

ATHEISTS IN THE FOXHOLE:

Representation of atheists on American dramatic series *Firefly*, *House, MD*,
Bones, and *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*

Bachelor's thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Työn aiheena oli ateistien representaatio amerikkalaisissa draamasarjoissa <i>Firefly</i>, <i>House, MD</i>, <i>Bones</i> ja <i>Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip</i>. Lähtökohtana oli selvittää miten heitä representoidaan, eli kuvataan, edustetaan, millaisen vaikutelman ateisteista saa näiden sarjojen perusteella ja kohdellaanko uskonnollisia ja ateisti hahmoja samalla tavalla. Tarkoitukseni oli tutkia näiden neljän sarjan päähenkilöitä ja miettiä onko ateistien representaatio positiivista vai negatiivista.</p> <p>Koska ateisteista oli vaikea löytää akateemisia tutkimuksia käytin apunani verrattavissa olevia tutkimuksia representaatiosta televisiossa. Representaation lisäksi käytin kulttuurin tutkimusta ja populaarikulttuurin tutkimusta. Tutkimuksessa ensin analysoin ja sitten vertailin ateistihahmoja keskenään. Vertailin myös hieman henkilöihahmoja, jotka ovat uskonnollisia ateistihahmoin nähdeksi miten näiden hahmojen representaatiot eroavat toisistaan. Tutkimukseni oli kvalitatiivista.</p> <p>Tulosteni mukaan ateistihahmoilla on enemmän positiivista kuin negatiivista representaatiota, koska vaikka nämä ateistihahmot pitäytyvät melko paljon ateistisissa stereotyyppioissa, he ovat muutakin kuin heidän ateisminsa ja koska he ovat päähenkilöitä, heidän maailmankatsomuksensa on yleensä oikea sarjan mukaan ja vaikka se ei olisikaan, heidän mielipiteensä ja niiden esittäminen ovat sallittuja ja hyväksytyjä.</p> <p>Koska datani oli vain neljä sarjaa, yleistäviä johtopäätöksiä on vaikea tehdä. Sen vuoksi olisikin hyvä tehdä lisätutkimusta tämän aiheen parissa. Laajempi aineisto, enemmän hahmoja ja katsaus myös komediasarjoihin tekisi tästä tutkielmasta paremmin yleistettävän.</p>	
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1. Introduction

This study examines the representation of atheist characters in American drama series. I have concentrated on four series from the 21st century, because I feel these four series gives a good if limited overview of how atheists are represented currently in television drama. In this study I have used a few comparative studies concentrating on television presentation.

I have chosen this topic because there has been very little studies done on atheists, even though it as a fascinating and growing minority. While academics seem to be quiet about atheists, at least about their representation, the internet is not. There have been many blog post musings (for example see Sparks, West, and Williamson) about what the atheist characters who are currently on television represent about all atheists. The biggest question is whether or not the representation is positive. The answers on the internet are mixed; Williamson (2011) is happy to have “angry” atheists to pave the way for other types of atheists, while “Teen Atheist” is happy with the characters as they are. However, Katie from Canadianatheist.org and “Sisyphus Fragment” would prefer it if the atheist characters were not always the “mean/sociopathic/disconnected people of the shows” (Canadian atheist).

This is one of the research questions this study tries to answer. What constitutes positive representation and are atheists represented positively, negatively or neutrally? What kind of impressions these television characters give off of atheists and are the impressions positive or negative? This study will also examine whether the religious and the atheist characters get equal treatment.

The structure of this study is simple. First I will go over some useful background material, such as previous studies of television presentation, reactions to atheists in America and a short history or overview of atheist television characters. These issues are covered in sections 2.1-2.4.

In sections 4-7 I will analyze all four television series I have chosen as my focus. In the first section I will analyze the protagonist, second section is reserved for the ‘religious foil’ character, a character that leads the protagonist to express their atheistic point of view. In the third section of each series I will examine what the series’ overall take on religion is, in that section I will mention other nonbelievers and characters that have expressed religious beliefs, but do not have the role of religious foil.

Before concluding this study, in section 8 I will discuss the findings of my research questions in general. I will compare and contrast the characters and series before summing everything up in the conclusion.

2. Background

This section will introduce the comparative studies on television presentation done previously, define the terms that will be used in this study, give a short overview of the history of atheist characters on American television, both comedy and drama, and give some background on the treatment of atheists in America.

2.1. Defining of the terms used in study

In this section I will define the terms I will be using in this study. All definitions are from *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2008, third edition). It is important to distinguish between atheists and agnostics because the line between them can seem very narrow. While the definitions make the different points of view clear, the distinction is not as clear in the real world. Because nonbelievers lack an overriding authority figure such as the Pope for Catholics and majority of them are self-identified, keeping the terms clear and separate is not always possible.

Cultural Studies: the study of how a society creates and shares meaning.

Representation: the way that someone or something is shown or described.

Non-believer: a person who has no religious beliefs.

I will use this term to refer to atheists and agnostic atheists when I do not need to make a distinction between the two groups. Or when the character's actual worldview is not apparent.

Atheist: Someone who believes that God or gods do not exist.

How much doubt an atheist can have is a big point of contention between atheists in the real world. As far as fictional characters are concerned, I will trust what the characters identify themselves as, for the most part.

Agnostic: Someone who does not know, or believes that it is impossible to know, whether a god exists.

This term can be separated into three groups;

*Agnostic atheist, a person who believes knowing is impossible but believes it is more likely that a god does not exist;

*Agnostic theist, a person who believes knowing is impossible but believes it is more likely that a god exists

*Agnostic who believes that knowing is impossible so does not even try to speculate one way or the other.

Religious: Having a strong believe in a god or gods.

I will use this term to refer to all characters that express religious beliefs.

2.2 Previous studies and theoretical background

In this study, the theoretical frameworks were cultural studies, how society creates meaning, study of popular culture, specifically television and representation as based on character analysis.

Television as a representational tool is often used to define the American national imaginary and the role of commercial, or network, television in the construction of that imaginary is especially important because it can reach the widest range of people (Gray, 2005:89). Showing diversity is important in normalizing minorities to whites, who are still the main consumers the advertisers care about. Seeing characters of different financial, ideological and racial backgrounds is very important in showing the wide variety of different Americans there are today. There have been many studies about the diversity of television series, one of them is by Eric from the website *Daemon's TV* (under *Daemon's TV*), that rates racial diversity. GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) keeps track of how they are represented on television with yearly reports.

Studies on television representation of specific groups that I used as comparative studies with this study, are Negra (2006), Hamamoto (1994), and Gray (2005). The edited volume *The Irish in Us* includes several articles which examine representation of Irishness from multiple points of view. Meaney's (2006) essay examines how Irishness is represented in Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* and Negra examines how the Irish-identity came to symbolize innocence and family values on television comedies and dramas starting in the 1990's and especially after 9/11.

The collection of articles *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of Representation* by Hamamoto examines the representation of a wide variety of Asian identities, both in dramas and comedies (*White Christian Nation*) and documentaries and other non-fiction (*Counterprogramming*). The representation of Asian Americans had been plagued with simple stereotyping and desexualization in only minor roles for a long time.

Gray (2005) examines the history of minority representation on television and the important role television, especially network television, plays in normalizing minorities and reflecting the American national imaginary. Television is able to reach the widest range of people, so representing minorities is important for accurate reflection of the current American society.

Jowett (2010) points out that cult television representation is often liberal humanist, meaning it embraces diversity, and freedom of expression while not acknowledging political significance of identity. According to her, network television also always tries to go for "the least offensive programming" strategy, meaning not offending the target audience of white, heterosexual males. However, television helps create tolerance, normalizing racial, sexual and ideological minorities for a wide range of the American public, which makes representation of minorities very important.

2.3 History of atheist characters on television

An important thing to remember about religious/atheistic representation in fiction is that fiction often only includes pertinent information. If a character's religious beliefs do not matter either from a plot or character perspective it is usually excluded. Because of this I am only including characters that are expressively atheist or their atheism can be clearly inferred from the text.

