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SEARCHING FOR GOD: PORTRAYALS OF RELIGION ON TELEVISION

by

Alicia Suzanne Vermeer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Master of Arts degree in Religious Studies
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2014

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Kristy Nabhan-Warren

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Alicia Suzanne Vermeer

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been much speculation and debate over the religiosity of youth and young adults in contemporary American society. Online media is flooded with articles like “More Young People are Moving Away from Religion, But Why?”¹ “Young Americans Losing Their Religion,”² and “Religion Declines as American Youth explore non-spiritual solutions to problems.”³ All of these articles point to the decline of religious affiliation and participation of American youth and young adults. Social scientists now categorize this demographic as “nones,” or young Americans who identify as having no religious affiliation. The Pew Research Center has released staggering statistics including, “one-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling,” and, “in the last five years alone, the unaffiliated have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults.”⁴ These types of statistics seem to indicate that the millennial generation is secularizing at an alarming rate.

However, this “rise of the nones,” is more complicated than youth simply abandoning religion. A further analysis on the religiosity of youth and young adults,

Finds that many of the country’s 46 million unaffiliated adults are religious or spiritual in some way. Two-thirds of them say they believe in God (68%). More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious” (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day. In addition, most religiously unaffiliated Americans think that

¹ NPR Staff, “More People are Moving Away from Religion, But Why?” NPR, 15 Jan 2013. <http://www.npr.org/2013/01/15/169342349/more-young-people-are-moving-away-from-religion-but-why>.

² Dan Harris, “Young Americans Losing Their Religion,” ABC News, 6 May 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=7513343>.

³ Kristen Wilkerson, “Religion Declines as American Youth explore non-spiritual solutions to problems,” Examiner, 16 December 2012, <http://www.examiner.com/article/religion-declines-as-american-youth-explore-non-spiritual-solutions-to-problems>.

⁴ Pew Research Center, “Nones on the Rise,” Pew Research Forum, 9 October 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

churches and other religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor.⁵

Thus, it is not that youth and young adults have become disinterested in religion, but rather their religiosity appears different from previous generations. Young people are not abandoning faith, spirituality, and religion altogether, but rather are dissatisfied with the Church as an institution because they feel religious organizations are, “too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics.”⁶ Robert Putnam of Harvard University and David Campbell of Notre Dame also suggest in their recent book, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, “[r]eligiosity and conservative politics became increasingly aligned, and abortion and gay rights became emblematic of the emergent culture wars.” The result was that many young Americans came to view religion as “judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political.”⁷

Scholars like Kendra Creasy Dean are concerned about this new religiosity, particularly among teenagers. In her recent book, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, she claims that,

The National Study of Youth and Religion reveals a theological fault line running underneath American churches: an adherence to a do-good, feel-good spirituality that has little to do with the Triune God of Christian tradition and even less to do with loving Jesus Christ enough to follow him into the world. It is hard to read the data from the NSYR without the impression that many American congregations are “almost Christian”--but perhaps not fully, at least not in terms of theology or practice.⁸

Dean labels this “feel-good spirituality” as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism; the guiding principles for which include: a God exists who created and orders the world and watches

⁵ Pew Research Center, “Nones on the Rise.”

⁶ Pew Research Center, “Nones on the Rise.”

⁷ Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 120-121.

⁸ Kendra Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

over life on earth; God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions; the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself; God is not involved in my life except when needed to resolve a problem; and good people go to heaven when they die.⁹ Regardless of whether one views this change in religiosity as negative or positive (Dean clearly views them as negative), it is undeniable that youth and young adults are moving away from the traditional, dogmatic religion of previous generations.

However, this change in religiosity does not necessarily indicate that religion is no long important to the millennial generation, as suggested by the label of “nones,” nor is it sign that religious belief and practice has become shallow, as suggested by the label of “Moral Therapeutic Deism.” This generation does take religion seriously, and are asking deep questions. In fact, the conclusion that religion has become too politicized demonstrates that youth and emerging adults are trying to reconcile religion in modern world. Both labels underestimate the depth and breadth of the questions that young people are asking, and frankly do not give them enough credit. Thus, perhaps a better term to describe this generation is not “nones,” or “Moral Therapeutic Deists,” but rather as “Seekers.”¹⁰ They are relentlessly seeking the answers to large existential questions. Does God exist? If God exists, how do we explain all of the horrible things that have happened in modern history? Is Christianity the one true religion or is there validity in other religions? What do we do with all of the atrocities that have happened because of, or in, the church? And even though contemporary youth and emerging adults are leaving the church or exploring other avenues to address these questions, does not mean that they are abandoning religion completely. They are seeking and searching for meaning, as well as exploring other avenues outside of Church to answer these questions.

⁹ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 14.

¹⁰ This terminology of “Seekers” has been used to describe other generations as well. For example Religious Studies scholar, Wade Clark Roof, used the term Seekers to describe the baby boomer generation in his 1993 book, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*.

This different religiosity of the millennial generation not only comes in the form of religious affiliation and practice, but also the types of media that are used to express religiosity. Television has become a highly influential platform for both the presentation and discussion of religious issues that matter to this younger generation of Americans. It is difficult to overstate the pervasiveness of television in contemporary American society. It is now common knowledge that with 99% of American households possessing television sets, on any given day more American view television than listen to radio or read a newspaper. Despite the fact that nearly all Americans own a television, the rise of new technology and media may lead some to believe that television has become outdated.¹¹ However, in our era of convergence among different technologies and cultural forms, television is more present than ever. As Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell encouragingly state in the introduction of their collected volume, *How to Watch Television*, “while new technologies might enable some to claim that they do not watch television, we believe that people who say they don’t watch TV are either lying or deluding themselves. TV is everywhere in our culture and on many different screens, as we often watch television programs on our computers, or play videogames on our televisions.”¹² Even as media continues to be reconfigured in the digital era, television is still America’s dominant mass medium, impacting nearly everyone.

Thus, television is essential to the production of American cultural narratives that shape opinion on issues ranging from corruption, sexuality, and now, in recent years, religion and God. While portrayals of religion in television may have once been limited to televangelism, discussion of religion, identity, and destiny have become central themes in many programs featured on primetime television. Until recently, mainstream network

¹¹ In fact, I have several conversations with concerned faculty, grad students, friends, and family over the past year about studying television as it is losing influence with the rise of “new media.”

¹² Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, *How to Watch Television*, (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 5.

broadcasting was an area of television that was known for shying away from overt religious themes. In short, this was a “secular” realm.¹³ This dissemination of religious issues to primetime television is generally dated to the beginning of the twenty-first century and more precisely the tragic events that took place on September 11, 2001. Diane Winston explains that, “The confluence of George Bush’s presidency (i.e., the candidate who named Jesus Christ as his favorite political philosopher) and the political ascendancy of the Religious Right; the coalescence and deployment of political Islam; and growing concerns about climate change begat an acute apocalyptic sensibility among true believers and heightened sense of anxiety among everyone else.”¹⁴ These fears were expressed through television, and with the expansion of cable and premium options, the number of shows exploring existential issues of morality and identity greatly increased. While the conventions of primetime dramas do not suit dramatic instances of conversion, salvation, or redemption; its intimacy and familiarity allow characters to develop over time. This character development allows for the raising of religious issues, asking ethical questions, and experiencing spiritual insights in the course of our ongoing relationship with them.

The goal of this thesis is to analyze exactly how religion is portrayed on television, and how youth and emerging adult (ages 18-32) audiences connect and engage with the religious issues. It will attempt to illuminate broad themes and trends of religiosity of young Americans through a series of case studies; including *Supernatural*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Joan of Arcadia*. The research of these case studies is threefold. The first is a textual analysis of the portrayal of religion on the show; and the reasons the creator(s), producer(s), and writer(s) chose to portray religion in that way. The second, is a genre analysis of each case study to illuminate which television genres provide a platform

¹³ Michael Suman, “Do We Really Need More Religion on Fiction Television?” in *Religion and Prime Time Television*, ed. Michael Suman, (Westport: Praeger Press, 1997), 69.

¹⁴ Diane Winston, ed. *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 1.

where youth and young adults are comfortable discussing religion and expressing their heightened social anxieties. It is my argument that the apocalypse genre provides the best platform for youth and young adults to discuss and question issues of religion. This is because it allows young people to discuss their fears and anxieties in a way that is less intimidating, because they are able to work out their questions in a way that does not directly correlate to their society. This is how *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica* successfully utilized the apocalypse genre, and both had young audiences. *Joan of Arcadia* was a teen soap opera/serial drama¹⁵ that used a realism narrative with more explicit, traditional religious themes, and was prematurely cancelled after two seasons due to its inability to captivate a young demographic. It was precisely because the realism narrative that this genre provided both did not capture the religious imaginations of younger audiences, but also because the correlation to contemporary society was too strong. The last mode of analysis, and equally important step, is the audience responses to the shows and their religiously themed story lines.

Theoretical Framework

While more attention has been paid in the last two decades to some media-religion spheres including cyber-churches, online missionaries, mega-churches, televangelism, and religious radio; scholarship on religion in primetime television continues to be under-studied, especially when considering how influential television is in contemporary society. As Daniel Stout states in the preface of his recently published book, *Media and Religion: Foundations of an Emerging Field*, “media play a central role in contemporary religion, and conversely, religion is essential to understanding media’s

¹⁵ This teen soap opera/serial drama combination genre is my own terminology. When I began this project, I was initially classifying *Joan of Arcadia* as a soap opera. Throughout the course of my research, it became clear that while the show does share many characteristics of soap operas, some scholars like Jason Mittell, argue against classifying prime-time serial dramas with soap operas. Thus, I decided to combine the two for the genre analysis portion of that chapter.

place in society.”¹⁶ The fact that religion has been largely overlooked in media studies is extremely problematic, because it has resulted in inadequate models of mass communication and insufficient theorizing about how individuals experience both media and religion today. Thus, the theoretical framework for this project will be diverse and interdisciplinary, drawing from scholars in Religious Studies, Media Studies, Communication Studies, and Sociology.

John Fiske provides a good working definition of television studies in his monumental book *Television Culture*. He states that television is, “a bearer/provoker of meanings and pleasures, and of culture as the generation and circulation of this variety of meanings and pleasures within society. Television-as-culture is a crucial part of the social dynamics by which the social structure maintains itself in a constant process of production and reproduction: meanings, popular pleasures, and their circulation are therefore part and parcel of this social structure.”¹⁷ Essentially, Fiske is arguing that television shows have a variety of potential meanings and that networks and producers attempt to control this meaningfulness into a more singular and preferred meaning that fits into the dominant ideology of society. He explains that television consists of a series of codes or system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared amongst members of a culture. These rules are also used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture. Fiske states that, “Codes are links between producers, texts, and audiences and are the agents of intertextuality through which texts interrelate in a network of meanings that constitutes our cultural world.”¹⁸ It is because these codes are made up of producers, texts, and audiences that the analysis of the case studies for this project also encompasses these three things.

¹⁶ Daniel Stout, *Media and Religion: Foundations of an Emerging Field*, (Florence, KY: Routledge, 2012), x.

¹⁷ John Fiske, *Television Culture* 2nd edition, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1.

¹⁸ Fiske, *Television Culture*, 4.

In addition to the analysis of these codes, this project also includes a genre analysis of each show. Television scholar, Jason Mittell, explains that “industries use genres to produce programs, to define brands and identities, and to target audiences through scheduling. Genres help audiences organize fan practices, guide personal preferences, and frame everyday conversations and viewing practices.”¹⁹ More specifically, television genre is best understood as a process of categorization that is not found within media texts, but rather operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts. Thus, genres can be seen as key ways that our media experiences are classified and organized into categories that have specific links to particular concepts like cultural value, assumed audience, and social function. Media scholar, Jane Feuer, also emphasizes that “the concept of genre can bring into play (1) the system of production, (2) structural analysis of the text, and (3) the reception process with the audience conceived as an interpretive community—that is, a social grouping whose similarities cause them to interpret texts the same way, as opposed to completely individual interpretations.”²⁰ For the purposes of this project, this means that the producers of *Supernatural*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Joan of Arcadia* (and any religion-based program that for youth and young adults), need to frame the theological plotlines in a genre that the interpretive community can connect and relate to. *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica* prove that the apocalypse genre, as a subfield for either fantasy or science fiction, provides this platform in a way that the teen soap opera/serial drama of *Joan of Arcadia* was not.

Feuer explains that there are three approaches to genre analysis: aesthetic, ritual, and ideological. The aesthetic approach includes all attempts to define genre in terms of a system of conventions that permits artistic expression, especially involving individual

¹⁹ Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), xi-xii.

²⁰ Jane Feuer, “Genre Study and Television,” in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, edited by Robert C. Allen, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 144.

authorship. This approach also includes attempts to assess whether an individual work fulfills or transcends its genre.²¹ The ritual approach sees genre as an exchange between industry and audience, an exchange through which a culture speaks to itself. This approach focuses on the negotiation of shared beliefs and values and helps to maintain and rejuvenate the social order as well as assisting it in adapting to change.²² This project will use the third form of genre analysis, the ideological approach. The ideological approach which, “views genre as an instrument of control. At the industrial level, genres assure the advertisers of an audience for their messages. At the textual level, genres are ideological insofar as they serve to reproduce the dominant ideology of the capitalist system. The genre positions the interpretive community in such a way as to naturalize the dominant ideologies expressed in the text.”²³

Here, Feuer is arguing that genres thus are not neutral categories, but rather ideological constructs that provide and enforce a pre-reading. Thus the driving question in this type of genre analysis is why is this show presented in this particular way at this particular time? *Supernatural*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Joan of Arcadia* all debuted in the early 2000s, and their religiously themed story-lines were likely made possible by the change in media and society after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Each show also presents an extremely humanist view of God and religion in order to appeal to the religiosity of many young Americans. It is the apocalypse genre though, that allowed for the success of *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica* because it not only provided a platform to discuss the religious, political, and social anxieties that arose in the wake of 9/11, but it was a platform that did not directly correlate with “real” society. This makes the discussion of these issues less scary frightening for youth and emerging adults because they can work out these fears when the stakes are lower. The realism of *Joan of*

²¹ Feuer, “Genre Study and Television, 145.

²² Feuer, “Genre Study and Television, 145.

²³ Feuer, “Genre Study and Television, 145.

Arcadia did not appeal to a younger audience for two reasons: first because the anthropomorphized God in the show was too reminiscent of the traditional/dogmatic religion that young people are desperately trying to get away from; and second because a show with a realist narrative is a more intimidating platform to discuss these fears and anxieties because of the strong correlation to contemporary society.

