

SHOWING FAITH: CATHOLICISM IN AMERICAN TV SERIES

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ABSTRACT

According to Colleen McDannell, Catholicism stands above all other religions for the film and TV audience because it seems to be the most mystical and the most easily recognizable of all religious creeds; however, it is also the most criticized and suspicious denomination. Since Catholics star on the big screen, as well as on the flat screen in American homes, it is useful to have a close look at the different depictions of Catholicism and their criticism by institutions. Using examples from movies such as *Million Dollar Baby* and *Gran Torino* as well as TV series such as *Ally McBeal*, *Bones*, *The West Wing* and *The Simpsons*, this article discusses the fascination with Catholicism on the screen and argues that even depictions seen as negative by the Catholic League do not necessarily harm Catholicism.

KEYWORDS

Catholicism; American Catholicism; TV series; Anti-Catholicism; cinema; *Bones*; *Ally McBeal*; *The West Wing*; *The Simpsons*; Clint Eastwood

I. LEARNING BY WATCHING

“Every situation you will face in life has already been faced by the crew of the Starship Enterprise NCC 1701.”¹ With *All I Really Need to Know I Learned from Watching Star Trek*, Dave Marinaccio added another volume to the immense collection of self-help books. Marinaccio’s whole enterprise is remarkable, because his wisdom is based on the 1960s television series *Star Trek*—by writing about learning from his heroes Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, and Doctor “Bones” McCoy he underlines the major impact watching TV has on society. Cinema and movies have influenced American society from the very beginning: conveying ideas, sparking people’s imagination, educating minds, and shaping culture. Moviegoers can escape from reality, find themselves in another world, and live, love, and suffer with their heroes and heroines on the big screen. Nevertheless, real life was reflected in the imagined adventures, and the imaginations left the cinema with the moviegoer and stepped boldly out into reality. Who would not want to be like one of these stars who are larger than life?

1. Dave Marinaccio, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned from Watching Star Trek* (New York: Random House, 1994), 9.

If movies can shape America,² then the impact of a TV series like *Star Trek* is even stronger. The characters on screen reach out to the people in front of the screen and become like friends and family members. As they visit American living rooms on a weekly basis the audience takes part in their lives, sees them come into existence, grow up, and die, and keeps them company for years and even decades. The relationships may become so close that the fans do not want to let them go and try to take them into reality. In the case of *Star Trek* this worked: after receiving thousands of letters in 1976, NASA named its first experimental space shuttle *Enterprise*.

For Americans living in a society that expects its presidents “to discuss their personal faith on television,”³ religious topics also play a major role in the lives of their imaginary friends on the big or the flat screen. In *Catholics in the Movies*, Colleen McDannell, a professor of religious studies at the University of Utah, and her colleagues have been following the “common admission [that] ‘everything I know about religion I learned from the movies.’”⁴ McDannell emphasizes that religion in America is not “merely learned in synagogues, mosques and churches.”⁵ Movies depict all kinds of religious creeds and Christian denominations: there have been Jewish cantors (in *The Jazz Singer*, 1927, dir. Alan Crosland), murderous preachers (*Night of the Hunter*, 1955, dir. Charles Laughton) and followers of Mohammed (*The Message*, 1977, dir. Moustapha Akkad). In particular, there was a strong cultural Jewish influence in American literature and filmmaking; like Catholics, Jews had to face many difficulties in trying to become Americans and fit in with WASP culture, and one way to integrate was through the movies. However, as David Desser points out in his 1996 article,⁶ immigrant Jews almost immediately identified themselves with America itself, which made them less exotic than Catholics, with their links to Rome and the Pope.

Focusing mainly on primary sources, this essay takes a look at what is to be learned from religion in TV series and why Catholicism seems to be so popular with movie and TV producers—especially after the end of movie censorship in the mid-1960s.

II. RELIGION IS CATHOLIC

“In the world of movies, religion is Catholic,”⁷ claims McDannell in her introduction to *Catholics in the Movies*, and she has good reasons to do so. One

2. See, for example, Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage, 1994); and John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994).

3. Colleen McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?,” in *Catholics in the Movies*, ed. Colleen McDannell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.

4. McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?,” 8.

5. McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?,” 8.

6. See David Desser, “‘Consumerist Realism’: American Jewish Life and the Classical Hollywood Cinema,” *Film History* 8 (1996): 261–80.

7. McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?,” 29.

of the latest proofs of this is Walt Kowalski, a seemingly narrow-minded Korean War hero. Played by Clint Eastwood in the recent movie *Gran Torino* (2008), the grumpy and guilty old man is regularly visited by his parish priest, Fr Janovich, played by Christopher Carley. Though mocked by Kowalski—Kowalski tells him: “I think you’re an over-educated, 27-year-old virgin who likes to hold the hands of old ladies who were superstitious and promise them eternity”⁸—the young priest never gives up and keeps reaching out to the cranky veteran, and Walt continues to rebuff spiritual guidance until cancer and certain death push him into the confessional.

Kowalski is not the first Catholic character Eastwood has portrayed throughout his career as an actor, producer, and director. In *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), for example, he played Frankie Dunn, also a Catholic struggling with his faith. However, looking through Eastwood biographies, one can only find comments on his Protestant upbringing. Clint Eastwood’s ancestors, dating back to colonial times, were almost entirely Protestants. Most of these ancestors were actively religious; many of them were church builders, pastors, or church leaders. His forefathers in America include Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and a Christian Science practitioner (his great-grandmother). There is no hint of Catholicism; sometimes he is even called an agnostic, and Eastwood himself has often pointed out that he finds spiritual inspiration in nature.⁹ One is thus almost forced to raise the question: why are we fascinated by Catholicism?