The history of atheist characters on television is both relatively long and relatively short. It is long because the first atheist characters were from the 1960's, in Gene Roddenberry's original *Star Trek* series. All five *Star Trek* series are situated in an atheistic and secular universe where having religious belief is not the norm. The original series ran from 1966-1969, the spin-off *Star Trek: The Next Generation* ran from 1987-94, the third series *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* from 1993-1999, the fourth series *Star Trek: Voyager* from 1995-2001 and the fifth series *Star Trek: Enterprise* from 2001-2005. The *Star Trek* universe consists mostly of characters that are functional atheists and religion was portrayed in a neutral light while not being promoted. Having atheist characters even in the 1960's was probably acceptable because the series was set in the future and in science fiction everything is possible.

While the comedy series *All in the Family* (1971-1979) had an agnostic couple Michael (Rob Reiner) and Gloria Stivic (Sally Struthers), *Good Times* (1974-1979) had black atheist Carl Dixon (Moses Gunn), and the female lead of the series *Moonlighting* (1985-1989), Maddie Hayes (Cybill Shepherd), was an atheist, it took until the 1990's for nonbelievers to get more representation. The '90s introduced first Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) in 1993's *The X Files*, who is one of the most well known skeptics and nonbelievers, while his ideological identification is not quite clear, he often mocks his partner Dana Scully's (Gillian Anderson) religious beliefs. In 1993 Daria Morgendorffer (Tracy Grandstaff) first appeared in MTV's *Beavis and Butt-Head* and in 1997 she got her own spin-off series, *Daria* (1997-2002). She is a very sardonic and cynical teenage girl, and when her sister Quinn becomes convinced that she has a guardian angel in episode 4.11 Groped by an Angel, Daria is shown to be very annoyed by her sister's silly beliefs. While she never calls herself an atheist or agnostic, she says she thinks humans are on their own until she sees some pretty convincing evidence to the contrary. In 1998 the Ted Danson starring comedy series *Becker* (1998-2004) had the first of a common stereotype, the angry, atheist, funny doctor.

In the turn of the millennium, representation of nonbelievers started becoming even more common. In *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000) protagonist Lindsey Weir (Linda Cardellini) was an openly atheist character, the comedy series *Scrubs* (2001-2010) had Dr. Perry Cox (John C. McGingley) from the beginning until the end, *Firefly* with Malcolm Reynolds (Nathan Fillion) premiered in 2002 and *Wonderfalls*' (2004) Aaron Tyler (Lee Pace) is both an atheist and a theologian.

Comedy series especially have started having more and more nonbeliever characters. Out of shows currently in the air, *Community* (2009-) has Britta Perry (Gillian Jacobs) who is an atheist and Jeff Winger (Joel McHale) is an agnostic, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-) has Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons) and Leonard Hofstadter (Johnny Galecki), the

anthropomorphic dog Brian from *Family Guy* (1999-) is often the mouthpiece of the atheist creator Seth MacFarlane and *Glee* (2009-) has two atheist characters, Sue Sylvester (Jane Lynch) and Kurt Hummel (Chris Colfer).

In drama series the atheist protagonist has become more and more common these days. Especially procedural series seem to find nonbeliever leads interesting. Dr. Gregory House (Hugh Laurie) of *House, MD* (2004-), Patrick Jane (Simon Baker) of *The Mentalist* (2008-), and *Bones*' (2005-) Dr. Temperance Brennan (Emily Deschanel) are all leads of their popular series as well as openly atheist. Other atheists in drama series are for example serial killer Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall) from *Dexter* (2006-), Matt Albie (Matthew Perry) from *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, and Sam Tyler (Jason O'Mara) from the American remake of the British series *Life on Mars* (2008-2009). The remake of the 1970's series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009) has an interesting and different perspective of atheists, because it is situated in a polytheistic universe yet contains many atheist characters such as Billy Keikeya (Paul Campbell) and Gaius Baltar (James Callis). Tara Thornton (Rutina Wesley) from *True Blood* (2008-) recently announced that she is an atheist.

2.4. Background on the treatment of atheists

Currently nonbelievers, or religious unaffiliated, make up 16 % of America's population. This significant minority has been on the receiving end of some rather harsh treatment and generalizations. In 1987, then Vice President while campaigning for Presidency, George W. H. Bush told a representative of American Atheists that

No, I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God. (O'Hair, 1991)

Despite respectful attempts by the American Atheist members, calling congress members, asking for a meeting with Bush in 1989 and in 1990 asking Congress "to pass a resolution condemning discrimination against atheists by any elected or appointed official of government" but to no avail. Bush never retracted or apologized for his words. In contrast, current President Barack Obama included non-believers in his list of Americans in his inauguration speech in 2009.

A study conducted on 2006 by the University of Minnesota revealed that atheists are the most distrusted group in America. 47.6% of respondents would disapprove of their child's marriage to an atheist and 39.5% believe atheists do not share their vision of American society. According to the lead researcher, sociologist Penny Edgel, this study showed "a glaring exception to the rule of increasing tolerance over the last 30 years" (Paulos, 2006). According to the study, atheists are seen as cultural elitists, amoral materialists, or given to criminal behavior or drugs. They are also seen as self-interested individuals who are not concerned with the common good. The study was published in the April 2006 issue of *American Sociological Review*, written by Joseph Gerteis and Doug Hartman.

When American Atheists' Communications Director, Blair Scott, made an appearance on Fox News' program '*American Live*' in August 2011 to talk about the group's lawsuit to stop the erection of a crucifix at the World Trade Center Memorial, Fox News' Facebook page was filled with over 8,000 death threats. Hurst (2011) managed to find screen shots before they were taken down. One particularly striking message was by Bob O'Connell, "They're atheists

so it won't matter if you kill them." Such a hostile reaction against an atheist says a lot about how parts of America feel about nonbelievers.

3.Data and methods

This study examines how atheist characters are represented in 21st century American television drama series, meaning I will examine how they are shown and described. Atheists are a small but growing minority that seems to invite a disproportionate amount of mistrust and intolerance in America. This makes studying their representation very fascinating.

I have chosen to concentrate on four television series, and in addition, one of the series, *Firefly*, has a sequel film and a prequel graphic novel that seemed suitable to include in the analysis. I will go through all series one by one and explain why I chose them for closer study.

Firefly: It has a passionate cult following that is active worldwide even though the series was cancelled nine years ago and the film is six years old. Malcolm Reynolds is an interesting character for many reasons and an atheist creator adds an interesting point of view.

House, MD: One of the most watched series in the world, literally. In 2008 it was the most viewed series worldwide and during other years it is near the top. While Gregory House is not the nicest person to be representing atheists, such a wide acceptance of this character deserves examining.

Bones: A very popular series with lead who is both a female and an atheist. Brennan is one of the most successful female atheists so it is important to get a little more gender balance. Besides, the relationship between atheist Brennan and Catholic Booth is worth looking into.

Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip: Creator Aaron Sorkin is an atheist and multiple award winner. To many, this series is one of his few flops, so it is interesting to study that. It also gives a different perspective to religious-atheist relationship when Matt and Harriet is contrasted with Brennan and Booth from *Bones*.

Representation on the television was my main framework. This was a qualitative study because of the small sample and quantitative study is often incompatible with representation and cultural studies.

4. Firefly (2002-2003)

“You’re welcome on my boat. God ain’t.” (The Train Job)

Firefly is a science fiction- western series set in 2517. After Earth-That-Was got used up by humans, they found a star system consisting of several stars, of which at least five have orbiting planets and these planets have moons. All or most of these planets and moons were terra-formed, meaning the atmosphere, temperature and other aspects of these celestial bodies were made Earth-like so humans could occupy them. Terra-forming is not a perfect system and because of this the celestial bodies can end up very different from one another and can have different problems.

