

***FAITH IN POP CULTURE***  
***Religious Representation on Television***

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**Abstract**

This study is concerned with the presence of religion and religious characters in contemporary popular culture, specifically which groups receive media attention and in what ways they are portrayed. After a careful review of studies in media, religion, and culture, American television is analyzed with a focus on the Fox medical drama *House*. Using both quantitative and qualitative data found in 155 episodes, the author argues that the world-renowned television show implicitly holds an agnostic view on religious matters, leaving interpretation up to the audience. Despite many characters that are religious, atheist, or ambiguous about their beliefs, a sense of uncertainty and a lack of specificity appear to promote this idea. Caricaturizing specific beliefs and using them as plot devices also helps to hide religious representation in plain sight. Findings suggest that American popular culture has a tendency to target the broadest possible audience with regard to religiosity by presenting the most basic representation of various views without promoting any single standpoint. More research must be done to further the understanding of how religion is represented via worldwide media and how it is received by consumers.

In an age of diverse religious plurality and global media popularity, a few questions must be asked: how do the realms of faith and popular culture intersect, intertwine, interact? How are those in power using our most complex and subtle cultural tools to construct images of differing worldviews? Religious institutions often serve as sources of social pedagogy, but the media does this as well - with the additional power of teaching us how to think about other pedagogical forces (such as religion, philosophy, and academic institutions). Moreover, the universality and concentration of corporate television in modern society is telling: We are all subject to its limited views of faith and belief (Griswold 2008). To properly grasp the importance of popular culture in this regard, we must understand the relationships it has with other elements of the social world on both individual and societal levels (Croteau and Hoynes 2000).

Relatively little sociological research has been conducted with the intent to better understand images of religion in popular culture. Indeed, this near vacancy remains the case in media studies “despite religion’s salient role in communication history” (Stout and Buddenbaum 2001:5). Of the literature that can be found, scholars tend to focus on news, documentaries and narrative feature films. More often than not, these authors come from a background in religious studies and focus on a singular religion (Zierler 2010; White 2011; Alleva 2010). A few authors have looked for depictions of numerous religions, but they tend to be trained in the particular medium which is investigated, major motion pictures being the most popular (Mitchell 2003). Scholars of film and video seldom adopt a sociological point of view when addressing religious content. Usually, they prioritize the history and production of movies and television over the relationships between the sociologies of media and religion.

Studying religion in popular culture directly “contributes to media literacy” (Stout and Buddenbaum 2001:7). Analyzing the representations of religiously-oriented cultural objects enhances our understanding of how to read, or consume, religious content as an element of cultural texts. As Jolyon Mitchell writes, “Analysis of representation, caricaturing and stereotyping of religious traditions and figures is an important part of developing any multi-religious approach to media, religion and culture” (2003:342). That, in short, should be a goal of sociologists of media and religion: to become aware of which religions receive representation, how they are portrayed, and what ideologies are being sent to us over the air. “Once we have a sense of how that cultural object fits into its context, we are on our way to understanding the culture as a whole” (Griswold 2008:16).

### **RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATIONS**

Those ideological messages we receive about religion are produced by a “cultural industry system” (Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 1975) that transforms spiritual, philosophical, and ethical messages into products for consumption (Griswold 2008:75). Similar to the way items may be marketed to certain racial, ethnic, gender, or class groups, products are also sometimes developed to appeal to the prevailing religious ideology of the society they are produced within.

However, it should not be assumed that the religiosity of a product is apparent or even univocal. Much like gendered products that are occasionally only noticed as such upon closer investigation, almost every religion bias (especially on television) is subtly hegemonic. Moreover, media producers often find generalization to be a useful tool. If a program can

appeal to certain religious groups without necessarily pushing other groups away, that creates a larger audience/consumer draw.

When speaking of religious ideology in mass communications, critical scholars often introduce the concept of propaganda. Harold D. Laswell defined propaganda as “the manipulation of symbols as a means of influencing attitudes on controversial matters” (1942:106). The question arises: to what extent does the mere presence of a religious character influence an audience’s attitude toward that religion? Does a kind-hearted, heroic Christian make us feel better about Christianity? Does a lying, atheistic drug addict arouse negative attitudes about atheism? Essentially, what dispositions does a cultural object have the power to instill via association?

The culture-producing abilities of media are manifold. Media consumers’ views of religious groups can be reinforced, weakened, or altered through representation. Stout and Buddenbaum have argued that cults and new religious movements (NRMs) often work their way into cultural consciousness by inserting themselves into popular culture and the media (2001:42). However, the same authors go on to attest “popular culture’s power to foster new religious movements pales in contrast to mainstream popular culture’s massive ability to dilute religious traditions” (Stout and Buddenbaum 2001:43). Interestingly, it seems that rather than introducing new ideas or dismissing old ones, popular culture’s main impact on ideas about religion is often a leveling-off effect. By this I mean that all members of a particular group will be portrayed as equivalent and homogenous. A Hindu character on American television will most likely not be a realistic representation of Hinduism, but rather a watered-down, more digestible version which conforms to American stereotypes of that group. Complexities of a

particular belief system and unfamiliar rituals associated with them tend to be omitted from popular culture. On the rare occasion they are included, it's typically a voyeuristic moment to view how different other cultures are (a common anthropological malady).

