Religion

BEYOND A CONCEPT

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Can Television Mediate Religious Experience?

The Theology of *Joan of Arcadia*

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American prime-time television has recently seen a number of programs that deal with spiritual issues from various perspectives.[1] These wildly successful primetime dramas have included the much-older *Highway to Heaven* and its successor *Touched by an Angel* (both featuring angels on earthly missions among ordinary people), *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer,* popular among young people for its heroine who secretly fights against evil spirits, and science-fiction shows like *The X-files,* which had the FBI investigating strange phenomena from alien spaceships to extrasensory perception.[2] These shows raise interesting questions about "theology and its publics" in the U.S. context. What form does religious discourse take in public spaces in a country dedicated to the separation of church and state? Is mass-media entertainment, in fact, an "open space" for such discourse to appear in a politically nonconflictual fashion? Can such entertainments be described as "theological" and if so, what sort of theology is it?

In this essay, I will discuss one of these programs, *Joan of Arcadia,* which aired for two seasons (from fall 2003 to spring 2005) on Friday nights at 8 P.M. on the CBS network. *Joan of Arcadia* takes off from the story of St. Joan of Arc, the young heroine who led the armies of medieval France upon divine command. In the TV version, Joan is an ordinary teenager to whom God—the God of Christianity—appears on a daily basis, giving her tasks to perform that will quietly transform the everyday life of her family and friends. The show did well enough, but due to a ratings drop was cancelled in May 2005. Nonetheless, it provides us with much food for thought.

I will first introduce debates about religion in primetime U.S. television, discuss "mediation" in the deep theoretical sense of the term to understand how it intertwines with religion, and then analyze *Joan of*

Arcadia using excerpts from the pilot episode, interviews with its creators, and the writings of critics, bloggers, and fans.[3] I will propose that we might compare "process theology" and New Age conventions in making sense of the theological implications of the show but conclude that these hermeneutic attentions to the text of the show are, in the end, trumped by the performative action of its cancellation.

Religion on TV

Protestant Christians in the United States were very early users of "televangelism," employing the medium of TV for preaching and fundraising on an ever-increasing scale.[4] If at first this programming was marginal, the past fifteen years have seen a startling growth in what one might almost call a parallel universe of media production by fundamentalist evangelical Christians in America. These productions include: radio; pop, rock, and country music; movies; and entire TV broadcasting networks, which produce programming of every sort, from cartoons to news to talk shows to drama.[5] Though surely it has exerted some influence on taste, that is not the world I am discussing: I am talking about mainstream network broadcasting, a realm of television that, until recently, was known for shying away from any sort of overt religious themes, especially in the evening primetime hours. A realm, in short, known as "secular."[6]

When people argue over religion on *that* sort of television, the terms of the debate seem to follow what I consider the three main areas of intersection between religion and media more generally, as we study it at New York University's Center for Religion and Media:[7] religion *in* the media, religious people's *use of* media, and how media can function in ways similar to religion. A conference at the University of California at Los Angeles in 1995 brought together religious leaders, media makers, and scholars to discuss *Religion in Primetime Television*—the title of the proceedings, published in 1997. The religious leaders were mostly interested in how religion appears on TV: Are its images positive? Are there any at all, or is religion ignored? They argued that religion is too profound a part of human life to be left out of such an important medium. But it must also be noted that, as believers, they felt that they, like anyone else who constitutes a community in the United States, were entitled to see themselves on television.

This interested stance by religious leaders provoked anxiety on the part of the attending scholars, who were not particularly in favor of more religious programming. Michael Suman notes that the most vocal critics of a dearth of TV programming on religion are among the Christian right. It is not that they are simply in favor of "religion in general"; rather, he notes, "What is most important to them is not that people are religious in some way, but that they are religious in a particular way, their way."[8]

The third group of participants in the conference, the media makers, noted that introducing religion into TV programs has the potential of alienating great portions of

the possible audience. The networks especially, with their emphasis on wide audience, have historically shied away from the niche marketing left to cable TV. So the mid-nineties answered the question of whether mass-mediated entertainment like TV can or should provide open space for religious discourse very cautiously. Anxiety over content ran high. In ten years, the situation altered radically. As TV critic Gloria Goodale wrote in 2005, "religious-themed programming is here to stay."[9] She notes long- and short-term trends.