There seem to be two obvious answers to this question. The first answer lies in the early history of American filmmaking. Until the 1950s the Legion of Decency¹⁰ had the depiction of Catholics under close control and, as McDannell explains, since “the Production Code, which set out moral standards for movie plots, behaviors and representations, [had been] composed by a Jesuit priest, Daniel Lord, with the support of Catholic layman Martin Quigley,”¹¹ Catholics were always depicted in a positive way. This positive depiction of Catholics during the early decades of Hollywood had a long-lasting effect on the movie industry and laid the foundations for the regular appearance of Catholic characters on screen today. The second answer is that Hollywood likes a good show and where would one find a bigger one than in the “smells and bells” of a Catholic mass? That goes along with McDannell’s observation that Catholicism stands above all other religions for

8. Clint Eastwood, dir., *Gran Torino* (2008; Warner Home Video, 2009), DVD.

9. For more details see Richard Schickel, *Clint Eastwood: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 5, 19–20, 27, 35–36; and Patrick McGilligan, *Clint: The Life and Legend* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 2–3, 11–22, 29.

10. The Legion had been established in 1933 by the American bishops of the Roman Catholic Church to identify and combat questionable content in films. Founded as the Catholic Legion of Decency (CLOD), it changed its name to the National Legion of Decency in April 1934, since it included Protestant and Jewish clerics as well.

11. McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?,” 17.

a movie audience because it seems to be the most mystical and the most easily recognizable of all religious creeds:

An intensely visual religion with a well-defined ritual and authority system, Catholicism lends itself to the drama and pageantry—the iconography—of film. Moviegoers watch as Catholic visionaries interact with the supernatural, priests counsel their flocks, reformers fight for social justice, and bishops wield authoritarian power.¹²

Catholicism provides the scenery, which can also be a social and ethnic background, as Carlo Rotella points out in his analysis of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972). Here Catholicism becomes a symbol for the old world immigrants living in their own ethnic neighborhood and drawing strength from their shared tradition.¹³ The same is true for Sylvester Stallone's character Rocky Balboa, who, in the 2006 movie of the same name, the sixth in the series, also lives in an old immigrant ethnic urban village, as well as for Walt Kowalski from *Gran Torino*, who is the last remaining representative of Polish descent in his neighborhood.

This strong link between Catholicism and ethnicity can also be seen in *The Simpsons* episode "The Father, the Son and the Holy Guest Star" in which Homer and Bart are tempted to convert to Catholicism. Marge is afraid of losing part of her family to Catholicism and envisions the afterlife divided into a Protestant Heaven and a Catholic Heaven. She, of course, ends up in the Protestant Heaven, while Homer and Bart are in the Catholic Heaven, which seems to be a lot more fun. While Marge is stuck with some preppy WASP croquet players (with a very British accent), Catholic Heaven is populated by Mexican, Irish and Italian Catholics all sitting at their own tables, eating, drinking, singing, and obviously enjoying themselves just like in Hilaire Belloc's poem "The Catholic Sun": "Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine, / There's always laughter and good red wine. / At least I've always found it so. / Benedicamus Domino!" The hardest blow for Marge is that Jesus himself prefers the Catholic Heaven.¹⁴

On the one hand, Catholicism provides a colorful ethnic background, setting the stage for Hollywood. On the other hand, one has to ask oneself whether a director like Eastwood did not have more in mind. Dealing with the artistic and practical constraints of a two-hour film, he understands that the Catholic context speaks volumes to the audience. In *Gran Torino*, the brief confessional scene clarifies more than ten minutes of dialogue or five minutes of narration could have explained, and it does so in a moving and interesting way. Kowalski's confession might be seen as superficial: he once kissed another woman at the Christmas party at his Ford plant while his wife, who

12. McDannell, "Why the Movies? Why Religion?," 14.

13. Carlo Rotella, "Praying for Stones Like This," in *Catholics in the Movies*, ed. Colleen McDannell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 185.

14. Matt Warburton, "The Father, the Son and the Holy Guest Star," *The Simpsons*, season 16, episode 21, directed by Michael Polcino, aired May 15, 2005 (Fox Broadcasting Company, 2005).

later died, was in another room; he once made \$600 on a motorboat and never paid taxes on it, which is “the same as stealing,” as he explains to the young priest.¹⁵ The viewer, who suspects throughout the film that Kowalski really is a good man despite his xenophobic attitude, gains affirmation through the brief confession scene. After that, the audience knows much more about him, and who he is about to become. For Eastwood the Catholic milieu becomes a shorthand explanation for the character’s motifs and inner struggle. It does this concisely, in a context familiar to moviegoers—Catholic or not. At first Walt’s confession seems to mock the young priest because Walt confesses only some venial sins, despite all of his other objectionable deeds. At the same time, however, it gives the audience the chance to see what makes the grumpy old man really tick. The lifelong anguish of Eastwood’s characters about his venial sins disappears with a few “Hail Marys” and “Our Fathers.” In *Million Dollar Baby* even the final illegal mercy killing becomes acceptable because the hero has such deep faith. In everyday life fitting Vatican teachings into our daily decisions is not always so easy, and neither is Catholicism always depicted in such a positive—though simplified—manner as in *Million Dollar Baby* and *Gran Torino*.

III. CATHOLIC-BASHING: A NEW ANTI-CATHOLICISM?

According to the Catholic League For Religious and Civil Rights, among many other institutions defending Catholicism in the USA, anti-Catholicism has to be labeled “the last acceptable prejudice.”¹⁶ Philip Jenkins even entitled his 2003 book *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice*. The question is: what is new? Anti-Catholicism in the U.S. is as old as the U.S. itself; it arrived together with the Puritans.