United States of America and China, the superpowers of the day, formed a union called the Alliance. The Alliance wanted to unify all the celestial bodies under one Parliament, but everyone did not want this, hence a civil war between The Alliance and the Independents, or Browncoats, erupted. The Unification War ended with the Alliance’s win. The series is set six years after the end of the war.

Firefly aired 11 episodes on Fox in the fall of 2002, the DVD release in 2003 included 4 unaired episodes. In 2005 the series had a big screen continuation with the film *Serenity*. In 2010 the prequel graphic novel *Shepherd’s Tale* was published, which told the mysterious back story of one of the characters, Shepherd Derrial Book. The series was created by American atheist Joss Whedon.

4.1 Malcolm Reynolds

Malcolm Reynolds (Nathan Fillion) is a captain of a spaceship that is a Firefly model, based on its shape, called *Serenity*. He was a sergeant in the Unification war, fighting for the Independents. Losing the civil war made him into a bitter and somewhat angry man. He runs a crew of thieves and smugglers that includes his right arm woman Zoe Alleyne Washburne (Gina Torres), she fought with him during the Unification war. Zoe’s husband and the ship’s pilot Hoban “Wash” Washburne (Alan Tudyk), mechanic Kaylee Frye (Jewel Staite) and muscle Jayne Cobb (Adam Baldwin). On aboard the ship is also Inara Serra (Morena Baccarin), a registered companion, a position similar to a Geisha, she has much power in this futuristic culture. Inara and Mal have a slightly dysfunctional will they/ won’t they relationship throughout the series, comics published by Dark Horse Publishing, and the film *Serenity*.

In the series’ first episode, *Serenity* parts 1&2, the crew takes on passengers to make some extra money. Shepherd Derrial Book (Ron Glass), and fugitive siblings Simon (Sean Maher) and River Tam (Summer Glau) are first passengers and then become a part of the group. Simon is a doctor, which comes in handy because the crew often gets hurt during missions.

As a character, Mal can come off as closed off, angry and bitter and he certainly is those things. Losing the war affected him greatly and he was never really able to recover from what losing his faith did to him. He is, however, also a very caring, loyal and warm to the people he cares about. He is a thief, because it is one of the few ways he can make a living and keep

his relative independence in an Alliance ruled universe, but he is also very particular about the jobs he pulls. In 1.3 The Train Job, when he realizes that what he stole for a criminal kingpin Adelei Niska (Michael Fairman) was medicine that a town desperately needed, he returns the medicine because he felt that morally there is no other choice. This gets him into trouble with Niska, but he did what was right and that is what matters most. In 1.10 Ariel he steals medicine, again, but this time it is from a very rich central planet hospital that will have no trouble restocking the medicine within hours of the job.

He is also a very loyal person to his crew. He might not like Simon Tam, and his sister River has mostly just brought trouble to the group but he will still save them in 1.6 Safe, even though leaving them would be much easier. In Ariel, once he figures out Jayne tried to sell the Tams out during their mission, he almost kills Jayne, but spares Jayne's life when Jayne begs Mal to think of a false reason why he deserved to die so as not to sully his name with the rest of the crew after his death, which means Jayne is starting to care about other people and how he affects them. This slight change is enough for Mal to give Jayne a second chance.

As an atheist Mal is a fascinating example. Unlike all the other characters I will examine in this study, Mal had a conversion experience from religious to atheist. The first scene of *Serenity* part 1&2 is set during the last days of the Unification War, six years prior to the beginning of the series. He's shown to be a man of faith who will kiss his cross for luck, and he makes heroic speeches to keep others fighting. He believes until the last minute that they can win the war and when it becomes clear that the war is over, that the Independents have lost, one can almost see hope and faith die in Mal's eyes.

In addition to this, the word *atheist* is not once uttered during the show. Mal's actions and behavior mark him as an atheist, especially his words to Shepherd Book, most famously from the third episode The Train Job when Mal warns Book not to make him into a mission: "You're welcome on my boat. God ain't". He does, however, develop a friendship with Book, but Book does not really question Mal's lack of belief after the Train Job exchange until the film *Serenity* where they have a short discussion on belief and what it means.

Book: There's only one way to walk you through this. Belief.

Mal: I always look to you for counsel, but sermons make me sleepy, shepherd. I ain't looking for help from on high. That's a long wait for a train don't come.

Book: When I talk about belief, why do you always assume I'm talking about God? (*Serenity*, scene 8)

Mal has no answer to Book's question. This is almost half way through the film and later it becomes clear that Mal's apparent way of shunning all believe is the wrong way to behave and in the end he finds belief in the people around him and the idea of a better world, which he stopped believing in after he lost the Unification war. This is a common way to handle atheists, the idea that they need to belief in something, if not in God then other people. Mal starts to open himself up again at the end of the film and for him that is enough progress. He does not need God, he has the people around him and his ship.

The differences between Mal pre- and post-conversion experience make his representation as an atheist slightly problematic. While religious Mal is only shown in two episodes of the series (*Serenity* part 1&2 and 1.13 The Message), those flashbacks indicate that when Mal had faith, he was a much happier and more well adjusted person than after he lost his faith. While losing one's faith can be a traumatic experience, and the portrayal of Mal makes sense because of it, making Mal become angry, bitter, and closed-off afterwards perpetuates the angry, unhappy atheist stereotype that is still very common in popular culture. While relying

on this stereotype can be seen as a way of letting American culture slowly get used to atheists, as Williamson (2011) indicates, it is odd that the creator Joss Whedon, who himself is openly atheist, relies on this stereotype. However, part of Whedon's creative M.O is subverting stereotypes, or showing that stereotypes can be misleading. That is somewhat the case here. While Mal does express anger at God, he still manages to be friendly and become friends with Shepherd Book, and under the surface of bitterness he is actually very kind, honest, warm, and loyal. One wonders if his initial hostility to Book had been the same had he not once been religious himself. In *Serenity* part 1&2, Book asks if he can say grace while they are eating dinner, Mal's reaction is a hostile "Only if you say it out loud." However, he overcomes his initial hostility against Book and Book becomes one of his most trusted friends.

Another aspect of Mal that makes his representation of atheists problematic is the fact that he has questionable morality, being a thief and a criminal who also kills people in an emotionless manner if the situation calls for it. He is more an anti-hero than a morally respectable traditional hero. Considering many Americans believe atheists are amoral or immoral, to have one of the most well known atheists be a criminal does not help matters. Although, as I have already written, he does have a conscience and makes moral choices when choosing his jobs and his loyalty to his crew is very commendable. He may not be perfect, but he is not immoral or amoral.

4.2 Religious foil: Shepherd Derrial Book

Shepherd Derrial Book is a mysterious character throughout the series and film. His religious views are portrayed positively, but his back story is very mysterious which leads both the characters and the audience to wonder about him and his history. When he is introduced in the first episode *Serenity* part 1&2, he has just left the monastery South Down Abbey, having decided to try to walk in the world again after isolating himself from it for years. For the most part he keeps his faith to himself, but if he feels strongly about something he is not afraid to express himself even though Mal's reactions to his beliefs are often hostile. In 1.4 *Bushwhacked*, when the ship stumbles on another ship that has been attacked by Reavers (savages that raid, rape and kill everyone if they manage to board a ship), he asked if he can try to give the victims of Reavers some peace by saying a few words, in a way arranging a funeral. At first Mal refuses, but then relents.

Surprisingly the character who is most interested in Book's views is Jayne Cobb, the violent, crude, not overly intelligent, amoral muscle of the crew. Jayne is often curious about religion, and asks many questions from Book about his beliefs. While Jayne most likely was not about to fully convert, he found Book's points of view interesting and they developed an odd friendship. Another character that has an interesting reaction to Book is River Tam. River is a child prodigy, a teenager whose brain has been tampered with by the Alliance so badly that she has become insane. In 1.8 *Jaynestown*, when River finds Book's Bible she feels compelled to fix it. She is hyper rational and incredibly intelligent and she tries to make the Bible make logical sense. In order to be able to understand Noah's Ark, for example, she sees it as an "early quantum state phenomenon. Only way to fit 5,000 species of mammal on the same boat." she explains happily to Book. Book, however, is not amused and tries to get River to understand that the Bible is not about making logical sense but faith and one does not have to fix the Bible, "the Bible fixes you."