First, Hollywood has discovered the evangelical Christian audience, estimated to be 25 to 75 million strong, as a new advertising niche. As the Christian media industry I mentioned above has distributed its novels, music, and films through stores like Wal-Mart, those products become ever more visible. It was the blockbuster success of *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004, however, that really opened producers' eyes.[10] In fact, Jeff Zucker, head of NBC Universal Television Group, said candidly of religion, "We looked at it as something that was underserved in network television."[11] Second, the baby-boomer generation has matured and is searching for values in life. This search may not lead to institutionalized religion, but it does lead to "spirituality."[12] Third, after September 11, the media chose to play up—following the lead of the U.S. government—a religiously inflected picture of the "War on Terror." And finally, the availability of wonderful special effects calls forth plots of the miraculous.[13] These many reasons why religion appears more often on television address the first two aspects of "religion and media": how the media treat religion and how religious people mediate themselves.

Here I am most interested in exploring a third possibility: whether and how media themselves can function religiously, a possibility that rests upon understanding both religion and media as aspects of "mediation" more generally. What aspects of a show induce audience commitment to combine the fervor of personal, ongoing devotional attention with community building as fans? When a show's content is specifically religious, a powerful possibility for theology in public is produced.[14] That being so, what happens when the interior of a theological plot crashes into the encompassing material circumstances of its production?

Of Mediation

What do I mean by "mediation in the deep theoretical sense of the word"? In a dialectical model of the construction of social reality, people are constantly engaged in producing the material world around them, even as they are, in turn, produced by it.[15] Every social practice moves through and is carried upon a material framework or vehicle. One can follow this line of theorization from the Marxist Bakhtin circle in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, especially in the writing of V. N. Vološinov, who noted that "the existence of the sign is nothing but the materialization of (that) communication" to its later bourgeois

incarnation in Clifford Geertz's cultural anthropology.[16] The critical theory of the Frankfort School has contributed consistently to viewing culture as that which "*mediates* the interaction between the material and the mental, the economic and the socio-political."[17] This active sense of world making lies at the heart of the antipositivist mission of critical theory and of the turn toward practice in the social sciences in general, especially in the British cultural studies of the Birmingham School and certain strands of American cultural anthropology. It takes strict empirical account of the world as it exists without assuming that this world is forever given as it is, as an unchanging facticity. As both historian and anthropologist, I find it important to station an analytic between embodied actors and the things of the world, grasping their mutual constitution as a process of mediation, always giving sufficient attention to possibilities of agency.[18]

People are aware of these processes of endless mediation to differing degrees. Take language. All humans are meant to speak it, and for most of us it just appears when we open our mouths. But for poets and ad copywriters, every word is precious and carefully wrought, producing a language resistant with a life of its own. We might, in an older idiom, say "reified." That would imply, however, that someday de-reification would come and we could live in an im-mediate reality, when in fact such a sense of "natural" immediacy is itself a mediated effect. The production of social life proceeds so well because most of us do not notice it happening and proceed to devote our energies to the world unhampered by self-reflexivity. It provides us with a ground of "natural" culture, which functions like a bowl of water in which we swim like fish, unaware of the edge or end of our horizon of survival.[19]

Language and the gesturing bodies that speak it may be the most naturalizing media through which human life takes place.[20] At the opposite end of the spectrum are entire industries of media production—print, radio, television, film, video, the Internet—which, in a world of increasing commodification, appear as reified products for consumption.[21] And yet, the complexity of the media industries' productions, which include their own constant publicity, results in many moments of self-conscious disclosure of their processes of signification (e.g., the many "Making of . . ." documentaries, Entertainment News on broadcast and cable TV, tabloid magazines, "Reality TV," etc) Thus the machinations of artifice become more and more obvious to more and more people. People face their mediated representations more forthrightly—noticing that someone might be in charge of them, that they might be experiencing an interruption of the imagined flow of authentic, im-mediate experience. We then see efforts to seize the means of mediated production, a phenomenon increasingly found in indigenous and religious communities worldwide.[22] Just as often, however, people rush in the opposite direction, giving vent to longing for im-mediate, authentic experience, relieved of such burdens of knowledge, sure that if only we could turn off the TV, we would all have a better grasp on the truth of our lives.

The practices often named "religion"—as a subset of the processes of the mediation of social life that I have just described—have much in common with the problems of the

media. Religion, like the media and mediations of all sorts, also functions best when no one notices it, when people appropriate it as an always-already present aspect of social life. Yet religious believers also have had prophetic epiphanies and transformations at times of self-reflexive understanding, and certainly the longing for "religious experience" as the definition of "the spiritual," that ever-present default position in modern religious life, reveals a similar wish for im-mediate, unmediated reality.