Despite the Ku Klux Klan and anti-Catholic violence, we have been clearly able to see a change since the 1940s and 1950s: Hollywood films started to portray Catholics and their clergy in a new and better light. This positive depiction, however, is no coincidence: movie censorship and the activities of the Legion of Decency made anti-Catholic movies impossible. Before the Supreme Court ruled in 1952 that movies must be covered under the freedom of speech clause of the Constitution, Irish American Catholics had been the “regulators of popular culture,”¹⁷ and the depiction of Catholicism was jealously guarded.

Television viewers of many faiths tuned in to watch Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen’s weekly TV show *Life is Worth Living* (1951–55) on DuMont and

15. Clint Eastwood, dir., *Gran Torino*.

16. See proceedings and discussions at the May 24, 2002 conference at Fordham University “Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice?” co-sponsored by the Francis and Ann Curran Center for American Catholic Studies and *Commonweal* magazine with funding by the Pew Charitable Trusts. One of the main speakers was the Catholic League’s president, William Donohue.

17. McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?” 17.

later on ABC (1955–57). Sheen was one of the first Catholics on TV and is often seen as a pioneer of televangelism. *Life is Worth Living* won Sheen an Emmy award in 1952 and it is in honor of him that actor Martin Sheen adopted his stage name. Starting in the 1940s, the descendants of Catholic immigrants assimilated more and more into mainstream America. Perhaps most importantly, in spite of public questions about whether John Fitzgerald Kennedy could be a loyal American and a good Catholic at the same time, in 1960 he won the presidency, a task in which Catholic and Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith had failed thirty-two years earlier.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Jenkins claims that there is a new anti-Catholicism, which came to life after the 1960s. One of the latest things about the “new” anti-Catholicism, according to Jenkins, is the number of “anti-Catholic themes . . . present in popular culture and popular media.”¹⁹ Moreover, anti-Catholic rhetoric “that had largely been excluded from respectable discourse” is now accepted by “the social mainstream,” as a result of the innumerable anti-Catholic movies, shows, and books that have been produced since the 1970s. Now, Jenkins argues, it seems “natural to present any tale of religious deceit in a Catholic context.”²⁰ And he seems to be right.

Some examples of Catholic-bashing on TV should suffice to clarify the point. In David E. Kelley’s TV productions, especially, such as *Pickett Fences*, *The Practice*, *Ally McBeal*, and *Boston Legal*, as well as other shows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, Catholics and their religion are often targeted in a rather rude way. Whenever a Catholic priest appears on TV, he seems to be either a pedophile or a nerd. For example, there is a foot-fetishist priest in *Pickett Fences*, and the sexually active nun, Chrissa Long, in *Ally McBeal*, second season (the episode “World’s without Love”), who, when confronted with having had sex with a man, replies: “A priest has sex with a boy, he gets transferred! And me . . . At least my lover was of legal age, for God’s sake.” In the same episode, Ally remarks to John Cage: “Yes, a nun. Nuns are not supposed to have sex except, you know, with other nuns.”²¹ Another example taken from the same season of *Ally McBeal* can be found in episode three, “Fool’s Night Out,” in which Ally represents a minister who broke off a relationship with his choir director. The minister tells lawyer Richard Fish: “Obviously we weren’t married, and I’m the minister. The minister and somebody from the church, I mean, it doesn’t exactly make me an altar

18. For a detailed history of American Catholicism and the Catholic struggle to prove that it is possible to be a good Catholic, as well as a good American, see John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: Norton, 2003). See also Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

19. Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 113.

20. Jenkins, *New Anti-Catholicism*, 156, 173.

21. David E. Kelley, “World’s without Love,” *Ally McBeal*, season 2, episode 6, directed by Arvin Brown, aired November 2, 1998 (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

boy, does it?" And Fish answers: "If you were an altar boy, you'd be with a priest."²² In comparison, *The Simpsons* are rather harmless. In "Lisa Gets an 'A,'" Bart asks his mom: "Oh, I'm starving! Mom, can we go Catholic so we can get communion wafers and booze?" And Marge replies: "No, no one's going Catholic. Three children is enough, thank you."²³

Jenkins states that as far as movies are concerned this tendency increased throughout the 1990s and especially after the furore over the sexual abuse of children in 2002: "Large sections of the media assumed that most Catholic clergy were by definition child molesters, who should be viewed as guilty until proven innocent." Anti-Catholicism seemed to be on "a scale not witnessed since the 1920s."²⁴ As evidence, he provides scenes from *Primal Fear* (1996, dir. Gregory Hoblit), *The Virgin Suicides* (1999, dir. Sofia Coppola), and *Stigmata* (1999, dir. Rupert Wainwright).²⁵ His observation is right, no doubt, but hardly comes as a surprise; during the 1990s and especially since 2002 people throughout the U.S. have been deeply shocked by the child abuse scandals. Naturally, this is reflected in movies, as well as in TV shows such as *Ally McBeal*. Nevertheless, this so-called new anti-Catholicism is not new at all. One has to agree with McDannell when she says that starting in the 1980s, "fantasies about Catholicism returned to nineteenth-century themes of secrecy, darkness, murder, institutional corruption, and spiritual cynicism,"²⁶ but what she does not mention here is sex. Still, sex and sexual threats also played an important role throughout the history of anti-Catholicism. There are good reasons why the anti-Catholic literature of the early nineteenth century is often called "pornography for Puritans."²⁷

First of all, the whole concept of women living independently together in celibacy did not fit everyday Victorian American life, since women belonged under the care of a man. Nunneries were not "normal" and thus sparked the erotic fantasies of the Protestant middle class. *Ally McBeal's* comment about nuns having sex with each other is no more and no less scandalous than Mary Martha Butt Sherwood's anti-Catholic novel *The Nun* (1833), published in the United States one year after its British edition, in 1834, or Maria Monk's