Book has a sense of humor about his beliefs, while he does sometimes feel the need to make a point about morality, such as in 1.7 Our Mrs. Reynolds, he makes very clear to Mal not to take advantage of his wife who he accidentally married as payment for a job, telling Mal he will go to the special hell that is reserved for child molesters and people who talk in the theater. He also has a few catchy sermons prepared for Inara about her profession if she would care to hear them, said with a joking tone. The only time Book shows his disapproval of Mal's lack of belief is in reaction to Mal's taunting in The Train Job. Mal is trying to get Book to leave him alone by commenting

“Shouldn't you be off bringing religiosity to the fuzzy-wuzzies or some such?

Book: Oh, I got heathens aplenty right here.

Mal: If I'm your mission, shepherd, best give up. You're welcome on my boat. God ain't. “
(The Train Job, scene 3)

Book is also shown as trying to get Mal to belief in something in the film and in the end he succeeds.

He often has a hard time dealing with the criminal actions of the crew, and the constant threat of violence and breaking of the commandments often disturbs him. He is not above breaking some rules himself or exploiting loopholes in the Bible, such as the fact that the Bible is very clear about not killing but fuzzy on the subject of kneecaps (1.11 War Stories). He can be very pragmatic about violence, which is part of his mysterious past, which included plenty of violence, crime, killing and betrayals. He has found some peace in religion, but sometimes it is just too much for him to deal with. This ultimately makes him leave Serenity after spending about two years there, however, it does not end his friendships with the people on board. After his death in the film, Jayne, the amoral muscle, tells the crew something important he learned from Book: “If you can't do something smart, do something right.”

4.3 Religion in the universe of the series

Most likely because of the short length of the series (it was cancelled during season one after only 15 episodes), the series never goes very deep into the religious worldview of the series. Most of the characters do not express any religious beliefs, only Mal (nonbeliever), Book (Christian of unknown denomination) and Inara (Buddhist) are shown 'practicing' their beliefs. However, none of these points of view are treated as strange hence religion is not completely gone from the universe. Also, in the first episode when Book says his silent grace, all the characters besides Mal, are shown as taking part in the grace. This scene is before the introduction of River, so her reaction to saying grace is unknown.

The world of the series seems to be mostly secular. While there are Buddhist temples and monasteries still in existence, and reactions to religious belief or lack thereof is nonplussed, (which most likely is because the crew has known Mal for years and the Tams as new comers make no note of his lack of belief one way or the other) it makes sense to assume the universe is similar to modern Europe which for the most part is very secular.

However, in Safe, one celestial body is shown that seems very stuck on the Middle Ages, the people talk and act very religiously and they almost burn River on a stake when they believe

her to be a witch. Hence religious fundamentalism seems to be still in existence.

Because the series is so very short, it is hard to make a proper point about how religion is viewed in that universe as a whole because we mostly only see the regular nine characters.

5. House, MD (2004-)

“I find it more comforting to believe this [existence] isn't simply a test” (Three Stories)

House, MD is a medical procedural series about a misanthropic doctor Gregory House (Hugh Laurie) and his occasionally changing team of diagnosticians at the fictional Princeton-Plainsboro Teaching Hospital in New Jersey. It was created by Canadian Jewish David Shore and has been on the air since 2004. It started its 8th season on Fox in October 2011.

5.1 Gregory House

Dr. Gregory House is a misanthropic who will insult absolutely anyone for whatever aspect of them he finds mock worthy. He can come across as sexist, racist, intolerant, anti-Semitic and misogynistic. However, he says all those things not because he means them but because he enjoys getting a rise out of people and often what he says is sarcastic and funny. While he finds patients intolerable because they always lie and are also boring, he enjoys solving puzzles and rare or odd diseases are a great way for him to get his fix. He is also a drug addict, eating multiple Vicodins a day to deal with the chronic pain from his leg.

He is an incredibly intelligent doctor who can solve any medical mystery presented to him. He only takes on the hardest and most confusing cases that Princeton-Plainsboro gets. However, he does not care for medical ethics and when watching viewers need to suspend their disbelief not only because the medical symptoms are exaggerated and sped up, but also because the crazy antics of House, while entertaining, should lead to House losing his job. Despite this, *House, MD* is constantly one of the most watched series in the world. While House can be a very unpleasant character, he is also a very fascinating and entertaining character. His lack of adhering to social niceties can be refreshing and he is played with great skill by Hugh Laurie who makes this possibly unlikable character enjoyable and makes his many crazy treatments and the way he often behaves towards his colleagues if not condonable then at least entertaining and understandable.

As an atheist character, House is the typical stereotype. He is angry, bitter and miserable and often counts religious belief in his patients as a symptom unless it can be ruled out. He shows little to no respect to people with different points of view to his own, and is ready to debate in a hostile way with anyone who believes in God, whether they are a nun (1.5 Damned If You Do), a faith healer(2.19 House vs. God), rape victim (3.12 One Day, One Room) or someone who crucifies himself yearly(7.8 Small Sacrifices). However, he has studied the sacred religious texts of the major religions in order to understand exactly what he is dismissing, so his takedowns of religious characters are done in a hostile yet intelligent manner. Most of the other things he attacks in his patients and colleagues he attacks because he can, but he attacks religion because he finds the lack of logic and hypocrisy that are imbedded into religion, in his view, unbearable. Even Dr. Allison Cameron (Jennifer Morrison), one of the other nonbelievers in the series is constantly insulted by House because she is very emphatic, feminine and naïve. Martha Masters (Amber Tamblyn), a medical student who was a part of

House's team in season seven, is unwaveringly honest in every situation and even though House professes to be a big proponent of honesty, he mocks her non-lying ways since it often leads him to problems because it makes it harder for him to dismiss medical ethics when he has someone who will not lie on his team.

While he can be funny, he often also comes across as arrogant, smug and patronizing. This is something that many fans like about his character, but as a representation of atheists it is rather unflattering. He fits the atheist stereotype to a tee and conforms to all negative ideas non-atheist people might already have about atheists. He certainly is not going to change anyone's mind about atheists as angry, hostile, bitter, miserable, argument prone, rule breaking and morally deficient. He often works high, medical ethics or hospital rules mean very little to him, he has sex with prostitutes, sometimes in the hospital, he spreads misery everywhere around himself and has no interest in bothering with normal social niceties. He shows no respect to anyone else because he has no respect for anyone else either because their intelligence or points of view are inferior to his own intelligence or point of view. He has intimacy issues and trouble connecting with others. He does not have Asperger's syndrome or autism yet he wishes he did.

Some of his behavior is explicable. He had a harsh, possibly abusive father who is not actually his biological father. Ironically, his real father is a minister who has published a book of sermons. House reads the book of sermons but find no commonalities with his biological father. He is also in constant chronic pain because he had a clot in his leg which almost killed him, but because he did not want amputation, instead they did a very dangerous procedure that left his leg practically useless and him in constant pain. This explains his drug addiction and his bitterness but often he goes too far in his behavior and father issues and chronic pain are not enough to excuse them.

However, the fact that he has chosen medicine as his profession instead of science that would give him all the puzzles to solve he wants, shows that he is not necessarily as cold and cynical as he seems. He has also had some reflective moments during which he acknowledges that he does not actually know for sure why certain things happen such as 'the white light' that people with near death experiences see and he acknowledges that he is an atheist because he finds that world view to be more comforting. He prefers the idea that existence is not just a test organized by a superior being who is either indifferent to the suffering of the world or malevolent (1.21 Three Stories). Occasionally he does connect with a patient, most famously with a rape victim from One Day, One Room, an autistic boy from episode 3.4 Lines in the Sand, Hanna (China Jesusita Shavers) from episode 6.22 Help Me, and someone (David Strathairn) whose case was not interesting enough for him to try to heal him from episode 6.17 Lockdown. While House's personality is not the most welcoming, it is good to see such an openly and honestly atheist character on television, especially one that is not going to have a sudden conversion experience. House is way too cynical for such a thing to happen.