So, from the point of view of the mediation of social life, "religion" and "media" can be seen to function in surprisingly intimate ways and to form even more potent forms of social practice when deliberately intertwined.[23] They both involve and mobilize epistemological and cosmological matters of the constitution of the real. The stakes could hardly be higher and in their details raise questions of great import for theorizing. As media theorist James Carey notes: "Reality is a scarce resource . . . the fundamental form of power is the power to define, allocate and deploy that resource."[24]

Joan of Arcadia: Casting God?

Joan of Arcadia was the creation of Barbara Hall, an experienced television writer and producer who is now a practicing Catholic. The show first aired on September 29, 2003, was nominated for an Emmy, and received the People's Choice Award for Best New Drama. Despite these successes, it was cancelled in May 2005, to the surprise and dismay of its writers, cast, and fans. The reason given was that its audience had dropped from 10.1 million in the first year to 8 million by the end of the second season. More significant was the demographic of the audience: a mean age of 53.9. CBS, driven by advertising, anxiously pursues the younger audience, aged 18 to 49, and that season replaced a number of successful shows with new ones for the fall. As Les Moonves, president of CBS, said of a new show where a young woman speaks to the dead: "I think talking to ghosts will skew younger than talking to God."[25]

Joan of Arcadia tells the story of a young high-school student to whom God begins to speak in the form of various people she meets in her daily life: first a "cute guy," then a cafeteria worker, a jogger, a little girl playing in a park, a fat construction worker . . . the list is endless, extending during the two seasons to a dog walker, an old woman who manifests as a nurse, a school volunteer, a Goth student, and so on.[26] Neither Joan nor the audience knows when God will pop up. Joan's family has just moved to the town of Arcadia, where her dad has taken over as police chief. Her mother is an artist who has given up painting, and her younger brother is a brilliant young scientist/geek. But it is her older brother who provides a kind of moral engine to the show: he is now paralyzed and in a wheelchair after a car accident—once a powerful athlete bound for college on a scholarship, he is a despairing young man who provides the show's sense of theodical

urgency as the family grapples with the question of why such a terrible thing could happen.

The opening of the show's pilot episode cuts back and forth between a crime scene and Joan asleep in bed. It is very dreamy. Is the crime real or Joan's dream? A voice calls her, she wakes, but rejects it by putting on her headphones to listen to music . . . Was that God? The audience wonders . . . Then we meet the family at breakfast, and we realize that the police chief from the crime scene the night before is her father.

Everyone has agreed that the show's innovation lay in introducing God as an actual character. Bob Gale, writer and producer, pointed out how dangerous this can be to dramatic plotting: he fantasized about what would happen if you had a show where people prayed, hoping God would answer—and decided, based on the theological proposition that God can do anything and might indeed answer, that the result would be profoundly boring.[27] Barbara Hall faces this theological dilemma directly by reversing the action: God takes the initiative, appearing to Joan unexpectedly, speaking through random people she encounters, and assigning her mysterious tasks, whose reasons only become clear as the plot unfolds. Neither Joan nor the audience knows what will happen. God has a plan; Joan has doubts. God is like the writer; Joan is the actor who (along with the audience) must make sense of the script. Clearly, the dramatic possibilities rest upon *how God is written as a character.*

Theological issues arise on two levels. First, how is God imagined by humans? And second, should God be imagined and "cast" this way at all? Various traditional, biblically oriented Christian critics objected to the show precisely because they think God should not be represented. Stephen Keels, a youth minister at Good Shepherd Community Church, disliked seeing God portrayed in human form at all. He maintained that "the series creates a God with limitations that he [Keels] cannot accept."[28] He might have objected, as well, that the show's "God" was not declared to be the Christian God per se, but was resolutely nondenominational, thus skirting the ongoing problem of network TV—that of alienating a portion of audience demographic by too narrowly casting the religious message.

By contrast, most commentators embraced the premise of the show: that God is among us and can take human form. They described him as manifesting in the everyday; as being "the one you talk to in turbulence over the Atlantic Ocean" (Joe Mantegna, who plays Joan's father); as "personal" and not "religious" (Amber Tamblyn, who plays Joan); as a "sort of cosmic super shrink"; as working through nonreligious people; yet, despite this closeness to human reality, as ultimately "mysterious."[29]

Let us look at a few manifestations of God to Joan. Eight minutes into the first episode, Joan meets a cute boy on the bus. He follows her to school, starting up a conversation. He explains that he was standing outside her window that morning after she got dressed for school. She gets very angry and says:

JOAN: What are you talking about? What do you want with me? Because I 've got to warn you, my dad's a cop. Not just any cop, he is THE cop . . .
GOD: I know who your father is . . .
J (frightened): Who are you?
G: I've known you since before you were born. I'm God.
J: I'm going to ask you one more time . . .
G: I'm God.
J: You're what?
G: God.
J (long pause): Don't ever talk to me again.