22. David E. Kelley, "Fool's Night Out," *Ally McBeal*, season 2, episode 3, directed by Peter MacNicol, aired September 28, 1998 (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

23. Ian Maxtone-Graham, "Lisa Gets an 'A,'" *The Simpsons*, season 10, episode 7, directed by Bob Anderson, aired November 22, 1998 (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

24. Jenkins, *New Anti-Catholicism*, 2.

25. See Jenkins, *New Anti-Catholicism*, 169–72.

26. McDannell, "Why the Movies? Why Religion?," 27.

27. Since historian Richard Hofstadter wrote in his much-debated 1964 essay "The Paranoid Style of American Politics" that "Anti-Catholicism has always been the pornography of the Puritan," this definition of anti-Catholic literature has been widely used. See George McKenna, *The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 98, and Robert P. Lockwood, *Anti-Catholicism in American Culture* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2000), 25–26.

Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery (1836). The publication of the latter was arranged by a group of New York reformers and abolitionists and, though completely fictitious, it became the best-selling American book of the nineteenth century before Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.²⁸

The second problem is confession, which has been as dubious as it is today for a long time; in literature it has been a screen for erotic fantasies at least since Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. Mark Twain had the devil write the following to his fellow-archangels in the eleventh of his *Letters from the Earth*:

His priests got a share of the virgins, too. What use could priests make of virgins? The private history of the Roman Catholic confessional can answer that question for you. The confessional's chief amusement has been seduction—in all the ages of the Church. Père Hyacinth testifies that of a hundred priests confessed by him, ninety-nine had used the confessional effectively for the seduction of married women and young girls. One priest confessed that of nine hundred girls and women whom he had served as father and confessor in his time, none had escaped his lecherous embrace but the elderly and the homely. The official list of questions which the priest is required to ask will overmasteringly excite any woman who is not a paralytic.²⁹

Not only was the confessional seen as a place of seduction, but also as a dangerous place for a woman's purity—even if the priest did not try to seduce her, he could still ask her about intimate details about which pure women were not supposed to talk.

Monasteries, cloisters, and the confessional are still met with the same prejudices as they have been since the foundation of the United States and before. So maybe the new part in Jenkins' not-so-new anti-Catholicism is the definition of the Catholic clergy as dangerous child molesters. But even for this factor there are some old roots to be discovered: in the nineteenth century the Catholic clergy had already been depicted as a threat to American children. Although the clergy did not present a sexual threat, children were in great danger nonetheless, as Thomas Nast points out in his cartoon the "American River Ganges," published in *Harper's Weekly* on September 30, 1871. It shows Tammany politicians³⁰ dropping little children into the "American River Ganges," infested with crocodilian bishops. The American flag is flown upside down, the universal sign of distress, from the ruins of a public school. Linking Roman Catholicism to the Ganges, the sacred river of Hinduism, suggested its exotic un-Americanism and also linked it with what Americans then considered a primitive and fanatical religion. Jenkins himself mentions these continuities, quoting Mark Twain and describing

28. See Marie Anne Pagliarini, "The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America," *Religion and American Culture* 9, no. 1 (1999): 97–129; and Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 154–61.

29. Mark Twain, *Letters from the Earth*, ed. Bernard DeVoto (1962; New York: Harper Perennial, 2004).

30. The New York City Democratic party was centered at Tammany Hall and had a large and influential Irish Catholic constituency.

Nast's cartoon,³¹ but fails to notice the lack of a really "new" anti-Catholicism when speaking about movies, television shows, and news stories. Only the presentation of these stereotypes in different media forms has changed; neither the plots nor the subjects of the anti-Catholic stories have. In the case of the Catholic threat to children, however, there was a change from the ideological question of the separation of church and state to the question of the sexual abuse cases and the following crisis in 2002, which was created "by bishops and priests [and] not the media," as McGreevy points out.³² Nevertheless, ever since then the media has felt free to extrapolate on the topic and reinforce anti-Catholic tropes.

Another, even more important issue that Jenkins fails to notice is that contemporary Catholics might be under attack by the media because they are the most visible group and still publicly teach Christian morality. Liberal Catholic-bashing would then become liberal Christian-/Religion-bashing. Mark Twain did not target only Catholics,³³ as the above quotation leads one to believe, but the Christian religion and beliefs as such:

Would you expect this same conscienceless God, this moral bankrupt, to become a teacher of morals; of gentleness; of meekness; of righteousness; of purity? It looks impossible, extravagant; but listen to him. These are his own words: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. *Blessed are the merciful*, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. *Blessed are the peacemakers*, for they shall be called *the children of God*. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. The mouth that uttered these immense sarcasms, these giant hypocrisies, is the very same that ordered the wholesale massacre of the Midianitish men and babies and cattle; the wholesale destruction of house and city; the wholesale banishment of the virgins into a filthy and unspeakable slavery. . . . The Beatitudes and the quoted chapters from Numbers and Deuteronomy ought always to be read from the pulpit together; then the congregation would get an all-round view of Our Father in Heaven. Yet not in a single instance have I ever known a clergyman to do this.³⁴

Maybe Catholics on both the big and the flat screen not only have to suffer from the old prejudices, but have to turn the other cheek for all Christians. As the easiest denomination to recognize, Catholics seem to be used as shorthand for Christian beliefs and morality as such.

31. Jenkins, *New Anti-Catholicism*, 28, 43.

32. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 290.

33. Mark Twain did distinguish between prejudices and facts and sometimes overcame his animosity towards the Catholic Church: "The pauper and the miser are as free as any in the Catholic Convents of Palestine. I have been educated to enmity toward everything that is Catholic, and sometimes, in consequence of this, I find it much easier to discover Catholic faults than Catholic merits. But there is one thing I feel no disposition to overlook, and no disposition to forget: and that is, the honest gratitude I and all pilgrims owe, to the Convent Fathers in Palestine." *The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrims' Progress* (1869; New York: New American Library, 1980), 448.

