

Religion and/on American Television

“From Heartland to Quality: A Historical Trajectory of Religious Dramas on American TV”
Charlotte E. Howell, *Boston University*

When I posed this question for Flow, I chose to emphasize the current American television landscape because of the sheer abundance afforded by Peak TV: with hundreds of new scripted shows created each year and the glut of distribution channels looking to make a name for themselves, religion seems to have suddenly become an acceptable aspect of dramatic content. Following almost two decades of wider cultural discourse that Hollywood productions (and producers) avoided or even disparaged religion, the current boom in religious programming has been gaining attention. In Austin, the ATX TV Festival had a panel about it. Journalists are taking notice; Alyssa Rosenberg wrote in 2015, “If any year should give the lie to the idea that pop culture is hostile to religion in general or Christianity in particular, it’s 2015. I can’t think of a year that did more to present Christianity (and occasionally Judaism) as a force for genuine heroism.”¹ Her examples to support that claim focused on television: *Jane The Virgin* (CW, 2014-), *Transparent* (Amazon, 2014-), and *The Americans* (FX, 2013-). And yet, running through many of these journalistic and industry articulations of the current moment is the assumption that Hollywood is *de facto* resistant to religion and it is only during the last few years of unprecedented content possibilities that ideology is changing. In this response, I hope to articulate the historical trajectory that the popular culture and trade attention often ignores. To understand the current boom in religion on television dramas, we must return to the 1990s.

Twenty years ago, *7th Heaven* (WB, 1996-2007), a drama about a reverend’s family, premiered on the fledgling WB netlet and would become highest rated program on the channel from 1998-2006. Its premiere occurred two years after a drama about guardian angels premiered on CBS: *Touched by an Angel* (1994-2003), which drew enough viewers to regularly place it in the top 10 ratings from 1996-2000. Both shows were unabashedly Christian, and both shows were popular and successful in the late 1990s. Both shows also gained reputations for being [corny](#), [preachy](#), the kind of shows your aunt or grandma likes, and decidedly not for upscale, urban, and young audiences. Justified or not, those two shows became the assumed definition of “religious” television among television creatives. For another project, I interviewed approximately two dozen creatives working on television dramas that featured religious narratives, and most of them avoided the term “religious” or “religion” in favor of “spirituality” or “mythology” and a variety of other distancing strategies. In public interviews with journalists, the fear and hesitation regarding acknowledging religion within their show persisted, although occasionally recently it is only used as an example of [how a creative didn’t let that fear](#) keep them from telling the story they needed to tell. The foundation for the current era emerged from the ossification of 1990s shows like *Touched by an Angel* and *7th Heaven* as epitomes of religious dramas and their popularity during a time when heartland audiences were still a—if not the—dominant target for mainstream television.² These shows and their middlebrow appeal became the frame by which television producers, marketers, and executives understood religion in relation to target audience profiles. As post-network-era practices and culture-war polarization pushed the heartland audience to the side of the television industry’s discursive consideration and upscale audiences became more and more central, acknowledging religion as part of dramatic content became *outré*. Religion, it was thought by many, would alienate an upscale audience that was perceived to be young, educated, coastal, and secular.

In the intervening twenty years, this perception of religion in relation to upscale audiences and the television shows increasingly aimed at them has experienced moments of rupture, small shifts in acceptability, and increased experimentation. This all led to a culminating shift around 2015, coinciding with Peak TV and the variety of industrial changes wrought by the rise of streaming television. Edgy approaches to religion are beginning to appear across the television landscape without shying away from their use of religion: some, like *Hand of God* (Amazon, 2014-) and *Preacher* (AMC, 2016-) using religion as part of its edgy packaging, presenting it as part of a corrupt system; others, like *Greenleaf* (OWN, 2016-) using religion as a part of life and setting for edgy relationship drama. Regardless of the strategy, I would argue that the dramas airing as part of this religious programming boom are reacting—consciously or not—to *Touched by an Angel*, *7th Heaven* and the long reach of their late-1990s success.

¹ Alyssa Rosenberg, “It’s Time to Get over the Idea That Pop Culture and Religion Don’t Mix,” *The Washington Post*, December 23, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2015/12/23/its-time-to-get-over-the-idea-that-pop-culture-and-religion-dont-mix/?utm_term=.47f1ba53a70c.

² For more about heartland audiences and TV, see: Victoria E. Johnson, “Welcome Home?: CBS, PAX-TV, and ‘Heartland’ Values in a Neo-Network Era,” *Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal Of Film & Television*, no. 46 (Fall 2000): 40–55; Victoria E. Johnson, “The Persistence of Geographic Myth in a Convergent Media Era,” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 38, no. 2 (June 2010): 58–65; Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (NYU Press, 2008).