New study shows TV censors religion as a normal part of life

Whether you see television as a window on the world or a distorted mirror of life, a new study commissioned by the American Family Association indicates that the religious sides of people's lives are rarely included in the fictional world of television.

Researchers Thomas Skill, Ph.D. (Department of Communication, University of Dayton), John Lyons, Ph.D. (Department of Psychiatry, Psychology, & Medicine, Northwestern University) and David Larson, M.D. (Department of Psychiatry, Duke University Medical Center) analyzed 100 episodes of prime-time network programs appearing on ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox during November 1990. The investigators conducted a systematic content analysis which examined the religious and spiritual behaviors of characters as well as the appearance of all religious images, artifacts and rituals such as churches, crosses, and prayer services.

Of the 1462 speaking characters in the study, only 81 had an identifiable religious affiliation. There were 51 Catholics, 21 Protestants, five cult members and three New Agers. Overall, 94.5% of all speaking characters on television have no discernible religious affiliation.

A twelve-category index of religious and spiritual behaviors found that across nearly 68 hours of programming, there were only 115 behaviors by just 91 characters that were clearly religious or spiritual. These behaviors, in most cases, were very brief statements or actions such as someone saying "Thank God!" after a close call of some type. This finding suggests that, on average, about one character per episode is likely to do or say something religious.

The extremely small number of significantly religious or spiritual behaviors on network television suggests that the religious or spiritual dimensions of people's lives are mostly invisible.

In just over 50% of the occurrences, religious behaviors were presented as clearly negative. ABC had the greatest proportion of positive portrayals—82%. Fox had the fewest behaviors of the four networks—just 17 total and 41% of the portrayals were clearly negative. Fox also was most likely to frame religion in a humorous context—47% of the occurrences on Fox were humorous, whereas the average for the other networks was less than 15%.

"This censoring of religion as a normal part of individuals' lives clearly indicates the bigotry and bias the networks and Hollywood have toward religion and religious people," said Donald E. Wildmon, president of AFA. "The networks and Hollywood always tell us they are simply reflecting life as it is. That is an absolute lie. And numerous studies confirm that it is a lie. A 1991 Gallup poll showed that average weekly attendance at worship is 107 million, representing 43% of the population. A 1989 Gallup poll says that religion is the most trusted institution in America. According to the poll, 59% of the American population has 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of trust in religion.

"In a March 1989 Gallup poll of college students 42% said religion is very important in their lives, while another 37% said it was somewhat important. A 1990 Gallup poll says that 94% of the public believe in God, 90% pray and 88% believe God loves them. More than 75% say that their religious involvement has been a positive experience.

"Twenty-five percent of business and education leaders cited the Bible when asked in a 1990 National College of Education survey about what books most affect their lives. The second closest book was Charles Dickens *Tale of Two Cities* with only 4%.

"Fifty-eight percent of the respondents in a 1990 Associated Press poll conducted by ICR Survey Research Group said religion was very important in their lives, and 86% said it was either very important or fairly important. A poll by Poloma and Gallup showed that 91% of women pray, as do 85% of men," Wildmon said.

In the study, there were no occurrences of a character inviting another to pray or attend a service and there were no occurrences of preaching or sermons. The only people who attend worship are professionals.

In terms of the "environment" of television, there were a total of 215 occurrences of religious images, artifacts, and rituals in the sample of 100 episodes. This limited result suggests that religion and spirituality are not a common part of the everyday background to stories on television.

The extremely small number of significantly religious or spiritual behaviors on network television suggests that the religious or spiritual dimensions of people's lives are mostly invisible. When considered in light of the many portrayals of other social institutions on television education, justice, family, and health care —the limited exploration of spirituality and religion might symbolically suggest that this dimension of people's lives is unimportant.

Overall, characters rarely acknowledge or reflect a belief in God or Jesus and on the occasions when they do make such references, those comments tend to be ambiguous. The implication is that characters are serious when they speak of God, but few demonstrate any significant strength of commitment. This might be interpreted as the "hedging the bet" syndrome—characters tread carefully on issues of God and religion just in case they need it at some later point.

