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Book Review
Charlotte E. Howell, Divine Programming
Negotiating Christianity in American Dramatic Television Production 1996–2016

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 271 pages,
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Charlotte Howell's book, a revised doctoral dissertation in Media Studies from the University of Texas, Austin, in the United States, represents a great contribution and a missed opportunity in the study of religion and television. I looked forward to reading this book and was rewarded by Howell's clear writing and convincing description of how television producers, writers, and directors shy away from acknowledging the religious content of their shows when they have an "upscale" audience in mind. Scholars of religion and television have been waiting for another study of prime-time drama since the publication of *Small Screen, Big Picture* in 2009, a collection of essays edited by Diane Winston that set the standard for a variety of approaches to the topic. Because of constant turnover in television shows, essays that were ground-breaking in 2009 are not always relevant to readers in the 2020s. A treatment of recent shows, in light of changes in technology, politics, and demographics, is sorely needed. So, Howell's analysis of shows like The Leftovers (HBO, US 2014–2017) is welcome. The drawback for those who study television in religious studies is Howell's lack of engagement with the scholarly study of religion – a drawback in the field that also works in the opposite direction, as religion scholars like Conrad Ostwalt, S. Brent Plate, and Sofia Sjö have noted and responded to by advocating that scholars of religion educate themselves in the area of media studies.[1]

1 See Ostwalt 2008; Plate 2008; Sjö 2016.

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Howell's book is readable and well-organized. She argues that changes in television production and the television industry (from networks to streaming and on-demand) changed the focus of "creatives" (producers, writers, executives, etc.) away from "middlebrow" fare that appeals to "middle America", to niche or "upscale" audiences (5, 25, 30). That change incorporated a turn toward "edgy" materials in the representation of gender, sexuality, and violence, but significantly not that of religion. Her thesis is that an "ideology of religion as risky" (and here she means, and sometimes says, Christianity) and inherently connected to middlebrow values caused creatives to embrace various modes of distancing and containing "religion" while simultaneously increasing the amount of "religion" present in their narratives (23). In other words, the producers, writers, directors, and other executives denied religious content even where religion is clearly important as part of a show's storyline (31).

One major contribution this book makes comes from Howell's access to creatives connected to shows she chooses as her examples. Her valuable data encompasses statements by marketing executives, producers, writers, and directors addressing "religion" in their shows, revealing how they either downplayed its presence or anticipated pushback when they wished to incorporate it. These rhetorical techniques of denial or displacement of religion make her argument very convincing. She carefully frames her research as wholly production-centered, demonstrating awareness and appreciation for reception studies while drawing a boundary around her work to exclude that perspective (23). I appreciated that, as she positions her work as supplemental to audience studies.

In her introduction, Howell explains her criteria for inclusion of "series that feature mainstream Christianity as a core element for at least one season" but does not explicitly address why it is important to focus on "mainstream Christianity" or to define what she means by "religion" in cases like Battlestar Galactica (Syfy, US 2003–2009), where her criteria are not applicable (4). She does an excellent job justifying the time period she chose for her analysis based on developments within the industry. In the book's first section she establishes that industry understood white Christianity as "middlebrow", represented by shows like 7th Heaven (The WB / CW, US 1996–2007) and Touched by an Angel (CBS, US 1994–2003), hosted by networks that wanted to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. She shows this attitude continuing in the 2010s with several miniseries based on biblical stories (31–74).

The second section covers the first type of "containment" of religious content. In this approach creatives used Christianity to enhance the authenticity of their portrayals of specific American subcultures. Her examples are Friday Night Lights (NBC, US 2006–2011) and Rectify (SundanceTV, US 2013–2017), Southern stories where religion is "othered" as a marker of regional identity for both white and Black Southerners, and two shows where religion is seen as an ethnic or racial marker. Chapter 4, "Nonwhite Christian Dramas", left me feeling that she could have taken the same approach to race as she takes in the book to religion – an explicit choice to focus on the dominant as representing a hegemonic narrative – because the topic of race and religion on television is worthy of more serious treatment than can be offered in one short chapter. However, the chapter provides a possible starting point for future research or analysis of the place shows like these have in the ongoing racialization of religions in 21st century America.

