

Televised Religion
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Good religious television is as rare as good religious literature, and, perhaps, for the same reason: it is hard to make virtue as interesting as sin. And let's face it. Television is about selling and sin sells. The few shows that focus on religion are likely either to be so saccharine they seem more like public service announcements than portrayals of real people or to spend far more time exploiting vice than exhorting virtue. Seventh Heaven, which now airs in syndication on ABC Family, and TNT's Saving Grace are recent examples of these types, respectively, and illustrate how religion is portrayed on secular television. The nature of their portrayal also suggests the difficulties of exploring religious topics in a time when, given the proliferation of religious networks, an offended audience has numerous options.

Seventh Heaven, the story of a minister, his wife, and their seven children, tackles everything from teenage pregnancy to spousal abuse. The reverend's counsel is often helpful, but if the show had ditched the Sunday morning scenes with the minister at the pulpit, he could just as easily have been a psychiatrist or a compassionate plumber. The show's approach to religion seems tentative at best, for it is a religious show without an identifiable religion, with few references to God and with far fewer references to Jesus (although the show is clearly supposed to be Christian). In fact, the most intense discussion of religion occurs when the oldest son decides to convert to Judaism to appease his fiancé's parents. Even then, the conversion for the son seems rather casual, as if he is choosing to live in Sacramento rather than Los Angeles instead of renouncing a faith to which he has supposedly been devoted his whole life. Why go to the trouble to create a show about a Christian minister, give it a decidedly moral agenda, and then allow religion to make only polite guest appearances?

There is nothing tentative or polite, however, about TNT's Saving Grace, which chronicles the Augustinian descent of its title character into a debauched existence of casual sex, alcohol and bouts of self-recrimination. Earl, her personal angel, witnesses this descent, having appeared one night in response to Grace's desperate prayer for help when, drunk, she believes she has run over a man who turns out to be in prison and for whom Earl is also a "last chance" angel. The accident is not real. God has set her up in order to save her from herself, hence the title. The audience is also set up: to eat its secular cake and have its religious cake too. To provide more moral (or amoral) icing for the cake, Grace is a major crimes detective in Oklahoma City and investigates the most depraved acts imaginable. Complicated? Yes. Religious? Sort of. Grace certainly thinks about God, often laments her behavior, and the presence of an angel, albeit one that looks more like he belongs in a biker gang than a celestial choir, makes it hard for her to dispute or ignore God's existence. In one episode she even has a mountaintop encounter; however, her path to salvation is no road to Damascus, and the show's prolific use of nudity, sex, and violence makes the angel's witness, like the audience's witness, more voyeuristic than redemptive.

The rationale behind the portrayal of religion in each of these shows and the under-representation of religion in general is rooted in the nature of the television market.

Questions posed by religion are often difficult to navigate, antithetical to those posed by television and almost impossible to resolve in thirty or sixty minutes between jaunty ads for burgers and cars. Further, television is a jealous god, whose very existence depends on keeping our attention long enough to sell soap/cars/frozen fish/make-up, fostering our discontent with our bodies/cars/houses, and keeping us home, watching. Religion often eschews consumerism, encourages prayer, and suggests we forget about ourselves and help others. Would not, therefore, television's promotion of religion be to its own detriment? Additionally, the ability to sell relies on targeting a demographic often based on age, socio-economic level, gender and even race. Religious affiliation is much harder to target because it is more likely to cut across so many of these lines. To offer an audience with a diverse range of religious beliefs shows that portray topics as volatile as the nature of faith and as personal as one's relationship to God risks offending that audience at its core. The offended are in no mood to spend money. If, however, the show becomes one big, bland sermon, it runs the risk of boring the audience. The bored do not keep watching. It is best to keep the religion as vague as possible and the storylines as titillating as possible.

Religious-based networks, however, run no such risks. They operate instead on the principal "if we build it they will come." These networks, exploiting their niche, have created a booming "go to" place for Christians who desire shows that reflect their ideology—non-denominational, evangelical, traditional protestant or Catholic—and who wish to get away from what many see as the moral decline of secular television. Instead of having to figure out what the audience will tolerate, shows on these networks simply do what they do and let the audience find them.

In some ways, television and religion are made for each other. After all, proselytizing is a bit like selling, and selling is what television does best. The problem is it's a hard sell.