisconsin.
- Besecke, K. (2005). "Seeing Invisible Religion as a Societal Conversation about Transcendent Meaning." Sociological Theory 23(2): 181-196.
- Beyer, P. (2003). Social Forms of Religion and Religions in Contemporary Global Society. Handbook of the Sociology of Religion. M. Dillon. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 45-75.
- Bibby, R. W. (1987). Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada. Toronto, Irwin Publishing.
- Bibby, R. W. (1993). Unknown Gods: The Ongoing Story of Religion in Canada. Toronto, Stoddard.
- Bibby, R. W. (2002). Nevers, Nones, and Nots: Latent Life in Unexpected Places, A Research Note. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association, Vancouver, British Columbia.
- Bibby, R. W. (2002). Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada. Toronto, Stoddard.
- Blythe, T. (2002). The God of Prime-Time Television. Religion as Entertainment. C. K. Robertson. New York, Peter Lang Publishing.
- Borgmann, J.
- Carey, J. W., Ed. (1988). Media, Myths, and Narratives: Television and the Press. Newbury Park; London; New Delhi, Sage Publications.
- Chidester, D. (1996). "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola and the Potlatch of Rock n' Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture." Journal of the American Academy of Religion 64(4): 742-765.
- Clark, L. S. (2003). From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, The Media and The Supernatural. Oxford; New York, Oxford University Press.
- Clark, L. S. and S. M. Hoover (1997). At the Intersection of Media, Culture, and Religion: A Bibliographic Essay. Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture. S. M. Hoover and K. Lundby. Thousand Oaks; London; New Delhi, Sage Publications.
- Dawson, Lorne L. (1987). "On References to the Transcendent in Scientific Studies of Religion: A Qualified Idealist Proposal." Religion 17 (2): 227-230.

- Dunlap, T. R. (2004). Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest. Seattle, University of Washington Press.
- Durkheim, É. (1966). Suicide: A Study in Sociology. New York, The Free Press.
- Durkheim, É. (1984). The Division of Labor in Society. New York, The Free Press.
- Durkheim, É. (1995). The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. New York, The Free Press.
- Ellis, J. (2000). Seeing Things: Television in the age of Uncertainty. New York, I.B. Tauris Publishers.
- Erickson, G. (2002). 'Sometimes You Need a Story:' American Christianity, Vampires and Buffy. Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer. R. V. Wilcox and D. Lavery. Lanham, MD, Rowan & Littlefield: 108-119.
- Ferré, J. P., Ed. (1990). Channels of Belief: Religion and American Commercial Television. Ames, Iowa State University Press.
- Fisher, W. R. (1985). "The Narrative Paradigm: In the Beginning." Journal of Communication 35(4).
- Fisher, W.R. (1987). Human communication as a narration: Toward a philosophy of reason, value, and action. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Forbes, B. D. and J. H. Mahan, Eds. (2005). Religion and Popular Culture in America. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London, University of California Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers.
- Gerbner, G. (1977). "Television: The new state religion?" et cetera 34(2): 145-150.
- Giddens, A. (1991). Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Stanford, California, Stanford University Press.
- Goethals, G. T. (1981). The TV Ritual: Worship at the Video Alter. Boston, Beacon Press.
- Goss, Jon. 1999. "Consumption geographies." Introducing human geographies. P. Cloke, P. Crang, and M. Goodwin. M London: Arnold.

- Green, M. C., J. Garst, et al. (2004). The Power of Fiction: Determinates and Boudaries. The Psychology of Entertainment Media: Blurring the Lines Between Entertainment and Persuasion. L. J. Shrum. Mahwah, N.J., Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 161-176.
- Greil, A. L. and D. G. Bromley, Eds. (2003). Defining Religion: Investigating the Boundaries Between the Sacred and the Secular. Amsterdam; New York, JAI.
- Griffen, D. R., Ed. (1990). Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality Political Economy and Art. Albany, New York, State University of New York Press.
- Halbwachs, M. (1980). The Collective Memory. New York, Harper & Row, Publishers.
- Hall, S. (1993). Encoding, Decoding. The Cultural Studies Reader. S. During London; New York, Routledge: 90-103.
- Heelas, P., L. Woodhead, et al. (2005). The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality. Malden, MA; Oxford, UK; Victoria, AU, Blackwell Publishing.
- Hervieu-Leger (2000). Religion as Chain of Memory. New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press.
- Hoover, S. M., Ed. (1988). Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church. Newbury Park; Beverly Hills; London; New Delhi, Sage Publications.
- Hoover, S. M. (1988). Television Myth and Ritual: The Role of Substantive Meaning and Spatiality. Media, Myths, and Narratives: Television and the Press. J. W. Carey. Newbury Park; London; New Delhi, Sage Publications: 161-178.
- Hoover, S. M. and K. Lundby, Eds. (1997). Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture. Thousand Oaks; London; New Delhi, Sage Publications.
- Inglehart, R. (1990). Culture Shift in Advance Industrial Society. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.
- Introvigne, M. (2000). "There will be no Thomas Aquinas at This Table": Notions of God in the New Religious Consciousness". The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University.
- Irwin, W., Conrad, M. T. and Skoble A.J. (2001). Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh of Homer. Chicago, Illinois, Open Court.