This stereotyping happens across the board, from the most popular religious views in America (like Protestantism) to the most socially stigmatized (like atheism). It pays (literally) to portray religious characters in a manner which will conform, or at least not disagree with, common stereotypes. Ramji writes that "Hollywood films represent all Muslims as Islamic fundamentalists" (2003:65). While this statement is clearly an overgeneralization, the idea isn't entirely misleading. And when a Christian character appears, it makes more sense to keep his or her dialogue and actions nondenominational. By doing so, every Christian watching can assume their own beliefs are what the character represents. Likewise, every non-Christian can think of the character as a personification of Christianity in general.

In spite of these stereotypes, propaganda, and popular culture's ability to spread its take on religion, the general public remain oblivious. From living room conversations to sociological research, religious representation is ignored. "Even when popular culture recognizes ethnic and cultural identity, it tends to ignore religiosity" (Stout and Buddenbaum 2001:44). Researchers are either unaware or afraid to talk about it. Why?

It's time to acknowledge the relationship between religion and media.

### **RELIGION, MEDIA, AND MEANING**

In his classic article, "Encoding, Decoding," Stuart Hall (1980) proposes a social framework of the semiotic paradigm. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols as elements of

communicative behavior and meaning-making, can be aptly applied to both media and religion. Hall's paradigm consists of four stages of communication: production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction. An object and its intended ideas are created and it is made available. Consumers then receive, interpret, and critique it in one way or another. Finally, that which works is reproduced with new changes, and the cycle starts over. At the beginning of each cycle, producers "encode" an intention into the symbols. On the receiving end, consumers "decode" it and arrive at their interpretations of its meaning. With religion on television, this can be easily imagined. A broadcasting company produces an episode of a series that contains religious content. Some people watch it and some don't. Those that do will either like it or dislike it. The broadcasting company then examines audience reception, weighs the pros and cons of releasing similar material, edits the elements of the representations that seem discomforting, and produces new episodes in hopes of better ratings.

Wendy Griswold writes that "at the point where human beings experience cultural objects, they have reactions, construct interpretations, and make meanings" (2008:85). The objects and symbols we encounter and consume directly impact our views of the world around us. As humans, we are driven by the need for meaningful orientation which popular culture bestows (Griswold 2008:42). That gift is made up of society's "patterns of meaning, its enduring expressive aspects, its symbols that represent and guide the thinking, feeling, and behavior of its members" (Griswold 2008:11), all of which are embodied by the media objects it produces and reproduces.

Importantly, media must produce *something*. Broadcasting companies are "institutional structures" which are "required to produce a program" (Hall 1980:93). Religiosity is, in essence,

merely one of the varieties of possible program content that may be offered. Just as race/ethnic, gender and class representations often emerge as the prevailing stereotypes and culturally acceptable norms, religious content also tends to fall into the traps of giving audiences what they have learned to expect. These expectations about religion sometimes develop in guises such as “hypocritical piety” and “meaningless ceremony” (Stout and Buddenbaum 2001:45).

Television is particularly important in this media communication process because it is available to just about everyone in the country. And, as Griswold points out, “virtually any competent human can master and use them. A two-year-old can attend to and follow a television program” (2008:103). Put simply, watching T.V. is easy. We need not be adult, educated, or even literate to consume television and the representations offered by popular culture. From childhood, television teaches the typical American how to think about all kinds of social phenomenon (such as religion) via television, although such messages are rarely made explicit.

The FOX medical drama *House* is a particularly pertinent series to any discourse on media and religion. Frequently cited as the most watched television series in the world (Eurodata TV Worldwide), the show has a large, varied, and loyal global fan base. Interestingly, it also frequently comments on religion; well over half of the episodes aired thus far touch on the subject. Despite prime time television’s penchant for secularity (Stout and Buddenbaum 2001:43), *House* is a miraculously religion-saturated program.

## DATA AND METHOD

My goal is to ascertain how media transmit cultural ideas about religion to media consumers. I chose *House* as a case study for multiple reasons. First, *House* frequently focuses on the subject of religion and faith. A number of episodes muse on the idea of religiosity, with titles such as “House vs. God,” “Damned If You Do,” “Cane and Able,” and “Instant Karma.” The titular character Dr. Gregory House is a devout atheist (pun intended) and that worldview pervades the portrayal of his character. Similarly, the religious beliefs of many characters (both hospital staff and patients) are prominently presented. House’s rejection of faith frequently enters into their discussions by way of his “God-Complex” (“Larger Than Life,” Season 7, Episode 9) and “God-like doctoring” (“Poison,” Season 1, Episode 8).