Mittell also argues that genre analysis continues to be important in television studies because, “through the prevalence of generic mixing and niche segmentation, genres may be even more important today than in previous television eras.”²⁴ Mittell is pushing back against the notion that because genre analysis has been in practice for so long, that new shows can simply be placed into an existing genre and prearranged framework for analysis. Because of generic mixing and niche segmentation, genre analysis is a continuous process. He explains that, “one of the great lessons of poststructuralism is to question the categories that seem to be natural and assumed. Genre definitions are no more natural than the texts that they seem to categorize.”²⁵ Genres are cultural practices making them subject to continuous change and redefinition. For example, as already alluded to in this project, *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica* both fall into the apocalypse genre. Yet, the apocalypse genre can be a subgenre to the larger categories of both fantasy and science fiction. Therefore, the genre analysis of *Supernatural* as apocalypse genre will be different than *Supernatural* as simply fantasy genre.

While this project is largely grounded in media theory, a Religious Studies theoretical framework is also necessary to interpret how both the viewing practices of youth and emerging adults as well as the religious content of the shows. The act of watching television, aligns with the theory of “practice” in Religious Studies scholarship. Like much of the common terminology used in Religious Studies, “practice” is an

²⁴ Mittell, *Genre and Television*, xiii.

²⁵ Mittell, *Genre and Television*, 1.

ambiguous notion without a clear definition. Courtney Bender explains the malleability of definition of practice and its number of meanings ranging from: signaling interest in things that religious people do, signaling a theoretical and conceptual turn to religion, or it can also engage in debates on ethical and political impacts.²⁶ Thus, if the definition of practice, or practicing religion, is already wide and varied; then it can also be applied to an activity such as watching television. Bender is advocating for a shift that redirects attention from the things or objects that appear to be self-evidently “religious,” and turn it instead toward the processes that *make* certain things (activities, ideas, institutions, etc.) recognizably religious.²⁷ So while watching television may not be self-evidently “religious,” perhaps the act of watching television could be a process of “making” a recognizably religious activity.

Just as watching television falls under the category or “practice,” television series can be considered “texts” (after all, the first part of the methodological approach for this project is a textual analysis). Anne Blackburn classifies religious texts in terms of material culture. She explains that religious texts are, “often model styles of human action and character that inform the imagination, action, and interpretation of those who read, see, or hear them.”²⁸ This is precisely the function of television in contemporary society, and is especially true of the four series discussed in this essay. Each create a model for society, whether literal or dystopic, and comment on human action and character. These texts then serve as the foundation for a textual community which consists of those, “who participate in shared practices of reading, writing, listening, interpretation, and performance, with reference to the same body of texts.”²⁹ This textual

²⁶ Courtney Bender, “Practicing Religions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert Orsi, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012), 273.

²⁷ Bender, “Practicing Religion,” 275.

²⁸ Anne M. Blackburn, “The text and the world,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert Orsi, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012), 159.

²⁹ Blackburn, “The text and the world,” 164.

community is especially prevalent in the online communities that form around specific television series. Thus, with the frameworks provided by Blackburn and Bender, television is an example both of practice and text for scholar of Religious Studies.

Just as Blackburn views text as material culture, Matthew Engelke also writes about material religion and material culture, and the need to frame materiality in terms of media. He claims,

Scholars of religion have long paid attention to media in the commonly understood sense of a particular technology of communication. Increasingly, however, religious media studies are taking account of media in their wider sense as ‘middle ground’: something through which something else is communicated, presented, made known—whether that something is a book or a pair of eyes.³⁰

In this case, the “something that is being communicated” is through the medium of television. Until the turn of the millennium, religion was rarely discussed, or even featured, on primetime television. However, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 revolutionized the way that religion, ethics, and morality were presented on television. It is clear that there’s a profound hunger for people to connect through art, stories, and technology that feel directly relevant to the challenges of the modern day. Television became a medium to bring these ultimate questions into the home, and opened a dialogue among the viewers.

Thus, it is in this “middle ground,” between media and religion that this project rests. Engelke explains that religion and media are, “two sides of the same coin,” and that you cannot have one without the other.³¹ Television has become one form of religious expression in contemporary society, as producers are able to use programs as a platform for discussing these deep religious and existential issues. *Joan of Arcadia* attempted to tackle the big issues including the nature of good and evil, why bad things

³⁰ Matthew Engelke, “Material religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert Orsi, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012), 227-28.

³¹ Engelke, “Material religion,” 228.

happen to good people, and where was God in all of this suffering; by providing a literal explanation of how God works through humanity to influence the world. *Supernatural* takes a humanist approach to the book of Revelation as two brothers attempt to stop the Apocalypse that is desired by both angels and demons. *Battlestar Galactica* invites viewers to adopt a critical and self-reflective frame toward our post-9/11 world. Through the struggle between the polytheistic humans and the monotheistic Cylons (human-made robots who look exactly like humans), the audience is invited to explore issues of religious fanaticism, global politics, terrorism, and what it means to be human. These shows do not attempt to provide an answer to these troubling questions. It is the process of asking the questions and beginning the dialogue that is important. All of these shows provide viewers with a vocabulary and thus with a set of symbolic resources for managing their social anxieties. It is precisely this vocabulary and platform to discuss these prevalent issues in contemporary society that makes television shows such fruitful modes of inquiry for scholars.

Methodology

As previously stated, this thesis will use a variety of methods in order to fully understand the broader implication of what television can illuminate about the nature of religion in America. Each chapter will do a complete textual, genre, and audience analysis of one of the three shows chosen as case studies. These specific programs were chosen because they all are existential journeys where the protagonist(s) are searching for God or trying to understand God's divine plan. Almost all television series on air today will address religion, even if it is just one episode. However, it is important for this project to choose shows where religion is a foundational element of the show in order to effectively analyze how audiences are responding to religion. *Battlestar Galactica* and *Supernatural* were chosen because they have both experienced huge success, particularly

with the young audience demographic. *Joan of Arcadia* was chosen, because despite critical acclaim, it was prematurely cancelled because it did not capture the young demographic that the network wanted. Thus, there is something about both *Battlestar Galactica* and *Supernatural* that has deeply resonated with audiences in a way that *Joan of Arcadia* was not able to accomplish. After all, *Supernatural* was just renewed for its tenth season, and *Battlestar Galactica* ran for four seasons and sparked two spin-off series.

In order to understand what resonates with audiences, a textual analysis of how religion is portrayed in each series is necessary. Textual analysis is shared approach that assumes there is something to be discovered by carefully examining a cultural work, or text. Because of the breadth of material that a television show provides, only one or two episodes of each show will be used for the textual analysis. The two episodes chosen for *Supernatural* the sixteenth episode of the fifth season entitled “Dark Side of the Moon,” and finale of season five entitled “Swan Song.” These two episodes were chosen because they provide the foundational theology about God in the series. In the second chapter about *Battlestar Galactica* the two-part miniseries that serves as the show’s pilot will be the material for the textual analysis. The pilot episode will be the point of analysis for the third chapter on *Joan of Arcadia*. Through textual analysis, or the, “close watching” of a program, it becomes possible to make a broader argument about television and its relation to other cultural forces, ranging from representation of particular identities to themes of religion and spirituality. The goal of such textual analysis is to connect the program to its broader contexts, and make an argument about the text’s cultural significance.³²

The second analysis completed on each of the case studies is a genre analysis. *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica* both successfully use the apocalypse genre to frame the presentation of religion in the series, with *Supernatural* leaning towards a

³² Thompson and Mittell, *How to Read Television*, 4.

fantasy genre and *Battlestar Galactica* leaning more in a science-fiction genre. *Joan of Arcadia* is a teen soap opera/serial drama that uses a realism narrative to explore Joan's relationship with God. Through a synthesis of existing scholarship on genre with specific details about each show, the goal is to confirm why the apocalypse genre provides the best platform for discussions among religion with a young audience.

After completing a textual and genre analysis of how religion is portrayed in each series, it is then possible to analyze how audiences respond to these depictions. This will primarily be executed through a study of online communities and ancillary content dedicated to each series. Located on television series' official website, ancillary content models consist of webisodes, webcomics, episodic podcasts, blogs/vlogs, alternate reality games (ARGs), and a range of other content aimed at fans. *Battlestar Galactica* and *Supernatural* both have very active online communities, where viewers participate both in the ancillary content as well as discussion forums to engage with the themes and questions of the shows. Thus, these virtual communities are a fruitful source for analyzing how audiences are responding to the portrayal of religion. This type of online involvement was very minimal for *Joan of Arcadia*, which may be one reason for its ultimate failure. Blogs, reviews, and interviews will also be used to gauge the audience reaction to each show and the religiously themed storylines.

The combination of textual, genre, and audience analysis will illuminate that the apocalypse genre provides the best frame to attract a younger demographic for religiously themed television. Perhaps more importantly, the analysis of each case study will also reveal the nature of the religiosity of the millennial generation. Again, rather than the negative connotations that come with labels like "nones" and "Moral Therapeutic Deists," a better description of this generation is that of "Seekers." While this study may not ease the panic that churches feel about young people leaving or no longer participating in religious institutions, perhaps it will be comforting to know that this change in belief and practice is not due to apathy. It is not that youth and emerging adults are disinterested in

religion, nor abandoning it altogether. They are expressing that their world is different from their parents and grandparents, and acknowledging that traditional doctrine and dogma is not something they can reconcile in their worldviews. They are still asking questions and seeking ultimate truths and answers, what is new is that it is no longer the church that is the sole platform to discuss these issues. Television has become one of these new platform to discuss religious issues and express social anxieties, as shown in the existential journeys of *Supernatural*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Joan of Arcadia*.

CHAPTER 2

SUPERNATURAL

Supernatural is an American television series created by Eric Kripke, which debuted on The WB network on September 13, 2005. Starring Jensen Ackles as Dean Winchester and Jared Padalecki as Sam Winchester, the show's first three seasons follows the two brothers as they hunt demons, ghosts, monsters and other figures of the supernatural. The show's fourth season begins to incorporate Christian mythology through the introduction of angels and apocalyptic story lines that include both Lucifer and the archangels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. Seasons four and five have now become known as the "Apocalypse Arc," in which Sam and Dean are aided by an angel named Castiel, and the three attempt to save humanity from the apocalypse, which, if allowed to occur, would make earth the battleground for the final struggle between angels and demons.

Supernatural has become an extremely popular television series, and has captivated its audience demographic of adults ages 18-34. The show was intended to be five seasons long, but due to its overwhelming popularity, it continued and has just been renewed for its tenth season. With the introduction of the "Apocalypse Arc," *Supernatural*'s average total viewers rose from 2.92 million in season three to 3.19 million viewers in season four.¹ Thus, this show is resonating with a popular audience; and the fact that it has continued the religious and mythological storylines² indicates that the viewers are willing to continue on this existential journey of good and evil with the Winchester brothers. Thus, the willingness of the writers and producers to create a show

¹ "Ratings," *Supernatural Wiki*, 13 January 2014, <http://supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Ratings>.

² After the popularity of the Apocalypse Arc, the show continued these religious story lines in later seasons. Season six follows a civil war in heaven that has occurred after Michael and Lucifer are both locked in hell in the finale of season five. In season seven, purgatory is opened and the Winchester brothers have to stop the monsters that have been released and are now causing havoc on earth. Seasons eight and nine detail how an angel named Metatron locks thousands of angels out of heaven, and the conflicts that occur when angels are now forced to live on earth with humans.

with deeply religious themes, and to form story lines that combine (and sometimes change altogether) traditional biblical doctrine with humanist themes; suggests that *Supernatural's* audience is not at all disinterested in religion. If that were the case, the writers would have given up these theologically driven story lines long ago. A textual, genre, and audience analysis of the "Apocalypse Arc" will explain why youth emerging adults are attracted to this type of portrayal of religion on television.

The Portrayal of Religion on *Supernatural*

Because the series is quite long (nine seasons each having at least twenty-two episodes), this chapter will focus on two key episodes that will serve as the analytical foundation for the show. The first is the sixteenth episode of the fifth season entitled, "Dark Side of the Moon," in which Sam and Dean discover that God is no longer in heaven and no one is sure of God's location. The second episode is the finale of season five entitled "Swan Song," which serves as the end of the Apocalypse arc. To show the significance of these particular episodes, it is necessary to provide a bit of background information about the Apocalypse arc that themes seasons four and five. Throughout the fourth season, Sam and Dean fight to stop the impending Apocalypse, a process that was initiated by the first demon ever created, Lillith. Legend dictates that once Lillith breaks the "66 seals" (special attachments made by God to secure Lucifer's cage in hell) then Lucifer would be released from hell and able to come to earth. The final episode of season four ends with the Winchesters' failure to stop the Apocalypse and Lucifer rising to earth. In the fifth season it is revealed that neither angels nor demons can come to earth unless they inhabit a willing human body. This includes Lucifer and the other archangels, and because they are much more powerful than other angels and demons, they need their predestined "perfect human vessel" in order to sustain life on earth for a long period of time. In a shocking twist, it is revealed that Sam is Lucifer's perfect vessel and Dean is Michael's perfect vessel. But even archangels need approval before they can

inhabit their vessel, thus, season five chronicles the brothers' resistance to becoming vessels for Michael and Lucifer, as they attempt to save humanity from the wrath of angels and demons.

The season five finale outlines the event of the final phase of the Apocalypse, which begins in Detroit where it has been prophesized that the final battle between Lucifer and Michael will occur. At this point, Lucifer has taken Sam as his vessel, and in an interesting piece of dialogue between Lucifer and Michael, Lucifer asks why they have to fight, and why they always have to do exactly what their father wants. "He made me like this!" Lucifer says, suggesting that perhaps God wants evil in the world. Michael refuses Lucifer's offer to stop the battle just as Dean, his mentor Bobby and Castiel arrive. Lucifer then proceeds to fight off Castiel and Bobby and just before he can kill Dean, Sam briefly regains control of his body long enough to pull the key to Hell out of his pocket, open the pit³, and start backing into it. Michael tries to pull him back to Earth to continue their fight, but instead Sam pulls Michael down with him into the pit and locks them both in.⁴

This episode has particularly fascinating theological implications, making it a fruitful source of inquiry for why youth and young adults are drawn to this portrayal of religion. After all, the story of Michael wrestling Lucifer in the Bible has been rewritten⁵, with both fighters consigned to Hell and humanity coming out victorious. Journalist and fan of the show Annalee Newitz claims that, "although the characters have never talked much about how their trials might be God's way of testing them, the whole Armageddon arc makes sense when cast in that light."⁶ It seems that everybody was being tested here:

³ The pit refers to the cage in hell that was designed by God for Lucifer. Sam is able to open the cage because throughout the season Sam and Dean acquire the rings of the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse, which are the keys to Lucifer's cage.

⁴ *Supernatural: The Fifth Season*, "Swan Song," episode 22, 2010 (originally aired May 13, 2010).

⁵ Revelation 12:7-13.