- James, W. C. (1998). Locations of the Sacred: Essays on Religion, Literature and Canadian Culture. Waterloo, ON, Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Jindra, M. (2005). It's About Faith in Our Future: Star Trek Fandom as Cultural Religion. Religion and Popular Culture in America. B. D. Forbes and J. H. Mahan. Berkely; Los Angeles; London, University of California Press: 159 -173.
- Johnson, S. (2005). Everything Bad is Good For You. New York, Riverhead Books
- Katz, E., J. Blumler, et al. (1974). Uses of Mass Communication by the Individual. Mass Communication Research: Major Issues and Future Directions. W. P. Davidson and F. Yu. New York, Praeger: 11-35.
- King, A. S. (1996). "Spirituality: Transformation and Metamorphosis." Religion 26(4): 343-51.
- King, U., Ed. (2001). Spirituality and Society in the New Millennium. Brighton; Portland, Sussex Academic Press.
- Kubey, R. and M. Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Television and the Quality of Life: How Viewing Shapes Everyday Experience. Hillside, N.J., Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Lazarsfeld, P. and R.K. Merton. (2000). "Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action." P. Marris and S. Thornham. Media studies: A Reader. New York : New York University Press. pp 18-30.
- Livingstone, S. (1998). Making Sense of Television: The Psychology of Audience Interpretation. London; New York, Routledge.
- Luckmann, T. (1967). The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society. New York:, MacMillian.
- Luckmann, T. (1990). "Shrinking Transcendence, Expanding Religion?" Sociological Analysis 50(2): 127-138.
- Lull, J. (2000). Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach. New York, Columbia University Press.
- Lyon, D. (2000). Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times. Cambridge, UK, Polity Press.
- MacInyre, A. (1984). After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory. Notre Dame, IN.
- Maslow. A. (1964). Religions, Values and Peak-experiences. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press.

- Maslow A. (1970). Motivation and Personality New York : Harper & Row
- McClure, J. A. (1995). "Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality." MFS: Modern Fiction Studies 41(1): 141-163.
- McIlwain, C. D. (2005). When Death Goes Pop: Death, Media and the Remaking of Community. New York, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- McLaren, D. L. and J. E. Porter (1999). (Re)Covering Sacred Ground: New Age Spirituality in Star Trek: Voyager. D. L. McLaren and J. E. Porter. New York, State University of New York Press: 101-115.
- McLymond, K. (2002). The Gospel According to Oprah: A Canon for Contemporary Living. Religion as Entertainment. C. K. Robertson. New York, Peter Lang Publishing: 173-192.
- Medved, M. (1992). Hollywood VS. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values. New York, HarperCollins Publishers.
- Morley, D. (1992). Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies. London; New York, Routledge.
- Newcomb, H. B. (1988). One Night of Prime Time: An Analysis of Television's Multiple Voices. Media, Myths, and Narratives: Television and the Press. J. W. Carey. Newbury Park; London; New Delhi, Sage Publications: 88-112.
- Newcomb, H. B. (1990). Religion on Television. Channels of Belief: Religion and American Commercial Television. J. P. Ferré. Ames, Iowa State University Press.
- Newcomb, H. B. and P. B. Hirsch (2000). Television as a Cultural Forum. Television: The Critical View. H. B. Newcomb. Oxford; New York, Oxford University Press: 561-573.
- Newman, J. (1996). Religion vs. Television Competitors in Cultural Context. Westport, CT; London, Praeger.
- O'Toole, R. (1993). In Quest of Hidden Gods in Canadian Literature. The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Focus. W. E. Hewitt. Toronto; Vancouver, Butterworths Canada, td.: 157-171.
- O'Toole, R. (1996). "Religion in Canada : Its Development and Contemporary Situation." Social Compass 43(1): 119-134.
- Pinsky, M. I. (2001). The Gospel According to the Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of the World's Most Animated Family. Louisville : Westminster John Knox Press.
- Primiano, L. N. (2001). Oprah, Phil, Geraldo, Barbara, and Things That Go Bump