When he tells her he is God, she rejects him as crazy. Joan tries to avoid him, but he finds her again after class. She greets him sarcastically with, "Hey, God, get lost. I mean it!" But he perseveres, telling her things about herself no one could possibly know: "You said you'd study hard, stop talking back, clean your room, and even go to church if I let your brother live."

Joan begins to believe him, and listens as the boy as God says:

"Let me explain something: I don't look like this. I don't look like anything you'd recognize. You can't see me. I don't sound like this. I don't sound like anything you'd recognize. You see, I'm beyond your experience. I take this form because you're comfortable with it. It makes sense to you. Do you get it?" Joan then confesses that she is not religious. He answers—in a key point of the show's theology—"It's not about religion, Joan. It's about fulfilling your nature."

In this conversation Joan is slowly convinced because of God's intimate knowledge of her past, especially her prayers when her brother nearly died. He gives her a first, mysterious, task—to get a job in a bookstore. And we learn that God has no fixed form, that he "appears" solely that Joan may "see."

In the final short scene, God contacts Joan again, because she has not gotten that job in the bookstore—and God has changed! Joan is in line in the school cafeteria, getting her lunch. An elderly black woman serving behind the food counter suddenly asks seriously, "How come you didn't get the job?" Joan is completely startled—just as he warned, this time God looks completely different. She is nervous and annoyed and demands, "Could we possibly talk about this somewhere else?" And the old woman as God answers sharply, "Well, just do what I tell you and we won't have to discuss it. Couldn't be easier. Move on now. You're holding up the line."

The rest of the pilot episode shows Joan getting the job, with the surprising result that her older brother in the wheelchair is shamed by his younger sister's initiative while he is complaining about his life and refusing to go out in the world. He tells her she has inspired him to look for a job and move on with his life. Now that we have met "God"

as a cast member, let us turn to the theological arguments about his representation in this show.

Douglas Leblanc, founder of *getreligion.org*, an online religious magazine, writes in a story for *Christianity Today* that the show can be theologically misleading. "*Joan* requires that Christians check their credulity at the door. God's instructions to Joan are often mysterious. . . . These revelations are not specific enough to withstand a testing by Scripture, by any historic creed, or even by messages Joan might hear in church. . . . *Joan of Arcadia* is not a source of systematic theology, even at a popular level."[30] He also notes the objections to God's appearance at all as an affront to the rejection of "graven images" but overall approves of the show's ethical value.

Other Christian critics have objected to the absence of Jesus, since it is a tenet of evangelical Christianity that the way to the Father lies only through salvation in the Son—at least since the New Testament. But Catholic priest and author Andrew Greeley writes very positively about the show, saying: "Producer Barbara Hall asks the really important questions about God—who he is, what's he up to, why he sometimes seems to go away, why he permits bad things to happen. God, in the various forms in which he appears to Joan, provides no easy answers to these questions. Rather He or She is usually content with two claims (1) He knows what he is doing even if we can't figure it out, and (2) He loves all of us."[31]

Greeley finds the show squarely in a theological stream he calls the "Hidden God" tradition, dating back at least to Saint Augustine. In this tradition, God is unpredictable, unfathomable, and "ineffable." Though "most Americans don't think this kind of God is fair," Greeley approves of the mysterious power God displays on the show, even as he appears in human form right next to Joan. This power does not take the form of fancy special-effects miracles but rather appears in the show as a kind of conversational reticence. As Greeley says: "He does not explain or apologize, much less give political advice. Any god who is not mysterious is not God. Any god who is willing to play our game is not God. Any god who whispers answers to important questions in our waiting ears is not God." He describes this Hidden God, in the theological tradition of St. Augustine, Kevin Smith (director of the film *Dogma*), and Barbara Hall, as "a mysterious and unpredictable reality, a God of implacable love and constant surprises."[32]

Barbara Hall—the show's creator and producer, and thus, in this case, the creator of God, as it were—obviously does not accept the theological premise that God is unrepresentable. Recall that one of the first things God explains to Joan is that he must take form, mediate himself, so that she can experience him at all. Hall felt that about ten million viewers did not mind seeing God everywhere. She was hyper-aware, however, of the problems of writing him as a character, thus returning us to the first theological issue above. She honed a quite precise vision of how her show's writers should imagine God—even cleverly putting out what she called her "Ten Commandments":