⁶ Annalee, Newitz, "'Supernatural' Finale Justifies our Love for an Absent God," *IO9*, 14 May 2010,

Lucifer, the angels, and humanity as represented by Sam and Dean, with the winner being “Team Free Will.”⁷ Newitz seems to think that only the characters that were willing to defy “destiny” and “God’s plan” are favored by God in the end. Lucifer and Michael, determined to act out their God-given roles no matter what, are hurled into the pit. Thus, it seems that God chose humanity as his champions on earth. While Newitz provides a thought-provoking analysis of the season’s climax, perhaps her argument needs to be slightly altered. After all, if God is no longer in heaven, and no one has seen God for millennia, perhaps stating that God favors Sam and Dean is inaccurate. However, it should be noted that even though God is absent throughout the series, Sam and Dean are constantly bombarded with fate and destiny, and their journey throughout the show is a continuous struggle against these forces. How there is destiny without God, is one of the many ambiguities of the series (however it is unclear if this is an intentional ambiguity or an oversight of the writers).

This idea of “Team Free Will” being able to overcome the forces of destiny was the exact message that the creator, Eric Kripke wanted to portray in the show. In an interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, Kripke explains that he created the theology of the show to be deeply humanist. In the article he states that his driving question for the series is,

Can the strength of family overcome destiny and fate, and can family save the world? If I had a worldview... it's one that's intensely humanistic. It's that the only thing that matters is family and personal connection, and that's the only thing that gives life meaning. Religion and gods and beliefs -- for me, it all comes down to your brother. And your brother might be the brother in your family, or it might be the guy next to you in the foxhole, it's about human connections.”⁸

accessed 3 March 2013, <http://io9.com/5539243/supernatural-finale-justifies-our-love-for-an-absent-god>.

⁷ Newitz, “‘Supernatural’ Finale Justifies our Love for an Absent God.”

⁸ Maureen Ryan, “‘It’s the fun Apocalypse’: Creator Eric Kripke talks ‘Supernatural,’” *Chicago Tribune*, 26 August 2009, accessed 3 May 2013, http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/entertainment_tv/2009/08/supernatural-season-5-eric-kripke-cw.html.

Thus, it is clear that Kripke's humanist view of religion has been woven into the fabric of the show, through the telling of two brothers that are able to defeat the forces of heaven and hell.

The most interesting theological plotline in *Supernatural* is the absence of God. Castiel explains that only the archangels have ever seen God. It is revealed in the episode, "Dark Side of the Moon," that at some point, God left Heaven, at which time Michael (the archangel) assumed command of the angels and ran Heaven and Earth for millennia. After such a long absence, the angels are divided on what has happened to God. Many still believe in God's existence; however some have come to the conclusion that God is dead, as this is the only explanation for the horrible things that have happened on Earth over the last hundred years and God's continuing silence. In the episode, Sam and Dean go to Heaven to seek out the angel Joshua, the caretaker of the Garden of Eden, because he is the only one that hears God speak. It is Joshua who tells the brothers that God is on earth, but that he does not know where he is or what he is doing. However, God no longer cares about the apocalypse, nor views it as his problem. He did confirm that God has intervened several times on behalf of Sam and Dean saying, "It's more than He's intervened in a long time, and now He's finished. And you won't be able to find Him" When Dean inquires why God refuses to stop the Apocalypse, and why he is willing to watch the world burn, Joshua only responds with an apology. Dean replies, "Forget it, just another dead-beat dad with a bunch of excuses right?"⁹ This episode has two complementary images of God: God as absent and God as dead-beat dad. This portrayal of God and religion aligns with both the genre of the series as well as dominant attitudes of American youth and emerging adults.

⁹ *Supernatural: The Complete Fifth Season*, "Dark Side of the Moon," episode 16, 2010 (originally aired April 1, 2010).

Supernatural genre analysis

This idea of the religious foundation of the show as a form of humanism is very intriguing. After all, as Charles Taylor states in *A Secular Age*, “disengagement from cosmos and God made exclusive humanism a possibility.”¹⁰ Thus, there is a fascinating tension in that the show is, in a way, re-enchanting the world through the supernatural, yet at the same time grounded in the type of humanism that came about in the post-enchanted world. Graham Ward explains that, “demythologization was the intellectual process of secularization just as what Weber termed *Entzauberung* or disenchantment was the technological process of secularization.”¹¹ Ward attributes both of these processes to liberalism as it was thought to bring about social salvation and redemption through the institutions of the secular state. Liberalism allied with the ever-increasing confidence of scientific reasoning “exposed” all forms of superstition, challenged all ignorances, and set in a process of radical demystification of the world.¹²

However, contained within the cultural logic of liberalism and secularity, was its own downfall. This is because, “it negotiated pluralism and difference on the basis of an essential metaphysical unity: the value of human life. Such humanism was far too frail a foundation.”¹³ Essentially catastrophic events such as genocide, world wars, and death camps placed the optimistic accounts of being human into question. This changing foundations of liberalism and the secular worldview is the transformation into post-secularism for Ward. Thus, one of the significant effects of post-secularism for understanding religion in postmodernity is the reversal of Weber’s disenchantment-by-technological advancement” thesis.¹⁴ This re-enchantment,

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 41.

¹¹ Ward, *True Religion*, 126.

¹² Ward, *True Religion*, 126.

¹³ Ward, *True Religion*, 127.

¹⁴ Ward, *True Religion*, 129.

Though effected and disseminated by contemporary technological breakthroughs, particularly in telecommunications—goes beyond the technological. Since the ‘slasher’ movies of the 1970s there has been a cultural reaffirmation of the gothic expressing itself on a number of social levels: the ‘goth’ look; the mass international consumption of the Harry Potter series; the fascination with the psychopath; and the lurid worlds of cybergames like *Doom*, *Crypt*, *Diablo* and *Warrior Kings*. The gothic reintroduces Gnosticism into the cultural imagination: dark forces battle in apocalyptic fashion with the powers of light. There is a fashion for angels, on the one hand, and fascination with vampires, the demonic and the undead on the other.¹⁵

Supernatural fits perfectly with Ward’s analysis of the reintroduction of the Gothic in popular culture. The show’s combination of Biblical mythology along with ghost stories, fairy tales, and mythologies of other ancient religious traditions provides a unique case study into contemporary cultural imagination. Gail DeVos, scholar of urban legends, agrees that the themes and motifs within *Supernatural* resound in the conventionality of interrelated gothic and horror modes in general. Partnered with Kripke’s well-documented awareness of cinematic and television genres, the multitude of supernatural television programming that began airing around the same time, demonstrates a long tradition of the gothic in popular culture addressing national fears as type of haunting or possession by the “Other”.¹⁶

Mark Edmundson makes the interesting point that, “If I were pressed to submit one reason for the contemporary proliferation of the Gothic, that reason would in a certain sense be religious . . . With the contemporary turn to the Gothic we recover a horizon of ultimate meaning. We recover something of what is lost with the withdrawal of God from the day to day of the world.”¹⁷ Ward adds that, “we can observe that

¹⁵ Ward, *True Religion*, 130.

¹⁶ Gail Arlene De Vos. *What Happens Next? Contemporary Urban Legend and Popular Culture*, (Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2012), 20.

¹⁷ Mark Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sodomasochism and the Culture of the Gothic*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 67-8.

contemporary religion is not about God, but the absence of God.”¹⁸ Thus, it seems that the absence of God in *Supernatural* fits into the contemporary religious milieu, and it seems that Ward would agree that the absence of God in the show does represent an absence of God felt by Americans.

While *Supernatural* fits into the resurgence of the Gothic genre, seasons four and five also align with the discourse of the apocalypse genre. Joshua Gunn and David E. Beard explain that, “All apocalyptic discourses, from the parodic to the deadly serious, emphasize an eschatology, or a theory of ends. These discourses locate meaning within a narrative structure that presupposes the resolution provided by a ‘conclusion’ most often, the ‘end of the world.’”¹⁹ Barry Brummett explains that this eschatology promotes a discourse that, “empowers its audience to live in a time of disorientation and disorder.”²⁰ For both Brummett and Stephen O’Leary, the apocalyptic narrative structure provides a space where audiences are encouraged to identify various social anxieties and institutions. O’Leary specifically feels that the genre allows the audience to wrestle with the nature of good and evil²¹, which fits perfectly with how religion and the apocalypse is presented in *Supernatural*. After all, *Supernatural* does not follow the traditional Christian discourse that demons are bad and angels are good. In fact, the vast majority of the angels in the series care very little about humanity and wants the apocalypse to happen. Many even try to kill Sam and Dean in order to accomplish this mission. Sam and Dean also align themselves with certain demons throughout the series, again breaking the traditional dichotomy of good and evil.

In an analysis of twentieth century literature, Frank Kermode draws a distinction

¹⁸ Ward, *True Religion*, 130.

¹⁹ Joshua Gunn and David E. Beard, “On the Apocalyptic Sublime,” *Southern Communication Journal* 65 (2000): 269.

²⁰ Barry Brummett, *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric*, (New York: Praeger, 1991), 9.

²¹ Stephen O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

between “imminent” and “immanent” paradigms of apocalypse. In traditional, imminent, apocalyptic discourse the end is anticipated and still in the future. This differs from the immanent apocalyptic discourse, the protagonists realize they are already in the end period.²² Kermode goes on to explain that unlike the traditional imminent discourse, the immanent apocalypse, “reflects our lack of confidence in ends, our mistrust of the apportioning of history into epochs of this and that.”²³ Essentially, society loses its linear progression of time, and characters are caught in a state of transition. For Kermode, this state of transition is marked with ambivalence and confusion.²⁴ *Supernatural* is a particularly interesting case study to apply Kermode’s theory, because the plot line shifts from an imminent to immanent paradigm of the apocalypse. Throughout season four, the Winchester brothers and their allies struggle to stop the apocalypse from occurring, making it an imminent view of the apocalypse. However, in the season finale, Sam and Dean fail to stop the apocalypse and Lucifer is able to come to earth, transitioning to an immanent apocalyptic paradigm. Even Kermode’s description of the apocalypse being a state of ambivalence and confusion is seen throughout the Apocalypse arc. As seen in “The Dark Side of the Moon,” Joshua says that God, himself, does not care if the apocalypse occurs. The angels and demons work diligently to assure that their prophesized battle occurs, and it is only Sam, Dean, Castiel, and a few other close companions that even know that the apocalypse is occurring.

Gunn and Beard continue their discussion on apocalyptic discourses by stating, “People respond to traditional apocalyptic discourses precisely because the revealed system of order restore a sense of agency and sovereignty lost in the preceding crisis.”²⁵

²² Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1977), 28.

²³ Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 101.

²⁴ Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 102.

²⁵ Gunn and Beard, “On the Apocalyptic Sublime,” 274.

This sense of agency manifests in the importance of the stability of the subject in the postmodern world. This means that the subject's experience is central to any elaboration of the postmodern apocalyptic. The emphasis on the experience of the subject aligns with the intentional humanistic portrayal of religion and the apocalypse throughout the series. As previously mentioned, Sam and Dean are "Team Free Will," and constantly claiming their own agency in the divine battle between angels and demons. Thus, *Supernatural* is a good example of both Kermode's description of imminent and immanent apocalyptic discourse, but also continues the themes of the apocalyptic genre more broadly into the television sphere.

Audience Responses to the Show

As previously mentioned, *Supernatural* was intended to be five seasons long, but after its overwhelming success, the show continued and has now been renewed for its tenth season. Thus, the show and its religiously themed story lines are resonating with a popular audience. Evidence of the show's popularity, aside from its average 2 million-plus viewing audience, includes the fan publication *Supernatural Magazine*, published by Titan magazines; a series of companion novels and books; various fan sites and SuperWikis available on the Internet; as well as the ample show-related merchandise such as calendars, coffee mugs, T-shirts, statuettes, throw blankets, trading cars, and series-specific jewelry and costume accessories. The contemporary legends in the series have been discussed, explained and retold on these countless websites, blogs, message boards and social networking sites as well as in *Supernatural Magazine* which also provides fans with educational material regarding the origins of the urban legends and monsters featured in episodes.²⁶

Laura E. Felschow believes that *Supernatural* has attracted a cult fandom. She

²⁶ De Vos, *What Happens Next?*, 21.

explains that cult programs often inspire strong viewer loyalty and involvement. The faithful viewers that comprise online fandoms demonstrate an attachment to a program, its actors, and the characters and become emotionally invested in the storylines. The Internet has only enhanced this involvement as it enables discourse among like-minded cult fans across the globe and offers recourse to viewers who may feel as if they cannot engage in an in-depth discussion of their favorite shows with their immediate family and friends. Viewers become loyal not only to the program and its producers, but also to the social community that is centered upon it. *Supernatural* by its very nature lends itself well to cult sensibilities, because categories like science fiction, fantasy, and horror television programs such as *Star Trek*, *The X-Files*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are prime examples of cult television.²⁷ This cult fan base made *Supernatural* a run-away hit, despite the small budget and marketing campaigns compared to other cult shows like ABC's *Lost* that had millions of dollars in promotional backing.

For scholars of religion, the most exciting aspect of a show like *Supernatural*, that has the cult fan following is that it starts conversations about religion among a young viewing audience who might otherwise have little interest in these types of discussions. Amidst claims by individuals such as Boston University professor, Stephen Prothero, that students are becoming increasingly uncomfortable with discussions of religion and divinity²⁸; *Supernatural* has found a way to reach the imaginations of young people. Prothero commented in a 2008 article that, "These young people aren't just allergic to dogma. They are allergic to divinity and even heaven. In the religions of their imagining, God is an afterthought at best. And the afterlife is, as one of my students told me, 'on the back burner.'"²⁹ Prothero offers these observations in a cultural moment where questions

²⁷ Laura E. Felschow, "Hey, check it out, there's actually fans": (Dis)empowerment and (mis)representation of cult fandom in *Supernatural*," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 2010, accessed 19 April 2013, <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/134/142>.

²⁸ Stephen Prothero. "Is religion losing the millennial generation?" *USA Today*, 4 February 2008, accessed 19 April 2013, <http://blogs.usatoday.com/oped/2008/02/is-religion-los.html>.

of religion, ethics, and morality have come to the fore. As the country faces two continuing wars, deep economic hardship, and political debates about gun control and the nature of good and evil, cultural conversations about shared morals and the rise or decline of tradition are omnipresent. Thus, perhaps it is not surprising that we would see these themes raised in contemporary television programming and its reception.