- in the Night. God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture. E. M. Mazur and K. McCarthy. New York; London, Routledge: 47-63.
- Radway, J. (1984). Reading The Romance. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina.
- Rogers. C. (1961). On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy. London: Constable
- Rogers, C. (1980). A Way of Being. Boston : Houghton Mifflin,
- Russell, C. et al. (2004). People and 'Their' Television Shows: An Overview of Television Connectedness. The Psychology of Entertainment Media: Blurring the Lines Between Entertainment and Persuasion. L. J. Shrum. Mahwah, N.J., Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 275-290.
- Schultze, Q. J. (1990). Television Drama as Sacred Text. Channels of Belief: Religion and American Commercial Television. J. P. Ferré. Ames, Iowa State University Press.: 3-27.
- Shanahan, J. and M. Morgan (1999). Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Shrum, L. J., Ed. (2004). The Psychology of Entertainment Media: Blurring the Lines Between Entertainment and Persuasion. Mahwah, N.J., Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Shrum, L. J., et al. (2004). A Process Model of Consumer Cultivation: The Role of Television Is a Function of the type of Judgment. The Psychology of Entertainment Media: Blurring the Lines Between Entertainment and Persuasion. L. J. Shrum. Mahwah, N.J., Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 177-191.
- Siegler, E. (2001). God in a Box: Religion in Contemporary Cop Shows. God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture. E. M. Mazur and K. McCarthy. New York; London, Routledge: 199-216.
- Signorielli, N. (1990). Television's Mean and Dangerous World: A Continuation of the Cultural Indicators Perspective. Cultivation Analysis: New Directions in Media Effects Research. N. Signorielli and M. Morgan. Newbury Park; London; New Delhi, Sage: 85-106.
- Silverstone, R. (1988). Television Myth and Culture. Media, Myths, and Narratives: Television and the Press. J. W. Carey. Newbury Park; London; New Delhi, Sage Publications: 20-47.
- Silverstone, R. (1994). Television and Everyday Life. New York; London, Routledge.

- Sjödin, Ulf. (2002) "The Swedes and the Paranormal." Journal of Contemporary Religion. 17 (1): 75-85.
- Sparks, G. G. and W. Miller (2001). "Investigating the Relationship Between Exposure to Television Programs that Depict Paranormal Phenomena and Beliefs in the Paranormal." Communication Monographs 68(1): 98-113.
- Sparks, G. G., C. L. Nelson, et al. (1997). "The Relationship Between Exposure to Televised Messages About Paranormal Phenomena and Paranormal Beliefs." Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 41: 345-359.
- Stevenson, G. (2003). Televised Morality: The Case of Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Lanham, MD, Hamilton Books.
- Stossel, S. (1997). The Man Who Counts the Killings. Atlantic Monthly (Online).
- Sumser, J. (1996). Morality and Social Order in Television Crime Drama. Jefferson, North Carolina; New York, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Sutcliffe, S. J. and M. Bowman, Eds. (2000). Beyond the New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.
- Swatos, W. H. J. (2003). Differentiating Experiences: The Virtue of Substantive Definitions. Defining Religion: Investigating the Boundaries Between the Sacred and the Secular. A. L. Greil and D. G. Bromley. Amsterdam and London, JAI. Religion and the Social Order, Volume 10: 39-53.
- Taylor, B. (2001). "Earth and Nature-Based Spirituality. (Part I) From Deep Ecology to Radical Environmentalism." Religion 31(2): 175-193.
- Taylor, B. (2001). "Earth and Nature-Based Spirituality. (Part II) From Earth First! and Bioregionalism to scientific paganism and the New Age." Religion 31(2): 225-245.
- Vasquez, M. A. and M. F. Marquardt (2003). Globalizing the Sacred: Religion Across the Americas. New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, Rutgers University Press.
- Wagner, J. and J. Lundeen (1998). Star Trek and Sacred Time: Star Trek in the American Mythos. Westport, CT, Praeger.
- Weber, M. (1958). The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Weber, M. (1965). The Sociology of Religion. London: Methuen.

- Woodhead, L. and P. Heelas, Eds. (2000). Religion in Modern Times: An Interpretive Anthology. Oxford, UK; Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishers.
- Wuthnow, R. (1976). The Consciousness Reformation. Berkeley; Los Angeles: London, University of California Press.
- Wuthnow, R. (1992). Rediscovering the Sacred: Perspectives on Religion in Contemporary Society. Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Wuthnow, R. (1994). Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community. New York, Free Press.
- Wuthnow, R. (1998). After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Zinnbauer, B. et al. (1997). "Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the fuzzy." Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 36(549-564).
- Zinnbauer, B. et al. (1999). "The Emerging Meanings of Religiousness and Spirituality: Problems and Prospects." Journal of Personality 67(6): 889-919.