Equally important to this sociological investigation is the popularity of the series. Currently *House* is the most viewed show in the world (CSI is number two) and is available globally. Despite being a dominantly verbal series (as opposed to action-based), it is remarkably popular in non-English speaking societies. *House* has been nominated for and won dozens of awards, including Emmys, Golden Globes, Golden Reels, NAACP Image Awards, Screen Actors Guild awards, Writers Guild awards, and a Peabody. In 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011, *House* received the People’s Choice Award for Favorite TV drama, as well as Favorite TV Drama Actor (Hugh Laurie). In 2011, the show added Favorite TV Drama Actress (Lisa Edelstein) and Favorite TV Doctor (Robert Sean Leonard) to its People’s Choice wins. A show with such accolades and universal popularity obviously has some control over which ideological messages it transmits (“intellectual force” in the terms of Karl Marx [2009:64]). On this, Griswold says that “to understand a certain group of people, one would look for the expressive forms through which

they represent themselves to themselves” (Griswold 2008:51). The ways culture is reproduced (in Stuart Hall’s semiotic paradigm) relies on how images are transmitted and received. *House* is received considerably well.

Wanting the most comprehensive picture possible of the representation of religion on *House*, I sampled all 155 episodes of the first seven seasons. I used a combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis strategy for my investigation. For my quantitative analysis, I coded for religious content using two different coding sheets. The first was a singular “overall” sheet on which I kept track of which religions were included, which were excluded, and the frequency of inclusion. Based on the religious categorization used by the CIA World Factbook, I listed the top nine American religions: Protestantism, Catholicism, Atheist/Agnostic/Unaffiliated/None, Other/Unspecified, Mormon, Judaism, Other Christianity, Buddhism, and Muslim. Throughout each episode I kept tally of which were specifically discussed. For each “Other or Unspecified” instance, I also kept track of *how* the representation occurred and which words were used to speak about faith. Typically, the terms “God,” “religion,” and “prayer” were kept so vague as to merit the “Other or Unspecified” categorization.

The second coding sheet was episode-specific and contained 24 possible religious ideas that could arise. These included certain characters’ views and topics such as “religion vs. atheism” and “afterlife/death.” I chose to exclude the expletive phrase “Oh my God” from my observations due to its inherent meaninglessness and ridiculously high frequency on the show. Obviously, such an utterance should not be entirely discounted. That commonplace expression is rooted in religion and embedded so deep into our culture to the point where we can fully disregard it in analysis of religion in media (which is exactly what I did). Yet, due to the nature of

this study and my own prudence toward over-representing religiosity on *House*, I omitted it. As will be seen, this exclusion certainly did not skew the findings in a noticeable way. In fact, despite leaving the phrase “Oh my God” out, the overwhelming presence of religion is still clear.

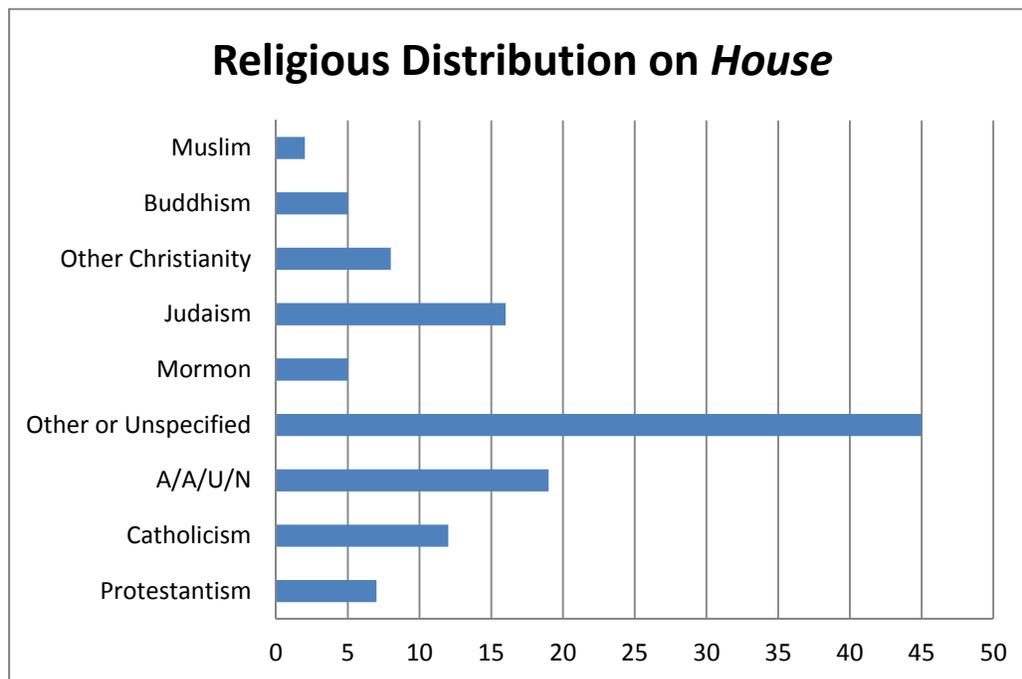
Qualitatively, I used a grounded theory approach (Chambliss and Schutt 2010) to identify recurring themes, which characters promoted and/or argued against religious beliefs, and the manner in which those topics were handled. Tracking trends and identifying emergent themes proved less difficult than I had anticipated. The religious content on *House* is so obvious and omnipresent that I had a wealth of data speaking to me. For instance, the faith/science dichotomy (which became one of my key themes) is alluded to almost constantly in the series, and many characters take it for granted. For the most part, the quantitative data gave way to the qualitative data.