Indeed, the questions that Prothero raises sound strikingly familiar to viewers of *Supernatural*, as these are the very questions faced by the program's characters. Sam and Dean do what they can to put the afterlife on the back burner, resist strict commandments (even when they come from angels), and certainly resist the splitting of their family into the saved and the damned, despite the revelation that Dean is a chosen warrior of heaven as Michael's vessel and Sam a chosen tool of Lucifer.³⁰ *Supernatural* is one of many programs directed at the so-called millennial audience referenced by Prothero, a generation imagined in public discourse to embrace moral nuance in a seemingly contradictory union with ethical high ground. Those invoking the millennials as generational category cast a wide net, imagining a group with shared cultural values ranging from current twelve-year-olds to thirty-two-year-olds (birth years from the late 1970s to the late 1990s). So imagined, such a wide yet supposedly unified audience construct appears significant for media institutions, businesses, and political and religious organizations alike.³¹ *Supernatural* does not open and close questions of faith, but rather poses them and holds all possible answers in tension. In so doing, the program has provoked prolonged and diverse discussions among its fans.

Louisa Stein conducted a study of the fan fiction that has been written about the show. She notes that after the introduction of biblical themes in season four, "as the

²⁹ Prothero, "Is religion losing the millennial generation?"

³⁰ Louisa Ellen Stein, "'What do you know?' *Supernatural* fan vids and millennial theology," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 2010, accessed 20 April 2013, <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/192/158>.

³¹ Stein, "What do you know?"

season progressed, we saw more and more fiction that introduced biblical themes beyond those specific to *Supernatural*, incorporating other angels and even God as a character. Fan fiction took up questions of God, spirituality, dogma, faith, and tradition as concepts to be interrogated and debated in relation to the show and at times beyond.”³² The question of the role of religion in the “millennial” identity is unclear and at times even contradictory; with some scholars saying religion is rising among the youth population and others saying it is declining. However, perhaps the reason for the ambiguity is due to the fact that the right questions are not being asked. We should not be asking to what extent the young generation is religious, but rather what could this millennial generation potentially offer in terms of new and revised approaches to religious belief? Perhaps the millennials seek to return to tradition and organization, yet want less dogma and more acceptance of diversity. *Supernatural* portrays these conflicting factors: the show invokes religion, hell, heaven, dogma, salvation, resurrection; and it recreates the book of Revelation and the final battle between Lucifer and Michael. And yet at the same time, *Supernatural* shows us a heaven that looks like a crime movie, angels who appear to be morally bankrupt, and, in season five, a potentially sympathetic Lucifer. After all, not coincidentally, the fifth season’s premiere episode was entitled “Sympathy for the Devil.”

While many viewers have responded positively to the religious and theological direction of the fourth and fifth season, this also became a point of contention, especially for the Catholic audience. A continuous discussion of the show has been occurring on the website, *Catholic Answer to Explain and Defend the Faith*. The initial blog post about the show stated that,

...late last season and this season, they have finally tried to address the existence of God and although I thought this might be a positive thing (because this show is popular, especially among the young) it has turned out to be more harmful than helpful...God is described as an almost negative tyrant who indiscriminately does things on a whim and demands complete obedience without use of reason...none of it makes any sense theologically and it presents a bleak picture of the afterlife,

³² Stein, “What do you know?”

whether it's heaven or hell. This season is turning out to be not only stupid but dangerously close to being downright blasphemous.³³

Other comments in the forum describe *Supernatural* as “bad theology” and a “misrepresentation of the truth about God.” It is interesting to note that while there are entire forums dedicated to the Catholic criticisms on the show, there are not these types of forums dedicated to Protestant criticisms to *Supernatural*. While it would not be fair to claim that only or all Catholic viewers are unsatisfied with the introduction of religious theology, the fact that the main dissenting voices being from the Catholic audience could provide an interesting commentary on religiosity in America. It seems obvious that agnostic and atheist viewers would not find fault with the absence of God, but why do Catholic viewers seem to find this idea more offensive than Protestant viewers?

Perhaps the answer is not that Catholic viewers find the absence of God more offensive, but rather that Protestants are more willing to accept the “spiritual warfare” story lines in seasons four and five. S.T. Karnick explains that while the show does not follow Biblical Scripture exactly, “these oddities do not undermine the overall effect of the show, which is to portray a vast spiritual war with the earth and the human race as both the main battleground and the prize. That, of course, is consistent with most Christian thinking and in particular with that of the Evangelical denominations.”³⁴ Thus, if the show is more aligned with the Evangelical Christian mindset, then that would explain the primarily Catholic criticisms. For example, one prominent theme of the show is Dean's religious skepticism, to which he clung despite the copious evidence that there is a good deal more to the world than natural science can account for. Sam appeared much more accepting of traditional Judeo-Christian thinking and frequently criticized

³³ “TV *Supernatural*,” *Catholic Answers to Explain and Defend the Faith*, 22 November 2008, accessed 3 March 2013. <http://forums.catholic.com/showthread.php?t=288137>.

³⁴S.T. Karnick, “CW’s ‘Supernatural’ Presents Biblical Ideas in Dark Melodrama. *Breitbart TV*. 15 May 2009, accessed 3 March 2013. <http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Hollywood/2009/05/15/CWs-Supernatural-Presents-Biblical-Ideas-in-Dark-Melodrama>.

Dean for his skepticism. This, too, strongly reflects an Evangelical Christian notion, the idea that each individual must make a conscious choice of whether to accept salvation offered freely to all, and that crucial to the process is participation in a good deal of debate about the matter, so as to make a fully informed decision. Despite the criticisms that *Supernatural* can be theologically misleading, Stein's study of the engagement with the religious themes and story lines by the program's young audience supports the thesis that there is something very appealing about *Supernatural's* portrayal of religion.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, the creators of *Supernatural* are also concerned with bringing these issues of morality, agency, and destiny into the public forum. The introduction of overt religious themes in the fourth and fifth season, complete with angels, demons, and the absence of God, has elicited fan explorations of questions of morality, faith, God, and the role of religion. These existential and religious themes coupled with the absence of God align with the path that primetime television has taken in the past decade. Programs such as Fox's *Prison Break*³⁵, Showtime's *Dexter*³⁶, and ABC's *Lost*³⁷ are all examples of shows that have sparked deep theological discussion, without being traditionally religious. After all, if we are to accept Taylor's thesis in *A Secular Age*, that religion and belief is but one of many options in contemporary society³⁸ then this could

³⁵ *Prison Break* aired from 2005-2009, and was about two brothers; one was framed for murdering the Vice President's brother and is now on death row, his brother is a brilliant engineer and comes up with an elaborate plan to break him out of prison. The show sparks deep discussion about collateral damage, and if Michael is justified in doing whatever it takes to save the life of his brother.

³⁶ *Dexter* is a show that just wrapped up its seventh season. It is about a serial killer who trains himself to only kill other serial killers. The show has sparked great discussion about morality and can killing be justified if you are killing other murderers? Should society accept the work of vigilante's as moral citizens?

³⁷ *Lost* aired from 2004-2010 and was hugely popular. The show raises a number of theological and philosophical issues ranging from the purpose of life, what happens after death, and whether or not individuals should be defined by their actions.

³⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

imply that the portrayal of religion and belief would come in many different forms as well. The creator and writers of *Supernatural* have chosen to rewrite traditional Christian mythology. This alternative narrative has taken many risks, most notably the absence of God. While this choice has not come without criticism, the overwhelming majority of viewers have responded positively to the theological liberties that the writers have taken.

This is especially true in television programs like *Supernatural* that have boldly chosen to both incorporate traditional religious doctrine, yet also not been afraid to deviate from, alter, or combine that traditional doctrine with mythology outside of the Christian tradition. Perhaps equally important as studying the show is also monitoring the reaction of the audience. After all, the opinion of the select few producers and writers will not yield the opinions of the various demographics of the American population. *Supernatural* provides a unique opportunity for scholars because of the show's cult status and strong following, which has created various fan sites, blogs, and fan fiction about their favorite themes and characters from the show. Journalist, Annalee Newitz ends her article about the season five finale by asking who and where is God? She claims, "Maybe the answer to the riddle is that God is always absent. Because he's present, in everyone, at least sometimes. God's absence is the final proof that he's present, in everything on Earth, where we'll never see him. *Supernatural* is the kind of show that leaves you with thoughts like that."³⁹ While her conclusion is a bit nonsensical, Newitz is clearly wrestling with the theology of the show. By reimagining the book of Revelation and placing it in a fantasy-apocalypse genre, Kripke and his team of writers are sparking deep theological questions and discussions in a way that is appealing to young people. Thus, it is not that youth and emerging adults are disinterested in religion and these larger issues or morality, the existence of God, and the agency of humanity; rather, this demographic is less interested in traditional doctrine and dogma, and searches for newer,

³⁹ Newitz, "'Supernatural' Finale Justifies our Love for an Absent God."

more creative outlets. *Supernatural* is one such show in the apocalypse genre that provides a platform to discuss these issues and anxieties in an environment that is more comfortable for youth and emerging adults.

CHAPTER 3

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

Battlestar Galactica is a science-fiction series that aired on the SyFy Network from 2004-2009. The series takes place in a civilization where humans live in a system of planets known as the Twelve Colonies. In the past, the Colonies were at war with a cyber-race of their own creation, known as Cylons. The series opens with a devastating attack by the Cylons which leaves approximately 50,000 human survivors. Under the leadership of Captain William Adama and President Laura Roslin, the *Galactica* (name of the ship) and its crew try to lead the few survivors to Earth, a land that is only known to them in myth and legend. The series is flooded with religious themes, perhaps most interestingly the fact that the humans are polytheists and the Cylons are monotheists. *Battlestar Galactica* took its original form as a television series in the 1970s created by Glen A. Larson. The current reimaged series, developed by Ronald Moore, maintains the mythic sense established in the earlier quest narrative, but adds elements of hard science and aggressive engagement with post-9/11 American politics juxtaposed against the rise of religious fundamentalism.¹

The *Battlestar Galactica* narrative (and arguably the science fiction genre more broadly) creates associations that offer more honest commentary on contemporary events than is to be found on mainstream news programming. As Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall state in their introduction to the edited volume: *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica*, “The series moves well beyond the simple reflection of Western culture’s religious, economic, and gendered organizations, toward a dialogic relationship, informed by questions, debate, and analysis, representing the world not merely as it is, or as it should be.”² The show comments on contemporary culture by

¹ Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall eds. *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica*. (New York: Continuum Books, 2008), 1.

² Potter and Marshall. *Cylons in America*, 5-6.

imagining dystopic alternatives, and by doing so it invites the viewer to interrogate notions of self, nation, and belief that are often taken to be nonnegotiable both on television and in contemporary society. It is clear that there's a desire for people to connect through art, stories, and technology that feel directly relevant to the challenges of the modern day. *Battlestar Galactica* gave people an avenue to explore these deeper issues, and the online community (fandom) continues to do so now that the show is over.

The Portrayal of Religion on *Battlestar Galactica*

Battlestar Galactica first aired as a two-part miniseries in December 2003 on the Syfy channel, attracting 3.9 and then 4.5 million viewers, making the miniseries the third most watched program on the Syfy network to date.³ *Battlestar Galactica* is a reimagined series, based off the 1978 series created by Glen Larson. While it was unknown to most viewers, the original *Battlestar* series was pitched by Larson as a series of Bible stories set in space. Larson was also a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the series is largely influenced by the Book of Mormon. *Battlestar Galactica* and the Book of Mormon both start from the premise that civilization is either about to be destroyed or has just been destroyed, leaving just a small population. The series also includes allusions to the lost tribes of Israel. While not solely a Mormon concept the lost tribes of Israel is the idea that ten tribes of Israel were lost to history after they were exiled. Both in the original series and the remake ground the plot in the idea that Earth will be this colony that they do not have a record of, but they believe it exists. Perhaps the most obvious parallel between Mormonism and *Battlestar Galactica* is the Kolob/Kobol connection. In the show, Kobol is where the gods live, and in Mormonism Kolob is supposed to be the greatest star in the universe and the dwelling place of God.⁴

³ "List of Nielsen Ratings," *Battlestar Galactica Wiki*, 29 October 2010, [http://en.battlestarwiki.org/wiki/List_of_Nielsen_ratings_\(TRS\)](http://en.battlestarwiki.org/wiki/List_of_Nielsen_ratings_(TRS)).

Robert Moore, creator of the reimagined *Battlestar* series, chose to keep some of the allusions to Mormonism, but not to expand on them. Instead, he draws parallels to a number of religious traditions including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and ancient pagan religions. The miniseries begins with the surprise Cylon attack on humanity, the background to which is given in the opening credits:

The Cylons were created by man. They were created to make life easier on the Twelve Colonies. And then the day came when the Cylons decided to kill their masters. After a long and bloody struggle, an armistice was declared. The Cylons left for another world to call their own. A remote space station was built, where Cylon and human could meet and maintain diplomatic relations. Every year, the Colonials send an officer. The Cylons send no one. No one has seen or heard from the Cylons in over forty years.⁵

The scene then shows a man in a military uniform sitting at a desk. The door opens, and two Cylon robots walk into the room followed by a human-looking woman (who the audience later finds out is a Cylon). After a brief interaction between the man and woman, an explosion occurs, and destruction of the human race has begun. Nearly the entire population of the Twelve Colonies has been killed, and most of the Colonial military is compromised by malware in the military computer network, which made it vulnerable to cyber-attack. The malware was planted by Number Six, the same Cylon female who is shown in the opening scene of the series, through the seduction of Dr. Gaius Baltar (the Colonies' most famous scientist). Thus, it seems that the premise of *Battlestar Galactica* is a revisionist Genesis story. The idea that seduction and sexuality as the implementation for the genocide of humanity is reminiscent of the traditional view of Eve as temptress who causes the downfall of humanity.

⁴ Ellen Leventry, "Born Again 'Battlestar': Drawing from Mormonism, Roman Polytheism, and even Buddhism, the reimagined sci-fi TV series is steeped in religion," Beliefnet, 26 May 2005, accessed 3 March 2014, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Movies/2005/05/Born-Again-Battlestar.aspx>.

⁵ *Battlestar Galactica: The Miniseries*, "Part 1," episode 1, 2004 (originally aired December 8, 2003).

The *Galactica* is an old space battleship that fought in the first Cylon War, and was in the process of being decommissioned into a museum when the series begins. Because it is an older model with less sophisticated technology, the ship is not affected by the Cylon cyber-attack. Thus, Commander William Adama, the current commanding officer who was preparing for retirement, assumes control of the remaining military fleet. Secretary of Education, Laura Roslin, is sworn in as President of the Colonies as she is the only surviving member of the political cabinet, because she was overseeing the preparations of *Galactica*'s conversion to a museum.

