



The Gospel According to Primetime

From *Roswell* to *West Wing*,
scripts are theological documents.

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Christmas in *Roswell*? It seems unlikely. This teen-angst-as-alien-life series, created by Jason Katims, explores life on Earth for a clique of extraterrestrial teens. Their supernatural abilities would seem to leave little room for the traditional "baby Jesus" story. Yet, the *Roswell* Christmas last year ["A Roswell Christmas Carol," written by Jason Katims] was sincere and literal. The episode finds a cancer ward of sick children healed on Christmas Eve.

Recruited to attend the Christmas Eve service by his girlfriend, Liz, Max protests, "I don't believe in God." Why should he? He knows he was the source of the supposed miracle. He walks the streets alone. Eventually, as strains of "O Come All Ye Faithful" float through the air, Max shows up at the candlelight service. "I thought you didn't believe in God?" Liz asks. He answers, "I believe in you."

If this honest, human spiritual moment was unexpected, it is not an exception. God, it seems, is suddenly in demand for guest appearances in primetime.

Even with greater prominence, God is still not usually a role to be cast. God is reflected in the way the narrative world works. Events that occur, decisions made, reactions of others, consequences imposed--all these add up to describe the rules of the world as created, revealing the intent of the implicit creator. The recent development is that characters are more often talking directly about

God. The various treatments of God are illustrated in five categories.

Angels Unawares

Ancient wisdom says that we each might, at any given time, be "entertaining angels unawares." *Touched by an Angel* [created by John Masius] takes that wisdom literally. Although the show does not name the God involved, its angelology is quite orthodox and sincere. According to series executive producer Martha Williamson, there will be no "man behind the curtain" in the last episode.

The Pax network is also well-represented in the angel category. *Mysterious Ways* [created by Peter O'Fallon] deals with the exploration of supernatural intervention in life. *It's a Miracle* takes a reality TV approach, as does *Miracle Pets*. Angels unawares, indeed.

Biblical Epics

The Biblical epic is a staple in film and television. *Jesus of Nazareth* [1977, written by Franco Zeffirelli, Anthony Burgess, and Suso Cecchi D'Amico] remains the classic among made-for-television recitations of timeless Biblical stories. There are many newcomers. The TNT network started the trend in 1995 with the story of the Israelite patriarch, *Joseph* [story by James Carrington, teleplay by Lionel Chetwynd]. It also brought us *Moses* [1996, written by Lionel Chetwynd], *Samson & Delilah* [1996, written by Allan Scott], and *David* [1997, written by Larry Gross]. Where TNT left off, the PAX network picked up with *Jeremiah* [1997, written by Harry Winer], *Solomon* [1997, written by Bradley T. Winter], *Esther* [1999, written by Sandy Niemand], *Joseph of Nazareth* [1999, story by Gianmario Pagano, teleplay by Gareth Jones], and *Mary Magdalene* [2001, written by Gareth Jones]. The three traditional networks participated, as well. Each major player in the Biblical pageant, it seems, has had his or her story told.

Ministers & Priests

A standard technique used to give characters permission to talk about spiritual things is to put a clerical collar on them. The latest manifestation of this, notable because the minister in question is a regular character in the series, is *Seventh Heaven* [created by Brenda Hampton]. The relentlessly earnest Eric Camden, played by Stephen Collins, earns the WB some of its most spiritual rating points by facing life's problems through a spiritual worldview. The

explicit religion in the show is kept to a minimum, but there is a lot of looking upward with a knowing glance right after a tough situation resolves well. In the end, faith in a higher being is at the heart of the implicit theology of this show.

The Simpsons: A Special Category

The most religious show on television is *The Simpsons* [created by Matt Groening, developed by James L. Brooks & Matt Groening & Sam Simon]. The show takes some religious moments quite sincerely, particularly those of Marge and Lisa. Other moments, mostly those of Bart and Homer, it portrays as hypocritical. Observers have found in the Simpson family a complete typology of contemporary religious attitudes. As noted Protestant evangelist Tony Campolo wrote, "Both the hypocrisies and the virtues of the Simpson family and the other characters on the show are too often my own." His thoughts came in the foreword to *The Gospel According to 'The Simpsons'* by Mark Pinsky.