5.2 Religious foil(s): Patient(s) of the Week

House, MD is the only series I examine in this study that does not have a strongly religious regular character as someone with who House can regularly have religious debates. This role is filled when needed by Patient of the Week (PotW), the subject of the weekly medical mystery.

This dynamic is established early on. In episode 1.5 *Damned If You Do*, House's patient is a nun (Elizabeth Mitchell) from a monastery. Even this early on in the series House is allowed to explain his point of view. He explains that he has difficulty with the concept of belief because faith is not based on logic and experience. While he expresses his worldview more to one another nun who is there to comfort the sick nun, he is somewhat even about it. He is not overly hostile, he is jokey but not necessarily dismissive towards the nuns' beliefs. Also, he loses. One of the main themes of House is no one ever changes. The series is very committed to this idea and it plays out over and over again with House himself and the patients. It is always the most clear with religious patients. The nun was very close to losing her faith during her illness when House kept misdiagnosing her and she thought she was going to die. However, she ultimately managed to keep her faith once she was healed.

In episode 2.19 *House vs. God* the patient is a faith healer Boyd (Thomas Dekker) who House gets into competition with. House is very dismissive of the patient, using most of the patient's religious experiences as a symptom, which some of them turn out to be. While the faith healer tries to argue that God works through natural laws, for example, giving him a tumor so God can speak to him directly, House thinks he is insane "No, you talk to God you're religious, God talks to you, you're psychotic." In the end, the competition between House and God ends 3-3, the faith healer manages to make extraordinary coincidences happen yet House fixes him in the end.

In episode 3.12 *One Day, One Room*, House makes a surprising connection with a rape victim (Katheryn Winnick) who, for reasons she cannot express, feels like House is the only one she is able to open up to. Before she is ready to talk about her experience, she and House have long, complicated discussions on religion. She has studied comparative religion and is also religious. They debate the existence of God, heaven and hell, abortion, and the benevolence of God. She even gets House to open up about his own experiences. House is very argumentative with her but she mostly gives as good as she gets. It is a very interesting episode. It is also one of the few times House scores a 'victory'. The patient starts out as anti-abortion but in the end House manages to convince her that aborting her 'rape baby' is the best option for her.

House does not interact much with the patient in episode 4.12 *Don't Ever Change*, a Hasidic Jewish woman (Laura Silverman) who became religious only six months prior. He is very suspicious of her conversion, especially since she spent her life before the conversion living the rock 'n' roll lifestyle of sex and drugs. However, nothing comes off it. The patient seems to be genuine in her new lifestyle and her conversion does not have anything to do with her ultimate diagnosis.

An atheist priest (Jimmi Simpson) hallucinates Jesus in episode 5.15 *Unfaithful*. He lost his faith when he was falsely accused of pedophilia and he was bounced around from one church after another as a result. That experience made him question the foundations of his beliefs and being a priest became just a job like any other. House is very interested in this patient and the patient makes many of the same points House himself has and will make about religious beliefs. However, in the end, all the multiple coincidences that lead him to House make him find his faith again. It is facilitated by the apology of the boy who falsely accused him all those years ago. House is very disappointed that someone who seemed so reasonable could ultimately be so gullible.

A man (Mos Def) suffers from locked-in syndrome in episode 5.19 Locked In. He can only communicate with blinking. House finds this fascinating. To pass the time the patient is given some kind of virtual reality glasses so he can imagine himself on a beach with his children and wife, and House. In his head the patient wonders about God and House makes all the same points he always does. Once the patient is cured he has become convinced that God sent House to cure him and House immediately loses interest in the patient.

In tribute to God for saving his daughter's life in episode 7.8 Small Sacrifices, a man (Kuno Becker) crucifies himself once a year. During the fourth time doing this, something goes wrong and he is admitted to Princeton Plainsboro. House has multiple discussions with the patient to try to make sense of his strange bargain with God. At one point the patient is convinced that he has broken the bargain and that is the reason he is dying and refuses treatment. House tricks the patient into thinking his daughter was not cured after all all those years ago and the patient gets the right treatment and is cured. House is disappointed that when he reveals his trick to the patient, the patient is able to make every outcome into the will of God. If he is punished and dies, it is God's will. If he and his daughter stay healthy, it means God is truly good and merciful. House can respect such 'cover all your bases' thinking.

There has been only one properly religiously devout character during *House, MD*'s run. During season four, when House was looking for new fellows to replace his old team that he lost at the end of the third season, one of the applicants was a Mormon Dr. Jeffrey Cole (Edi Gathegi), he lasted seven episodes until he was fired. House took much pleasure in annoying him and talked with him about religious matters occasionally. Dr. Cole was given the nickname "Big Love", because of the HBO series about a polygamous marriage. While Cole and House shared an interesting dynamic, he did not last long, unfortunately.

While the series always respects House's worldview, might even view it as the right one, the series never lets him win over a religious person. This is because of the 'no one ever changes' theme and while having a religion-mocking atheist as a protagonist is one thing, having him win and convince people to lose their faith would most likely be unacceptable to an American audience. Even the priest from Unfaithful regains his faith after years of atheism. Hence, according to the series, conversion experience is impossible, hopefully from both sides, if one does not have faith one will not magically get it, but if one has faith one will eventually regain it.

The patients are not always given the best portrayal. Often they seem insane, such as the rock producer who converts to a very strict form of Judaism and its 613 rules, the faith healer who while having a seizure sings hymns and the patient who crucifies himself yearly. Once House sarcastically quips that it is very hard to distinguish between religious behavior and insanity.

5.3. Religion in the series is general

The series is set in modern day New Jersey, so being religious is the default setting. While the show has no devout religious characters, except Dr. Lisa Cuddy (Lisa Edelstein) who started connecting more with her Jewish heritage after she adopted a little girl, but even that did not extend too far, just a religious naming ceremony. House mocks Cuddy's hypocrisy for

picking and choosing when to be religious in Unfaithful. Dr. James Wilson (Robert Sean Leonard) and Dr. Chris Taub (Peter Jacobson) are also secular Jewish, neither one of them seem to be particularly religious.

Dr. Allison Cameron is an interesting character because of her beliefs. She has stated that she finds humans trying to understand God, if there is one, the same as penguins speculating about nuclear physics (House vs. God). While she never defines herself, House once calls her the ‘most naïve atheist [he’s] ever met’ (1.17 Role Model). However, her beliefs fit more with an agnostic atheist. She has stated that she does not believe in God, but acknowledges that she cannot know and “if there is some higher order running the universe, it is probably so different from what our species can conceive there’s no point even thinking about it.” (House vs. God) This is the view point of an agnostic, and an agnostic that does not believe in God is an agnostic atheist if one wants to define oneself very specifically.

Out of other long running characters, both Dr. Robert Chase (Jesse Spencer) and Dr. Eric Foreman (Omar Epps) are ambiguously religious. Before becoming a doctor, Chase was in seminary school studying to be a priest. He had a crisis of faith and did not go through with it and became a doctor instead. He still prays and at the very least has faith in God, but he is not devout. Foreman has shown incredulity at Cameron’s lack of belief and it was him that got her to express her point of view in both House vs. God and Damned If You Do. In episode 3.21 Family, he is shown in the hospital chapel trying to deal with his actions, having accidentally killed a patient in the previous episode. He often gets confused for an atheist by the viewers (Sparks), but it seems that he is more ambivalent about religion rather than completely rejecting it.