### **RELIGION ON *HOUSE***

*House* is a medical drama on Fox loosely based on classic detective mystery novels. The show focuses on the brilliant Gregory House, head of the diagnostics department at the fictional Princeton-Plainsboro Teaching Hospital, and his team of doctors as they try to solve cases to save lives. In doing so, both doctor and patient beliefs about life, death, and religion arise. This may be expected, but religious representation on the show is surprisingly frequent and prevalent.

Quantitatively, 119 instances of religious content appeared throughout 155 episodes (see bar chart, below, for a breakdown by specific religion). This excludes minor instances that could be included in a more strict analysis (such as characters saying things like “Oh my God” or

“Go to Hell”) and references that may have simply been lost on me as a viewer. Nine different religious affiliations were discerned, including the CIA World Factbook categories of “Other or Unspecified” and “Atheist/Agnostic/Unaffiliated/None.” For the latter, I did not include anyone or anything that did not have a discernible religious status. Four major themes emerged from the quantitative and qualitative analysis, which I call “A Lack of Specificity,” “Complexities and Caricatures,” “An Overall Uncertainty,” and “Mortality and Morality.”



### **A Lack of Specificity**

*House* frequently portrays religious characters and beliefs, yet rarely is the audience told exactly which religious worldviews are being discussed. The highest occurring category of religious representation is “Other or Unspecified” with 45 instances (or 37.8% of the total) of the religious content. Second place goes to “Atheist/Agnostic/Unaffiliated/None” with 19 instances (16%), and which is almost always brought up in relation to a generalized “Other or Unspecified” religious ideology or character. The high frequency of religious content and

religious characters on the show is complicated by the fact that it tends to shy away from specifics. *House* does a lot to allow for a wide range of interpretations by its audience, but it does so by watering down religion into a vague concept, unspecific and caricatured. At times, the show even blatantly avoids getting to the point of characters' views. In the Season 5 episode "Unfaithful," Dr. Wilson interjects into a religious conversation, "This is medicine, not metaphysics!"

The overwhelming majority of religious dialogue on the show revolved around the generalized debate of atheism versus religion. A focus on the faith/science dichotomy promotes the lack of specificity by assuming any religious audience member will disagree with atheist characters while atheist audience members will identify with them. From a media marketer's standpoint, this makes perfect sense: every religious and nonreligious viewer is included in the target audience. In the Season 6 episode "Wilson," a patient chooses not to have a particular life-saving medical procedure performed because it disagrees with his beliefs. Dr. House then asserts that "Religion just killed another person." This type of attitude arises constantly (usually via House himself), but as that phrase shows, it's not a distinct problem with "Muslims" or "Christians" or "Scientologists," but a problem with "Religion."

Likewise, when a patient's atheist husband breaks down and prays for his wife in the Season 3 finale "Human Error," it is never mentioned to whom or what he is praying. He merely claims, "I promised my wife I'd do everything I could to fix her" and that if he doesn't pray then he hasn't tried everything. When the issue of human error arises (that possibly the doctors had done something wrong to worsen the patient's condition), Dr. House disagrees. "What if it was God's error? A congenital effect?" He then finds a biological treatment for the dying wife's

condition and addresses the husband: “I better not see you praying! I don’t wanna have to fight for credit on this!”

The issues of prayer and God are the most commonly occurring semi-specific religious references portrayed on *House*. In Season 2 there is even an episode entitled “House vs. God” which I explore in depth later in this paper. In the episode, Dr. Wilson tells Dr. House that “[t]he majority of Americans believe in a personal God.” These sorts of phrases pervade the religious discourse of the show – it’s always “God,” never a specific God.

Dr. Chase, one of Dr. House’s fellows, has a history of religious participation and conversions which ends with a vague belief in a “higher power” (“Acceptance,” Season 2, Episode 1). A former seminary student, Chase left the church when his faith began to fade. Although not Catholic anymore, he often sympathizes with Catholics and other religious believers. He says that he prays to “pretend somebody’s listening” (“House Training,” Season 3, Episode 20) and that “there’s a role for faith and prayer” (“Here Kitty,” Season 5, Episode 18). In other episodes he can be seen reading books on religion and religious histories. In the highest dramatic point in the character’s story arc thus far, he intentionally prescribes the wrong treatment to a sick African genocidal dictator, which effectively kills the patient (“The Tyrant,” Season 6, Episode 3). Two episodes later in “Brave Heart,” Chase goes to a Catholic confession to seek absolution for his sin.

Such ambiguities in characters’ beliefs allow for a larger viewer draw. In the media, it makes sense to provide a product that appeals to the most people. Speaking about religion in the most nonspecific terms allows popular culture to attract a more diverse audience. If *House* can present a viewpoint that manages to accord with Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim beliefs,

there will be an increase in the show's popularity, ratings, and profit. And if atheist viewers also get to consume media that portrays generalized religious characters, they can interpret them as representations of religion as a whole. So long as the lack of specificity makes everyone interpret the message in their own way, the corporation producing the program has its highest odds to capitalize on religious content.

