

Richard Goodwin

## Book Review

# Kutter Callaway with Dean Batali, Watching TV Religiously

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There's a moment on *THE SIMPSONS* (Jeffrey Lynch, US 1994) when Homer, smeared by the media as a sexual predator, begs his children to believe him rather than TV – but the kids waver. Bart explains, "It's just hard not to listen to TV. It's spent so much more time raising us than you have" (to which Homer replies, "Maybe TV is right. TV's always right"). Few would deny that recent generations have been raised by television. At a time when it is more likely to be streamed "on demand" using a 5.8-inch screen than watched on the family television set at the time of broadcast, TV remains a significantly formative feature of 21st-century life. Is the formative power of TV something to bemoan and resist? Or might there be genuine theological value there – a medium through which, perhaps, even God may be encountered? These are the questions that animate *Watching TV Religiously*, a compelling, comprehensive look at TV in which theologian Kutter Callaway and screenwriter Dean Batali argue not only for discerning theological engagement with the pervasive medium, but also for the possibility that it may occasionally serve as the site for the Spirit of God's transformative work in the viewer's life.

"Conversation[s] about God' ... are regularly happening both on TV and among TV viewers", write Callaway and Batali. "Our hope is to chart a path for Christians to join this theological conversation in ways that are as constructive as they are life-giving" (6). And the sophistication with which the authors approach this conversation is decidedly fresh. Rather than focus solely on content, this book is concerned with how TV "is already functioning 'theologically'" (6). As such, Callaway and Batali examine the medium with respect to not only form, but also "process" (i.e. production) and "practice" (i.e. reception). Moreover, they understand TV itself as more than mere "text" (actually, the writers prefer the more dynamic term *trace*, less tethered as it is to a literary paradigm and more evocative of TV shows' amorphous quality); television is simultaneously technology, narrative, commod-

ity, and ritual (22–35). The net result is a study interested not so much in theology on TV as in a theology of and (to a lesser extent) *through* TV.

Chapters 1–3 seek to understand TV on its own terms, asking first how to define TV (a surprisingly complex task, thanks to technological developments that have given the designation “TV” an “increasingly symbolic” function [22]), before dedicating significant space to developing the analytical tools essential for televisual “literacy”. Chapters 4–7 are more directly theological, exploring the telos of TV, historic Christian approaches to the medium, TV as mediating God’s revelatory presence, and, finally, consideration of ethics. The structure reflects the method: TV first, theology second. This is not to say that theology is subordinated to TV – not at all! – but simply that in the subtitled dialogue between TV and theology, the authors’ “primary impulse is to listen rather than speak, to set aside our own agendas and presuppositions for the sake of honouring our conversation partners” (13). Granting methodological priority to TV is presented as an act of Christian hospitality and as a more realistic approach for a post-Christendom culture in which Christian theology can no longer assume it has the first word (15).

Though certainly a work of legitimate scholarship, *Watching TV Religiously* is fun and even funny – appropriately enough for a book about a medium largely associated with leisure. For example, the writers use the analogy of a jury to explain the internal workings of the TV writers’ room and claim that this analogy is an allusion not to the film *12 ANGRY MEN* (Sidney Lumet, US 1957) starring Henry Fonda (or the eponymous play), but rather to a derivative episode of *HAPPY DAYS* (Jerry Paris, US 1978). In defence of this claim, they write facetiously that “this is a book about TV, so on these pages, Mr. Fonzarelli’s coolness trumps Mr. Fonda’s” (72). And to express their skepticism about the findings of a Netflix-funded study into viewers’ binge-watching habits, they sarcastically quip, “This of course is a completely trustworthy statistic. As everyone knows, human beings never attempt to mislead others about their unsavoury behaviors” (19). Batali’s day job as a TV comedy writer has apparently informed the tone – and the book is the better for it. Humour aside, the writing style is down-to-earth. There are no instances of scholarly obfuscation, no intractable tangles of clunky academic prose. Instead, the writing is lucid and elegant – the way academic writing should be. It is one of the most accessible theological texts I have ever read, understandable to a wide range of readers in a manner befitting a populist medium.

The style, however, does not compromise the substance. The book is weighty and insightful. One of its key strengths, already alluded to, is the holistic way in which it comes at the topic, engaging TV in terms of, yes, “text” – or, better, *trace* – but also of process and practice. Regarding process, Batali’s contribution is invaluable. His career as a TV writer yields useful insights into how TV shows are written. Perhaps even more helpful, I think, is the focus on audience reception. To my mind, elaborate scholarly “readings”, however clever they

may be, are no more important (and are arguably less so) than the coding, interpretations, and appropriations in which viewers *actually* engage.