Pinsky writes about how the show was rejected from the bully pulpit of the White House to the Baptist pulpit on Main Street. As people looked a little deeper, though, it was slowly accepted. Pinsky reports that the show offers a sharp criticism of false religious practice, but honors genuine faith against a thorough knowledge of things religious with the occasional clunker thrown in to see if the audience is paying attention.

Characters Facing Daily Life

The recent emergence of spirituality in narrative television is most apparent in shows otherwise not about religious subjects. The profound enters into daily life.

In *Judging Amy* [created by John Tinker & Bill D'Elia and Amy Brenneman & Connie Tavel, developed by Barbara Hall], for instance, Amy, the agnostic lead character, has had several brushes with the spiritual. In the episode "The God Thing" [written by Karen Hall], Amy's longtime friend Greta returns to work after a bout with cancer. The experience brought Greta a greater appreciation for God. "We've always been cynical agnostics together," protests Amy. "A life-threatening illness will change that," replies Greta. When Amy turns to court officer Bruce Van Exel for a little sympathy, she finds out he is a quietly devout Catholic.

By commenting on the real world, the writer necessarily comments on the creator of the real world. The creator of the real world is, by definition, God. For things that comment on God, we use the word theological.

After Greta dies unexpectedly, Amy shows up at Van Exel's church, still questioning: "So you believe in Him?" He affirms that he does believe. When she asks why, he answers, "The look on my daughter's face when I tuck her in at night. That's the short answer." Not convinced, but more open, Amy goes into the Mass with him rather than going home to an empty house as she mourns her friend.

The West Wing [created by Aaron Sorkin] season finale this past May ["Two Cathedrals," written by Aaron Sorkin] stages a scene rivaled only by the Book of Job. Secret Service agents guard the massive doors to the National Cathedral as they slam shut, locking in the most powerful man in the world for a one-on-one confrontation. President Bartlet rages at the altar, at full volume, in both English and Latin. In the end, after a little theological counseling from the memory of his now-deceased secretary, Mrs. Landingham, we suspect that this unusual summit of the highest order has brought the President a greater understanding of just exactly who is responsible for what in life.

West Wing prepared us for this encounter earlier ["Take This Sabbath Day," story by Lawrence O'Donnell Jr. & Paul Redford and Aaron Sorkin, teleplay by Aaron Sorkin]. Struggling with the Executive Branch privilege to commute a death sentence, President Bartlet sends for his childhood priest. The priest, played by Karl Malden, is intimidated to approach this youth that he counseled years earlier, now, as president in the Oval Office. When he asks how he should address the president, as Jeb or Mr. President, Bartlet replies, "Call me Mr. President, out of respect for the office." Bartlet realizes that he cannot use his Executive

Privilege to indulge his own opposition to the death penalty. He refuses to commute the sentence. Bartlet knows, however, that although upholding the law is the right thing to do, it is no less a sin to comply in the death of another. As the midnight execution time passes, the priest dons his vestments. Without asking, he addresses the president as Jeb. As the camera pulls up to an overhead point of view, we see that Jeb Barlet, though kneeling on the presidential seal in the carpet, is nonetheless humbled before a higher power, as he begins his confession. More recently, *The West Wing* response to the September 11 terrorist attacks ["Isaac and Ishmael," written by Aaron Sorkin] invokes Biblical knowledge as necessary foreign policy background in today's world.

Special mention in the Daily Life category goes to David E. Kelly's *Picket Fences*. Predating the current trend, that series single-handedly kept the fires burning for spiritual analysis of life's events. The show's Roman Catholic priest and Protestant minister were joined in framing the community debate in terms of faith by Fyvush Finkel as the Jewish defense counsel. Ray Walston as the God-like judge meted out not justice but morality, as the show created theology on the fly.

More recently, Kelley has continued to involve the Almighty in street life. A number of *Ally McBeal* storylines have featured God. In "Angels and Blimps" [written by David E. Kelley] Ally meets Eric Stall, an eight-year-old leukemia patient. He hires Ally to sue God. When young Eric doubts that God even exists, Ally recounts how, when she was a child and her five-year-old sister died, Ally stopped believing in God. One day, Ally noticed a blimp flying in the sky. Her mother told her that "God had man make the blimp to remind people that He's up there watching." Now, every time Ally sees a blimp, she thinks of the Almighty. After the boy succumbs to his cancer, Ally is walking home, thinking of him, when a blimp flies overhead. The sign on the side of the blimp: just looking.