6. Bones (2005-)

“God has a soft spot even for the atheist.” (The Priest in the Churchyard)

Bones is a crime drama-comedy that was created by Canadian Catholic Hart Hanson in 2005 loosely based on the life of forensic anthropologist Kathy Reichs. It is situated in the fictional Jeffersonian Institute in Washington, DC where Dr. Temperance Brennan (Emily Deschanel) works with the FBI to solve murders when the body is too decomposed to be identified by normal means. She has her own team at the Jeffersonian and most often works with FBI Special Agent Seeley Booth (David Boreanaz). It is currently in its seventh season which started on Fox in November 2011.

6.1 Temperance Brennan

Dr. Temperance Brennan is the world’s best forensic anthropologist, meaning she helps solve crimes by looking at markings and wear and tear in bones. She is also a best-selling novelist which has made her extremely rich. She is extremely intelligent, and while she can have trouble expressing herself emotionally, she is very kind and generous; she often spends her free time and vacations identifying victims of genocides and the hurricane Katrina (1.19 The Man in the Morgue), she paid for a funeral for father and daughter because the daughter was religious and deserved a proper burial (1.12 The Woman in the Garden), spent the Christmas morning at a victim’s funeral when the victim had no one but his mother to attend (5.10 The

Goop on the Girl) and paid to fix a bridge that would revitalize a small town (3.12 The Baby in the Bough). She is often very accepting of differences because she has a degree in cultural anthropology in addition to forensic anthropology which makes her very knowledgeable of different cultures.

She can be honest to a fault, because she does not always understand that the truth might not be the best way to handle the situation, for example, parents do not need to know all the details on how their child died, but she shows continued improvement over time. She is very confident in her work and is not ashamed to acknowledge her accomplishments, however, that can make her appear arrogant, smug and condescending. She also has somewhat lacking social skills, her intelligence making her not relate to her peers, being unpopular in high school and spending about three years in foster care after her parents disappeared when she was 15 years old and her 19-year-old brother Russ (Loren Dean) abandoned her as well soon after. It is important to note that the series does not treat Brennan's tragic backstory as a basis for her atheism. She is an atheist because there is no proof of the existence of God and she is very logical and rational about her worldview. Even when her life has been in danger, such as in episode 2.9 Aliens in a Spaceship, she does not resort to praying, although she understands why people would.

Brennan is very open about her atheism. In episode 1.9 The Man in the Fallout Shelter, she is surprised to find that her partner Seeley Booth is not the only one of her friends and co-workers who cares about 'The Christ myth'. Her reaction to religion varies. She often relates modern behaviors in historical context, equating decisions the victims or her friends have made with ancient tribes and their customs and habits. She is often respectful of other's religions like Voodoo in The Man in the Morgue, or wanting to give a woman a proper burial because she was originally buried with a rosary (Woman in the Garden), or respectfully questioning Booth about his religious convictions. She seems to be very curious about religion, wanting to go to church with Booth (Aliens in a Spaceship), wanting to know how he can keep his faith after all the horrible things they see in their line of work (5.14 The Devil in the Details) and when trying to deal with the death of a co-worker Brennan asks help from Booth, while still keeping to her own atheistic point of view (6.22 The Hole in the Heart). Over time, while she still does not quite understand them, she has come to respect his beliefs. She respects anyone who can explain their beliefs to her, she appreciates consistency (3.5 Mummy in the Maze).

It is only in isolated incidents that she comes off as hostile towards religion. In episode 2.17 The Priest in the Churchyard, she has just decided to not take a one year sabbatical and sail around the Caribbean with a man she was very fond of, and she is not quite sure why she made this decision, assuming it had something to do with her relationship with her partner, so she is overly dismissive and hostile about Booth's Catholic beliefs. She makes fun of the holy water, refers to God as Booth's imaginary friend and insults both the old school priest Father Donlan with her dismissive attitude of Christianity and by being surprised that a seemingly intelligent man, Father Matt, would believe in all the supernatural mythology that Booth and Father Donlan believe in, and expressing her incredulity out loud. The underlying issues between Booth and Brennan made her be more aggressive in her dismissal of religion than she usually is. Another incident was when the Muslim intern Arastoo Vaziri (Pej Vahdat) first came to work at the Jeffersonian (4.17 The Salt in the Wounds). She did not appreciate prayer taking time away from their important work and the idea that someone could be both a devout believer in a deity and a man of science was suspect to her. This does not have anything specific to do with Mr. Vaziri being a Muslim. In episode 1.2 The Man in the SUV,

she shows great knowledge of Islamic customs by promising to get as much of the victim's remains as she can to the victim's wife for burial.

While she is respectful of other's belief she does sometimes make questionable comparisons. While trying to convince Booth that Voodoo is not any crazier than his religion, Catholicism, she says they share the same saints, his prayers are their spells and Jesus rose from the dead after three days, practically comparing Jesus to a zombie (*The Man in the Morgue*). Booth was understandably not amused. She also once compared God to a recurring serial killer Gravedigger, who buries their victims underground and only asks for ransom once, if the ransom is paid coordinates are given, if not the victim is never found. According to Brennan

"He lays down the rules, no way to question him or negotiate, then, it's as if he doesn't care about how it works out. Either you do as he says, make some sacrifices and they are delivered. Or you don't and you end up in hell."

Booth: "I'd appreciate it if you didn't say that. I don't wanna get struck by lightning." *crosses himself* (Aliens in a Spaceship, scene 4)

During the seventh season of *Bones* that is currently airing, after spending the first six seasons in a will they/won't they relationship, Brennan is pregnant with Booth's child and it is clear they will have to have more talks about religion because in episode 7.1 *Memories in the Shallow Grave*, Brennan called God a sociopath and she does not want God babysitting their child. How they are going to handle parenthood would be fascinating to see, but unfortunately it is outside of the scope of this study because of time constraints.

6.2. Religious foil: Seeley Booth

FBI Special Agent Seeley Booth is a former sniper, devout Catholic, a gambling addict, son of an abusive alcoholic and a father to a son he cannot see as much as he wants. He is very protective and caring, but he also has some control issues and he can go too far in his caring, checking out Rebecca Stinson's (Jessica Capshaw), the mother of his child, new boyfriend and his brother Jared's (Brendan Fehr) new girlfriend. During his career in the military and the FBI he has killed over 50 people. He is a very emotional and intuitive person, which contrasts him with Brennan, who always tries to be very rational and empirical. While he is very open minded and modern, he has some old fashioned beliefs that come from his religion and how he was raised by his grandfather. He sometimes struggles with what his religion says and what he feels. A good example of this is episode 4.9 *The He in the She*, where a pastor from a "give your money to God" church goes through a sex change operation and founds a Protestant Inclusion Church. While Booth argues that they should stick to the pronoun *she* because that is who she wanted to be and who she was when she died, not all of his views are as enlightened. Seeing her as a 'real' woman gives him some trouble.

Booth is an interesting character because while he is not the only religious character in the series, sometimes he has trouble dealing with the very secular people he works with daily. His 'gut feelings' about whether a suspect is guilty or not is often not given credence, least of by Brennan, and most of his fundamental beliefs, such as that miracles exist, are dismissed as wrong by the people he works with. Add to that his normal intelligence and working with a group of certified geniuses can be hard for his self esteem. However, the series itself never dismisses his beliefs and his right to have them. He is shown crossing himself and praying when it would make sense and these actions are treated as normal by the series, although

Brennan finds them odd. His spirituality does not prevent him from being liberal and open minded.

However, he is often rather hostile to Brennan's questions, even when she is simply curious or confused by his point of view. But given that Brennan has said some offensive things about his faith and the secular world he works in, it is understandable if he comes off as defensive of his beliefs. However, he always manages to defend and explain his point of view, which is to his credit as a religious person. He keeps to his faith, even questions it but does not lose it.

