

## **Religion and/on American Television**

“Blending the Sacred & the Secular”

Danielle E. Williams, *Georgia Gwinnett College*

The expansion of religious narratives on prime time television is the result of the increase of Christianity within popular culture. The Christian media industry has gone from a niche market to one with successful mainstream appeal. Christian books, games, and films generate billions of dollars in revenue annually. Incorporating religious narratives into network and cable shows is a smart strategy because these shows provide entertainment (and ministry) to Christians as well as connect with viewers who are not religious. One strategy used by popular programs is biblical paraphrasing, in which characters will say familiar lines of scripture (e.g. “peace be still” or “brother’s keeper”). The non-religious viewers will think that it is just a common phrase or saying whereas the religious viewers will make the religious/spiritual connection with the phrase. Biblical paraphrasing allows a program to connect with both groups. Also, certain religious themes have “crossover” appeal; incorporating themes and messages about “forgiveness” can appeal to both religious and non-religious viewers.

The sacred-secular balance is a smart strategy. Shows that incorporate elements of Christianity entertain and minister to Christians as well as reach out to non-religious viewers with their use of religious signifiers such as prayer, faith, and forgiveness. For example, Tyler Perry is a Christian and incorporates Christianity and religious themes into his works. His works appeal to “urban faith-based” audiences. Even though African Americans are more religious than any other demographic in the U.S., they have been mostly ignored by Hollywood. Perry’s plays, films, and television shows serve this overlooked demographic. His primary audience is African American women, but to maintain his level of success he has expanded his audience by including Caucasian and Hispanic actors and actresses into his works. Through the use of

Christian identification markers such as storylines that emphasize the importance of religion and faith as well as the inclusion of gospel music and hymns in all of his works, he has created a brand of “faith, family, and friends,” which has resulted in Perry building a \$2-billion-dollar empire.

Perry’s show *The Haves and the Have Nots* (OWN) is a good example of blending the sacred and the secular. As OWN’s first scripted program, the hour-long series focuses on two wealthy families and one working-class family in Savannah, Georgia. Even though the characters are lying, cheating, blackmailing, swearing, and scheming, he is able to incorporate messages about God and the power of faith in every episode. The show balances the sacred and the secular to appeal to Perry’s faithful fans and his non-religious viewers. Furthermore, *THATHN* and other Perry shows helped OWN double its viewership and make a profit. OWN is now the number one cable channel for African American women and *THATHN* is one of OWN’s most popular shows. OWN is continuing the sacred-secular strategy; in June 2016, the cable channel debuted its third hour-long drama *Greenleaf*. The Greenleaf family runs Calvary Fellowship World Ministries, a megachurch in Memphis, Tennessee. The Greenleafs are not perfect Christians; they also deal with issues of infidelity, abuse, and family secrets. *Greenleaf* has performed well for OWN; the series’ first episode replaced Perry’s *If Loving You Is Wrong*, as the channel’s highest rated debut. Moreover, the show already has been renewed for a second season.

Examining how religion is used on television is important because it has the potential to educate as well as entertain; viewers are exposed to different religious ideas and perspectives. The most challenging aspect of examining religion in media is defining what makes a text “religious,” “Christian,” “Jewish,” etc. These shows should be examined along with evangelical

productions for how they present religious narratives visually through religious symbols (e.g. cross/crucifix) and rituals (e.g. prayer, communion) as well as through characters talking about their faith and beliefs. These texts should also be examined for how they balance the sacred and the secular in their appeal to religious and non-religious viewers. Another area to explore is how they incorporate religion and/or religious themes into “non-religious” settings (e.g. *Lucifer* takes places in Los Angeles, *Supernatural* in Kansas/Midwest, *The Real O’Neals* in a Chicago suburb, etc.).