34. Mark Twain, *Letters from the Earth*, 55–56.

IV. NOT AS BAD AS IT SEEMS: REINVENTING CATHOLICISM FOR TV

The widespread media coverage of child sexual abuse cases in the Catholic Church in the United States from the mid- to late 1990s through 2002 might have boosted anti-Catholic depictions, but they started with the end of movie censorship in the 1960s and the consequences of the Second Vatican:

Simplifying rituals and customs so that people could focus on what was important in them may have been good for practicing Catholics, but it was not good for the movies. Many Catholics had jettisoned their Catholic “look” and were no longer interested in defending devotional traditions or theological dogmatism.³⁵

But directors and producers still needed Catholicism to be unvarying and easy to recognize. With movie censorship gone and the Catholic clergy no longer able to influence how Catholicism was depicted, they were able to do whatever they liked and started to create their own version of Catholicism—and not all of these versions are negative.

The Catholic League cries “wolf” far too often and far too easily. Yes, there is anti-Catholicism on TV, but the Catholic League also keeps criticizing TV shows that paint a rather positive picture of Catholicism. One example of this is the still-running TV series *Bones*, which deals with the cases of forensic anthropologist Dr. Temperance Brennan, called Bones, and her FBI partner, Special Agent Seeley Booth. One problem the Catholic League had with *Bones* is the following scene from the episode “The He in the She”:

Booth: “She’s a pastor. Yeah. Looks like one of those grassroots community churches.”

Bones: “Huh. She was preparing for a sermon.”

Booth: “A pastor with augmentation and veneers.”

Bones: “So?”

Booth: “A spiritual leader shouldn’t be so vain.”

Bones: “The pope sits on a throne. He wears robes worth hundreds of dollars. Isn’t that vanity?”

Booth: “Oh, really? You’re going after the pope now?”

Bones: “One pastor gets her teeth whitened, and the other drinks wine on Sunday mornings and tells everyone that it’s been miraculously transformed into blood. Which of those is more outlandish?”³⁶

As a response the League issued the following statement:

It does not matter that non-Catholics may not accept what happens at Mass. What matters is that they show respect. And to just throw this line in while the opening credits are running—about a minister, no less—shows how mean-spirited the writers are. If only they thought of Catholics as if they were an indigenous people, we’d be fine.³⁷

However, everybody who knows the series would agree that it shows an overall positive picture of Seeley Booth, a devout Catholic, and is therefore rather friendly towards Catholicism. It is not just Catholicism that is attacked by

35. McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?,” 26.

36. Karina Csolty, “The He in the She,” *Bones*, season 4, episode 7, directed by Craig Ross, Jr., aired October 8, 2008 (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2009), DVD.

37. “Catholic Bashing Marks Fox’s *Bones*.” *Catholic League*, <http://www.catholicleague.org/catalyst.php?year=2008&month=November&read=2492>.

Dr. Brennan, a scientist and an atheist, but religion as such. Agent Booth's character functions as a criticism of the old upper-class attitude that there are only two religions: Catholicism, which is wrong, and all the others, which do not matter.

By focusing on the—in their perception—negative parts only, William Donohue and the Catholic League even succeeded in getting a show canceled that “depicted Catholic clergy as tough, independent fighters for justice.” The problem was that *Nothing Sacred* was far too independent for Donohue's taste. He described it as “a depressing show about a dissident priest in a dysfunctional parish.”³⁸ Others, however, perceived it differently. According to Philip Jenkins, “the clergy characters, the heroic priests and nuns, were all identified with liberal positions . . . such as the ordination of women.” Nevertheless, anti-Catholic moments in the show are difficult to find, and Jenkins sees it as “a tragically lost opportunity” because “*Nothing Sacred* offered the best pro-Catholic propaganda that had appeared in the U.S. media since the 1960s.” As a result of the League's vehement protests and their success in persuading corporate sponsors not to advertise during the show, *Nothing Sacred* was not renewed for a second year in 1998.³⁹

Also not quite to the liking of William Donohue is the way in which the Catholic Special Agent Seeley Booth is depicted in *Bones*. He shows characteristics and opinions that are not normally linked with Catholicism. For instance, he is clearly in favor of the death penalty and shows an eagerness for revenge found in the Old Testament rather than in the New Testament (episodes “A Man on Death Row” and “The Girl in the Fridge”), he is not married and has an illegitimate son, and he has an immense knowledge of the scriptures, just as is usually expected of a Protestant. Given only one keyword, he is able to quote whole passages from the Holy Bible, which he does, for example, in the episode “Judas on a Pole,” a curious trait he shares with another positive Catholic figure on TV: President Josiah Bartlet in *The West Wing*.

In this context it is important to have a closer look at the series *The West Wing*, in which Catholics play an important role: President Josiah “Jed” Bartlet is Catholic, as are his Vice President, John Hoynes, and his Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry. His presidential successor, Matt Santos, is also a Catholic. Thus Catholicism provides the ethnic background for these characters once more: Santos is Hispanic, and McGarry is described as “good old Boston Irish.” McGarry is also a recovering alcoholic and drug addict; therefore, he is a Catholic who has gone beyond a common cliché. Bartlet wanted to become a priest, but then met his wife Abby (also a Catholic), and he is a fan of the Notre Dame Fighting Irish, which often leads to friendly quarrels between him and his staff.

38. “Catholic Bashing Marks Fox's Bones.”