### **Complexities and Caricatures**

Gregory House is a devout atheist, adamantly opposed to all beliefs that are not based solely on scientific evidence. He argues this point as often as issues of faith arise. He's a brilliant, quick-witted diagnostician, a polyglot, an excellent musician (piano and guitar), and he can solve any puzzle. However, he is also a depressed drug addict who constantly lies, steals and breaks the law. He hires prostitutes, manipulates his colleagues and patients, and makes rude comments (including racist and sexist remarks). As a sardonic, misanthropic narcissist, House lives only for himself and generally does not care for the well-being of others. His chosen profession is due to an insatiable desire to solve puzzles, along with an obvious Messiah complex. His only friend Dr. James Wilson notes that House "reads the Bible. He reads the Koran. He says he likes to know what mistakes people are making." ("Private Lives," Season 6, Episode 14). That's how he sees alternate religious worldviews: as mistakes.

This is hardly a flattering portrayal of atheists in general. Atheists, according to the universe of *House*, are malicious and irreverent to those with differing systems of belief. When a patient raising two younger siblings turns out to share that ideology, House admires him: "He's teaching kids that truth matters, God doesn't, and life sucks – I like him" ("Whac-A-Mole," Season 3, Episode 8). Referencing one of Karl Marx's oft-quoted statements, House attests that

“Religion is not the opiate of the masses, religion is the placebo of the masses” (“Unfaithful,” Season 5, Episode 8). Time and time again, atheism becomes a caricature of cold rationality and cynical derision towards people of faith.

The faithless may be stereotyped, but believers also receive sweeping generalizations. The show seems to promote religion as psychologically uplifting and morally superior compared to atheism. Members of religious groups are portrayed as simply happier in general. But the line between praiseworthy and naïve is blurred. Religion itself tends to be represented as inferior to science, and many beliefs are given an alternate biomedical explanation that challenges the need for faith. Typically, religious patients on *House* suffer from neurological and/or psychological symptoms and mental illnesses (though this is a common occurrence in patients without stated religious status as well). When House is put in a psychiatric hospital for Vicodin addiction in Season 6, he meets another patient that believes he can fly. A third patient says, “We get more Jesuses than superheroes” (“Broken,” Season 6, Episode 1).

Christianity has been represented in various forms on *House*. Guest characters have included nuns, priests, faith healers, a crucifixion reenactment extremist, as well as average every-day worshippers. In season six it’s discovered that Dr. House’s biological father is in fact a Unitarian minister (“Private Lives,” Episode 14). And as stated earlier, Dr. Chase (one of the starring characters) is a former seminary student whose current beliefs remain uncertain.

A recurring character in Season 4 is a Mormon named Dr. Cole, one of many doctors vying for a fellowship on House’s team. Consistently, House challenges Mormonism and Dr. Cole’s beliefs. In “The Right Stuff” (Episode 2), a patient must drink alcohol to test her liver functionality. Dr. House convinces Dr. Cole, as a non-drinker, to take the alcohol liver test as a

kind of control group subject (Mormons are supposed to abstain from alcohol). Cole agrees, stating that “when a situation isn’t clear, we’re encouraged to make our own decisions.” House soon labels him a “Religious Nut” and says that his “beliefs are ridiculous” (“Guardian Angels,” Season 4, Episode 4).

Judaism is portrayed relatively frequently, with only three fewer instances than atheism. House’s boss in Seasons 1 through 7, his best/only friend, and a medical fellow that joins House’s team are all Jewish. That fellow, Dr. Chris Taub, is mocked relentlessly by Dr. House for his religious/ethnic heritage, as well as his appearance (Taub is short and has a rather large nose). In the Season 4 episode “Ugly,” House rewards Taub’s beneficial treatment idea by giving him a “gold star of David.” The patient in “Don’t Ever Change” (also from Season 4) is a Hasidic Jew that collapses at her arranged wedding. Though Dr. Taub is Jewish, he at first considers Hasidic Jews to be “out of touch with reality.” House agrees and tells the Jewish family that “[i]n this temple, I am Dr. Yahweh.” All Jewish characters are reduced to a few phrases and symbols that pervade their image in American popular culture. One woman states that Judaism isn’t even about religion anymore: “Half the Jews I know are atheists. It’s about community” (“Larger Than Life,” Season 7, Episode 9).

Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam are addressed only 9 times all together throughout seven seasons (5, 2, and 2 times respectively). That their numbers are so few reflects the Western media tendency to avoid non-Western religiosity. Buddhism is brought up with reference to karma twice (“Distractions,” Season 2, Episode 12 and “Instant Karma,” Season 6, Episode 4). In a later Season 6 episode “Wilson,” a patient refuses an organ transplant because of the Buddhist belief in keeping the body whole. Zen is referenced in season seven’s “Small

Sacrifices” and season three’s “Lines in the Sand.” “Adverse Events” deals with a Chinese-American woman who collapses while in a Buddhist temple.