## Appendix I

### QUESTIONNAIRE: Religion, Meaning and Values Survey

**1. How many hours of television do you watch per week?**

\_\_\_ 0 - 5 \_\_\_ 6 - 10 \_\_\_ 11 - 15 \_\_\_ 16 - 20 \_\_\_ 21 - 25 \_\_\_ 26 - 30 \_\_\_ 31 or more

**2. Can you name three television programs that you watch regularly?**

**3. How often do you watch the following television shows? Please note that this includes reruns, repeat shows and syndicated programs.**

**Oprah Winfrey**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**OZ**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Buffy The Vampire Slayer**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Law and Order**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Boston Public**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**The Practice**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**The X-Files**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Martha Stewart Living**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**CSI: Crime Scene Investigation**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**3. How often do watch the following television channels?****Space TV**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**A & E: Arts and Entertainment**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**CBC Newsworld**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**VisionTV**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**ONE: The Body, Mind and Spirit Channel**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**The Learning Channel**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**4. Do you ever talk with people about TV programs?**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**5. If so, to whom? (sisters, brothers, mother, father, spouse, daughters, sons, house-mates, friends, co-workers, etc.)?**

**6. Do you think television news programs depict reality accurately?**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**7. Do you think television talk shows such as Oprah, Dr. Phil, Balance, etc., depict reality accurately?**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**8. Do you think fictional television dramas depict reality accurately? (Such as Law and Order, Boston Public, etc)**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**9. Do you often agree with the content of the programs that you watch on television?**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**10. Does it matter if television shows present unrealistic storylines, actions or characters?**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**11. Even if a television show does not present an accurate depiction of reality do you think it offers any valuable commentary about everyday reality?**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**12. Do you ever watch television shows that depict any examples of the paranormal or supernatural, such as ESP, telepathy, ghosts, angels, vampires, monsters, etc?**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**13. Do you ever watch television shows that depict any examples of unexplained or unknown phenomena, such as UFOs, crop circles, mysterious disappearances, Ancient Mysteries, Mostly True Stories: Urban Legends Revealed, etc?**

Always                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never                  No Answer

\_\_\_\_\_

**14. Do you ever watch television shows that depict any of the following yoga, Tai'chi, meditation, natural healing, alternative medicine, .etc.?**

Always                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never                  No Answer

\_\_\_\_\_

**15. Do you ever judge the behaviour of television characters? For example laugh at them for doing something "stupid" "outrageous" or "immoral".**

Always                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never                  No Answer

\_\_\_\_\_

**16. Do you ever think about the ethical or moral dilemmas that people on television are dealing with?**

Always                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never                  No Answer

\_\_\_\_\_

**17. Do you ever compare situations depicted on television shows (real or fictional) with events in your own life?**

Always                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never                  No Answer

\_\_\_\_\_

**18. What types of books or magazines do you read?**

**19. What radio stations do you listen to?**

**20. What types of leisure activities do you do?**

**21. Are you a member of a religious group, organization or institution? If yes which one(s)?**

**22. Were you raised within a particular religious tradition(s)? If yes, which?**

**23. How often do you attend religious or spiritual services?**

\_\_\_\_\_ 1 or more times per week

\_\_\_\_\_ 1 - 2 times a month

\_\_\_\_\_ 1 every 3 months

\_\_\_\_\_ 1-3 times a year

\_\_\_\_\_ Only for special holidays such as Christmas, Yom Kippur, etc.

\_\_\_\_\_ Only for special celebrations such as weddings, funerals, etc.

\_\_\_\_\_ Never

**24. Do you believe in God (a divinity or higher power)?**

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

No Answer

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**25. Do you think it is important for a person to choose their religious or spiritual beliefs?**

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

No Answer

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**26. Are religion and spirituality the same?**

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

No Answer

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**27. Do you ever engage in private prayer?**

Always                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never                  No Answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

**28. Have you ever experimented with different types of spiritual or religious practices?**

Always                  Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never                  No Answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

**29. Do you believe that humans have a soul or spirit?**

Yes                  Most likely                  Possibly                  It is unlikely                  No                  Unsure                  No Answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

**30. What do you think happens after death (death is a biological function, is there an afterlife, heaven, hell, reincarnation etc.)**

**31. Do you believe that the way that people behave in this life will affect what happens to them after they die? (Such as going to heaven, reincarnation)**

Yes                  Most likely                  Possibly                  It is unlikely                  No                  Unsure                  No Answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

**32. Do you believe in any of the following:**

**Psychic abilities (ESP, telepathy, precognition)?**

Yes                  Most likely                  Possibly                  It is unlikely                  No                  Unsure                  No Answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Communicate with the dead (Ghosts, channeling, etc)?**

Yes            Most likely            Possibly            It is unlikely            No            Unsure            No Answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Astrology, Tarot Cards or other forms of divination?**

Yes            Most likely            Possibly            It is unlikely            No            Unsure            No Answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

**33. Have you ever had a mystical, religious or spiritual experience?**

Yes            Most likely            Possibly            It is unlikely            No            Unsure            No Answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

**34. Have you ever had an encounter with an "other-worldly being", such as an angel, ghost, spirit, alien?**

Yes            Most likely            Possibly            It is unlikely            No            Unsure            No Answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