39. Jenkins, *New Anti-Catholicism*, 162–63.

One of the best examples of Bartlet's knowledge of scripture is a scene taken from the second-season episode "The Midterms" in which he confronts Dr. Jenna Jacobs, who is modeled after the conservative commentator and host of the *Dr. Laura Program*, Laura Catherine Schlessinger:

Bartlet: "I like your show. I like how you call homosexuality an abomination."

Jacobs: "I don't say homosexuality is an abomination, Mr. President. The Bible does."

Bartlet: "Yes it does. Leviticus."

Jacobs: "18:22."

Bartlet: "Chapter and verse. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions while I have you here. I'm interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. She's a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, always cleared the table when it was her turn. What would a good price for her be? While thinking about that, can I ask another? My Chief of Staff Leo McGarry insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself or is it okay to call the police? Here's one that's really important because we've got a lot of sports fans in this town: touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean. Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point? Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother John for planting different crops side by side? Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads? Think about those questions, would you? One last thing: while you may be mistaking this for your monthly meeting of the Ignorant Tight-Ass Club, in this building, when the President stands, nobody sits."⁴⁰

Bartlet's harangue first of all links a severe Evangelical-bashing (which happens more than once in *The West Wing*) with the hint not to take the Bible literally, which fits in with the Catholic tradition, and secondly, illustrates the above-mentioned detailed knowledge of the scriptures, which is common among American TV Catholics, thus underlining the importance of the individual over the importance of the institutional church. Booth, Bartlet, and also John James McCoy in *Law and Order* do not quote the Catechism, the Pope, or even St. Thomas Aquinas—they quote from the Bible, which everybody can read and interpret for themselves. That's also one of the consequences of the Second Vatican and the change American Catholicism underwent during the 1960s: individualism started to replace the teachings of the Church and the Roman magisterium.

For President Bartlet, Catholicism provides not only the social background, but also explanations for his inner struggles, something which is dramatically shown in a scene that takes place at the end of the second season. In this scene, Bartlet has to decide whether or not to run for office a second time, has to deal with his lie to the public about suffering from multiple sclerosis, and has to deal with the fact that his secretary, Mrs. Laningham, whom he had known since his prep school days, has just been killed in an accident. Bartlet is standing alone in the National Cathedral—he had the Secret Service agents seal it—right after Mrs. Laningham's funeral service. He begins to walk slowly towards the altar and speaks to the Lord:

40. Aaron Sorkin, "The Midterms," *The West Wing*, season 2, episode 3 (25), directed by Alex Graves, aired October 18, 2000 (Warner Home Video, 2003), DVD.

You're a son of a bitch, You know that? She bought her first new car and You hit her with a drunk driver. What? Was that supposed to be funny? 'You can't conceive, nor can I, the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God,' says Graham Greene. I don't know whose ass he was kissing there, 'cos I think You're just vindictive. What was Josh Lyman—a warning shot? That was my son! What did I ever do to Yours but praise His glory and praise His Name? There's a tropical storm that's gaining speed and power. They say we haven't had a storm this bad since You took out that tender ship of mine in the North Atlantic last year. Sixty-eight crew. You know what a tender ship does? Fixes the other ships! It doesn't even carry guns. It just goes around and fixes the other ships and delivers the mail. That's all it can do. *Gratias tibi ago, Domine*. Yes, I lied. It was a sin. I've committed many sins. Have I displeased You, You feckless thug? 3.8 million new jobs, that wasn't good? Bailed out Mexico. Increased foreign trade. Thirty million new acres of land for conservation. Put Mendoza on the bench. We're not fighting a war. I've raised three children. That's not enough to buy me out of the doghouse?⁴¹

After that, Bartlet lights and crushes a cigarette on the floor of the cathedral because of a discussion he had had in prep school with his now long-gone father, who was not Catholic and had problems with his son following his mother's religion. Apart from the common struggle of proving himself able to be a good Catholic as well as a good American, Bartlet also had to prove himself to be a good son as well as a good Catholic, in which he feels he failed.

It is not the only time he failed to be either a good son or a good Catholic, which explains his anger and doubt. In the first season episode "Take This Sabbath Day" he confesses on his knees in the Oval Office, after not having granted a presidential pardon to a convicted murderer who is then executed.⁴² Agent Booth in *Bones*, on the other hand, does not even show remorse when defending the death penalty. "Catholics and the death penalty" is a fairly recent topic: Catholic governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico banned the death penalty on March 18, 2009 at least partly because of pressure put on him by the clergy, although he himself supports it. He also will not pardon the two inmates currently on death row. Not only in fiction, but also in reality, there is a gap between the teachings of the Catholic Church and the opinions of its flock. As strongly as American Catholic bishops oppose the death penalty, a slight majority of white Catholics are in favor of it.

Both Bartlet and Booth prove to be good and loyal Americans, although they have to act against the teachings of their Mother Church. It seems that what Kennedy had had to prove, that he could be a loyal American and a good Catholic at the same time, still needs proof. Just as if he had never uttered the words:

because I am a Catholic, and no Catholic has ever been elected President, the real issues in this campaign have been obscured—perhaps deliberately, in some quarters less responsible than this. So it is apparently necessary for me to state once again—not

41. Aaron Sorkin, "Two Cathedrals," *The West Wing*, season 2, episode 22 (44), directed by Thomas Schlamme, aired May 16, 2001 (Warner Home Video, 2003), DVD.

42. Lawrence O'Donnell, Jr., Paul Redford, and Aaron Sorkin, "Take This Sabbath Day," *The West Wing*, season 1, episode 14, directed by Thomas Schlamme, aired February 9, 2000 (Warner Home Video, 2002), DVD.

what kind of church I believe in, for that should be important only to me—but what kind of America I believe in.⁴³

More than once Bartlet and Booth do not let their Catholicism get in the way as soon as they have to make decisions that would reflect badly on their being loyal Americans. Their Catholic faith is very important, for both of them, but it is an Americanized version of Catholicism, which was shaped during the 1960s. At that point it was decided that Catholicism was no longer to be influenced by Rome and the Pope, but to become the private matter of every individual. In a season 4 episode, “Process Stories,” a dialogue between Bartlet and his communications director, Toby Ziegler, underlines this idea:

Toby: “I was intimidated by your Catholicism.”