Adama then leads the remaining survivors to Ragnar Anchorage, a military armory station where *Galactica* can resupply itself with weaponry and essential supplies. At Ragnar, Adama is confronted by an arms dealer who is attempting to pillage the military storehouses. It soon becomes clear that the man is being affected by the radiation cloud surrounding Ragnar, to which humans are immune. Adama then deduces that he is facing a new type of Cylon that looks, sounds, and acts human. In an interesting piece of dialogue between the two characters that occurs just before Adama realizes the man is actually a Cylon, the Cylon states: "When you get right down to it, humanity is not a pretty race. I mean, we're only one step away from beating each other with clubs, like savages fighting over scraps of meat. Maybe the Cylons are God's retribution for our many sins. What if, God decided He made a mistake, and He decided to give souls to another creature, like the Cylons?" To which Adama responds, "Gods didn't create the Cylons, man did. And I'm pretty sure we did not include souls in the programming."⁶

This scene serves as a nice foundation for many theological implications of the show. As previously mentioned, the humans are polytheists in the mold of the Romans and Greeks, who worship a pantheon known as the Gods of Kobol. However, their

⁶ *Battlestar Galactica: The Miniseries*, "Part 2," episode 2, 2004 (originally aired December 9, 2003).

creations, the Cylons, have a strict belief in a singular God and in the existence of their own souls which leads them on a mission to eradicate their non-believing human creators. While there are a few scenes in the two-part miniseries that show human devotion (for example humans praying to the Gods of Kobol), it is the religious fanaticism and fundamentalist worldview of the Cylons that drives the show. Warrior-drones have become spiritual seekers: in addition to waging war on humankind, the Cylons are searching for God, for the True Creator that they believe imbued them with souls after humans gave them life.⁷ Cylon theology is also presented as more than a doctrinal choice. There is even a suggestion that there has been divine revelation, and that God has spoken to the Cylons. Prior to the attack on the colonies (and before Baltar knows that Six is actually a Cylon) Six tells Baltar, “God wanted me to help you.” When he sarcastically asks, “Right, he spoke to you did he? You had a little chat?” She responds, “He didn’t speak to me in a literal voice, and you don’t have to mock my faith.”⁸ This is all Six is willing to say on the matters of divine revelation in Cylon theology, but it is clear that the Cylons believe they are acting out commands that God has given to them. Thus, not only are Cylons seeking their creator God by chasing after their human creators, but they are double agents in the service of God.⁹

This distinction between the monotheistic Cylons and the polytheistic humans serves as both a historical and contemporary commentary on religion. It is historical in the fact that creator of the show, Robert Moore, has said in interviews that he was inspired by the rise of monotheism in the Western world and how it came to displace pagan religion. Moore stated, “Because you had this apocalyptic moment of genocide which kicked off the entire series, of this Cylon culture that has this belief system in one

⁷ C.W. Marshall and Matthew Wheeland, “The Cylons, the Singularity, and God,” in *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica*, eds. Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall, (New York, Continuum Books, 2008), 91-92.

⁸ *Battlestar Galactica: The Miniseries*, “Part 1.”

⁹ Marshall and Wheeland, “The Cylons, the Singularity, and God,” 98.

god that is literally wiping out this pagan belief system and then is pursuing them across the galaxy. There was a certain resonance in history.”¹⁰ However, the more relevant theological discussions that are prompted by *Battlestar Galactica* engage with commentary on contemporary religion both in the United States and worldwide in post 9/11 society. Like the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Cylon attack is organized by a group of “monotheistic religious zealots” and executed with the aid of “sleeper agents inside human society.” Moreover, as with 9/11, the Cylon attack functions as the pivotal historical moment within the series by fundamentally altering Colonial life.¹¹

However, the show complicates the traditional Cylon as a representation of Islam and human as a representation of Christianity. The fact that the humans are polytheists is significant because polytheism is usually associated with “backwards” religious belief and practice, an attitude reminiscent of orientalist views of Islam and the east. After all, the Cylon attack was successful because of the rapid advancement of their technology, allowing them to impose their will on the less-progressive humans. Thus, the show is complicating the traditional dichotomy of monotheism as “good,” modern, and Western pitted against polytheism as “bad,” backwards, and Eastern. The series deftly maps the fundamentalist monotheism of the Cylons onto both Islamic fundamentalism and American Christian fundamentalism, as if to suggest that the differences between them might not be as absolute as both groups often believe.¹² Robert Moore discusses this intentional complicated portrayal of religious belief, stating that

The show is really supposed to be about our society and political structure, the conversations we have today in the culture. Hopefully, the show is able to examine those things from a different perspective without making it as

¹⁰ Ellen Leventry, “Born Again ‘Battlestar’: Drawing from Mormonism, Roman Polytheism, and even Buddhism, the reimaged sci-fi TV series is steeped in religion,” *Beliefnet*, 26 May 2005, accessed 3 March 2014, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Movies/2005/05/Born-Again-Battlestar.aspx>.

¹¹ Brian L. Ott, “(Re)Framing Fear: Equipment for Living in a Post-9/11 World” in *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica*, eds. Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall, (New York, Continuum Books, 2008), 17.

¹² Marshall and Wheeland, “The Cylons, the Singularity, and God,” 96-97.

simple as the Cylons are Al Qaeda and Laura Roslin (the President) is George Bush. I don't think the show offers you easy answers on why Al Qaeda does what Al Qaeda does, but I think it gives you an easy reference into how an entire culture, or entire group of people can believe something so fervently that seems so unfathomable at the beginning.¹³

Thus, the existential journey for both humanity and Cylons serves as the foundation of the show. This journey is not merely an attempt to figure out which religion is True, but rather recognition that both species find legitimacy in their religious world-views.

***Battlestar Galactica* genre analysis**

Just as the apocalyptic narrative of *Supernatural* allows audiences to identify various social anxieties and institutions, *Battlestar Galactica* also uses the apocalypse genre to provide a platform to express social and religious anxieties. Frank Kermode's description of immanent apocalyptic discourse is a suitable framework for the type of apocalypse portrayed in the series, because the series begins with the apocalyptic event and humanity is desperately trying to survive what seems to be the end of the world. Joshua Gunn and David Beard continue their discussion on the apocalypse genre through the "apocalyptic sublime," which presents the apocalypse in postmodernism. Essentially, "the apocalyptic sublime is an emerging form of postmodern apocalyptic that replaces the traditional sense of impending cataclysm (an "ending") with a sense of never-ending crisis. It is similar to traditional apocalyptic form insofar as it is reactive in nature, but it differs in terms of its deferral of an ending and in terms of the kind of subject position it calls into being."¹⁴ As mentioned in the previous chapter, the distinction between immanent and imminent apocalypse, first identified by Frank Kermode more than twenty-five years ago, is the result of a wide array of fundamental changes in the political and material conditions of the social world, which is often loosely collected under the

¹³ Leventry, "Born Again 'Battlestar.'"

¹⁴ Joshua Gunn and David E. Beard, "On the Apocalyptic Columbine," *Southern Communication Journal* 68 (2003):199-200.

umbrella term postmodern. Immanent apocalyptic discourses never promise endings, but rather commit characters to a state of perpetual transition or crisis, “in no intelligible relation to the past, and no predictable relation to the future.”¹⁵

The most compelling example from the *Battlestar Galactica* that portrays this idea of being in a perpetual state of transition without the hope of a future is most, comes at the conclusion of the miniseries. The remaining human survivors have gathered for a memorial service to mourn the death of the majority of the human race. The scene begins with a priestess, Elosha, singing in an unknown language. She then begins the service stating:

Elosha: With heavy hearts, we lift up their bodies to you oh Lords of Kobol. With the knowledge that you will take their burdens and give them life eternal. We also pray that you will look down upon us now with mercy and with love. Just as you did upon our forefathers many years ago. Just as you led us from Kobol and found the 12 worlds, and we pray that you will lead us to a new home where you will give us life, anew. So say we all.¹⁶

Crowd: So say we all.

Commander Adama: So say we all.

Crowd repeats: So say we all.

Adama: (louder) SO SAY WE ALL!

Crowd repeats: SO SAY WE ALL!

Adama: Are they the lucky ones? It's what you're all thinking isn't it? We're a long way from home. We've jumped way beyond the red line, into uncharted space. Limited supplies, limited fuel, no allies, and now no hope. Maybe it would have been better for us to die quickly back on the colonies with our families. Instead of dying out here slowly, in the emptiness of dark space. Where shall we go? What shall we do? Life here began out there. Those are the first words of the sacred scroll, and they were told to us by the Lords of Kobol. Many countless centuries ago, and they made it perfectly clear that we are not alone in this universe. Elosha, there's a thirteenth colony is there not?

¹⁵Frank Kermode, *The sense of an ending: Studies in the theory of fiction*, (New York: Oxford University, 1967), 102.

¹⁶“So say we all.” Is used throughout the series as the equivalent of “Amen.” It is used both as a prayer and a rallying call.

Elosha: Yes, the scrolls tell us a thirteenth tribe left Kobol in the early days, they traveled far and made their home on a planet called Earth, which circles a distant and unknown star.

Adama: It's not unknown. I know where it is. Earth. The most guarded secret we have. The location was only known by the senior commanders of the fleet. We dared not share it to the public, not while there was a Cylon threat upon us. For now we have a refuge to go to. A refuge that the Cylons know nothing about. It won't be an easy journey. It'll be long and arduous. But I promise you one thing, on the memory of those lying here before you, we shall find it. And Earth will become our new home. So say we all!

Crowd: So say we all (repeated).¹⁷

In the final scene of the miniseries, President Laura Roslin and Commander Adama are having a private conversation about the speech that Adama had given.

Laura Roslin: There's no Earth. You made it all up. President Adar and I once talked about the legends surrounding Earth. He knew nothing about a secret location regarding Earth, and if the President knew nothing about it, what are the chances that you do?

Adama: You're right. There's no Earth. It's all a legend.

Laura Roslin: Then why?

Adama: Because it's not enough to just live. You have to have something to live for. Let it be Earth.

Laura Roslin: They'll never forgive you.

Adama: Maybe. But in the meantime I've given all of us a fighting chance to survive. And isn't that what you said was the most important thing, the survival of the human race?¹⁸

It is clear that the human characters are in a state of transition. The Twelve Colonies as well as the majority of the human population have been destroyed. They are fleeing from an enemy that they not only created but is stronger and more advanced than they could ever imagine. They are now forced to flee in a ship that was in process of becoming a museum, with limited supplies, few trained military personal, and a president who was the Secretary of Education, making her the forty-third in line to assume the

¹⁷ *Battlestar Galactica: The Miniseries*, "Part 2."

¹⁸ *Battlestar Galactica: The Miniseries*, "Part 2."

presidency. Their lives have completely changed in the course of a few hours, and they can no longer relate to their previous way of life. Just as they cannot relate to the past, they cannot foresee what their future will look like. This is precisely why Commander Adama told the people that they were going to earth, even though he knew it did not exist.¹⁹ There is a hopelessness that comes with an immanent apocalypse, with a long journey without an ending. Adama knew that, which is why he provided his people with a story that has an ending. This ending provides hope, and as Adama says in his concluding thoughts, they have to have something to live for.

Audience Responses to the Show

Media scholar, Henry Jenkins, provides a helpful theoretical framework for studying the fan base of *Battlestar Galactica*. Jenkins uses the Star Wars franchise as a starting point to explore how films in the digital age are able to create amateur fandom, parodies, and spin-offs that become mainstream. The shift in media culture has allowed for a greater increase in audience/fan involvement. He comically states that, “too often, fan appropriation and transformation of media content get marginalized or exoticized, treated as something that people do when they have too much time on their hands. The assumption seems to be made that anyone who would invest so much creative and emotional energy into the products of mass culture must surely have something wrong with them.”²⁰ However, Jenkins does not see fan culture in this way. He claims that media fans are active participants within the current media revolution and their cultural products are an important part of the digital cinema movement.²¹ This media revolution

¹⁹ Later in the series, it is revealed that Earth does, indeed, exist. But for the purpose of this analysis, it is important to note that Adama believes he is giving the people false hope.

²⁰ Henry Jenkins, “Quentin Tarantino’s Star Wars?: Digital cinema, Media Convergence, and Participatory Culture,” in *Media and Cultural Studies Keywords*, eds Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 454.

²¹ Jenkins, “Quentin Tarantino’s Star Wars?” 454.

has created a media convergence, in which companies have created new strategies of content development designed to intersect media content across various transmission channels. For this “synergy-based strategy” to be successful, media audiences must buy into a prolonged relationship with a particular universe, which is complex enough to sustain their interest over time.²²

This sense of participatory culture, is very much present in the audience engagement with *Battlestar Galactica*, primarily through what Suzanne Scott calls “ancillary content” (located on television series’ official website, ancillary content models consist of webisodes, webcomics, episodic podcasts, blogs/vlogs, alternate reality games (ARGs), and a range of other content aimed at fans.)²³ While Scott agrees that ancillary content enriches fan experiences, she is also skeptical of how ancillary content channels fan participation in ways that best suit the industry’s financial and ideological interests. Jenkins would agree that ancillary content will be used to the industry’s benefit, but is ultimately optimistic in terms of the benefit of the audience. He rejects conceiving of “media consumers as either totally autonomous from or totally vulnerable to the culture industries. It would be naïve to assume that powerful conglomerates will not protect their own interests as they enter this new media marketplace, but at the same time, audiences are gaining greater power and autonomy as they enter into the new knowledge culture. The interactive audience is more than a marketing concept and less than semiotic democracy.”²⁴

Scott would disagree with Jenkins, because while this ancillary content is marketed as encouraging fan involvement and participation, in reality it is merely imposing the intention of the show’s creators onto the audience. She uses the example of

²² Jenkins, “Quentin Tarantino’s Star Wars?” 455.

²³ Suzanne Scott, “Battlestar Galactica: Fans and Ancillary Content,” in *How to Watch Television*, eds. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 321.

²⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 136.

the webisode series, “Battlestar Galactica: The Resistance” which aired in ten installments prior to the beginning of the third season. This webisode series provided an introduction to the story line of the third season, preemptively answering any potential questions and settling debates that could come up during the third season. The webisode series also explored the back stories of more minor characters and relationships, which was once the domain of fan texts.²⁵ Thus, ancillary content models could be viewed as a more covert form of cease and desist letters, temporally and ideologically discouraging fans from certain interpretations of or elaborations on the text. After all, if ancillary content is released between seasons or episodes of a show, fans who wish to explore narrative gaps and ambiguities through the creation of their own fan texts increasingly find those gaps either already filled in by the show’s creators, or difficult to develop before another piece of ancillary content overwrites or negates it. Scott goes as far as to claim that ancillary content could be viewed as a mode of ideological control, because it suggests “intended” or “preferred” interpretations of the text. She concludes, “Ancillary content not only scribbles in the margins that used to belong to fans; it also encourages them not to color outside of the (often heteronormative) lines.”²⁶ This is very problematic for Scott, who sees this ancillary content as a means of reinforcing hegemony, and creating a hierarchy where some fan practices are legitimized and others are marginalized.

If the producers of *Battlestar Galactica* are incorporating fans into corporate community, this leads to the question: “is this ‘real’ fandom or ‘real’ community? How important is community to fandom, and how should that community be defined?”²⁷ Roberta Pearson explains that community is essential to fandom, “Fandom requires a

²⁵ Scott, “Battlestar Galactica: Fans and Ancillary Content,” 322-323.