**35. Do you ever read any religious, spiritual or holy books?**

Always            Often            Sometimes            Rarely            Never            No Answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

**36. What is your gender?**

**37. What year were you born?**

**38. Where were you born?**

**39. Approximately how long have you lived in Ottawa-Gatineau region?**

**40. Are you currently:**

- Single
- Married or living with a partner
- Separated or Divorced
- Widowed
- Live with parents or other family
- Live with house/room mates
- Other
- No Answer

**41. Do you have children?**

**42. Do you self-identify as a member of any particular ethnic group(s)?**

**43. Last week were you:**

- Employed full time outside the home
- Employed part time outside the home
- Working within the home
- Student
- Other
- No answer

**44. Is your household income:**

- Under \$15,000 per year
- \$ 15,000 - \$30,000 per year
- \$ 31,000 - \$ 70,000 per year
- \$ Over \$ 70,000 per year
- No Answer



## Appendix II

### PHASE II: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Please Note: Not all participants may asked all of these questions.

#### I. Religion, Meaning and Values

1. What does the term “religion” mean to you? What does the term “spirituality” mean to you? Are they different, the same?
2. I am interested in your religious background. Could you tell me about your upbringing, for example, were you raised in a particular tradition, the religion of you parents, and so forth.
3. Are you religious or spiritual now?
4. Have you ever experimented with different religious, spiritual or philosophical traditions?
5. Do you believe in God?
6. Do you believe in the Biblical Jesus?
7. Do you think that it is important for people to choose their beliefs and values based on their own meaning, truth and experiences?
8. Do you think it is important to uphold family traditions and values? If yes, which ones? Why or why not?
9. Do you think it is important to uphold cultural traditions and values? If yes, which ones? Why or why not?
10. Do you think it is important to uphold certain religious traditions and values? If yes, which ones? Why or why not?
11. Have you had any religious celebrations for rites of passage in your life, such as Baptism, Confirmation, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, Wedding, etc.?
12. Do you plan to have any religious celebrations for your future rites of passage, such as wedding, funeral, etc.?
13. Do you celebrate any religious, spiritual or cultural holidays, even though you do not regularly participate in that tradition? (Example. You do not go to church or consider yourself a practicing Christian, but still celebrate the holiday of Christmas, with common traditions such as a decorating, gift giving, Christmas music, etc.)

14. Do you believe that it is important for people to question their beliefs and values? Or why they have the beliefs that they do?
15. Do you think it is acceptable for people to question or challenge traditional religious authorities?
16. Do you think it is acceptable for people to question or challenge secular authorities such as political leaders?
17. What things tend to most influence you beliefs, values and opinions? Family, friends, education, job, news, religion etc.....
18. What things tend to be the most important in your life? Family, partner/spouse, friends, education, job, success, happiness, money, health, justice, etc .....
19. Where you do tend to get most of your information or knowledge about the world? Family, friends religion, education, TV news, newspapers, internet, radio, television, etc....
20. Have you ever practiced any of the following yoga, Tai'chi, Qi Gong, meditation, natural healing, alternative medicine, or Feng Shui? If so, could you tell me more about it?
21. Do you believe that humans have a soul or spirit?
22. What do you think happens after death?
23. Do you believe in Heaven?
24. Do you believe in Hell?
25. Do you believe that the way that people behave in this life will affect what happens to them after they die? (Such as going to heaven, reincarnation, rewarded for good deeds, etc.... )
26. Do you believe in things such as astrology, tarot cards, psychics, etc? Have you ever experiences with them?
27. Do you believe in things such as ESP, precognition, telepathy? Have you ever experienced any of them?
28. Have you ever felt that you were being guided or protected by a force or power outside of yourself, such as God, a guardian angel, etc.?

29. Do you believe in 'other-worldly beings' such as angels, ghosts, spirits, aliens? (If yes) Have you ever had an experience with any of them?
30. Have you ever had a mystical, religious or spiritual experience? Would you tell me more about it?
31. Have you ever had an experience with God? (Higher power, Goddess, whatever is appropriate term for the participant?)
32. Do you believe that the world is generally good?
33. Do you believe that people are generally good? What do you think makes someone good, moral, or ethical? Or immoral, unethical?
34. What are your moral or ethics? What makes you a good person?
35. What do you think evil is? Have you ever had the feeling that you were in the presence of evil?
36. Are you interested in things like mythology, folklore, ancient history? If so, can you provide some examples or explain further?