If spirituality has any visibility on prime-time television, it will most likely be seen in the form of personal prayer, the researchers said. A total occurrence of 45 personal prayer behaviors amounts to about one behavior for every 90 minutes of prime-time programming. This category frequently accounted for prayers that come when disasters, both big and small, have been avoided or resolved. The most common form of personal prayer was some type of variation on the simple "Thank God!" It was in this category that we also found the concept of "God as last resort." During crisis and when causes seemed hopeless, characters were most likely to engage in personal prayer. Characters rarely displayed personal prayer behaviors as an indicator of their religious faith.

The results of this study suggest that religion is a rather invisible institution on fictional network television. Few characters have an identifiable religious affiliation and even fewer engage in prayer or devotional services. In addition, religious environments are rarely incorporated into the backdrop of programs—despite the many religious institutions that comprise the landscapes and skylines across the U.S.

In the final analysis, the study says, the issue that is most central to the findings of this investigation is this: Television's treatment of religion tends to be best characterized as abuse through neglect.

Toyota ads support sitcom with vulgar sex, cursing minister

The January 4 episode of NBC's EMPTY NEST featured numerous lines focusing on illicit and tawdry sex. The Rob LaZebnik script was produced by Pat Dougherty, David Richardson, Peter Gallay, and Gilbert Junger.

In one early scene the sex-obsessed Charlie talks about trying to pick up women for sex at "Crotchduster's Bar." A later scene has him trying to develop new "pick-up lines," and incorporating the name of Jimmy Swaggart in one of his perverse sex jokes. When series star Carol caters a friend's wedding, the groom tries to seduce Carol as soon as the two meet.

Another story line features a clergyman, friend of Dr. Harry Weston (series hero), who pressures his 12-year-old son into aspiring to be a doctor. With one exception, the good reverend is the only person in the sitcom who curses.

Advertisers included: Pres. Y. Togo, **Toyota Motor Sales**, Post Office Box 2991, Torrance, CA 90509, **TOLL FREE 1-800-331-4331**. Lexus and Toyota motor vehicles.

Norelco sponsors teen sex on sitcom

ABC's ROSEANNE opened the fall season promoting teen sex, and on December 10 repeated the season premiere. In the story teenaged Becky tells her mother she wants birth control. (She doesn't tell Mom she's already having sex with her boyfriend.)

"She's 17, Dan," Roseanne tells the upset father, "I don't think there's much we can do." The parents then allude to their own illicit sex as teens. Roseanne eventually takes Becky to the doctor to get birth control pills.

Later, Roseanne says, "Becky, you're young; this is really a big step. You have time to reconsider."

"We already—," Becky mumbles in confession. "Don't worry, Mom! We used something—a condom for diseases and stuff!"

"Good thinking," retorts Roseanne.

"Don't tell Dad," Becky pleads.

Roseanne agrees; the scene ends with mother and daughter in warm embrace.

Producers were Brad Isaacs and Maxine Lapidus; writers were Amy Sherman and Jennifer Heath.

Among the advertisers was: Pres. Stephen C. Tumminello, **North American Philips Corporation**, 100 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10017, fax 212-850-5362, **TOLL FREE 1-800-247-7699**. Magnavox TV and audio-video centers, Norelco shavers & appliances, Philips light bulbs, Schick electric razors.

Positive priest, values portrayed in CBS movie

MILES FROM NOWHERE, the January 7 CBS movie, relates a family's trials after a teenage son is critically injured. The Steve McGraw story was produced by Hugh Spencer-Phillips. Excepting occasional profanity, the movie is superb.

Mr. and Mrs. Riley are firm in their Catholic faith, but their children are not following easily in their footsteps. A carpet layer by trade, Riley dreams of better things for his children, and pushes them—often too hard—to achieve. The oldest son and the only daughter have, Riley thinks, settled for too little. He is determined that will not happen to three sons still at home.