Another strength is the emphasis on aesthetics. Theological engagement with screen media has historically had a tendency to skip over formal analysis, proceeding directly to “literary” elements like plot, character, and theme.<sup>1</sup> But what and how an artwork “means” is inextricably bound up with style. Chapter 2 seeks to equip readers with the ability to appreciate television at this stylistic level, discussing form in terms of structure, sights, and sounds. That the authors prioritise aesthetic engagement yields deep insights into meaning. For example, the examination of *HOUSE OF CARDS* (Beau Willimon, US 2013–), a series still in production, scrutinises the theme music for clues about where the show might be headed, its *telos*. Though the show’s protagonist, Frank Underwood, seemingly gets away with murder and indeed is even rewarded for his nefarious behaviour, the conflicting major and minor modes of the theme music suggest that his “ultimate fate has already been sealed... Frank’s demise will come, but when and how remain to be seen” (198). Actor Kevin Spacey’s dismissal from the show in the wake of allegations of sexual misconduct (events that have only transpired since the book’s publication) has likely complicated the task of bringing the show to a conclusion, but, if anything, these sordid real-world revelations will probably only add weight to the downfall of which Callaway and Batali detect hints in the theme music. Of course, this meaning, derived as it is wholly from stylistic analysis, would elude commentators concerned only with discursive elements like plot and character.

To my surprise, some of the most fruitful analyses were of sitcoms. *FRIENDS* (David Crane and Marta Kauffman, US 1994–2004) and *PARKS & RECREATION* (Greg Daniels and Michael Schur, US 2009–2015) form the basis for a discussion of character growth and empathy. To preserve the comic potential inherent in recalcitrantly opposing personalities, the former show neither depicts nor encourages substantial character development. The latter show, however, is that rare (unique?) breed of sitcom that finds humour in selfless friendships. Even the fairly vanilla *THE BIG BANG THEORY* (Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady, US 2007–) is similarly shown to represent a distinctive vision of human community in which long-suffering, self-sacrificial care for the other enables collective flourishing. Why did I find this profundity surprising? Because the genre, especially in its most conventional versions, is usually considered to be among the fluffiest of TV fare – right up there (almost) with soaps and reality TV. The genius lies in the attention paid not just to individual episodes but also to whole seasons and indeed entire series. This, I think, is a more realistic understanding of how audiences are actually shaped by the television medium. While the formative impact

1 Johnston 2007, 19–20.

of an individual episode may be minimal, the cumulative effect of living with a particular TV show over months or years is bound to be more significant.

This brings us to one of the most important contributions of the book, namely its discussion of the presence of the Spirit of God in the ritual practices of TV consumption. The optimistic take on the capacity of screen media to occasion the Spirit's transformative activity will come as no surprise to those familiar with Callaway's earlier work on film music, *Scoring Transcendence*.<sup>2</sup> But here that notion is developed specifically with respect to the ritualisation so characteristic of the medium. Building upon the anthropological insights of Augustine, the authors advocate for a shift from a transmission view to a ritual view of communication (144). They then turn to the work of James K. A. Smith to demonstrate the power of ritual formation. The authors part ways with Smith slightly over the nature of desire; rather than seeing human passions as neutral and prone to misdirection, as per Smith, they prefer the more optimistic view of fellow-theologian William Dyrness that holds those passions to be potential sites of the Spirit's activity (151). From there, the authors draw upon the revised take on general revelation advanced by Robert K. Johnston, in which "God's wider presence" may be encountered in cultural artefacts and practices, like television (156). Callaway and Batali thus layer these theological resources to construct a robust argument for the possibility of the Spirit's presence and activity in the ordinary patterns of TV viewing that typify contemporary life.

Ordinarily, the discussion of ethics in this sort of book would hold minimal appeal for me. Not that ethics are not important – on the contrary, they are essential – but, in some cases, such conversations can feel a bit like a youth-group talk, aimed at the immature or just the plain puritanical. But, true to form, Callaway and Batali's treatment of the ethics of TV watching is far more generous, ambitious, and nuanced than most. They deliberately and explicitly move beyond the "big three" of content (sex, swearing, and violence) to consider ethical matters that are less obvious but potentially more insidious (166). Much of what they advocate boils down to the active avoidance of the silos and echo chambers that have become part-and-parcel of the modern, highly personalised mediascape. To that end, they point out the problematic nature of TV news that amounts to little more than entertainment (and the prophetic value of satirical news shows that expose it); the importance of diverse representation on TV; and the need to "curate" TV viewing habits to counteract the inevitable confirmation biases that arise when consuming an exclusive diet of "recommended for you" suggestions generated by Netflix algorithms.

Thanks to its accessibility and comprehensiveness, this book would be an ideal assigned text for classes on theology and television or required reading

2 Callaway 2013.

for classes on theology and popular culture. That being said, it focuses almost exclusively on US TV, and will thus be most relevant in an American educational setting. Even for readers outside the United States, however, it is a valuable resource, both because of American TV's global reach and because it serves as an exemplary model that could be adopted and adapted for theological engagement with the medium in other contexts.

Callaway and Batali are hopeful that “this book will spark constructive conversations that are at least as fun, enlightening, and meaning-filled as the conversations that surround so many of our favorite television shows” (17). Mission accomplished. *Watching TV Religiously* is winsome and thought-provoking. But this work goes further still, aiming to foster a mode of cultural engagement appropriate to a time in which the Western church finds herself increasingly on the cultural margins. The authors write, “The most theologically faithful thing to do is not to demand that the broader culture (and TV in particular) demonstrate... radical transformation as a precondition for our engagement... but to set aside our own interests in order that we might co-labor with culture” (208). This statement could be taken as the book's *raison d'être*: to equip the church to be, to use their James Davison Hunteresque phrase,<sup>3</sup> a “long-suffering presence” amidst a not-yet-transformed people – who happen to really like TV (208). I can think of no better book for the task.

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3 Hunter 2010.