Bartlet: “Really?”

Toby: “Yeah.”

Bartlet: “It’s my Catholicism, Toby. It works for me.”⁴⁴

The same is true for Booth: he just wants Bones to believe in God, not to convert her to Catholicism.

In another episode of *The West Wing*, “In God We Trust,” the press discovers that the Republican presidential candidate Arnold “Arnie” Vinick does not go to church regularly, which becomes a problem for his campaign. When Vinick is asked by the Republican leadership to work out a deal with President Bartlet to remove the wage amendment so they can pass the debt ceiling in time, Vinick gives Bartlet more than he asked for and asks him if he can “hang around for a while as if we are really slugging it out in here.” To pass the time, the two of them go for ice cream in the kitchen, where the conversation turns to religion:

Bartlet: “I don’t know how you plan to handle this religious thing in the campaign.”

Vinick: “Yeah, well, that makes two of us.”

Bartlet: “I could find a way to let it slip that I think a candidate’s religion or how often he goes to church is not relevant to choosing a president.”

Vinick: “You going to say that on the way into church?”

Bartlet: “Are you accusing me of politicking church going?”

Vinick: “You’ve had an awful lot of photo ops on the church steps.”

Bartlet: “I went to mass every Sunday long before I went into politics.”

Vinick: “I did, too.”

Bartlet: “Why’d you stop?”

Vinick: “One Christmas my wife gave me a very old edition of the King James Bible—17th century. It was a real find for a book collector. It was a thrill just to hold it. Then I read it.”

Bartlet [chuckles]: “You can’t take it literally.”

Vinick: “Yeah, that’s what my priest friends kept telling me. But the more I read it, the less I could believe. I could not believe there was a God that said the penalty for working on the Sabbath was death. I couldn’t believe there was a God who said the penalty for adultery was death.”

43. John F. Kennedy, “Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, Rice Hotel, Houston, Texas, September 12, 1960,” <http://www.jfklibrary.org>.

44. Aaron Sorkin, “Process Stories,” *The West Wing*, season 4, episode 8 (73), directed by Christopher Misiano, aired November 13, 2002 (Warner Home Video, 2004), DVD.

Bartlet: "I'm more of a New Testament man, myself."

Vinick: "I couldn't believe there was a God who had no penalty for slavery. The Bible has no problem with slavery at all. Lincoln could have used a little help from the Bible."

Bartlet: "You think Lincoln was an atheist?"

Vinick: "I hope not. That would mean all his references to God were just purely political."

Bartlet: "He didn't make any until he started running for office."

Vinick: "No, and he certainly was a doubter."⁴⁵

This dialogue shows once more *The West Wing's* warning against taking the Bible literally; it also shows that Bartlet really believes in God, that he is not using Him as a campaign consultant—instead one gets the sense that this is not just stained-glass-window-dressing; and the scene furthermore emphasizes the individualism of personal prayer and shows that separating "church and politics" seems to be an unaccomplishable task in a society expecting its presidents "to discuss their personal faith on television," which is even harder for Catholics, who still have to prove that they can be good Catholics as well as good Americans.

Being a true believer in both God and the Constitution, Bartlet more than once finds himself in the hard places between personal faith and public duty. Another example can be found in *M*A*S*H*. Although it is part of his job as an army chaplain to do exactly what he says, Father Mulcahy's statement to a wounded soldier in the episode "Point of View" can be seen as a common statement for most of the "good" TV Catholics:

I see you're a Protestant. That won't be a problem. I'm familiar with the procedures of most of the major denominations—although I'm a little inhibited when it comes to the Southern Baptists, a little frenetic and forceful . . . a bit of a stretch for me, but, then again, that's my problem.⁴⁶

Just like Father Mulcahy tells the young soldier, every TV Catholic seems to tell the audience: there is no problem how ecumenical your Catholicism has become, as long as you are a loyal American.

V. SEEING AND BELIEVING?

Encountering unknown situations, people tend to describe these incidents in patterns they know and feel safe with. They might even look for guidance on TV and turn to their old friends and virtual family on the flat screen for advice—just like Dave Marinaccio turns to Kirk, Spock, and "Bones" McCoy. Today trials are countless, especially when it comes to religion: an encounter with the Bible and Christian belief can be a challenge for a modern child who believes in science and technology, as Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen pointed out in his homily in "Wasting Your Life":

45. Lawrence O'Donnell, Jr., "In God We Trust," *The West Wing*, season 6, episode 20 (130), directed by Christopher Misiano, aired March 23, 2005 (Warner Home Video, 2005), DVD.

46. Ken Levine and David Isaacs, "Point of View," *M*A*S*H*, season 7, episode 10 (154), directed by Charles S. Dubin, aired November 20, 1978 (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD.

This little boy came home from Sunday school, or catechism class, and his father said to him, "What did you learn today?" "Oh," he said, "I learned how Moses defeated the Egyptians." "How did he do it?" "Well, the Egyptians were chasing the Israelites and Moses called the airfield, and the airfield flew in some engineers and they built some pontoon-bridges over the sea, and the Jews crossed over the pontoon-bridges. Then another fleet of planes came and they bombed the pontoon-bridges as the Israelites, I mean the Egyptians were on them and they were all killed." The father said, "Is that what they told you?" "No," he said, "it isn't, but if I told you what they really said, you wouldn't believe it."⁴⁷

For the little boy, Moses calling in the Air Force seems far more logical than his dividing the Red Sea. And he presumes that the same would be true for his father. What do all the viewers in front of the flat screen get, what they expect or what they are expected to want?