The third section of the book looks at "genre" shows – sci-fi and supernatural-themed shows like Battlestar Galactica and Supernatural (The WB / CW, US 2005–2020). She describes how creatives avoided talking about their shows as "religious" by rhetorically shifting their descriptions to words like "spirituality" or "mythology". In sci-fi settings this is easier because of the alien context, where Christianity simply does not exist in the imagined world, whereas the creatives involved with shows involving specifically Christian-associated figures like Lucifer or angels are even more adamant that these figures are part of a culturally shared "mythology", and not "religious". The fourth section shifts from particular genres of dramas to two newer shows, Daredevil (Netflix, US 2015–2018) and Hand of God (US, Amazon 2015–2017), that are products of the streaming and "Peak TV" era, and which she claims show a greater openness on the part of creatives to acknowledging their use of religion to appeal to an upscale audience.

Howell's conclusion offers an interesting reflection on the uncertainty of future trends in programming with regard to religion, describing how the trends she identified were upended by the election of Donald Trump and its polarizing effect on media. However, her concluding thoughts could have benefitted greatly from addressing the ways that her examples and findings add to the study of secularity, religion, and popular culture, instead of suggesting that the way forward for television shows could be to embrace "a new variation on upscale taste cultures: progressive Christians" (210).

It was somewhat difficult to write this review due to my disappointment at Howell's lack of engagement with existing scholarship in religion. I do not

hold Howell responsible for this issue but see it as a systemic problem of interdisciplinary studies, and of the academic study of religion and television in particular. In the introduction she draws on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, Rudolph Binion, and Stig Hjarvard,[2] which seems promising, but this attention to theory of religion is largely limited to this chapter, not sustained throughout the work. It is also limited in scope to scholars who worked primarily outside the field of religious studies. During the course of the researching, writing, and publishing of this ambitious and welcome book, not one of her mentors, reviewers, or editors seems to have suggested that her thesis is part of an ongoing and rich academic discussion of the topic of secularity in America. The lost opportunity for Howell to consult with someone like Chad Seales,[3] a scholar of secularity and Southern religion on the same campus where she did her doctoral studies, feels frustrating to say the least. Her repeated use of the term "religion-qua-religion" highlights her failure to define religion or secularity at all, let alone in relation to definitions of those terms that scholars have crafted and struggled with for decades. In chapter 6, Howell describes an example of secularization clearly, without using that term: "they take that story foundation [the Book of Revelation] and then claim it as nonreligious mythology" (156). Even if this volume does not address previous scholarship identifying and analyzing this pattern of secularization, in which Christian symbols, stories, practices, and people become removed from a "religious" context and identified as "cultural" or "American" (think Santa Claus), I hope that other scholars will be able to use Howell's book to pick up where she leaves off and integrate the data she reveals in her work into further research about how religion, popular culture, and television intersect in 21st century America and beyond.

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2 See Binion 1986; Nancy 2001; Hjarvard 2011.

3 See for example Seales 2013.

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Filmography

7th Heaven (Created by: Brendan Hampton, The WB / CW, US 1996–2007).
Battlestar Galactica (Developed by: Ronald D. Moore, Syfy, US 2003–2009).
Daredevil (Created by: Drew Goddard, Netflix, US 2015–2018).
Hand of God (Created by: Ben Watkins, US, Amazon, 2015–2017).
Friday Night Lights (Developed by: Peter Berg, NBC, US 2006–2011).
Rectify (Created by: Ray McKinnon, SundanceTV, US 2013–2017).
Supernatural (Created by: Erik Kripke, The WB / CW, US 2005–2020).
The Leftovers (Created by: Damon Lindelof and Tom Perrotta, HBO, US 2014–2017).
Touched by an Angel (Created by: John Masius, CBS, US 1994–2003).