6.3 Religion in the series in general

The series treats Booth as an equal to Brennan and does not promote either worldview as superior. While sometimes they decide to just agree to disagree, more often they appreciate the other's point of view and are able to find some common ground. This is shown most clearly in episode 5.14 *The Devil in the Details*, where Brennan equates her finding comfort in reason and scientific inevitabilities, such as that sugar turns coffee sweet and the sun rises because the Earth turns, with Booth regaining his faith even though the work he does and what he has experienced sometimes make him struggle to keep it.

Most of the characters, while they are scientists, are at least nominally religious. Dr. Jack Hodgins (TJ Thyne) is suspicious about organized religion, calls himself a lapsed Episcopalian but believes God can still love him (*The Man in the Fallout Shelter*, 5.19 *Rocker in the Rinse Cycle*). Angela Montenegro (Michaela Conlin), a forensic artist, believes during Easter and Christmas. Dr. Camille Saroyan (Tamara Taylor) is a Christian of some denomination.

The intern Arastoo Vaziri is a Muslim and for the most part the series has been respectable about it. While at first he faked an Iranian accent as not to have to explain his beliefs continuously, when he lets it accidentally slip, he starts using his own accent and explains that science is just a way to explain the mysterious world Allah has created (5.4 *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*).

The series has had two openly atheist characters, and a few others who most likely are nonbelievers, even though the series has not been explicit about them. Confirmed atheists are Brennan, of course, and the intern Vincent Nigel-Murray (Ryan Cartwright) from seasons four through six. Mr. Nigel Murray is a very sweet person, who knows a countless amount of trivia, both useful and useless which he will use as a calming technique by blurting them out. Other possible nonbelievers are Dr. Zach Addy (Eric Millegan), Brennan's graduate student from the first three seasons, who says that he is "an empirical scientist all the way. Unless you ask my mother, then I'm Lutheran." (*The Man in the Fallout Shelter*). The intern Colin Fischer (Joel David Moore) suffers from periods of depression and early on talked wistfully to the victims about the peace of death. He does not indicate there is anything after this life but feels it is not that such a bad thing to end up as worm food. Another possible nonbeliever is Dr. Lance Sweets (John Francis Daley), an FBI psychologist and a child prodigy, he once talked about how 'grandmother went to heaven' is just a way to help children deal with death when they are still too young to really grasp the concept of death. He is explaining this to

Booth who is constantly reiterating that heaven is real and not just a coping mechanism (4.4 The Finger in the Nest). Sweets only ignores Booth's protestations to the contrary.

The series is very good about showing the many different ways people see religion these days. There has been even been a suspect with a physics degree who was agnostic "like all reasonable people" (The Science in the Physicist) and a Wiccan coven (The Witch in the Wardrobe). For some characters, religion or lack of it, is an important part of their characterization, for some it is not that important or only important during specific times of year, like Christmas.

7. Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip (2006-2007)

"No one enjoys tweaking the Religious Right as much as Matt does." (Nevada Day part 1)

Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip is a series about an award winning writer Matt Albie (Matthew Perry) and his best friend, producer and director Danny Tripp (Bradley Whitford) who come back and take over a sketch comedy show of the same name when their previous boss has an on air meltdown and their careers in Hollywood are put on a backburner for a while. The series was created by an American atheist Aaron Sorkin and it aired 22 episodes on NBC.

7.1. Matt Albie

Matt Albie is a very talented and award winning writer of films and television sketch comedy. He is rather obnoxious about his atheism which is not that different from most vocal, celebrity atheists. Depending on your perspective, he can be either smug or charming, he can also come across as arrogant and patronizing. He is an admitted hypocrite, very liberal, decent and helpful guy. He helps his fellow writers and his friends with their problems.

He has a long on/off relationship with a Studio 60 cast member and main star Harriet Hayes (Sarah Paulson), and during the length of series they are again in an off mode. They spend most of their time fighting about their religious differences. Harriet is a Southern Baptist from Michigan and she is very devout. Their fights can be very harsh and nasty, and whether one thinks their relationship can actually work might color how Matt is represented. If one thinks there is real love under all that hostility, one can see Matt's harshness as just trying to deal with his heartbreak and wanting to be with this person he loves even though the relationship has multiple issues. If one does not buy the chemistry and connection, Matt comes across as just an arrogant, smug, jerk, one who keeps attacking his ex's beliefs and being passive-aggressive with her. He does not come across that well in his behavior with regards to Harriet. However, Harriet often gives as good as she gets and the fighting is a normal part of their eight years long relationship.

Matt Albie fits several of the stereotypical atheist characteristics. He is smug, has an air of arrogance and superiority that is common to some atheists and seems to have little to no respect for religions or religious belief. He is Jewish in culture only, gets much enjoyed out of angering the American religious right by writing anti-religious sketches, he is angry at religion and the effect it has on United States of America. He is more or less a happy, if neurotic person, who writes to get people to like him. He is not unhappy without religion and

his lack of religion only affects his relationship with Harriet, so fortunately he does not fit the unhappy atheist stereotype.

Because no other character, besides Harriet, seems to be openly religious, and he has a long and complicated history with Harriet, it is impossible to know how he interacts with other religious people on a day to day basis. Whether he attacks and belittles them or let's them believe whatever they believe is unknown. He is mostly shown only in the very secular Hollywood, working on writing his show.

7.2 Harriet Hayes

Harriet Hayes is a multi-talented comedienne, the star of the show-within-a-series Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip. She can sing, act and be funny. She is deeply devout and can be arrogant about her rightness. She occasionally makes comments about how God loves her and not the other cast members, she can be cruel to Matt and others, for example, in the Pilot episode she makes a comment to a relatively new cast member Dylan Killington (Nate Torrence) who tries to ask her about her recent break up with Matt: "Until you either accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior or make someone laugh, why don't you talk to somebody else?" She also has some homophobic tendencies that get her in trouble.

While during her fights with Matt she gives as good as she gets, the aftermath is often problematic for equal representation of atheists and religious people. Matt is allowed to come across as unrelenting and unforgiving while still being portrayed as right, while Harriet is often apologetic and wrong in her convictions. This makes the fights seem one sided and make Harriet look bad in comparison to Matt, while they both are often wrong or unrelenting. It is not until the last episode of the series that Matt admits that he has been wrong about certain things and they start another on mode for their relationship.

While she is serious about her beliefs and the series allows her to keep her convictions, even if it does not agree with her, the fights between Matt and Harriet always end on an impasse, for eight years, neither one of them has won, and neither is likely to win. It helps that she also has a sense of humor about her faith. She stands behind the religion mocking sketches that she thinks are funny, and most of her 'God loves me but not you' can be taken in jest. While she mostly sticks to her convictions, on some issues she is a fence sitter, such as gay marriage. While making a comment about gay marriage she managed to anger both gays and religious fundamentalists by saying "The Bible says it's a sin. But it also says 'Judge not, lest ye be judged'. And it is something for smarter people than me to decide" (1.7 Nevada Day part 1). While Matt comes across better as a character, I think Harriet comes off well as well.

7.3 Religion in general in the series

The show-within-the-series Studio 60 often gets in trouble with religious organizations. They temporarily lose affiliates, getting advertisement is occasionally a problem and they get boycotted regularly. They use Harriet Hayes as a scapegoat, making the point that she is religious and fine with the content, sometimes it works, sometimes it does not.

The beliefs of the majority of the cast go unmentioned. Harriet is devout and Matt openly atheist, but only two other characters make any mention of religious affiliation. Danny Tripp, Matt's best friend, is also an atheist. In episode 1.21 K&R part III, he is trying to pray because his fiancée is in the hospital and he is not allowed to see his daughter, because he is not the girl's biological father. He does not get anything out of praying and expresses typical atheist frustration with the idea of a supposedly benevolent God who does not stop suffering.

The head of the fictional network NBS that Studio 60 within-the-series airs, Jordan McDeere (Amanda Peet) makes a mention of being Catholic and having went to Catholic school from kindergarten all through high school in 1.10 B-12. She does not seem devout but she has a sense of humor about whatever faith she has, she is one of the biggest fans of Matt's religion mocking sketches and someone once comments that she 'delights in tweaking the religious right almost as much as Matt does' (Nevada Day part 1).