1. God cannot directly intervene.
2. Good and evil exist.
3. God can never identify one religion as being right.
4. The job of every human being is to fulfill his or her true nature.
5. Everyone is allowed to say no to God, including Joan.
6. God is not bound by time—this is a human concept.
7. God is not a person and does not possess a human personality.
8. God talks to everyone all the time in different ways.
9. God's plan is what is good for us, not what is good for Him.
10. God's purpose for talking to Joan, and to everyone, is to get her (us) to recognize the interconnectedness of all things, i.e. you cannot hurt a person without hurting yourself; all of your actions have consequences; God can be found in the smallest actions; God expects us to learn and grow from all our experiences. However, the exact nature of God is a mystery, and the mystery can never be solved.[33]

Hall's theology is close to Andrew Greeley's vision: a loving yet mysterious God who works through human beings, who makes suggestions, leaving plenty of room for choice, free will, and thus human agency.[34] In the show's stories, direct, im-mediate experience of God is avoided. This is not mysticism; God is experienced by Joan socially, through the medium of other speaking and gesturing bodies. She herself serves as God's medium to do his will in the world—when she gets up the nerve and stops doubting. In this sense, God is grasped by humanity only as an immanent presence. We are in a linguistic epistemology: no language, no God. Seen in this way, Hall's theological vision is profoundly anthropocentric, placing the acting person (in this case, literally the "actors") at the hub of a cosmology.

Many people have commented in the press on how much they appreciate this human-centered notion of God, how very comforting they find Him. Jason Ritter, who plays the crippled Kevin on the show, says: "I think a lot of people are liking the God we are portraying. I've had people come up to me and say 'I believe in that God! Find me a religion that has that God—a loving God that's all-inclusive and without punishment!' "[35] Yet there may be other ways to read this representation of divine presence.

New Age or Christian Theology?

The cosmology of the show likewise poses the interpenetration of good and evil. Following Hall's second writers' commandment: "Good and evil exist," the show has built into it the terrible crimes that Joan's father must solve almost every week. This was done to keep things from becoming too simple and sentimental. As Hall puts it in the producer's voiceover on the DVD version of the pilot episode: "The idea that good and evil exist. . . .

is part of the ten commandments [for writing the show] because I am not interested in talking about God in a benign universe. That's not an interesting entity to deal with. It's trying to deal with God when we have to confront in a world where there are serial killers."

Her production partner, James Hayman, who has directed several episodes, agrees: "Good can't exist without evil . . . without it, we would not be able to explore the good. Those things have to co-exist. They don't have any meaning without each other. If you look at any spiritual path, that's the concept—you have to have one to have the other."

Significantly, Hayman refers to "any spiritual path." In a crucial moment in God's first dialogue with Joan, she says: "I'm not religious, you know." And he replies "It's not about religion, Joan. It's about fulfilling your nature." Indeed, many moments in the show's total of forty-eight episodes reinforce this turn away from organized religious practice toward what Americans call "spirituality." Neither Joan nor her family ever goes to church; the only clergy we meet are a rather ineffectual young Catholic priest, the rabbi father of one of Joan's friends, and a nun who has left her order. Hall said in an interview: "We forget that this is a very spiritual country. . . . People have always been open to questions of spirituality . . . and it's non-denominational. There simply seems to be a large number of people with a spiritual bent."[36]

One online critic of the show named this sort of spirituality "New Age." Elliot B. Gertel not only notes that "the religion it advances is New Age doctrine" but goes on at great length to analyze how this New Ageism leads to anti-Semitic stereotyping of the show's various Jewish characters. Gertel notes that "New Age manifestos depict Jews as unspiritual—earthly, lustful, perpetually insensitive," while "New Age writers" insist that "monotheistic religions like Judaism [or Christianity or Islam] imprison people with ritual and requirements that stifle true spirituality."[37] We should especially note Gertel's point that a number of beliefs associated with New Age religiosity quite deliberately skew a classically monotheistic view of divinity. These ideas include:

1. There are many paths to a single divine source. Thus, all religions are basically versions of one truth, and the truly spiritual can see through their differences to the underlying meaning.
2. There is an emphasis upon personal experience rather than doctrine.
3. The true or deeper self is divine.
4. Our purpose as humans is to cultivate this deep self so as to connect with the divine forces of the cosmos.
5. The universe is in a state of constant becoming, in which we share.[38]