²⁶ Scott, “Battlestar Galactica: Fans and Ancillary Content,” 325-326.

²⁷ Roberta Pearson, “Fandom in the Digital Era,” *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture* 8 (2010): 93.

community and participation in that community—and possibly self-identification with that community. Even the lonely fan reading/watching/enjoying their text participates in an imagined community of other fans.”²⁸ This community that forms around a television show or movie franchise is what Jenkins calls a, “virtual community.”²⁹ While virtual communities have been studied for over a decade, what is of importance for this project is how the virtual community that surrounds the *Battlestar Galactica* franchise becomes a place for fans to negotiate their questions and anxieties about religion, politics, society, and the formation of identity.

The cleverness of the presentation of religion in *Battlestar Galactica* is the diversity of religious beliefs of the characters. While the humans are polytheists, the range of religious devotion ranges from intense belief to atheism. Dr. Gaius Baltar is the atheist voice in the mini-series, making it very clear that he is not religious. He is also the only character who is a scientist, so it is not surprising that he represents the rational and irreligious archetype. Despite the fact that it is because Baltar inadvertently allowed the attacks to happen by granting Six access to the technological mainframe; he is a character that irreligious audiences can relate to. One blogger states, “With the clashing cultures, Dr. Gaius Baltar seems to be the only sane character in the series. He’s the resident atheist... he justifies the world with reason and logic. He is not in the right because he doesn’t follow either religion, but because he doesn’t see the need for religious fanaticism, a war between monotheistic and polytheistic cultures, a killing of millions whether it is for a God or gods.”³⁰ Despite the fact that this blogger is very critical of religion in contemporary society, he continues by explaining the importance of

²⁸ Pearson, “Fandom in the Digital Era,” 93.

²⁹ Jenkins, “Quentin Tarantino’s Star Wars?” 457.

³⁰ Justin Tadlock, “So say we all: Religious Aboard Battlestar Galactica,” *Life, Blogging, and Wordpress*, accessed 6 March, 2014, <http://justintadlock.com/writing/so-say-we-all-religion-aboard-the-battlestar-galactica>.

the religion in the show. He states, “the show gives us an opening dialogue in which to discuss religion and faith. That’s what the world needs today.”³¹

These discussions happen on a variety of digital platforms ranging from online ancillary content (as previously mentioned) to internet websites like “Reddit,” that provide forums on a variety of topics. One such forum, entitled “Is Religion Killing Good Sci-Fi Shows?” has over 200 participants discussing the inclusion of religious themes on a variety of television series including both *Battlestar Galactica* and *Supernatural*, but also other popular shows like *Lost*, *The X-Files*, and *Firefly*.³² Opinions on the subject range from a firm belief that there is too much religion in science-fiction television, as stated by one user, “The problem is that sci-fi shows used to criticize the madness called religion. Nowadays most sci-fi (US-based) shows are pretty evangelistic: religion is good/the only way.”³³ Others are more supportive of science-fiction series exploring religious themes as stated by another user, “As an atheist, I love it when sci-fi explores religion. Good sci fi is as much psychology as it is science or technology.”³⁴ It is most important to note that these forums are not merely a place for viewers to state whether or not they like the portrayal of religion on these series, but real theological and existential discussions happen on these sites. One of the longer threads in the forum includes discussion on the difference between religion and spirituality; the continuous conflict between religious faith and rational science; and a discussion on how the various characters and storylines in *Battlestar Galactica* are representative of various world religions including Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Gnosticism. Thus, regardless of whether or not the audience enjoys or agrees with the religion presented on the show;

³¹ Tadlock, “So say we all.”

³² “TV Watchtower: Is Religion Killing Good Sci-Fi Shows?” *Reddit*, 18 October 2010, accessed 6 March 2014, http://www.reddit.com/r/scifi/comments/dt74b/tv_watchtower_is_religion_killing_good_scifi_shows/.

³³ “Is Religion Killing Good Sci-Fi Shows?”

³⁴ “Is Religion Killing Good Sci-Fi Shows?”

Battlestar Galactica is providing a platform for deeper discussion on religious issues in contemporary American society.

Conclusion

Battlestar Galactica has experienced great popularity as it blends science fiction with direct commentary on life in contemporary America. In a 2006 review of the show, Nancy Franklin states that, “what interests people who normally don’t care about science fiction is how timely and resonant the show is, bringing into play religion and religious fanaticism, global politics, terrorism, and questions about what it means to be human.”³⁵ The show invites viewers to adopt a critical and self-reflective frame toward our post-9/11 world. By dramatizing the moral dangers and pitfalls of unrestrained fear, the series furnishes viewers with a vocabulary and thus with a set of symbolic resources for managing their social anxieties.³⁶ It is precisely this vocabulary and platform to discuss these prevalent issues in contemporary society that makes television shows like *Battlestar Galactica* such fruitful modes of inquiry for scholars. The show does not attempt to provide an answer to these troubling questions. It is the process of asking the questions and beginning the dialogue that is important. For Brian Ott, it is because of this platform that *Battlestar Galactica* provides, that “viewers can see the diversity that exists within those groups deemed enemies, can reflect on the consequences of repressing political dissent, and can imagine what might be like to live in a country occupied by a foreign power. In its ongoing journey to locate Earth, *Galactica* is taking viewers on their own journey to find more humane ways of living in the present.”³⁷

³⁵ Nancy Franklin, “Across the Universe: A battlestar is reborn,” *The New Yorker*, January 23, 2006, accessed November 25, 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/01/23/060123crte_television

³⁶ Brian L. Ott, “(Re)Framing Fear: Equipment for Living in a Post-9/11 World” in *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica*, eds. Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall, (New York, Continuum Books, 2008), 13.

³⁷ Ott, “(Re)Framing Fear,” 25.

For both *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica* it is the use of the apocalypse genre that allows for this journey to take place. While *Supernatural* applies a fantasy lense and *Battlestar Galactica* a science-fiction lense to the apocalypse genre; both successfully captured the religious imaginations of youth and emerging adults. This is primarily because the apocalypse frame allows for producers to creatively explore the many religious, political, and social anxieties in our contemporary society. It also provides a platform for young audiences to engage with these anxieties in a way that less frightening than a show grounded in realism. It is much easier to discuss the big existential questions like the existence of God and the nature of good and evil in setting that is not literally contemporary America. This is why the apocalypse genre within fantasy and science-fiction are much more successful than a show like *Joan of Arcadia* which included a lot of these same religious themes, but through the teen soap-opera genre in a realistic framework.

CHAPTER 4

JOAN OF ARCADIA

Joan of Arcadia was created by experienced television writer, Barbara Hall and experienced initial success. The Emmy nominated show first aired on September 29, 2003, and received the People's Choice Award for Best New Drama. A modern portrayal of Joan of Arc, the show centers on a teenage girl, Joan Girardi, who begins to talk to God after her family moves to the small town of Arcadia. Throughout the series, God appears in several anthropomorphic forms, and each episode chronicles the way in which God works through Joan to influence the people around her. Despite critical acclaim, *Joan of Arcadia* was a controversial show, especially among the Christian community, because of its innovative portrayal of God. The God in *Joan of Arcadia* is not an abstract deity, but is an actual character that is directly involved in the world and has real relationships with humanity. This humanist portrayal of God should have resonated with a young audience, however it was ultimately cancelled after two seasons because it did not attract the young demographic that CBS was hoping for. Thus, the realistic narrative provided by the teen soap opera/serial drama genre did not capture the religious imaginations of young people the way that the apocalypse genre accomplished in *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica*.

The Portrayal of Religion on *Joan of Arcadia*

Joan of Arcadia was intentionally created to contribute to the dialogue initiated by the attacks on September 11. The creator of *Joan of Arcadia*, Barbara Hall, has discussed this issue stating that,

The show came out of my process of studying world religion. After Sept. 11, there was a paradigm shift and people were willing to talk about issues of faith. There was a lot of TV about 9/11 about how it affected people's faith. I was fascinated by that. The character of Will, the dad, is based on stories of people who did courageous things in 9/11 but they weren't religious, it wasn't about faith, about God, it was just about the right thing to do. And I love the idea of morality, of people who have an

innate sense of right and wrong not based on religion but because they're good people.¹

The character Will Girardi is Joan's father and the Chief of Police in Arcadia. He is very clear throughout the series that he is extremely anti-religion, and even discourages his wife, Helen, from seeing a priest after their eldest son, Kevin, is paralyzed after a car accident.² Thus, Will's character is used to analyze questions of religion and morality and whether people can be one without the other. Will abandoned religion because he could not reconcile the terrible things that have been done in the name of God and religion, something that not only Americans, but people around the globe, were also trying to come to terms with. The horror of terrorism led to a new openness to spirituality among Americans, an urgent need for goodness and meaning in a scary world that ultimately helped make a show about a teenage girl in conversation with God a possibility for network television.

As previously mentioned, the story focuses on Joan Girardi, a young high-school student to whom God begins to speak in various anthropomorphic forms. Joan's family has just moved to Arcadia because her father has been offered the position of Chief of Police. Joan's mother, Helen, is an artist; her younger brother, Luke, is a brilliant young scientist, and her older brother, Kevin, was recently involved in a drunk driving accident that left him paralyzed from the waist down, destroying his future as a collegiate athlete. Thus, the Girardi family is left to question how something so terrible could happen to Kevin and their family. The God of *Joan of Arcadia* was neither an abstract deity, nor an unattainable force in the universe; but rather appeared in various human forms and directly communicated with Joan. The opening of the show's pilot episode cuts back and forth between a crime scene of a female murder victim and Joan asleep in bed. A voice

¹ Barbara Hall, voiceover on pilot episode of *Joan of Arcadia*, DVD edition of the first season, 2005.

² *Joan of Arcadia: Season One*, "Death Be Not Whatever," episode 7, 2005 (originally aired November 7, 2003).

calls to Joan; and she wakes, frightened. She rejects it by putting on her headphones to listen to music. The next morning, Joan looks out her window and thinks that she sees a man standing in her yard. However, when she rushes outside to discover that no one is there, her family thinks she either saw a neighbor or did not see anyone at all.

The first time Joan encounters God, he is a cute boy sitting near her on the bus. He starts up a conversation, and explains that it was him outside her window this morning. She angrily replies:

Joan: What are you talking about? What do you want with me? Because I've got to warn you, my dad's a cop. Not just any cop, he's *the* cop!

God: I know who your father is Joan. He's Will Girardi, born September 4, 1955, Chicago. His father was Gerald Girardi, his mother was Ellen Monroe. He had an uneventful childhood, attended high school and went to junior college. After that he joined the police force in 1980. After that he met your mother, Helen Brody, she was an art school dropout. You're the middle child of three. About a year and a half ago, your older brother, Kevin was in a car accident, fractured his back, that left him a paraplegic. You have one other brother, Luke, he's 15. Your favorite color is green, you love salt on cantaloupe, John Das broke your heart in eighth grade. You're afraid of clowns.

Joan: Who are you?

God: I've known you since before you were born, Joan. I'm God.

Joan: I'm going to ask you one more time...

God: I'm God.

Joan: You're what?

God: God

Joan: (after a long pause): Don't ever talk to me again.³

And with that she walks away from God. While Joan does everything she can to avoid running into the boy who claims to be God, he eventually finds her and tells her things about herself that no one else could possibly know: "You said you'd study hard, stop talking back, clean your room, and even go to church if I let your brother live." Joan then

³ *Joan of Arcadia: Season One*, "Pilot," episode 1, 2005 (originally aired September 26, 2003).

begins to believe him, and that is when God begins to reveal more: “Let me explain something: I don’t look like this. I don’t look like anything you’d recognize. You can’t see me. I don’t sound like this. I don’t sound like anything you’d recognize. You see, I’m beyond your experience. I take this form because you’re comfortable with it. It makes sense to you. Do you get it?” When Joan confesses that she is not religious, he answers, “It is not about religion, Joan. It’s about fulfilling your nature.”⁴ This idea of God’s plan being for each individual to fulfill his or her true nature becomes one of the main themes of the series.

The creator and writers of the show were very aware that portraying God as a human character could be very problematic for the Christian community. They had a very clear view of how they wanted to portray God throughout the series. Therefore, in order to keep theological integrity, Hall created a list of “Ten Commandments” that she and the other writers had to obey through their construction of God. These “Commandments” included:

- i. God cannot directly intervene
- ii. Good and evil exist
- iii. God can never identify one religion as being right
- iv. The job of every human being is to fulfill his or her true nature
- v. Everyone is allowed to say no to God, including Joan
- vi. God is not bound by time—this is a human concept
- vii. God is not a person and does not possess a human personality
- viii. God talks to everyone all the time in different ways
- ix. God’s plan is what is good for us, not what is good for Him
- x. God’s purpose for talking to Joan, and to everyone, is to get her (us) to recognize the interconnectedness of all things, i.e. you cannot hurt a person without hurting yourself; all of your actions have consequences; God can be found in the smallest actions; God expects us to learn and grow from all our experiences. However, the exact nature of God is a mystery, and the mystery can never be solved.⁵

⁴ *Joan of Arcadia: Season One*, “Pilot,” episode 1, 2005 (originally aired September 26, 2003).

⁵ Angela Zito, “Can Television Mediate Religious Experience? The Theology of *Joan of Arcadia*.” In *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 732.

Hall's theology was clear: "a loving yet mysterious God who works through human beings, who makes suggestions, leaving plenty of room for choice, free will, and thus human agency."⁶ Thus, Joan's experience is not mysticism; she is experiencing God socially in an anthropomorphic form. Joan, then, serves as God's vessel to do his work in the world and fulfilling her true nature.

The true innovation of *Joan of Arcadia* was not merely the portrayal of God as a character, but God's relationship with Joan throughout the series. This was not just another show about a young woman's entanglement with supernatural forces. Joan did not have super powers. She wasn't a psychic, a witch or a saint. Joan was not even religious. In two seasons of seeing God, she never went to church, though her mom started the Right of Christian Initiation of Adults in the Catholic Church. And unlike previous shows with religious themes—like characters on *Touched by an Angel* and *7th Heaven*—she didn't moralize. She was a teenager; and most of the time, she tried to ignore God. When that did not work, much of the show's drama depended on her contemplation of what God could possibly want from her. Why would God want her to work in a bookstore? Jump from the high dive? Prevent her boyfriend from exhibiting his art? Join the chess team?⁷ When Joan listened to God and followed through on his requests, she could see the positive ripple effects of her actions. In the pilot, God asks Joan to get a job at a local bookstore. At the end of the episode, Joan's task had motivated her older brother, Kevin, to get a job. In a conversation at the end of the episode, Kevin says, "I got your point. If my little sister can get a job, I've got no excuse. You're shaming me back into the world. But you're right, it's time."⁸ Thus, giving her brother the confidence he needed to accept his new life and start living again.