Because the series is set in modern Hollywood, assuming anything about the other characters' religious beliefs is almost impossible. They might have faith or they might not, the series does not see the purpose of mentioning the beliefs of the other characters because it affects neither the plot nor their characterization.

8. Discussion

When talking about positive representation it is important to express what one means by that. Is positive representation showing only the good qualities of characters so as to make objects of representation appear worthy of representation and normalization. In my view, showing only the good sides of characters leads to boring and flat characterization which is not good enough to me. Great characters have flaws like real people. Of course, representing minorities only in negative terms is also problematic. Many minorities have suffered from one sided representation in minor roles. Fortunately for atheists, they have managed to avoid this kind representation. While there are atheistic stereotypes, "Teen Atheist" (2007) defines the most common one like this: 1) The Brilliant Angry Misanthrope, 2) The Heartless Dysfunctional Whore, 3) The Slutty, Angry Rebel 4) The Lab Geek, atheists could do a lot worse. The characters I studied in this study fall in groups 1 (Albie, House) and 4 (Brennan), with Malcolm Reynolds somewhere between 1 and 3 (he is snarky and angry). Most atheists on television are smart, successful, attractive, and hard working, good people. They are almost always the protagonist or at least an important regular character, they have characteristics outside of their atheism and atheism is not portrayed as a flaw.

This is most likely because atheism is a hidden minority. It is no surprise many atheists use terms associated with the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender) community, such as 'in the closet' and 'coming out'. These two minorities are such that one can hide them if one has to. This is not meant as saying that these two minorities are really comparable. I am just pointing out that one cannot necessarily tell another person's ideological or sexual orientation by just looking at them. Most of the non-believer characters on television are a minority only in the ideological sense, only the comedy musical *Glee*'s Kurt Hummel is both gay and atheist. Interesting that his 'coming out' as atheist was a bigger deal in 2.3 Grilled Cheesus than him coming out as gay in season one.

The representation of atheists in drama series is not completely unproblematic, even if it is mostly positive. The characters I chose to study often fit into multiple negative atheist

stereotypes. There is arrogance in all of them except Malcolm Reynolds. Only Brennan is not particularly angry at religion, although Matt Albie is otherwise happy. All except Albie have a tragic backstory, Brennan's abandonment, House's apparent abuse and useless, painful leg and Mal's lost war. Fortunately, both Brennan and House give logical, rational reasons for their atheism and the series back them up. Unfortunately, both Brennan and House lack social skills, House almost by choice, but Brennan's experiences with abandonment and the foster care system made her reluctant to make ties with other people, although she is slowly learning and has made great progress during the six seasons of her series. They all can seem to be attacking religion on occasion and having no respect for it, but all but House seem to be able to tolerate it, Matt because he is in love with Harriet, Malcolm because he respects Book and used to believe himself, and Brennan sees it as a modern myth system that has not yet outlived its usefulness and she respects and loves Booth.

Even if those issues point against the claim of positive representation, I would still say that there is more positive representation than negative. While both Malcolm and House can have questionable morality, they are still fundamentally good people. Malcolm steals only when it causes little trouble, and House has decided to practice medicine, a complicated medicine at that House is often the last hope the patients have. Brennan works tirelessly to catch killers, gives into charity and uses her wealth to help people, not to mention that she often spends her vacations working on mass graves or national disaster victims. I would also think the fact that these characters are the protagonists of the series, often being portrayed as 'right' and having the most screen time, shows that they are normal, flawed, complicated people. Showing atheists as normal people helps normalize atheists in the minds of Americans and maybe atheists will not seem so distrust worthy in the future.

When comparing the representation of atheists and religious characters on the same series, it came clear that the advantage is always on the atheist side. In *Firefly*, while Book's beliefs are respected for the most part, making him mysterious and lacking in backstory hinders the equality between the two characters. We do not even find out what denomination Book is, or anything about the contemporary state of Christianity in the future. Also, in *Safe*, one is shown a celestial body where the people are clearly Christian who almost burn River on the stake when they think she is a witch. *Safe* and Book's lack of history make the series seem less than equal.

Only one recurring character on *House, MD*, Dr. Cole, was devoutly religious, others are religious only vaguely or in the case of the patients, seemingly crazy. House is always portrayed as being right because he has read the material, and argues with logic and reason.

Bones is almost equal in its treatment of the characters' beliefs, everyone has the possibility to explain their view, everyone's view is ultimately respected. However, Brennan is the defacto lead character of the series and because of this her point of view is more dominant than Booth's who is the co-lead character. There has been an emphasis on Brennan's point of view and backstory in the series, but Booth is still clearly co-lead and he has had episodes that are more about his point of view than Brennan. Most often, however, they are very equal. When it comes to atheist-religious fights, they are often looking for common ground, because their bickering is personal, not political. There is an underlying attraction, sexual tension and a connection to the pairing that has been there from the beginning that makes them want to find common ground. It helps that Booth is portrayed as being as damaged as Brennan is, just in a different way, so there come off as equals.

While both Harriet and Matt can be aggressive, harsh and hostile during their fights, the series is always subtly more on Matt's side than Harriet's. After fights, more than once Harriet is left speechless or apologetic while Matt has the final word or acts unrelenting about the topic of their fight and more often continues the fight rather than accept the apology. The religious-atheist fights between them are often political, instead of looking for common ground, they are debating, hoping to convince the other person is wrong. This aggressive debating seems to be a normal part of their dynamic, whether they are together or not.

9. Conclusion

In this study I examined four different atheist protagonist from four different drama series. I used cultural studies, study of popular culture and representation as my frameworks. My aim was to study the representation of atheists in American television drama, what kind of impressions these characters might give off atheists and whether or not religious and atheist characters are given equal treatment.

On the surface, atheists are represented as flawed, somewhat damaged, angry, smart people who can be arrogant and unrelenting on their views. However, it is important to note that they are all fundamentally good people, some of whom do active good, like Brennan and House, Mal is an anti-hero, but a hero none-the-less and making people laugh and be entertained is respectable in its own way. Most of all, these characters are represented as people, normal and flawed like any other. Showing flawless individuals is not positive representation, to me, normalizing atheists is what changes the minds of people who would mistrust someone based on a lack of deity worship.

The first impressions these characters give are not always positive. There are many negative stereotypes of atheists and these are mostly at least adhered to on television drama, and more variety in dramatic characters would not hurt, but if being an atheist makes people think one is educated, smart and arrogant, then two out of three is not so bad.

In these series the treatment is skewed more in favor of atheists than religious characters. Only on *Bones* they get more or less equal treatment with slight favoritism towards atheism because Brennan is the main protagonist. *House, MD* is heavily skewed in favor of House against his religious patients. *Firefly* is almost equal with main characters but stereotypical witch-hunting Christians in *Safe* skew the favor to atheist Mal. *Studio 60* skews towards Matt subtly and sometimes not so subtly.

Since academic studies on atheists seems rather scarce, there are many possible gaps to fill. There are other drama series I did not manage to include, such as the *Star Trek* franchise, crime procedural *The Mentalist* and *Dexter*. Of course, one could go the other direction and study comedy series, there are many non-believers in current comedy series and there might be more variety in the characters than what drama affords. Another perspective would be to study atheists in the polytheistic universe of the new *Battlestar Galactica*.

It is my conclusion that while drama series could do with some more variety in the atheist characters they represent, the representation that atheists currently receive in American television is more positive than negative. If the characters could get flaws other than angry,

misanthrope and lacking in social skills that would be very good. However, atheists are allowed to have complicated, fascinating protagonist roles in series that are either long running (*Bones*, *House*, *MD*) or have long reputations (love for *Firefly*, hate for *Studio 60*). Normalizing atheists has a very good starts.

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