As for Hinduism, the Indian ashram is about the only element of the entire religion mentioned (“Cursed,” Season 1, Episode 13). Despite the Season 4 starring role of Dr. Kutner (an Indian-American), the only time Hinduism is represented with reference to him is when he dies in season five’s “Simple Explanation.” Even then, we merely see an Indian funeral service with no dialogue about the actual religion.

Islam is only referenced on the show twice, via jokes. In “Known Unknowns” from season six, Wilson tells House that he has to go to an event they’d planned: “It’s been on your calendar for weeks.” House quickly replies, “So has Ramadan.” This irreverence towards religion is exacerbated by the fact that there are no Islamic characters thus far on a show so riddled with religious representation. This exclusion speaks volumes to our popular culture’s aversion to that particular religion.

Also minimized are Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Scientologists, each of which receive only one mention (with no characters on screen that actually possess those beliefs). This is not to mention all of the religions worldwide that don’t receive any representation, symbolically annihilated through their exclusion (Gerbner and Gross 1976).

Despite the intricate complexity of any religious system, what makes it onto television is a caricature of the real thing. Easy to swallow and easy to understand, “popular culture homogenizes and deflates traditional religious beliefs” (Stout and Buddenbaum 2001:43). We are shown brief glosses, simplified versions of religion as a whole and of certain religions in particular. This could mean that “commercial popular culture constantly creates a lowest-

common-denominator religiosity that implicitly challenges the particular beliefs of virtually all religious groups” (Stout and Buddenbaum 2001:40). By offering the lowest-common-denominator view (and little else), caricaturization serves to reinforce and reproduce cultural norms, stereotypes, and it stifles diversity in the media.

### **An Overall Uncertainty**

Not only are religions nonspecific and the characters that represent them mere caricatures on *House*, but conclusions to issues of faith – positive or negative - are absolutely never evident. The overall attitude of the show therefore ends in agnosticism, framing no hypotheses on who is right and who is wrong. Particularly with regard to the faith/science dichotomy, opposing standpoints are put forth without a clear victory for either side.

When a patient in the Season 5 episode “Locked In” says both “I don’t know if I believe in God” and “I don’t not believe either,” this idea perfectly embodies the way *House* represents religion in general. Each time a character with faith-based ideas offers up an explanation of phenomena, a scientific explanation is there to meet it, and vice versa. When Dr. House has profound medical epiphanies or encounters near-impossible scenarios with his patients, those events may have been the will of a higher power. House himself denies such ideas and counters with academic and scientific possibilities.

In “House vs. God,” a faith healer is admitted to the hospital with a mysterious disease (Season 2, Episode 19). Dr. Chase starts a game, tallying which points on the path to a cure can be attributed to House and which appear to be the divine work of God. During the course of the treatment, Dr. Cameron (another one of House’s fellows) voices her opinion on the matter: “If there is some higher order running the universe it’s probably something so different from

anything our species can conceive, there's no point in even talking about it." She claims not to believe, but leaves the possibility open. Another of House's team, Dr. Foreman, holds that God is the "most important issue," although throughout the episode and series it's unclear what Foreman's actual opinion is on the issue. When the faith healer begins to have religious experiences conversing with God, House quips, "You talk to God, you're religious. God talks to you, you're psychotic." At the end of the treatment, it is discovered that the healer contracted herpes that he received through sex (and which he'd lied about and is contrary to his holy message). Chase and House agree to a 3-3 tie between House and God on the diagnosis. This exemplifies the overall uncertainty: the episode ends in a game with no winner.

House, the cynical atheist, has an ever-present interest in religiosity, and is frequently angry with "divine will." In the fifth episode of the series, a nun tells House that he "can't be angry with God and not believe in him at the same time. No one can." At times, perhaps sarcastically, he blames God for complications and errors in treatments and diagnoses. In "Whatever It Takes" he even claims that God is responsible for trying to kill the patient (Season 4, Episode 6). This paradoxical anger at something he doesn't believe in leaves the audience in a state of "aporia," referring to the point in an argument when both sides are equally plausible but inconsistent with one another. The question is left unanswered.

In a sense, House's fascination with "the divine" is related to this puzzle addiction. "If I could disprove an omniscient God," he says, "I would" ("Here Kitty," Season 5, Episode 18). He recognizes that scientific medical logic is unable to answer the questions that religion does for many people. The Season 2 finale, "No Reason," is comprised almost entirely of a dream/hallucination House has after being shot twice. Near the end of the episode, he realizes

that he's in a dream state and that he needs to find a way back to reality. While discussing his revelation he admits, "It's also possible that I'm already dead. But I don't believe in the afterlife." In the end, he wakes up from the coma, but the meaning of the hallucination is lost on him. In another episode, House even attempts a near-death experience to see if there's anything on the other side ("97 Seconds," Season 4, Episode 3). In the Season 6 finale, "Help Me," he prays with a patient who claims not to believe either.