These examples are not exhaustive. Even *Pacific Blue* [created by Bill Nuss], known for cops in shorts, buff villains, and scantily clad victims, featured a storyline in which a cop flirts with Satan worship, only to end up in confession with the sincere and hopeful, "I don't even know the question."

Primetime Pulpit

Jesuit priest Walter Burghardt welcomed filmmakers to the "fraternity of theologians: those who live with symbols and play with mystery." Professor Robert Johnston wrote in *Reel Spirituality* that "too few of us [Christians] have developed the skills of film watching let alone film criticism."

The observation that God is more frequently mentioned in primetime is only the most obvious part of a deeper reality. T.S. Eliot commented that "the author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it as human beings, whether we intend to be or not." In other terms, it can be said that every script has an inherent "theological" aspect. The narrative world entertains because it comments on the real world. By commenting on the real world, the writer, to a greater or lesser extent, asserts universal truths. To assert universal truths is to comment on the divine, which is also the work of theology. This is not to prejudge the identity or nature of God. Each script has its own say on those questions. A script might even assert or imply that there is no God. Yet, even that is a theological comment of a sort. Neither is most of the conversation about God religious. Following the lead of Holocaust martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the discussion of God occurs in the context of life, not religion, making it all the more relevant for the viewer.

The idea that primetime television (and film) is the venue for more of our theological reflection is not completely lost on the church. In a talk for aspiring film writers, film producer Roger Courts cited a 1968 invitation in *Variety* from Jesuit priest Walter Burghardt. The priest welcomed filmmakers to "the fraternity of theologians: those who live with symbols and play with mystery." Courts added, "Few filmmakers have probably thought of themselves as being theologians, [but] to dwell on those words for only a moment is to begin to appreciate why those who make films must--*must*--accept a heavy responsibility to the audiences they serve."

There are several professors at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, the closest seminary to Hollywood, who are exploring the theological dimension of entertainment. Professor Robert Johnston wrote in *Reel Spirituality* that "too few of us [Christians] have developed the skills of movie watching, let alone film criticism." The intent of his book is to encourage the Christian filmgoer to enter into a theological conversation with film.

Barry Taylor, a musician, pastor, and sometime adjunct instructor at Fuller, teaches a course on Post-Modernity, Pop Culture, and the Future Church. He observes that "the church is in trouble. Theology is being done outside the church now, in the popular culture. The church cannot stand outside the culture observing what's going on; we have to get into the discussion."

Fuller Seminary theologian Ray Anderson has tried to lead the way from theology being something that is learned to something that pastors and believers do. Anderson observes that as a young pastor he had no trouble with the red-letter Bibles, the ones where every word spoken by Jesus appears in red, that some of his parishioners carried. "I now hold," he writes, "that if one wishes to highlight what is revealed truth in the life and ministry of Jesus, one should better print his works in red!"

Anderson's typographic preference makes pretty good scriptwriting advice. Actions speak louder than words--for both reading the Bible and writing a script.

Father Bud Kieser, a producer-priest (one of Hollywood's more unusual hyphenate combinations) and founder of the respected Humanitas Prize, was a longtime voice in Hollywood for the relevance of film and television to a spiritual life. He hoped that he and other thoughtful producers would take viewers out of their own lives to a time and place of the camera's choosing--the process of incarnation, in his terms. By offering a film or television program as a midrash on the viewer's life, he hoped to create a cognitive dissonance that the viewer could resolve only with an inward self-examination. This is also the goal of every Sunday sermon.

In 1995 the full resources of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association focused on a crusade in Puerto Rico. The benefit of 50 years of such crusades made this the most widely telecast Billy Graham Crusade ever. In their words, it was "the largest single evangelistic effort in the history of Christianity." More than a billion people fell within the scope of the worldwide satellite and broadcast distribution of the televised events. This three-day event was a singular, crowning achievement of the career of the Reverend Graham. The writers of *Baywatch* [created by Michael Berk & Douglas Schwartz and Gregory J. Bonann] achieved the same worldwide reach 52 times that year. What's more, *Baywatch* surely reached more nonbelievers, making it the more potent pulpit. The theology of *Baywatch* is a seminary thesis begging to be written, but the same opportunity to illuminate viewers in the context of entertainment exists for every television program or film. More and

more, it seems, that opportunity is being taken seriously by those who start with the blank page.