"Spirituality's" emphasis upon the self and its personal creativity has profoundly influenced the arts in the United States.[39] This seems to be to be reflected in Hall's "Ten Commandments," which seize the power to "create God" (as she often has put it) for her

writers, celebrating artistic human creativity in a compelling way as encompassing in its agency the creation of its Creator. However, the turn to "spirituality" has also been critiqued as a symptom of radical possessive individualism, a kind of ultimate privatization of religion made famous by Robert Bellah's description of Sheila Larson, the nurse who described her religion as "her own little voice: Sheilaism."[40] Writer Austin Bunn criticizes the show: "Joan's idea of morality is a clueless stumble toward self-actualization. . . . It's a message perfectly tuned for audiences interested in spirituality."[41]

Yet the undoubted presence of peoples' allegiance to this self-description in America does open the door to public discussion of ethics and values. As Hall herself says:

> [The show] came out of my process of studying world religions. After Sept 11, there was a paradigm shift and people were willing to talk about issues of faith. Lots on TV about 9/11 about how it affected people's faith. I was fascinated by that. The character of Will the dad is based on stories of people who did courageous things in 9/11 but they weren't religious, it wasn't about faith, about God, it was just about the right thing to do. And I love the idea of morality, of people who have an innate sense of right and wrong not based on religion but because they're good people.[42]

Rather than dismiss such popular entertainment as silly distraction, or such folk notions of spirituality as merely diluting and degrading real religion from a golden past, it seems to me to be more useful to investigate actual theological genealogies for such discourses. One place we might turn is to "process theology."

Process theology grew out of an engagement with theories of Darwinian evolution and Einsteinian relativity. These provided models of a dynamic, ever-changing cosmos at the turn of the twentieth century. At that time, familiarity with Buddhism was also a factor. William James, John Dewey, Henri Bergson, and especially Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Alfred North Whitehead drew upon these cosmological shifts in their creation of new social theory and theology. American process theology, especially as formulated by Charles Hartshorne, took from Whitehead a sense of God as dynamically and intimately relating with the world, not separated from it, as in traditions after Aquinas.[43]

Whitehead's God is not the unmoved mover of Aristotle, nor is he the imperial ruler of Roman Christianity, not even "the personification of moral energy" of the Jews.[44] God is the dipolar ground of all opposites and contains the world, which operates in a similar and complementary fashion. As Whitehead says: "It is as true to say that God is one and the World many as it is to say the World is One and God is many."[45] God begins in primordial potentiality and requires the world's primordial actuality to complete him. God does not produce the world *de novo*; he arises with it, as it, of it. "He does not create the world; he saves it [in the sense of cherishing and preserving]; or more accurately he

is the poet of the world, with tender patience lending it his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness."[46]

Hall's God comes as close to Whitehead's vision of a summarizing, beneficent force as it does to Greeley's loving benefactor. Her God is not personified in a principle that possesses an ontology of separate presence, but only in the flesh of the actors through whom God speaks. Hall's seventh commandment for writers says baldly: "God is not a person and does not possess a human personality." He thus lacks human-style tendencies, such as the wish to intervene (see commandment number one), or have religious preferences (see number three). Instead, his purpose is to foster what I would call a Whiteheadian understanding of the interconnection of all things (see number ten).

The God who manifests on *Joan of Arcadia* is deliberately imagined as both accessible and mysterious, willing to suggest but not impel, limited in his omnipotence by Joan's human senses. In this very embracing of contradictions, s/he also resembles the dipolar God of process theology. The connection between that theology and New Age spirituality is not direct, but they do share a genealogy. Besides influencing process theologians, who are highly philosophical speculators in the scholarly reaches of religious enclaves, post-Einsteinian physics and its cosmology of constant dynamic change has also deeply influenced important threads in New Age spirituality. From the popular (and still in-print) books in the seventies connecting physics with "Eastern Mysticism,"[47] to the independent movie hit *I Heart Huckabees* (2004), this mode of finding the universe itself sacred and responsive to human desire inverts natural science's objectified positivism, bending it to a human-centered agency and forging newly imagined connections that are labeled "spiritual" rather than utilitarian. Ironically, this impulse yields an idealist version of critical theory's rigorously antipositivist critique of science and technology.