The Catholics depicted on the screen are either backward, pedophiles, corrupt, or immoral—in short: a menace to American democracy—or they appear to be simplified versions of the real thing; they underwent a substantial change as a result of liberal capitalism, or they still perform the traditional rituals, but the rituals have become empty symbols of their faith. Catholicism appears just to provide a set of rules for leading a good life, and if one does follow the rules one can expect "a righteous God, a just God, a wise God" to return the favor, just as Bartlet expects of Him (in "Two Cathedrals"). If one leads a good life and shows strong faith, even the merciful killing of somebody is 'OK' for TV Catholics, just as in *Million Dollar Baby*. The true confession of Walt Kowalski in *Gran Torino* does not take place in church, but in his own staircase after he has locked Thao, his Asian neighbors' kid who tried to steal Kowalski's *Gran Torino* and afterwards worked for him and became his friend, into the basement and is getting ready to leave to face the gang that has raped Thao's sister Sue; the door grating even makes the scene look as if it were taking place in a confessional. In both cases Catholicism has been transferred into something mundane. In the case of the old prejudices it is nowadays mostly "sex only," and the idea of purity does not enter the equation any longer. In the case of the "simplified Catholics," Catholicism has become shorthand for Christian morality.

Both the positive and the negative depictions of Catholics on the big and flat screen are merely symbols, molds to be filled by the spectator. Thus positive characters, especially, like Agent Booth from *Bones* and Bartlet from *The West Wing*, have the chance to shape the image of Catholicism by providing us with the opportunity to identify ourselves with them. A show like *The West Wing* has the chance to educate, as well as entertain. Institutions like the Catholic League should notice that, although Catholicism is not always realistically depicted, there is still a great curiosity about the old "smells and bells," and that not every criticism is immediately hostile. Stephen Colbert, who used to work with Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*, started his own satirical late-night

47. Fulton J. Sheen, "Wasting Your Life," *FultonSheen.com*, <http://www.fultonsheen.com/Fulton-Sheen-MP3s/Wasting-Your-Life.cfm?PID=148>.

television show *The Colbert Report* in October 2005 on Comedy Central. The show satirizes conservative personality-driven political pundit programs like Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor*. Stephen Colbert's fictional alter ego Stephen Colbert, modeled on Bill O'Reilly, often attacks the Catholic Church and religion as such. Nevertheless, the real Stephen Colbert is Catholic and even teaches Sunday school. When asked by *Time Out* magazine how he could square his Catholicism with comedy, he answered:

I love my Church, and I'm a Catholic who was raised by intellectuals, who were very devout. I was raised to believe that you could question the Church and still be a Catholic. What is worthy of satire is the misuse of religion for destructive or political gains. That's totally different from the Word, the blood, the body and the Christ. His kingdom is not of this earth.⁴⁸

What the Catholic League does not get is the fact that even jokes or the negative depiction of Catholicism help keep the faith alive. The characters on screen are still simplified or idealized versions of reality. As mentioned before, in real life, making Vatican teachings fit into our daily decisions is not always as easy as it is for Jed Bartlet, and Catholic priests are not all prone to sexual harassment. Showing faith on TV can have astonishing effects. Stephen Colbert, who now and then even calls the Pope a Rottweiler, left his role for a few seconds when giving testimony about the situation of migrant farm workers on Capitol Hill on September 24, 2010:

I like talking about people who don't have any power, and it seems like one of the least powerful people in the United States are migrant workers who come and do our work but don't have any rights as a result. And yet we still invite them to come here and at the same time ask them to leave. And that's an interesting contradiction to me and, um, you know, whatsoever you do for the least of my brothers. And these seem like the least of our brothers. Right now a lot of people are least brothers right now because the economy is so hard, and I don't want to take anyone's hardship away from them or diminish anything like that. But migrant workers suffer and have no rights.⁴⁹

As the *Washington Post's* E. J. Dionne puts it, nobody would have cared either about the topic, or these words, if anyone else but Colbert had said them. Catholicism on TV might not be the real thing, it might be simplistic, idealized, or even distorted, but it still shows faith in all its positive and negative ways. And so can the audience.

48. David Cote, "Joyce Words," interview with Stephen Colbert, *Time Out* (New York), June 9–15, 2005, <http://web.archive.org/web/20060820014908/http://www.timeout.com/newyork/DetailsAr.do?file=hotseat/506/506.hotseat.html>.

49. E. J. Dionne, "Colbert Turns Truthiness into Truth," *Post Partisan*, *Washington Post*, October 10, 2010, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/postpartisan/2010/10/colbert_turns_truthiness_into.html.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ARTICLES

- Diana Rosenhagen*
*Polk County: Zora Neale Hurston's Black South and the Quest
for a "real Negro theater"* 5
- Julia Sattler*
The Quest for Roots and Belonging in Contemporary
American Biography 19
- Constante González Groba*
Putting the Dynamic Past to Everyday Use in the Fiction
of Southern Women Writers 31
- Jan Nordby Gretlund*
Black and White Identity in Today's Southern Novel 43
- Roman Trušník*
Memories of Child Abuse in Jim Grimsley's Dan Crell Trilogy 53
- Radek Glabazňa*
Theater of Identity: *The Buddha of Suburbia* 65
- John Andreas Fuchs*
Showing Faith: Catholicism in American TV Series 79

BOOK REVIEWS

- Pursue the Illusion: Problems of Public Poetry in America,*
by Astrid Franke (reviewed by Jiří Flajšar) 99
- Literary Childhoods: Growing Up in British and American Literature,*
edited by Šárka Bubíková (reviewed by Ema Jelínková) 103