

Televised Religion: The Truth is out there.  
James Thompson

I don't feel like religion is "under represented on secular TV" – I'm not even sure why we'd still call TV secular, given the increasingly comfortable presence of religion on network and cable programming. Even on shows in which religion is not a major thematic, "faith" is usually represented – just ask President Bartlett, Harriet from "Studio 60" or Ned Flanders. From a genre perspective, however, I'd argue for three common forms of religious-themed programming.<sup>1</sup> Firstly, there is the religious family show, i.e. "7<sup>th</sup> Heaven" (the longest running family drama in TV history). Secondly, there is Jesus Christ, or Christ substitute, as magic hero. "Touched by an Angel" is probably the most successful version, while "John from Cincinnati," "Carnivale" and "Eli Stone" are more recent examples. "The Book of Daniel," although a total failure, is memorable for its weird combination of the family and magic hero forms.

The third kind, and the one I primarily want to discuss, is the non-believer vs. believer narrative. Perhaps the newest form, and in some ways the most interesting, it can attach itself to any genre – whether fantastical or procedural. All you need is to pour "The X-Files"'s Scully/Mulder dialectic mix into a bowl and add holy water. Thus, on Fox's "Bones", Dr. Temperance Brennan, a forensic anthropologist, is the atheist (what once was the more secular "skeptic") to FBI Special Agent Booth's practicing Catholic. Dr. House regularly pits his atheism against his patients' religious beliefs – House looks for medical answers while the patient assumes, and the promo suggests, that the diagnosis is ... "Possession," etc. But probably most clearly and consistently, there is the central conflict on "Lost" between Jack the empiricist and Locke the man of faith ("Lost" also has more traditionally defined Christians like Mr. Eko or Charlie Pace, but Locke is the biggest proponent of faith, destiny and miracles).

The lesson, dare I say the parable, in all of these cases is that science = atheism = cynicism = arrogance = general unhappiness. Religious faith, on the other hand, is often represented as magical. The person of faith has more harmony, as well as more humility. He/she is often the one who might be able to lead the atheist out of the cold (but probably not this season). The atheist certainly needs saving, as he continues to look for answers in a whiskey bottle full of painkillers. Because of the simplified binary present in all of these dramas, the phrase "The truth is out there" continues to linger for its television audience, like some kind of X-Files hangover. However, that "truth" has become more overtly about the superiority of religion over science, rather than the more abstract belief in the unknown vs. what's provable fact. It's not necessarily that faith is the right course (Dr. House is certainly right more often than his seemingly stigmatic patient), but faith is nevertheless represented as a "lack." This would seem to mirror the past eight years of presidential policy/philosophy as well, with a bizarre dismissal of the foreign policy "realists" and the "science community." It is with that comparison in mind, that I pose one more genre-based hypothetical. If the Westerns' well-established reliance on ideological antinomies like wilderness vs. civilization and individual vs. community controlled the national narrative for much of the prior century, are those terms being elevated to a more spiritual, but similarly themed plane, in which the individual is the atheist person of science who needs be brought into the flock for the good of the community? "House! House! Come back, House!"

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<sup>1</sup> There's actually a fourth, the Variety Show (The Johnny Cash TV Show being my favorite example) but it's a seemingly dead genre, at least in terms of a weekly series.