⁶ Zito, "Can Television Mediate Religious Experience?" 732.

⁷ Jessica Mesman, "Leaving Arcadia," *Notre Dame Magazine*, Summer 2005, accessed November 1, 2012, <http://magazine.nd.edu/news/10334-leaving-arcadia/>.

⁸ *Joan of Arcadia: Season One*, "Pilot," episode 1, 2005 (originally aired September 26, 2003).

Throughout the series, Joan begins to understand that every action had a reaction, and she starts to notice how even her smallest decisions affected the lives of everyone around her.

***Joan of Arcadia* Genre Analysis**

Joan of Arcadia is broadly considered a teen drama, but can also fit into the soap opera genre. While soaps are generally viewed as silly, excessive, or even trashy; they continue to be immensely popular, especially among women. Thus, just as Henry Jenkins takes the science fiction genre and fandom serious, soap operas also deserve to be analyzed with a scholarly lense. The previous chapters have shown that the apocalypse genre provides an ideal platform to discuss religious issues, and *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica* were extremely successful with young audiences. *Joan of Arcadia* also incorporates religious themes, and even presents a humanist view of religion, yet it was unable to attract a younger demographic. Thus, further genre analysis is needed to understand why the soap opera category does not provide an adequate platform for youth and emerging adults to discuss and express anxieties about the nature of religion and society.

Mary Ellen Brown lists eight generic characteristics of soap operas: (1) serial form which resists narrative closure; (2) multiple characters and plots; (3) use of time which parallels actual time and implies that the action continues to take place whether we watch it or not; (4) abrupt segmentation between parts; (5) emphasis on dialogue, problem solving, and intimate conversation; (6) male characters who are “sensitive men”; (7) female characters who are often professional and otherwise powerful in the world outside of the home; (8) the home, or some other place which functions as a home, as the setting for the show.⁹ *Joan of Arcadia* possesses nearly all of these characteristics, except the use of time which parallels actual time. (However, this is mostly likely

⁹ Mary Ellen Brown, “The Politics of Soaps: Pleasure and Feminine Empowerment,” *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies* 4 (1987): 4.

because *Joan of Arcadia* is primetime soap that only airs once per week, as opposed to daily soaps.)

In traditional realist narratives, plot lines are constructed to have a beginning, middle, and end; with the beginning as a state of equilibrium that gets disturbed. The plot then traces the effects of the disturbance until a solution is found and equilibrium is reestablished. However soap opera realism works through an infinitely extended middle, meaning that there is no sense of equilibrium. As Charlotte Brunson argues the pleasure in soap operas lies in seeing how the events occur rather than the events themselves. Each event always has consequences, final outcomes are indefinitely deferred, and the narrative climax is rarely reached. Instead there is a succession of obstacles and problems to be overcome and the narrative interest centers on people's feelings and reactions as they live through a constant series of disruptions and difficulties. The triumphs are small-scale and temporary, and these mini-climaxes complicate as much as they resolve.¹⁰ The narrative structure of *Joan of Arcadia* aligns with this disturbed and deferred plot formation of soap operas. In each episode, God gives Joan a task, and most of the time she resists but eventually does what God has asked of her. The audience then experiences with Joan how God's plan is implemented by seemingly unrelated actions. Thus, each episode has a mini-climax, in that the task is usually completed and Joan begins to see the interconnectedness of all things. However, oftentimes these resolutions prompt further questions from both Joan and the audience that God is never willing to answer. Thus, each episode serves as a piece to the never-ending puzzle that is God's plan for Joan, her family, Arcadia, and the world.

This idea that Joan needs to understand the interconnectedness of all things, aligns with Brown's second characteristic of the soap opera genre: the multiplicity of characters and plotlines. Joan is clearly the protagonist of the series; however, in almost episode

¹⁰ Charlotte Brunson, "Writing about Soap Opera," in *Television Mythologies: Stars, Shows, and Signs*, edited by L. Masterman, (London: Comedia/MK Media Press, 1984), 82-87.

there are storylines that do not include Joan. This is most often the case when episodes have storylines that focus on Will Girardi's police cases. It is important to note that there are episodes where Joan is able to influence her father's cases. For example in the pilot episode, Will is working on a case that involves the kidnapping and murder of young women. Not only does God ask Joan to get a job at the bookstore to help her brother realize that he needs to get a job; but also she sees the perpetrator one night after she gets off work. She is then able to tell her father what she saw and he is able to arrest the man responsible for the crimes. However, Joan does not affect all of Will's police cases throughout the series, and the show also has significant storylines for each of the members of the Girardi family, as well as Joan's two best friends, Adam and Grace.

John Fiske states that the purpose of the multiplicity of plotlines, "allows a variety of topics to be introduced and explored from a variety of positions. 'Progressive' subjects, such as abortion, test-tube babies, or interracial marriage can be introduced and explored through the different experiences of a number of characters."¹¹ *Joan of Arcadia* is able to tackle controversial subjects like interracial dating, homosexuality, the nature of good and evil, and why bad things happen to good people through the variety of perspectives in the Girardi family. Will is an atheist policeman whose dualistic mindset sees the world in black and white. Joan's mother, Helen is an artist who was raised Catholic, and while has not considered herself religious for a number of years begins to re-explore her religion after Kevin's accident. Kevin, a former all-state athlete, had his life completely altered after a car accident that left him paralyzed; and now has to come to terms with this new life that he never wanted. And Luke is a brilliant scientist who has a rational view of the world. Thus, this multiplicity of characters and points of view allow the audience both to identify with characters that they relate to, but also to question their previous ways of thinking as they see other characters grapple with the problem.

¹¹ John Fiske, *Television Culture* 2nd edition, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 197.

While the narrative structure of *Joan of Arcadia* does align with the soap opera genre, there are scholars who are weary of the correlation between daytime soaps and primetime serials. For example, Jason Mittell disagrees with the argument that the presence of serial melodrama in primetime suggests the expansion of soap opera outside of daytime, and asserts that this influence suggests that soaps should be as more legitimate and central to the cultural values of television. He responds, “But I just don't see that argument applying today, as the majority of both producers and viewers of primetime serials have never watched soaps and probably wouldn't particularly like them if they did.”¹² Essentially, he is arguing that soap operas did not invent serial form or melodrama, but rather just happened to be the dominant locale for both throughout the bulk of television history. Thus, contemporary primetime serial is more accurately described as cousins with the soap opera, sharing common ancestry from the nineteenth-century novel, but very few primetime shows seem to be directly influenced by day-time traditions.¹³

Despite the debate of whether to label *Joan of Arcadia* as a teen soap opera or a primetime serial, it seems that either genres do not provide an adequate platform for religiously themed plot lines. *Battlestar Galactica* creator, Ronald Moore was asked in an interview, why he believes people will watch a sci-fi show that involves a lot of religious themes, but might not watch a "*Joan of Arcadia*" type show? He responds, “I think it's like a lot of things in science fiction. People are a lot more comfortable allowing us to go into areas that are controversial or charged. People put in this automatic filter. It's why the original Star Trek series was able to deal with things like racism in the middle of the 1960's on primetime television. It's all pretend and it gives

¹² Jason Mittell, "Perspective: Scholar Jason Mittell on the Ties Between Daytime and Primetime Serials, Based on an Interview by Sam Ford," in *The Survival of Soap Opera: Transformations for a New Media Era*, edited by Sam Ford, Abigail De Kosnik, and C. Lee Harrington. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 137. .

¹³ Mittell, "Perspective," 137-138.

people permission not to get pissed off.”¹⁴ Moore is correct; people are less likely to get defensive or “pissed off” when controversial issues arise in science fiction, because they are clearly talking about a different time and place that is not contemporary American society. However, Moore’s analysis should be pushed one step further. Not only are people less likely to get angry, but they are also less anxious about discussing these troubling questions about society. This type of cognitive dissonance allows millennials to work out their fears, concerns, and curiosities on a platform that is not directly representative of their society. That is why youth and emerging adults are comfortable searching for God with shows like *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica*, but not the realism provided by *Joan of Arcadia*.

Audience Responses to the Show

The show’s unique approach to God and religion attracted a lot of attention that was both positive and negative. One of the show’s greatest proponents was author and Catholic priest, Andrew Greeley. In an article for the *Chicago Sun Times*, Greeley states,

Producer Barbara Hall asks the really important questions about God—who he is, what’s he up to, why he sometimes seems to go away, why he permits bad things to happen. God, in the various forms in which he appears to Joan, provides no easy answers to these questions. Rather He or She is usually content with two claims (1) He knows what he is doing even if we can’t figure it out, and (2) He loves all of us.¹⁵

Greeley believes the show fits in a theological category known as the “Hidden God” tradition, dating back at least to Saint Augustine. As the title of his article suggests, in this tradition, God is unpredictable, unfathomable, and “ineffable.” As Greeley says: “he

¹⁴ Ellen Leventry, “The Souls of Cylons: Ron Moore, Executive Producer of *Battlestar Galactica*, talks about the theology behind the Sci-Fi Channel Series,” *Beliefnet*, 22 July 2005, accessed 4 March 2014, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Movies/2005/05/The-Souls-Of-Cylons.aspx?p=1>.

¹⁵ Andrew Greeley, “TV Show Raises Questions about God: In *Joan of Arcadia*, God is Unpredictable, Unfathomable, and Ineffable,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 5, 2005, accessed December 9, 2012, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-1553361.html>.

does not explain or apologize, much less give political advance. Any god who is not mysterious is not God. Any god who is willing to play our game is not God. Any god who whispers answers to important questions in our waiting ears is not God.”¹⁶ Thus, Greeley, and many viewers of the show, approved of Hall’s representation of God throughout the series.

However, there were many people who did not approve of Hall’s portrayal of God, and harshly criticized the show. When attempting to anthropomorphize God, theological issues arise on two levels. First, how do humans imagine God? And second, should God be imagined and “cast” this way at all?¹⁷ Various traditional, biblically oriented Christian critics objected to the show precisely because they think God should not be represented. Stephen Keels, a youth minister at Good Shepherd Community Church, disliked seeing God portrayed in human form at all. He maintained that, “the series creates a God with limitations that he cannot accept.”¹⁸ While it is unclear exactly what the limitations are, it is possible that he objected that the God in *Joan of Arcadia* was uncompromisingly nondenominational, thus alienating part of the viewing audience. Other Christian critics have objected to the absence of Jesus, since it is a tenet of Evangelical Christianity that the way to the Father lies only through salvation in the Son—at least since the New Testament.¹⁹

There were some critics that went as far as to say that the show was theologically misleading. Douglas Leblanc, founder of getreligion.org, an online religious magazine, writes in a story for *Christianity Today*, “Joan requires that Christians check their credulity at the door. God’s instructions to Joan are often mysterious...these revelations are not specific enough to withstand a testing by Scripture, by any historic creed, or even

¹⁶ Greeley, “TV Show Raises Questions about God.”

¹⁷ Zito, “Can Television Mediate Religion?” 729.

¹⁸ Stephen Keels quoted in Zito, “Can Television Mediate Religion?” 729.

¹⁹ Zito, “Can Television Mediate Religion?” 731.

by messages Joan might hear at church.... Joan of Arcadia is not a source of systematic theology, even at a popular level.”²⁰ While he does approve of the show’s ethical value, Leblanc also notes the objections to God’s appearance at all as an affront to the rejection of “graven images.” Thus, not everyone approved of the theological choices that the Hall and her team of writers made.

The praises and criticisms of *Joan of Arcadia* all seem to fall in line with the current trend of Christians classifying themselves as either “religious” or “spiritual.” Many people who classify themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” presume that religion has to do with doctrines, dogmas, and ritual practices, whereas spirituality has to do with the heart, feeling, and experience. Amy Hollywood, Professor at Harvard Divinity School, explains that the spiritual person has an immediate and spontaneous experience of the divine or of some higher power. These individuals do not subscribe to beliefs handed to them by existing religious traditions, nor do they engage in the ritual life of any particular institution. At the heart of the distinction between religion and spirituality, then, lies the presumption that to think and act within an existing tradition, risks making one less spiritual. To be religious is to bow to the authority of another, to believe in doctrines determined for one in advance, to read ancient texts only as they are handed down through existing interpretative traditions, and blindly to perform formalized rituals. For the spiritual, religion is inert, arid, and dead; the practitioner of religion, whether consciously or not, is at best without feeling, at worst insincere.²¹

Thus, the “spiritual but not religious” label has increased in popularity with younger people in the United States and Europe. Columnist Alan Miller attributes the wider associations of “organized religion” to historic atrocities and contemporary

²⁰ Douglas Leblanc, “Hip Mission: A High-School Girl Further Increases God’s Prime-Time Exposure,” *Christianity Today*, April 16, 2004, accessed December 9, 2012, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/april/26.101.html>.

²¹ Amy Hollywood, “Spiritual but not Religion,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Winter/Spring 2012, accessed December 12, 2012, <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news-events/harvard-divinity-bulletin/articles/spiritual-but-not-religious>.

outrages, from the crusades to pedophilia and associations with extremism of the Religious Right in the United States and terrorism internationally seems to have coalesced with the broader disdain for institutions in society generally and a commitment to a set of principles or ideas in particular.²² However, this new movement has not gone without critique. While Miller understands why some Christians want to distance their faith from the past horrors committed in the name of religion, he is very critical of this group. He states,

The Spiritual But Not Religious-ers, seem to have appropriated the worst of all worlds. They have retained the superstitious outlook and yet do not want to engage or present anything more broadly life affirming. Selecting a superficial mixture of "nice-feeling" items from Yoga to a slice of Zen and a moment of Tao is hardly progressive as far as options for humanity is concerned. They have jettisoned the hard work, diligence and observation of organized religion for a me-me-me what-ever kind of lifestyle. It is transparent too however that the religious organizations themselves cannot motivate a vision that is compelling to young people. Super-churches are much discussed, but more like social centers than places of doctrine and diligent religious observation.²³

Thus, these terms of “religion” and “spirituality” can be very polarizing for Christians. These terms have become important not only for classifying one’s own religious beliefs, but also labeling others.

This polarizing effect of individuals classifying themselves and “religious” or “spiritual” has implications in how viewers responded to *Joan of Arcadia*. Those who responded positively to show were most likely individuals who would classify themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” Amber Tamblyn, the actress who played Joan, even described the depiction of God as “personal and not religious.”²⁴ And many people

²² Alan Miller, “Spiritual but not Religious: The Worst of Both Worlds,” *Huffington Post*, October 2, 2012, accessed December 12, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alan-miller/attacks-on-religion-miss-the-point_b_1920289.html?utm_hp_ref=religion.

²³ Miller, “Spiritual but not Religious.”