Arguably, viewers might be offended by a storyline that rejects their belief system or says someone else is closer to the truth than they are. Thus, if a problem can be stated and left unsolved – as it often is in *House* – the viewer is free to create their own opinion of how to approach it (Grazian 2010). Popular culture is "the system of meanings available to ordinary people" (Griswold 2008:89). On *House*, the audience is allowed to interpret the meaning of religion in whatever manner will make them most comfortable. Audiences then "actively construct and attribute meaning and significance to popular culture" (Grazian 2010:155), which in the case of *House* allows for meanings that encompass essentially every religious standpoint. The overall uncertainty, like the lack of specificity, produces and reproduces religious media that says as little as possible in order to attract the most people.

### **Mortality and Morality**

The theme of Mortality and Morality refers to the ways in which religion is used on *House*. Why does the series include religious subject matter at all? As opposed to "Complexities and Caricatures," the focus here is not on characters, but storyline. Religious content on the show comes about as a crucial factor in narrative development. It functions on the show primarily in relation to two common plot devices: the possibility of death (mortality) and

making ethical decisions (morality). The medical drama as a genre can't exist without both of these, and religion provides a deep well of ideas on both.

In terms of mortality, a series of issues arise that can move the story along. As a religious patient gets sicker, he or she may attempt to determine what life means to them or find peace with God. In extreme cases, patients may opt out of treatments because it's what their higher power wants (it's "my time to go"). In the Season 4 episode "97 Seconds" a dying man does exactly this and Dr. House predictably attempts to quash that belief. The notion of God's will also comes up in "Occam's Razor" (Season 1, Episode 3). Dr. House suggests betting on whether the patient will live or not, which Dr. Wilson thinks could be a bad omen. House responds, "Do you think God will smite him because of our insensitivity?"

Visions of Jesus have appeared to two different patients in two different episodes ("Damned If You Do," Season 1, and "Unfaithful," Season 5). Hallucinations are one of the most frequent symptoms on *House* (along with seizures), presumably because they are quite dramatic and visually captivating (same goes for seizures). House generally suspects unyielding faith to be a symptom and on various occasions religion has been partially responsible for the root cause of illness. In this way, impending death sometimes hinges on the patient's religion.

Religious extremism has been on House's list of symptoms multiple times as well. Often, a disease is onset by a religious ritual or environment. In "Small Sacrifices" (Season 7, Episode 8) a patient reenacts the biblical crucifixion every year that his daughter stays alive. She was once a cancer victim nearing death, and to save her the father made an oath to self-sacrifice every year. These beliefs push the story along and the ritual sacrifice provides part of the cause towards finding a diagnosis. Religion in such instances becomes both a matter of mortality and

morality: A devout Christian father thinks that self-sacrifice is his duty to God, but it also may be what's killing him. Within that same episode, two team members - Dr. Chase and Dr. Masters - discuss the effect of prayer on sick people. Chase notes that it is common for patients to recover quicker when their families pray for them. Masters responds that it only works when the patient is aware they are being prayed for. "So faith comes from within," says Chase, "Not exactly a news flash." These sorts of philosophical discussions dominate doctor-doctor side stories in religion-heavy episodes.

Individual choices are guided by worldview and reflect the values of characters. On the other hand, people are very complicated. Morality comes up in literally every episode, so naturally episodes that feature religious characters include moral dilemmas. The best example of this is "Unfaithful" (Season 5, Episode 15). A Catholic priest is admitted to the hospital after drinking a few shots of vodka, smoking a cigarette, and hallucinating Jesus outside his parsonage. At the hospital, two things are revealed. First, the priest never stays at one church too long because congregations find out that he was once accused of "inappropriate contact" with a young boy. Second, he is secretly an atheist. His profession is "just a job now. The fairy tale ended a long time ago." House of course thinks "it's cool that a priest doesn't believe in God." The priest comes to the brink of death, and in the end it turns out that the initial symptom – a "hallucination" of Jesus – is a complete coincidence, having nothing to do with the underlying disease. This miracle gives the priest his faith back (on a side note, it is also proved that he was falsely accused of the "inappropriate contact").

Abortion, as an issue of morality, has also been tackled on *House*, by none other than a religious studies major in college ("One Day One Room," Season 3, Episode 12). She was

impregnated during a rape, and House advises her to abort the fetus. She claims that “[a]bortion is murder. Every life matters to God.” This debate goes on all day, as House is stuck with her because she won’t talk to anyone else. By the end of the episode, she decides to terminate the pregnancy. The abortion debate is also briefly discussed in “Sports Medicine” (Season 1, Episode 12).

The title character of the show has his own story arc with God. Not just his disbelief in God, but his desire *to be* God (the ultimate “immortal”). The Messiah complex, or the belief that he has the superhuman ability to save lives that other doctors do not possess, is one of House’s many character flaws. His boss tells him, “You’re not God” (“All In,” Season 2, Episode 17), his boss’s mother says he has a “God complex” (“Larger Than Life,” Season 7, Episode 9), his boss’s boss says he practices “God-like doctoring” (“Poison,” Season 1, Episode 8), his best friend says, “If you solved a case based on no medical evidence you’d think you were God” (“Informed Consent,” Season 3, Episode 3), and his psychiatrist warns him, “You’re not God, House. You’re just another screwed up human being that needs to move on” (Season 6, Episode 1 “Broken”). Even House himself refers to his self righteousness in “Spin” (Season 2, Episode 6) when he says, “You see, this is exactly why I invented nurses.” Each instance of House’s Messiah complex furthers the story of his own personal and moral issues, along with his constant disbelief/admiration for the divine.