To be fair, Hall finds "God" central to her show's power in a way that might seem to challenge this New Age hypothesis. A Beliefnet interviewer said, at the end of the show's first season in May 2004, "Yet on TV these days God seems more acceptable than ever." She answered: "But none of those shows identify God. If you want to do the supernatural, that's one thing, and I enjoy that genre, but we're trying to dramatize something that, from my vantage point, could be real. It's not some force, or energy, or the hellmouth—it's God." She then fell right into the close connection between God and science we described above as so central to progressive Christian theology in the twentieth century:

> One thing I want to do is to debunk the notion that science and spirituality are natural enemies. Joseph Campbell said it's impossible to live without a mythology and it always baffled him how we live without one. But we don't. Our mythology is science—actually it's shifting now to celebrity, but we believe deeply in science. We don't realize that science is a very spiritual concept. There are aspects of it that are

> completely in line with spirituality. Theoretical physics to me is just the math of God. I didn't make that up—Einstein thought so.[48]

If not New Age, at least worthy of Whitehead.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to return to the question of media, mediation, and their connection to the modern concept of religion. The great Mediterranean monotheisms have had a love/hate relationship with the image. Dealing with it today seems inescapable, however, and therein lies a challenge for theologies, like the one underpinning *Joan of Arcadia*, that would taken into account an electronic public. Scholars have pointed to the ritualizing dimensions of our engagement with television watching: it is repetitive, providing us with a sense of continuity in everyday life, and, most importantly, it helps us to understand ourselves in the context of a larger community.[49] In other words, television is a vehicle (along, now, with video and the Internet) that can deliver the words and *images* that socially mediate religion in powerful ways. Television, film, and video games offer the opportunity to reengage notions of the divine in a current media-saturated context. Taking an optimistic and somewhat utilitarian view of the inevitability of mediation, theologian Richard Woods puts it like this:

> Symbol and myth, the concrete elements of spirituality as the story of our life-journey, are themselves constructions of the human spirit, specifically of our *imagination*—the power to represent the world cognitively and aesthetically, especially through visualization. Image is to spirituality what concept is to theology. As images, symbol and myth are *functions of human creativity, a prime instance of our participation in the divine order itself.*[50]

Woods's collapse of human image making into the divinity of universal order reminds me very much of Barbara Hall's willingness to cast God, and thus to cast herself as the creator, producer, and director of the divine. In making a show of God among us, she illustrates the process of creatively harnessing divinity to human ends. This is presented to us as an intimate art: when God appears to Joan, the first indication of presence is usually some stranger calling her name.[51] She is hailed in that most intimate of ways—God always already knows her. As audience we are always already ready for this display of interpellation as she responds to the hailing. We oscillate between identification with the thrill of Joan's being divinely known and knowing ourselves the truth of the origins of the script: it is just a story, a story made from nothing but the human imagination.

This process of back and forth mimicks our engagement with television in a larger sense, as a medium that has increasingly blurred the sense of fiction and fact. Nick Coudry points out that "media claim to connect us with a shared social reality." One needn't even include Reality TV to understand that something about television as a broadcast medium intrinsically accomplishes that sharing:

> Live transmission (of anything whether a real event or a fictional narrative) guarantees that someone in the transmitting institution could interrupt it at any time and make an immediate connection to real events. What is special about live transmission is the potential connection it guarantees with real events, rather than an actual portrayal of real events themselves. . . . Liveness guarantees a potential connection to our shared social realities as they are happening. Because of this connection, "liveness" can properly be called a ritual category which contributes to the ritual space of the media.[52]

It is especially television's longstanding claim to bring us our social reality "live" that underlies the power of *Joan of Arcadia*'s representation of the divine and, paradoxically, makes it vulnerable. The show's devotion to the quotidian does double duty: its absolute rejection of special effects to carry divinity to the viewer not only presents a picture of God as available to us daily, our knowingness about Barbara Hall's writerly "theology" embeds the sense of the sacred in everyday *television* reality.

Here we see how television naturalizes itself through its claim to provide "liveness"—returning us to the point made earlier about the relationship between religion and mediation in the deep sense of that term. Mediation that can disappear, allowing the light of the divine to shine through: that is what viewers of *Joan of Arcadia* sought, even as they knew perfectly well the show was brought to them by a team of writers following their own "Ten Commandments." This gratification of the fantasy of im-mediacy was rudely interrupted, however, with the abrupt and surprising cancellation of the show on May 18, 2005.