## **II. Television, viewing habits, taste and opinions**

1. What types of television shows do you like to watch?
2. Do you turn on the television to watch specific shows? If yes which shows?
3. Do you watch certain shows because they are all that is offered at the times you choose to watch television (i.e. they are the best thing on at the time)?
4. What are your five favorite shows?
5. Could you tell me about those shows? Can you describe a typical episode or maybe your favorite episode.
6. Who are your favorite people on TV and why?
7. How often do you watch TV?
8. Do you keep the television on while you are doing other things? If so, what types of things do you do?
9. Do you do other things while you are sitting watching television? If so, what types of things do you do?

10. Do you talk to other people while you are watching TV? If so, to whom (sisters, brothers, mother, father, spouse, daughters, sons, house-mates, friends, co-workers, etc.)? What types of things do you talk about?
11. Do you talk to people about TV? If so, to whom? (sisters, brothers, mother, father spouse, daughters, sons, house-mates, friends, co-workers, etc.)? What types of things do you talk about?
12. What do you think about the influence of television on society? Does it have much influence? Is it positive or negative? Do it depend on other things, too?
13. How much of an influence do you think that television has on individuals? Does it have much influence? Is it positive or negative? Do it depend on other things too, such as the individual, their environment, etc...?
14. How much of an influence does television have on you? Do you think that there is any relationship between the things that you see on TV and the things that you think or believe?
15. What other things influence how you think and what you believe?
16. Do you often think critically about the things that you see on TV? Do you criticize things, do you evaluate them?
17. Do you think it is important for people to think the things that they see on TV? (Critical thinking)
18. Are there any people on TV that you 'love to hate' such as a particularly nasty character, a villain, or a person on a reality TV show?
19. Do you often agree with the content of the programs that you watch on television?
20. Do you think television news programs depict reality accurately?
21. Do you think fictional television dramas depict reality accurately? (Such as Law and Order, Boston Public, etc)
22. Do you think that fictional television comedies depict reality accurately? (Such as Frasier, Friends)
23. Do you think television talk shows such as Oprah, Dr. Phil, Balance, etc., depict reality accurately?
24. Does it matter if television shows present unrealistic storylines, actions or characters?

25. Even if a television show does not present an accurate depiction of reality do you think it offer any valuable commentary about everyday reality?
26. Do you ever watch television shows which depict any examples of the paranormal or supernatural? Such as ESP, telepathy, ghosts, angels, vampires, monsters, etc.? If yes, which shows and why do you like them?
27. Do you ever watch television shows which depict any examples of unexplained or unknown phenomena, conspiracies, etc? If yes, which shows and why do you like them?
28. Do you ever watch television shows which depict characters that are religious? Such as religious leaders (monks, preachers, nuns, gurus, etc.), characters that are members of a particular religion or practice a particular religion (witches/wiccans, Catholics, new agers, Buddhists, etc.) If yes, which shows? What do you think about the religious characters?
29. Do you ever watch television shows that depict any of the following yoga, Tai=chi, meditation, natural healing, alternative medicine, .etc?
30. Do you ever judge the behaviour of television characters? For example laugh at them for doing something 'stupid' 'outrageous' 'immoral'. If yes, could you provide me with an example?
31. Do you ever think about the ethical or moral dilemmas that people on television are dealing with?  
If yes, could you provide an example? Do you think it is important?
32. Do you ever compare situations depicted on television shows (real or fictional) with events in your own life?
33. There are many television shows which include storylines and events that may not seem rational or possible in everyday reality. Does this matter to you? Do you still enjoy them?
34. Do you ever take pleasure in disagreeing with people on television? If yes which people or which shows? (News (style), talk shows, reality shows, drama). What benefit do you receive from this?
35. Do you ever take pleasure in hating certain people, views or actions on television?
36. Do you take pleasure in watching the happiness, success or achievements of people on television?
37. Do you think that there is any relationship between your religious or spiritual beliefs and things that you have watched on TV? What about other beliefs?

38. How important of a role does television play in your life?
39. How important of a role does television play in the lives of the people around you?

**III Various questions: demographics, personal interests, etc.**

1. Where were you born? Do you think that has any influence on who you are, what you believe?
2. Approximately how long have you live in Ottawa-Gatineau region?
3. Who are the most important people or what are the most important relationships in your life?
4. How important is your heritage, place of birth, your ethnicity, genealogy, etc, in your life? How have these factors influenced who you are now?
5. Could you describe a typical day in your life?
6. What sorts of things do you enjoy doing in your leisure time?
7. What books have you read recently? Do you have any favorite books? Why? Are there any that you have really disliked? Why?
8. What magazines do you read? Why do you enjoy them?
9. What movies have you seen recently? Do you have any favorite movies? Why? Are there any that you have really disliked? Why?
10. What radio station(s) do you listen to?
11. What kind of music do you listen to?
12. If you have children are you raising them to have the same beliefs and traditions as you?
13. If you have children, do you monitor what they watch on television?
14. Are there any other things that you would like to discuss

