



As a frequent wanderer through the painted desert that is American pop culture (because y'all know I just can't help myself!), I find one TV show particularly maddening in its inconsistency. That show is “Glee.”

I've been trying to write about the “Glee” phenomenon for a year now, but can never quite nail down my opinion. I've decided that's because the show can't quite nail down its tone, its characters, or its point of view. It's an ongoing, onscreen identity crisis. It can't decide what it wants to be, so I can't decide how I feel about it. One week I love it, the next week I hate it. Two weeks ago, the trashy, irredeemable Britney Spears episode almost had me swearing off “Glee” for good.

But then came last week's Religion episode.

That's right. “Glee” took on religion. And it wasn't terrible. In fact, it was actually rather wonderful.

But it made me sweat before proving itself. The name of the episode was “Grilled Cheesus,” which immediately set my teeth on edge, even as I giggled. Here we go again, I thought. Another bunch of Hollywood hipsters will now proceed to mock and revile religious believers while inadvertently revealing their own stunning ignorance on the subject. Been there, seen that. Yawn. Pass me the remote...

How wrong I was. What “Glee” offered up that night was one of the most powerful, thoughtful, deeply moving hours of TV I can remember. Challenging, but not brash... Provocative, but not offensive... it was everything I wish all TV was, all the time.

Now, for those who don't watch the show, let me be clear: “Glee” is nothing if not irreverent. Week after week, it offers up a universe in which nothing is sacred – except, perhaps, music. Nothing and no one is exempt from the show's relentless sarcasm and crass humor. But here's the twist: its steady stream of wise cracks, put downs, and gags is punctuated by a series of glorious, earnestly uplifting song-and-dance numbers. It's a strange brew.

The religion episode was no different, and if one were so inclined, one might certainly have taken offense. Maybe on a different night, in a different mood, I would have. But not that night. That night, all I could do was laugh and cry, and, of course... sing.

The episode revolved around two events: one student's “epiphany,” brought on by an image of Christ burned into a grilled cheese sandwich; and another student's spiritual crisis following his father's near-fatal heart attack. The first student, Finn, is a handsome, popular jock who's never thought much about God at all, but is suddenly a “true believer,” thanks to Grilled Cheesus. The other student, Kurt, is a flamboyant, gay outsider who has long since rejected belief in God and organized religion. With his mother long dead and his father in a coma, Kurt feels completely alone. His Glee Club friends, who keep offering prayers, only increase his sense of estrangement.

Our jock-boy Finn begins praying to Grilled Cheesus, and one by one, his prayers seem to be answered – his football team wins, he gets to second base with his girlfriend Rachel, and he regains his status as quarterback. Based on these results, his “faith” grows. Meanwhile, Kurt's father remains comatose, and Kurt struggles to accept the loving support of his friends without letting go of his core atheism.

While this drama is playing out, we see the rest of the “Glee” cast dealing with their own religious confusion and conflict. The Jewish-born Rachel is concerned about her boyfriend Finn's newfound love of Jesus. “I need to make sure that my children will be free to worship in the way that I decide,” she tells him. (“Sure, they should definitely go to Jew church and wear those hats and eat that orange stuff with their bagels,” replies the hapless Finn.) Discussing spirituality in class, bad boy Puck launches into Billy Joel's “Only the Good Die Young” to illustrate his own creed: “I see God every time I make out with a pretty girl.” Airhead cheerleader Brittany chimes in later with, “Whenever I pray, I fall asleep.” A girl after my own heart.

Meanwhile, egomaniacal cheerleading coach Sue Sylvester discovers that the Glee Club is working on spiritual songs (separation of church and state!), and she decides to make trouble for their teacher, Mr. Schuster. Her quest becomes a crusade, and one she takes very seriously. We later learn that Sue has lost her faith, mainly because of the cruelty she’s witnessed toward her beloved sister Janie, who has Down Syndrome. Sue’s scene with Janie, near the end of the show, is a rare and touching glimpse into the soul of a character who often seems to lack one. And Janie’s own expression of faith (“I don’t think God makes mistakes”) resonates poignantly.

I loved this episode, but not because it taught us anything about religion. It didn’t. There was no discernable theology. There was no serious exploration of religious doctrine. There was no talk of sin and redemption. There was nothing very... deep. There was simply a group of young people, broken and confused and struggling to find hope, with very little guidance from the adults, who were just as broken and confused. And there was *music*. A gospel choir singing “Bridge Over Troubled Water.” A transcendent rendition of “Papa, Can You Hear Me?” from Yentl. And when Kurt sang a slow, balladic version of “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” against a video montage of his younger self with his dad...? Well, I’m tearing up just thinking about it.

A Facebook friend of mine – a conservative Catholic who didn’t like the episode one bit – commented:

“The show was very well done, to be sure. Great production values, excellent singing talent. But here we are presented with a group of people in a dark pit, singing at each other. One of the characters begins to climb out of the pit, but just as he starts to get his fingers to the edge of the precipice, another character grabs his foot and drags him back into the dark murky hole. There is no movement and no hope that the characters will ever climb out of their confusion and misery. They are like the Jews in Babylonian exile, consoling each other with Psalm 137, except they have no memory of Zion, and no hope of return...”

I see his point. Believe me, I do. I even kind of agree with it. But the reason my friend hated the episode is the same reason I loved it. *Because it was so tragically honest.* Not just about the fictional teenagers at the fictional McKinley High School, but about
us

. The people we are and the world we live in. As a culture, we’re sprawling in every direction, our various limbs becoming ever more detached from the roots of a common heritage. When it comes to discerning what’s sacred – or how we should live our lives – we’re now on our own, every man for himself. Some embrace this brave new world with wondrous enthusiasm. Others, not so much. Me? It depends on what day you ask...

Near the end of “Glee’s” religion episode, we see Finn coming to terms with the bogus, superficial, *cheesy* nature of his faith, which seems to have disappeared as suddenly as it came. No longer certain of anything, but palpably longing, he makes a surprising move that can’t have been lost on religious viewers. Instead of throwing away the moldering “grilled cheesus” that’s been sitting around all week under plastic wrap – isn’t that what you’d do? – he eats it. An act of defiant atheism... or something else? “Glee” leaves the viewer to decide.

Get used to it.

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