

## **Televised Religion**

### **Response by Heidi Campbell**

While traditional religious programming may not be a staple of standard network programming, it can be argued that religion still plays a prevalent role in the television landscape. Popular TV shows such as *Lost*, *House* & *CSI* often integrate religious themes or characters into their dominant plot lines. Also there are growing examples of network television attempting to reach out to the religious public with shows such as *Eli Stone* or *Little Mosque on the Prairie* that uses religion as the basis for exploring a variety of cultural and social themes. While religious conservatives may bemoan the images of faith that appears on the screen, the fact is that portrayals of religion are not rare or uncommon. The current face of “televised religion” may not always reflect the beliefs and practices of Christian America, but what it does show is that spirituality has a place in the media marketplace as religion is used as a popular discourse to evoke traditional and non-traditional meaning-making systems.

Part of the reason for the perception that religion is less prevalent in broadcast programming is because there is a noticeable shift in the type of the religious practice depicted. This mirrors a shift in the actual practice of religion within America. It is arguable that in a postmodern era instead of religion fading further into the background, there has been a revival in popular and personal spirituality. Scholars have also recognized the public practice and understanding of religion has shifted towards “belief without belonging” (Davie, 1994,) or away from religious affiliations and institutional adherence. This shift from traditional religion has been towards what is described as “lived religion” (Hall, 1997) where people perform their personal religious beliefs on a daily basis in ways often unrelated to traditional creeds or codes of practice. Another trend in contemporary spiritual practice is a move from explicit to “implicit religion” which recognizes that seemingly secular practices may serve a religious function in people’s everyday life (Bailey, 1990). Seeing religion in terms of lived practice or acknowledging the sacredness of the secular world creates a hybrid space where traditional religious language and notions can be transposed upon actions and artifacts previously seen as non-religious. The language and images of the sacred thus become a definitional tool to redefine contemporary life (Ammerman, 2007). Together these trends mean that while religion is prevalent in American society it is a much more fluid construct, created from a variety of personal beliefs and accepted spiritual practices. Traditional religions still arguably serve an important, yet different, role by providing a bank of meaning-making resources for media producers and viewers to draw on.

The weaving together of various religious images and spiritual narratives allow a new form of piz-n-mix spirituality to be easily created on the screen. We see this in the discourse on karma in *My Name is Earl* or in the mixture of New Age & Christian beliefs at play in *Eli Stone*. Also the presentation of some media events and TV programming are structured in such ways that one can view and interpret televised events such as the Olympics or the Superbowl as implicitly religious. Both media events that evoke a transcendent spiritual quality and TV sitcoms or dramas that readily employ religious

iconography and ideas illustrate that the mass media does utilize religion as popular currency within its productions. Therefore the current face of televised religion within mainstream US broadcasting might not reflect many traditional religious programs (such as church services and talks shows), yet what is prevalent is a tendency to evoke implicit religion and integrate examples of lived religion in ways that reflect the actual practice of religion for many within American culture. Indeed scholars have recently argued that religion on television reflects these shifts toward belief without intuitional or formal religious affiliation (Clark, 2008) or holding to a practice of religion without firm belief (Bird, 2008) in the US. Therefore, the question may not be: why is religion being under-represented in mainstream television? But... what does televised religion as it currently is tell us about religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### Sources

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