²⁴ Michael E. Miller, “God Speaks, Viewers Watch.” *Washington Post*, November 9, 2003, accessed December 12, 2012, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-308476.html>.

really responded this portrayal of God. Jason Ritter, who played Joan's older brother Kevin, stated that, "I think a lot of people are liking the God we are portraying. I've had people come up to me and say 'I believe in that God! Find me a religion that has that God—a loving God that's all-inclusive and without punishment!'"²⁵ Thus, those who classified themselves as "spiritual but not religious" were more likely to respond to a personal God that refused to identify one religion as right.

However, as pointed out in the criticisms of the show, it is precisely this type of God that those who would classify themselves as "religious" found very problematic. The show was considered theologically misleading because God did not use Joan to promote Christianity; God did not even want Joan to become a Christian herself, but rather just to "fulfill her true nature." Pastor Lillian Daniels criticizes the "spiritual but not religious" movement as being too individualistic, stating that,

There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself. You [spiritual but not religious people] are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating.²⁶

Thus, it is very likely that those who consider themselves to be religious, could not identify with Joan's relationship with God because it was too individualistic. While God does use Joan to positively influence those around her, the theme of the show is the individualistic notion to "fulfill your nature" rather than a communal goal of spreading the Gospel and creating a community of believers.

Despite the devoted fan base, and critical acclaim, *Joan of Arcadia*, was cancelled

²⁵ Joel Rubinoff, "Joan of Arcadia Helps Ritter's Healing," *Toronto Star*, February 18, 2005.

²⁶ Lillian Daniel, "Spiritual but not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me," *United Church of Christ*, August 31, 2011, accessed December 12, 2012, <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/daily-devotional/spiritual-but-not-religious.html>.

at the end of the second season. The reason given was that its audience had dropped from 10.1 million in the first year to 8 million by the end of the second season. More significant was the demographic of the audience: a mean age of 53.9. CBS, driven by advertising, anxiously pursues the younger audience, aged 18-49.²⁷ It is interesting to note that in an effort to pursue a younger audience, *The Ghost Whisperer*, a show in which a young woman has the ability to see and communicate with ghosts, replaced *Joan of Arcadia*. In a comment about this decision president of CBS, Les Moonves, said: “I think talking to ghosts will skew younger than talking to God.”²⁸ This gives light to the interesting phenomenon that young people in America are more fascinated with supernatural forces like ghosts, vampires, and zombies; rather than the traditional Protestant portrayal of God. Perhaps it is not the case that the existential questions that arose in the wake of September 11 are no long of interest, but rather they are being expressed in other forms. Issues of the ultimate nature of humanity and what happens when we die are still prevalent, but they are being expressed in terms of apocalypse rather than rapture.

Despite this new fascination with the supernatural, Evangelical Christianity in America was rising in America. The best-selling books in the “Left Behind” series and the phenomenon of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* demonstrated that overtly Christian material could be wildly successful. Thus, it would seem logical that a show about a young woman with a personal relationship with God would be popular with an audience that seeks that type of relationship in their own lives. Did viewers suddenly grow bored with the show’s vague, ecumenical monotheism? When *Joan of Arcadia* debuted in 2003, the mere sight of an attractive God on primetime seemed racy. By ducking divisive issues of faith, the show appealed to seekers. However, in the post-

²⁷ Zito, “Can Television Mediate Religion?” 728.

²⁸ Jim Bawden, “CBS Show Jugglers Prefer Ghosts to God,” *Toronto Star*, May 19, 2005.

Passion world, Joan couldn't afford to be so coy.²⁹

There was a glimmer of hope: Despite the dramatic dip in ratings, Barbara Hall signed a three-year development deal with Paramount in February that, supposedly, guaranteed the show would stay on CBS through 2005-06. It seemed that *Joan of Arcadia* would have the chance to bounce back and be the best show on network television. Questions including would Hall and CBS continue to take risks and push the boundaries of secular pop culture and was it time for Joan to get religion, became the topic of discussion among fans of the show. While the show was losing steam, it was well produced, well-acted and incredibly nuanced for a teen drama. The writing was clever and the plots often surprising, and unlike the award-winning dramas on HBO like *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos*, and *Deadwood*, you could watch this with the entire family.³⁰

Hall and her staff of writers seemed to have the confidence of the network, and the wit and talent to dramatize religion without succumbing to the pitfalls of pat religiosity. With a new contract in place, it seemed Friday-night audiences would continue to unravel the relationship that God has with humanity. However, on May 18, the network cancelled the show. While it is unclear as to what transpired between the original contract for a third season, and the ultimate cancellation after the second season; it seems that the show's failure to capture the desired demographic proved fatal. It is obvious that the lack of the desired audience was most likely due to its Friday night time-slot, a time when most young people are not home watching television. While it is impossible to know the religious affiliation of the 8 million viewers who continued to watch the show through the second season, it can be gleaned from the reviews that many Christian leaders were unhappy with the show's portrayal of religion. Even though the show portrayed the desired relationship that Evangelical Christians want with God, the

²⁹ Mesman, "Leaving Arcadia."

³⁰ Mesman, "Leaving Arcadia."

God of *Joan of Arcadia* was too committed to the nondenominational stance that the writers worked so hard to create. While the show's theme of "it's not about religion, it's about fulfilling your true nature," appealed to more spiritual Christians, it was not going to satisfy the Evangelical tradition. After all, Hall's Third Commandment was that God can never identify one religion as being right. This would prove to be a difficult message to sell to an audience that believes the only way to salvation is through Jesus Christ. Thus, the rise of Evangelism in America, the very condition that allowed for a show like *Joan of Arcadia* to come into existence, also took away from the potential audience of the show.

Conclusion

Joan of Arcadia should have been popular with a young audience. The humanist portrayal of God that does not advocate for a traditional, dogmatic religious practice aligns with the religiosity of many American youth and emerging adults. The show's God, who cannot directly intervene, never identifies one religion as being right, and whose guiding principle is for humanity to fulfill its true nature; aligns with the Moral Therapeutic Deism and with the rhetoric of "spiritual but not religious" attitudes of young people. It is also clear that youth and young people are not completely disinterested in issues of God and religion. After all, *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica* are also existential journeys in which the protagonists are searching for God, and those series are extremely popular.

What makes the portrayal of religion in *Joan of Arcadia* different from that of *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica* is the genre in which the show is framed. *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica* both use the apocalypse genre as a platform for viewers to explore religious issues and express societal anxieties (with *Supernatural* leaning towards a fantasy genre, and *Battlestar Galactica* in a science-fiction genre.) *Joan of Arcadia* is a teen soap opera/serial drama that used a realistic narrative to explore

these issues of how God works in a modern world. With the average age of the viewing audience as fifty-three; *Joan of Arcadia* was unable to capture the young audience that the network desired. Thus, either young people were unsatisfied with the portrayal of religion in the show; or, more likely, the personified God character was an immediate turn-off because it was reminiscent of traditional, dogmatic Christianity.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

It is clear that American youth and emerging adults are undergoing a change in their religiosity, as they are tuning away from the traditional, dogmatic religion of their parents and grandparents. Current scholarship labels this new religiosity as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” the “rise of the nones,” or the classification of “spiritual but not religious,” implying that the millennial generation is giving up on Christianity. However, these labels are too simplistic and do not adequately describe the religious imagination of this generation. Youth and young adults are not completely disavowing faith, religion, and God; but rather are forging new paths to explore religious issues and questions. They are a generation of “Seekers,” who are thoughtfully and relentlessly searching for answers to life’s mysteries. Thus, it seems that contemporary scholars are not asking the right questions when reading the statistics that state that youth and emerging adults are leaving the church at alarming rates. The questions should not merely be, *are* youth and emerging adults leaving the church? But rather, *why* are they walking away and *what* exactly are they walking away from? Millennials may be abandoning the church as an institution, but not religion, or even Christianity, altogether. This generation is looking at the contemporary religious landscape, and understanding how Christianity has become a political tool used to divide the country. They cannot reconcile the type of homophobic, sexist, and exclusivist Christianity with their own worldviews, and it is this type of Christianity that many millennials have rejected. This continual link between religious pluralism as irreligion is a misrepresentation of the religiosity of many youth and young adults, and dismissive of the depth of questions that they are asking.

Many of these existential questions have come to the fore since September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and television has been a medium that has allowed for the expression of social, political, and religious anxieties. Young Americans also found television to be a mechanism for these types of discussions and a place to work through

their own questions. Youth and emerging adults are most comfortable having these types of discussions when television programs are in the apocalypse genre, a subcategory of either fantasy or science fiction. This is because apocalypse genre utilized by *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica*, allows individuals to work out moral dilemmas, ask the deep questions, and express their doubts in a setting that is not literally representative of the societies in which they live. They can talk about political corruption, the morality of torture, and whether or not God exists when the stakes are not quite as high, because regardless of the answer that they/the show reach; there is still the comfort that in “real life” things could be different. This type of cognitive dissonance means that the answers they glean and the choices they make do not have the same consequences, because the show is clearly in another time and place.

This is not the case with other genres like teen soap opera/serial dramas that framed *Joan of Arcadia*. The show was grounded in a realism narrative and was based on the question of what would happen if God literally spoke to people. Joan was a normal, teenage girl. She was flawed, didn't always get along with her family, and desperately wanted to fit in at school. She wasn't religious, yet God chose her to directly communicate with. God doesn't even ask her to do extraordinary things. He asks her to take AP Chemistry, plant a garden, and join the chess team; and from these small actions, God's plan is revealed. It is not that *Joan of Arcadia* does not tackle the tough issues; and throughout the series Will confronts issues of racism on the police force, Helen starts to re-explore religion (despite the disapproval of her husband), Kevin mourns the life that he could have had if he had not been involved in the drunk driving accident that took away his ability to walk, Joan deals with the death of a close friend, and Luke wrestles with the guilt he feels about being happy his brother is no longer the superstar of the family. However, it was precisely this experiment of anthropomorphizing God and placing God into our modern society that contributed to its cancellation. Unlike *Supernatural* and *Battlestar Galactica*, *Joan of Arcadia* directly correlated to our society

which made it a less desirable platform to explore religious issues and to express doubts. After all, it is difficult to doubt the existence of God when God is a main character in the series.

This study is just scratching the surface of the work that can be done on both the portrayal of religion on television and the religiosity of the millennial generation. Young Americans are challenging the foundations of traditional, exclusivist Protestant Christianity, and are reforming a religion that aligns with their worldview and experience. This means that religious question and expression are no longer happening solely in churches, which indicates that scholars of religion will need to analyze other avenues of religious exploration. This project was limited to three case studies of television shows from the mid-2000s, but since then there have been a number of other religiously themed television shows (which is further discussed in the Epilogue). However, these other avenues of inquiry should not only include television, but also other technologies like film, social media, blogs, etc. Technology is intertwined with the daily life of youth and emerging adults that simply was not present when their parents and grandparents were their age. Thus, it shouldn't seem surprising that their religious expression is different from, and therefore unrecognizable to, older generations of American Christians. And the automatic assumption that this difference is equated with irreligion is a misrepresentation of the religiosity of youth and emerging adults.

EPILOGUE

Supernatural, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Joan of Arcadia* all began in the early 2000s, and *Supernatural* is still on air having just been renewed for its tenth season. Thus, it is worth exploring the television landscape of shows today, and whether there are programs with predominately religious themes. Eric Kripke, creator of *Supernatural*, has continued his work in the apocalypse genre by creating a new science fiction series, *Revolution*, which airs on NBC. Debuting in 2012, and currently airing its second season; *Revolution* takes place fifteen years after a world-wide blackout. One day, the power went out and never came back on again. Society collapses as governments crumble and social disorder becomes rampant, and now most of the country is ruled by militias and warlords. The show centers on the Matheson family as it is revealed that Ben Matheson and his wife Rachel helped to build the technology that led to the blackout. Their children Charlie and Danny as well as Ben's brother Miles, and family friend Aaron Pittman journey to find out why the blackout happened. It is revealed that nano-technology created by Ben and Rachel with the computer code written by Aaron; spiraled out of control and turned off the power. The most interesting theological plotline comes in season two, as the characters are beginning to understand how the nano-technology works, and it is revealed that the nano-tech is now everywhere and so small that it cannot be seen. Thus, with the knowledge that nano-tech is everywhere, knows everything, and can control everything; one of the characters asks Aaron, "How is that any different from God?"

One new show that is less theological, but could also be considered both an apocalypse narrative and an existential journey is *Almost Human* which premiered on Fox in November, 2013 and just finished its first season. *Almost Human* takes place in the year 2048 after an uncontrollable evolution of technology caused crime rates to skyrocket. The police force then began pairing every human officer with a life-like robot android, and the show centers on one of these partnerships. John Kennex distrusts the androids,

but is forced to comply with policy and is partnered with a standard-issue MX-43 android, which he soon throws from a moving vehicle, when it threatens to report his unusual behavior. He is assigned a replacement android, an older DRN model named Dorian who was originally decommissioned for police work. The DNR models were given a synthetic soul because they were supposed to be as close to human as possible. However, the DRNs have trouble dealing with some of their own emotional responses, which was the reason they were replaced by the logic-based MX models. Throughout the season, Dorian puts himself in harm in order to protect Kennex, and both Kennex and the audience bond with Dorian, despite the fact that he is not technically human. While the show did not directly deal with religious or theological issues, the show has a mysterious post-apocalyptic setting as it is revealed that the city is bound by walls that allow no one to enter and exist. The show can also be classified as an existential journey as Dorian and Kennex they are constantly questioning what it really means to be human.

Thus, it is clear that television continues to provide a platform for discussing religious issues and working through religious, social, and political anxieties. It is interesting to note that *Revolution*, *Almost Human*, and *Battlestar Galactica* all combine questions about religion with anxieties about rapidly advancing technology. In all three, humans create technology that eventually evolves out of their control and turns on them. It is perhaps not surprising that there is an influx of television series questioning technology, and especially ones that resonate with youth and young adults. After all, this generation is living in a world where technology is advancing more rapidly than ever, and learning how to use and negotiate these developments is a societal necessity. However, this continuous connection between religious and technological questions is intriguing. Perhaps human creation of technology is meant to parallel God's creation of humanity; both of which spiral out of control and lead to evil in the world. Or perhaps the link is due to anxiety about our lack of control in the world and in our own lives—is there such a thing as fate? Does God exist? What is God's role in the world? Are we too dependent

on technology? Is it possible for technology to reach a point where we cannot control it? What does that mean for our future, and the future of the world? These questions all become linked together, and the apocalypse genre is the perfect platform to discuss these issues. These are real fears and anxieties, especially for youth and emerging adults today; that simply were not present for their parents and grandparents. Television has become one platform to ask these questions, especially among youth and young adults who are trying to negotiate their religious and social anxieties in the modern world.

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