## CONCLUSION

Religion, one of the most significant global social institutions, has been left out of most sociological research on media (Stout and Buddenbaum 2001). This study adds to the existing research literature by raising awareness of religious content on television through a case study

of *House*, the most watched television show in the world. Quantitatively, we have seen that religion, in a general sense, is a ubiquitous and persistent topic on the show, one that is structured to appeal to the largest possible audience. Qualitatively, we've explored four emerging themes: "A Lack of Specificity," in which religion is kept vague and underdeveloped; "Complexities and Caricatures," in which religious characters are portrayed in a lowest-common-denominator form; "An Overall Uncertainty," in which questions of faith are always left unanswered; and "Mortality and Morality," in which religious views on death and ethics are used as plot devices to steer the course of events.

Culture is no longer merely produced locally; mass media have gone global, and Fox's *House* delivers content to a worldwide audience. Many scholars are now recognizing "religion, spirituality, and ethics" as "significant topics for analysis" in television and film studies (2003:Mitchell 381). The findings in this study speak to some messages on religion and religious groups that are marketed around the world.

Systematically under-representing specific beliefs and rituals in favor of a vague, amorphous "religious" portrayal supports a simple business strategy: appealing to a large target audience. Unfortunately, this sort of "targeting" is the equivalent of a nuclear missile. When there is a lack of specificity, no one is actually receiving realistically complex representation. Despite good intentions to include everyone, that intention may be lost on a portion of viewers. Grant argues, "Although broadcasting may take pains to communicate as clearly as possible to mass audiences, the assumption that the message will be as unambiguous to audiences as it is to them is dubious" (Grant 2003:122) Paradoxically, it seems that the more groups of people a religious message appeals to, the fewer individuals it appeals to. That is, when everyone is

included in a religiously oriented message, nobody's faith is specifically receiving the attention. A socially broad message ignores particularisms and fails to capture the real lives of religious groups in our nation and world.

Any individual religion has a plethora of traditions, and each community practicing it is slightly different from the next. On television, these complexities are swept under the rug and we are shown a caricature of, for example, Jews and Judaism. This type of media representation produces and reproduces stereotypes. Because popular culture is "the primary source of socialization and everyday information (usually cloaked in the form of entertainment)" (Gerbner 1979:45), caricatures may easily be mistaken for how people really are. Once again, we see another way that the media distorts the social world.

On the other hand, the overall uncertainty when it comes to religious matters is a definitively positive element of representation on *House* in that it offers the audience considerable agency in their reading and decoding of the content. Gerbner points out that religion and television both serve the social function of "continual repetition of stories that serve to define the world and legitimize a particular social order" (Gerbner 1979:45). On a series like *House*, however, the repetition of arguments over faith and religion never reach a conclusion. So, instead of "a particular social order," the repetition of stories legitimizes *no* social order, *every* social order, or *any* social order (depending on one's perspective). Because the object in question is a commodity, "any" seems most accurate.

Employing religion as a plot device, *House* adds drama to its two driving forces: life-and-death situations and moral dilemmas. When we are supposed to die, the afterlife, finding meaning in mortality – these are death bed concerns (not exclusively), and they obviously

involve ideas on religion. Likewise, religious beliefs guide many characters' decisions and evaluations. Making the ethical choice sometimes disagrees with the medical choice that will save a life on *House*. On a few occasions, doctors have let patients die to save others. These storylines contribute to our "conceptions of social reality" (Gerbner 1979:44), and problems of mortality and morality force us to reassess those conceptions.

The difference between the complex fabric of diverse religious beliefs in America and what audiences often see on television is significant. Many people get the wrong idea about differing cultures by way of media. Hoover questions "whether the entertainment media are to blame for what they might call distorted beliefs of young people" (2003:21). Since our media is supersaturated with Western ideology, we tend to be given the watered-down or stereotypical version of alternate lifestyles and worldviews. Likewise, our own ethnocentrism is reinforced by the tendency to assume the audience agrees with mainstream ideas on religion (Gerbner 1979). Methodologically, we must sever those ties and look at media as it is: how it portrays and represents the world, in this case focusing on the religious aspects of human life.

The study of religion and culture in media is "the quest for communicative justice" (Mitchell 2003:343). To arrive at that destination, we must continue a sustained inquiry into representations of all religions, "in both local and international media" (Mowlana 2003:315). Ferre writes in *Mediating Religion*: "Somewhere between the contrasting views of media as conduits and media as modes of knowing is the approach that sees that media as indices of social values" (2003:88). This has been but a single index. Many more popular shows have yet to be studied. With an interdisciplinary approach, this should be of interest to those interested in further research in media studies, religious studies, sociology, anthropology, and cultural

studies. Do the findings from *House* reflect typical representations of religion on television? Are they significantly different? More research must be done.

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