### **Appendix III**

Upon reviewing the data gathered during interviews, I found clear patterns of correlates between participants' spirituality, or ultimate systems of belief, and their television viewing choices. For example, belief in the paranormal tends to correlate with watching programs with paranormal content; those for whom their spirituality was connected with a belief in fate and destiny tended to watch programs that conveyed those themes; and participants grappling with existential and moral questions tended to express enjoying television programs that deal with such issues. Such tendencies suggest that there may be a relationship between participants' spiritual worldviews and television viewing, but they do not indicate what this relationship may be. As participants explained that they tended to choose their spiritual beliefs, rather than accepting what someone or some authority told them, and that their spirituality was defined by reflecting upon and consciously engaging with questions about the divine, their personal significance and contributions to the world, ultimate meaning and purpose, and the nature of humanity and the world, a latent correlation between the television programs that they watch and their spiritual worldviews is not particularly significant. What makes the correlations in this particular study significant is the how participants engage with the content of the programs that they watch and how they use them to grapple with, reflect upon and ultimately choose their spiritual beliefs and practices.

My interview with Laurie serves to highlight this difference. Throughout our interview, there appeared to be many parallels between Laurie's spiritual beliefs and the things she watched on television. Topics that Laurie discussed regarding her spirituality included faith in God which she defined as "a higher being," belief that we are all

connected to God through our soul or spirit, interest in feminist spirituality, witchcraft and Wicca, exploration of the mind, body, spirit connection through alternative medicine and traditional medicine (such as herbalism, faith and energy healing), belief in various paranormal and unexplained phenomena, such as ghosts and hauntings, divination, psychic abilities, ESP, telepathy, precognition, telepathy, as well as interest in 'other' religious ideas, such as reincarnation and karma. In terms of her television viewing, Laurie regularly watched programs reflecting these spiritual themes, such as programs with supernatural content, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, talk shows when they featured psychics, such as Sylvia Browne and John Edwards, and programs dealing with alternative religions, mysticism, natural healing and 'real life' ghost stories, spirit possessions and psychic phenomenon. While Laurie did express that she appreciated certain shows because they reflected some of her beliefs and values, for the most part she maintained that she used television mainly as a source of entertainment and relaxation, rarely reflecting on programs in terms of their spiritual content or meanings. I draw upon two examples here. Laurie is a regular viewer of the soap opera *Days of Our Lives*, which regularly features religious symbolism and traditions such as religious rites of passage, attending church, prayer, confession, seeking spiritual guidance from priests or ministers, as well as featuring less traditional elements of spirituality and the paranormal, emphasizing concepts such as fate and destiny, 'soul mates,' telepathic connections, ESP, precognitive abilities, divination, and a storyline where one character was possessed by the Devil. During the interview Laurie said she liked the fact that the show focused on characters with an active spiritual life and emphasized the "more spiritual aspects of love" rather than overt sexuality and immorality as she found on other soap operas.

Nevertheless, the main appeal of the show for Laurie is the entertainment value. She characterized much of the content as “outrageous,” “comical” and “silly,” further explaining that she mainly enjoyed this soap opera because “it does not take itself seriously.” She could simply watch, laugh and enjoy. Rather than inspiring her to think deeply or reflect on the spiritual themes in the show, *Days of Our Lives* offered Laurie the opportunity to take a break from her regular day time activities as a stay at home mother and in fact offered her a chance to “not have to think.”

Laurie expressed a similar approach to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As a fan of *Buffy* Laurie said that the show appealed to her for multiple reasons. She explained,

I liked the whole supernatural thing – the vampires and the witches that whole thing.... I don't know. I just enjoyed it. It was something that you didn't have to think about. You could sit and watch.... I thought it was an extremely well written show. It was satirical. But all the women in the show were strong and fought for what they thought was right. There were no weak females on Buffy.

Part of the appeal included the supernatural content, the depiction of Wicca, as well as, the portrayal of strong female characters. However she primarily enjoyed the show for its ability to entertain. While the supernatural and spiritual elements of programs do draw Laurie's attention, she rarely thinks about them in relation to her own life or her beliefs. Laurie explained “TV would never influence my behaviour, unless it was an issue that I was dealing with and I liked the way they resolved it. For the most part I watch a show for the entertainment value, I don't watch it to help me. Oprah has all this stuff to on spirituality and it interests me a bit, but I would rather read about it.” When asked if there was a relationship between her television viewing and her spirituality Laurie said “No, none at all.” While there certainly do appear to be correlations between some of Laurie's beliefs and the content of the television shows that she watches, she

does not think of them as being particularly meaningful, nor does she reflect usually upon them in a spiritually significant manner. Laurie does, however, use books as a source for spiritual meaning and reflection. What this suggests to me is that Laurie, like many other participants in this study, does construct a spiritually meaningful worldview through reflecting upon and choosing various symbols, beliefs and practices gathered from various cultural sources. However television programs do not consciously serve as a primary site for this form of spiritual reflection, instead Laurie tends to intentionally draw from books, traditional religions, and conversations with significant people in her life and her own feelings and experiences for her sources of ultimate meaning. Consequently, while as a researcher I could likely support a "Cultivation Hypothesis" based upon the latent correlations between Laurie's television preferences and her spiritual worldview, it does not address the principal questions of this research that is, do participants use television as a spiritually meaningful resource? Consequently, for this project, the connection between television viewing and spirituality must be apparent to the participants.

