

American Studies: what do our cultural artifacts tell us about history and the world we live in?

Over the past 70 years, few mediums have more thoroughly encapsulated our culture than television. Television has been a touchstone of our common life, the locus of many shared experiences: from political upheaval, to sporting events, to sitcom finales. Perhaps unsurprisingly, television has also functioned as a barometer for how Christianity is understood in the wider culture. Join David Romanik as he explores the ways depictions of faith on television have evolved over time and how they can help us understand our responsibility as Christians.

The Andy Griffith Show

“The Sermon for Today” (1963)

- After Dr. Breen delivers his sermon, the people of Mayberry respond by working themselves into a tizzy to put on a “relaxing” band concert.
- The church functions as it often does in *The Andy Griffith Show*: it’s in the background, providing a vague moral context for the action of the show.
- This is fairly typical of other television shows of the era: church is where weddings, funerals, christenings, and other life events take place, but it is not a center for any kind of transformation
- The church was assumed to be important, which is why Gomer Pyle and Barney Fife are depicted fumbling with hymnals and dozing through the sermon
- Raises an important question: how important can the church possibly be if it is simply provides a moral backdrop that one can sleep through?
- David Bentley Hart: “after Constantine...the Church became that most lamentable of things—a pillar of respectable society”

M*A*S*H

“The General’s Practitioner” (1977)

- In this scene, the Church (represented by Father Francis Mulcahy), functions dialectically: the Glaucon to Hawkeye’s Socrates
- This adversarial role is not accidental
- Though he is something of a peripheral character in the show, Father Mulcahy is occasionally set up in opposition to the doctors he serves with
- Occasionally, Mulcahy is seen as an “angel of death” of sorts, a man who the surgeons work as hard as they can to keep at bay
- More than once, Hawkeye says something to the effect of “You can’t have him yet!” when Mulcahy comes near a patient
- Thus, the doctors represent the voice of moral clarity in *M*A*S*H*, while the Church becomes a bystander, a silent witness to the carnage of the Korean War (and by extension, the War in Vietnam)

The Vicar of Dibley

“Winter” (1999)

- Released by the BBC in 1994, *The Vicar of Dibley* coincided with the ordination of the first women in the Church of England.

- It's basic assumption: now that women can be ordained priests, churches will be full
- Put another way: now that the Church more accurately reflects the world around us, it will be relevant again
- In this scene, the Christmas story becomes a story about the contemporary church: "we are still telling this story in the middle of England, which is why it is important.
- Note: NO reference to the Resurrection!
- In other words, the Church is worthy of preserving as an institution for its own sake.
- It's worth noting that the Church of England is an established church, and isn't likely to go anywhere absent a change in the UK's constitution.

The West Wing

"Two Cathedrals" (2001)

22:00 - 25:23

- In this scene, President Bartlet rails against God for a variety of injustices, and frames his presidency within his understanding of God's will
- In some ways, it hearkens back to the model of the 1970s, when the Church simply provided a backdrop for character development
- Worth noting that this is the first time we've seen a character engage directly with God
- Also worth noting that Bartlet is, in some ways, tapping into the ancient tradition of lament, the discipline of bringing everything before God.
- In other words, the Church is portrayed as being something worth engaging on its merits

The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt

"Kimmy Goes to Church!" (2017)

0:00 - 1:50

3:05 - 6:40

14:07 - 15:50

26:40 - 29:50

- The most recent installment is also the most curious.
- Not uncommon these days. In the years between *The West Wing* and *Kimmy Schmidt*, television sitcoms and dramas have engaged with religion in ways that were previously unheard of.
- Through the eyes of the doe-eyed Kimmy Schmidt, we experience church as if for the first time, with all that is beautiful and ugly about the Body of Christ.
- So, for the first time in our survey, the Church is not any *one* thing: it is complicated, frustrating, and, for the first time, a place of true transformation.

Perhaps paradoxically, even as the cultural primacy of religion has diminished, public interest in religion has surged. People are genuinely curious about what we do on Sunday mornings and, more significantly, about what it means to be a person of faith.

Pew Study released in April:

Four in five American adults say they “believe in God.” Of these believers, 70 percent say they believe in the God of the Judeo-Christian Bible, while 30 percent say they believe in another higher or spiritual power. (According to the survey’s creators, the survey didn’t profile enough members of minority religious groups, such as Muslims or Hindus, to allow a more detailed analysis of their beliefs.)

But, surprisingly, almost half of the Americans who say they don’t believe in God also say they do believe in another higher power or spiritual force at work in the universe. Among the religiously unaffiliated — also known as the religious “nones” — nearly three-quarters (72 percent) believe in some form of higher power, and 17 percent believe in God as described in the Bible. And among self-described “atheists,” a full 18 percent believe in some form of spiritual higher power.

Among self-described Christians, the data shows a similarly complicated spread of theological beliefs. For example, among self-described Christians, a full 20 percent believe in a higher power but don’t believe in the God described in the Bible. That number goes up to 26 percent for mainline Protestants and 28 percent for Catholics. (The phrase “described in the Bible” was used by Pew without further clarification.)

Recent research by the Barna Group: 67 percent of unchurched people own a Bible.

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few!