

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

“From *Jane the Virgin* to Catholic TV: Religion Across the Channel Guide”

Kayti Lausch, *University of Michigan*

In this paper, I aim to contextualize our understanding of series with religious narratives within a broader consideration of religion’s place on television. I want to encourage specificity in how we think and talk about “religion,” and delineate between programming made for religious audiences, programming made for secular audiences, and the shows in between. Finally, I want to draw attention to the relationship between “family” or “family friendly” programming and religious programming.

It is important first to contextualize the current proliferation of religious narratives within the larger boom in television production. As many critics and pundits have noted at the last few upfronts, there has been a staggering amount television produced in the last decade. With this dramatic increase in programming, there are naturally more programs that feature religious elements. That said, I wouldn’t categorize any of the programs listed in this question as “religious” programs. I don’t say this to be cheeky or counterproductive; instead I want to delineate between programs designed for secular or “mainstream” audiences and those designed for religious audiences. “Religion” can mean many things, and the religious elements that are present in *Supernatural* or *Sleepy Hollow* vary greatly from those present in family-centric dramas or reality shows. Religion is also deployed in a variety of different contexts, and with different goals. None of the series listed in this question are pitched specifically to religious audiences. While religious elements inform the narrative, they do not inform the marketing or the networks’ vision of their target audience. There are programs that blur those distinctions, but programs like *Jane the Virgin* or *Homeland*, which include their characters’ relationship to religion, do not take as their

primary aim an attempt to convey a religious message. I therefore wouldn't label them as "religious" shows. Shows like *Touched by an Angel*, *Veggie Tales*, or *Praise the Lord* are much more didactic in their approach, address a religious audience specifically, and are/were therefore marketed differently.

I focus on marketing here because it can tell us a lot about who a program's audience is imagined to be, and how its producers and their network executives negotiate its relationship to capitalism and commercialism. There are exceptions of course (including several ostensibly non-profit religious channels), but most channels and their programs are designed to make money. For mainstream shows like those listed in this roundtable's question, they aim to amass a large audience, preferably of advertiser-friendly demographics. For religious programs, the goal is somewhat different. While they certainly want to attract large audiences, they also have a spiritual goal in mind. The producers of *Touched by an Angel*, for example, didn't just want to make money; they wanted to provide a space for families to watch a show that spoke openly about Christianity.

There is a big difference between *Jane the Virgin* and the programs on Catholic TV. Television studies has significantly neglected the question of religion in general, but it has been especially reluctant to engage with programs on religious channels. *The 700 Club* has attracted plenty of attention from religious scholars, but a paltry amount from television studies. I want to argue here that it is critical to think about all of the programs across the channel guide, and not just those that are already on our radar. It can be easy to ignore the religious networks, but what is happening on those channels is important. Historically, some of those channels have gone "commercial," and either sold their operations to larger media companies or shifted their focus from religious to "family friendly" programming. I

want to highlight this relationship between the religious and the family friendly, because it structures how we define “family’ programming, even on mainstream networks. Most “family” channels on American television began as religious channels, including The Family Channel/Fox Family/ABC Family, UP (which was once the Gospel Music Channel), and The Inspiration Network (now INSP). This connection between “family” and religion deserves further exploration, as their definitions of “family” are often rooted, at least initially, in Christian ideals. The ambiguity of the category of family shows is key to any conversation about religious television, and I look forward to a lively and productive roundtable.