The interview with Pierre highlighted a different aspect of latent correlations between television and spirituality that do not manifest into explicit spiritual beliefs or concerns. Pierre is the one participant whom self identified as neither spiritual, nor religious. Pierre explained that while he was raised Roman Catholic, and his wife is Roman Catholic and his children attended Roman Catholic school, he does not practice or believe in it. Pierre indicated on his survey that he did not believe in God, when I asked him whether or not he believed in God during his interview he explained the term God made him think of religious concepts of God, which he believes "is a man-made thing"

and consequently he does not believe in it. However Pierre further clarified that the term “Higher Power” more adequately described his belief. Pierre stated

There is too much going on. There are too many things. Something has to be at the helm of all this! It’s not just our little world. There is a whole universe out there. We can’t just be the only ones, there is something there. Like we are so minimal, we are just a grain. There has to be something else out there much bigger than we are.

Additionally, Pierre speculates that humans most likely have a soul or a component beyond our pure physiological aspects which he thinks provides us with moral guidance or a conscience, as well as, regularly thinking about what happens when we die, wondering if there might be some form of life or existence after death, but he is unsure about the answers. However, unlike other participants in the study whom consider reflection on such issues to be part of their spirituality, Pierre does not consider such questions to have any spiritual or religious significance.

Pierre is a moderate television viewer, reporting watching television on most weekdays for two hours or less, and not watching usually watching television on weekends, preferring to use that time to do household chores, spend time with his wife and family, or engage in other leisure activities such as fishing, hunting, and spending time at his cottage. In terms of his television viewing habits, Pierre tends to watch sports, situation comedies, movies on specialty channels, as well as the programs *CSI* and *American Chopper*. Pierre also reported frequently watching science fiction and horror, as well as, documentary or edutainment style programs featuring paranormal and unexplained phenomena. While Pierre recognizes that the people featured on such shows believe their experiences to be real, he does not actually believe paranormal activity such as ghosts, communicating with the dead, or psychic phenomenon to be real, rather he

watches such programs because he finds them interesting and entertaining. In terms of the other programs that he watches, Pierre reported that he does reflect on the moral and ethical issues presented in programs, and likes programs which feature values similar to his own, such as honesty, integrity, responsibility, caring family relationships, and having a strong work ethic, however, he does not consider these to be spiritual or religious issues, rather he considers them to be aspects of "living a good, clean life." Similarly, Pierre admits that sometimes television programs do provoke him to reflect upon mortality, what happens when we die and the meaning and purpose of life, however as Pierre does not consider himself to be religious or spiritual, he does not define any of these thoughts or activities as being spiritual or religious.

Working with my academic definition of religion as discussed in Chapter Two, Pierre could easily be described as religious. In terms of Bibby's indicators of latent spirituality, Pierre could also be considered to have spiritual beliefs as he does from time to time reflect upon existential questions, shows an interest in the supernatural and usually believes in concepts such as a 'Higher Power,' 'soul,' 'fate' and 'transcendent values.' Moreover, in terms of this research project, Pierre does sometimes reflect on these issues and questions in light of his television viewing. However, Pierre does not consider himself to be religious or spiritual, nor does he attribute spiritual or religious meaning to these issues. While as a researcher I could argue that this is both an example of latent spirituality and of televisions' potential to cultivate a particular form of spiritual beliefs, such an argument lends little understanding how participants directly conceive spirituality and how they use television as an explicit resource in constructing their spiritual worldviews.

While theories discussing the spiritual and religious symbolism, function and significance of television programs certainly do offer insight into potential uses and meaning of television programs and provide a theoretical evidence to suggest that television contributes to societal conversations about transcendent meaning, they tend to demonstrate only correlates and implicit relationships with the spiritual worldviews of viewers, rather than direct or causal relationships. As both Laurie and Pierre's examples demonstrate watching television programs with spiritual and religious content does not necessarily involve religious or spiritual meanings and interpretations. In such cases, one could easily support arguments claiming that the information gathered during Laurie and Pierre's interviews indicate that they are both spiritual and there is a relationship between their spiritual beliefs and their television viewing choices, however doing so serves little methodological purpose. Categorizing and interpreting their data in a manner counter to their own self-definitions does not reveal much about their concepts of spirituality, nor about how they do, or do not construct spiritually meaningful worldviews.