Frank, a community college wrestling star, gets a chance at a scholarship to Boston College. Mom and Dad are elated until Frank rebels, insisting he does not want to go on to school. When Frank allows younger brother Emmet (about 14) to drive home alone one night, Emmet is hit by a drunk driver and left comatose.

Subconsciously, both Frank and his dad hold Frank responsible, providing the base for more tension, numerous arguments and intensified family conflict. Doctors offer little hope that Emmet will ever walk or talk again, but Frank commits his every moment to Emmet's recovery. He is successful to a degree, but when he realizes that Emmet will always struggle just to walk a few steps and will never speak clearly, he finally sees his dad in himself—pressuring, demanding, expecting too much. Father and son reconcile at the movie's end.

The parish priest, who appears in several scenes, is portrayed in a positive light as a natural part of the Rileys' life. One scene features the family in church; their faith is clearly an integral part of their life.

Leading advertisers were: Chrm. Michael A. Miles, **Philip Morris, Incorporated**, 120 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017, Phone 212-880-5000, fax 212-878-2167. Birds Eye foods, Breyers Ice Cream, General Foods products, Log Cabin syrup, Oscar Mayer meats, Post cereals.

Chrm. S. Daniel Abraham, **Thompson Medical Company**, 919 Third Ave., New York, NY 10022, fax 212-415-7171, **TOLL FREE 1-800-521-7857**. Dexatrim diet capsule, Nathan Pritikin low-fat food, Slimfast diet aid, Sportscreme ointment.

Ford, GM support NBC tale of homosexual and adulterous love

"The father and daughter both had an affair with the same woman," boasted an NBC promo 15 minutes before the network aired REASONABLE DOUBTS on December 15. The Michael Marks script was produced by Randall Zisk.

The promo pretty well tells the sick story—except for the murder. The father, Harlon Beckwith, was charged with the murder of Ann, his young lover, presumably committed after he found her with someone else. Beckwith's daughter Rachel eventually testifies that **she** was having a lesbian affair with Ann. She testifies that she witnessed her father murdering Ann.

The "normalcy" of homosexuality is reinforced with scenes featuring male homosexuals, and a statement by Cody (series hero) who assures Rachel Beckwith, "Who you are [being lesbian] is nothing to be ashamed of."

Also, series heroine Tess goes to her estranged husband's apartment only to find him in bed with his lover-of-the-day. The hour ends with a tender bed scene featuring Tess and her current illicit sex partner.

Promiscuity and homosexuality are clearly the norm.

Advertisers included: Chrm. Harold Poling, **Ford Motor Company**, Post Office Box 1899, Dearborn, MI 48121, Phone 313-322-3000. Ford, Lincoln Continental and Mercury automobiles; Motorcraft automotive parts.

Chrm. Robert C. Stempel, **General Motors Corporation**, 3044 W. Grand Blvd., Detroit, MI 48202, Phone 313-556-5000. AC-Delco auto parts, Buick, Cadillac, Chevrolet, Oldsmobile, Pontiac and Saturn automobiles; Mr. Goodwrench service.

Pfizer, Sears ads uphold homosexuality, sick sex 'humor' in CBS series

On December 16, CBS'S DESIGNING WOMEN boasted a series of crude jokes about male genitals. A later scene features euphemisms for illicit sex when Anthony, the series male star, ogles a woman and sneers "I'd like to play in that sand."

The December 23 repeat episode champions the cause of homosexuality. The episode features Mark, whom Julia is dating. When a friend plants in her mind the idea that Mark is homosexual, Julia confronts him: "Mark, I thought you were gay."

"Gay! Me?" laughs Mark in disbelief. "Are you serious?"

"Well," Julia declares quickly, reassuring him [and all homophobic viewers], "there's nothing **wrong** with being gay!"

"Well, no, of course not," Mark agrees. "I'm just not, that's all." The point of the sermonette, however is clear: Homo-