The cast and production team were stunned; fans were outraged.[53] Ironically, the show had just made the metaphysical leap of including a representative of Satan in the form of the character Ryan Hunter—who also talked to God, he just didn't agree with the divine plan. In boldly casting its plotlines beyond the cozy sense of the divine carefully cultivated in its two successful seasons, the show managed, in an important sense, to refuse to grant immanence the last word. As it did so, this bit of popular culture finally may have had a truly late-modern "religious" moment: after bathing happily in the heart-warming pleasures of an everyday God, its audience and its makers were jolted out of a complacency summed up best by the title of an essay on the Web site failuremag.com addressing the cancellation: "A Plea to the Television Gods: Joan Fans Try to Keep the Faith."[54] These "gods" are, of course, the network executives whose decision processes

are as mysterious as those of the Hidden God. At precisely this crossing of religion and popular culture, we can see how they become the "site for the negotiation of critique, remembrance and emancipatory projections."[55] Fans gathered over 23,000 signatures to bring the show back. Their Web sites hummed for over a year. As Eduardo Mendieta notes, in his discussion of critical theory's approach to religion:

> Religion gives words to non-conceptual experiences. . . . In this way religion harbors a lexicon of transcendence and anti-fetishism . . . both inexhaustible, albeit always succumbing to decay and forgetfulness, and renewable via new experiences of the liminal and numinous, albeit gropingly searching for words beyond the quotidian. . . . It is the medium in which that from which it flows is both accessed and hindered from being encountered. The concept becomes the wall between the subject and the non-conceptual . . . thus religion is to be secured by means of the relentless criticism of religion.[56]

In the struggle to make visible and then interpret encounters with the divine in *Joan of Arcadia*, Hall and her audience performed such an effort to immanentize the transcendant and overcome quotidian expectations of institutionalized religion. That they failed because of the demands of the market upon this particular technology only reminds us that the effort was real, "live," and not merely just a "story" after all. That this struggle over the articulation of theological propositions should be adjudicated in the realm of "the market" is precisely why it can occupy public space at all, why its closing off is not understood as involving issues of free speech or politics, since the price of being able to utter "religion" in the space of dramatic primetime television remains silence about the "political."

A "Sense of Possibility"

Robert Musil, Meister Eckhart, and the "Culture of Film"

Niklaus Largier

The—at least slightly—enigmatic title of this essay begs for some preliminary explanation. As is well known, Robert Musil plays in the very title of his novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man Without Qualities*) on an expression coined by the medieval German mystic and philosopher Eckhart von Hochheim. In many of his sermons, Eckhart speaks of man "without qualities [*âne eigenschaften*],"[1] thus fashioning a term and a concept for a religious ideal that embodies specific aspects of detachment, freedom, and salvation. Musil's references to Eckhart in his great, unfinished novel do not end with the allusion in the title, however. In addition, he inserts into his text a series of quotes and excerpts from Meister Eckhart, whom he had read in a number of anthologies and in the translation published by Hermann Büttner in two volumes between 1903 and 1909.[2]

The so-called Büttner edition of Eckhart's works was remarkably successful and popular during the first decades of the twentieth century. It had been studied by everybody in the intellectual world of the time, including Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, and Martin Buber, but also Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, and Belá Balázs. In pointing out one of the many reflections of this interest in the "mystical tradition" and in Meister Eckhart, one might mention an intense and heated discussion that erupted after a lecture by Ernst Troeltsch at the First Convention of German Sociologists on the topic of the emergence of modernity.[3] The conversation focused on the relation between mystical traditions and the genesis of the modern world. At another moment, when Karl Mannheim and Georg Lukács met for the first time, they discussed Lukács's plan to write an "essay on mysticism."[4] At this point, Lukács had already translated some of Eckhart's texts, and he wrote shortly thereafter an essay, deeply inspired by his reading of Eckhart,

Jameson's Writing in the '80s," www3.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue500/10.3helmling.txt., 2000.

Angela Zito, Can Television Mediate Religious Experience? The Theology of *Joan of Arcadia*

1. My working definition of *spiritual* is "aspects of human existence that elude explanation in terms of rational, scientific paradigms, yet provide consolation and inspiration for action."

2. *Highway to Heaven* ran on NBC from 1984 to 1989; *Touched by an Angel*, on CBS from 1994 to 2003; *Buffy* from 1997 to 2003 on the Warner Brothers Network; *The X-Files* on FOX from 1993 to 2002.

3. In *Understanding Theology in Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), Gordon Lynch devotes chapters to analyses that are "author-focused," "text-based," and looking at "club culture."

4. Stewart Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1988).

5. Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

6. Michael Suman, "Do We Really Need More Religion on Fiction Television?" In *Religion and Primetime Television*, ed. Michael Suman (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Press, 1997).

7. The New York University Center for Religion and Media was founded in 2003 with a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts; its URL is www.nyu.edu/fas/center/religionandmedia.

8. Suman, "Do We Really Need More Religion?" 70.

9. Gloria Goodale, "When Dogma Meets Drama on Television," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 15, 2005, Arts section, 12.

10. Ibid.

11. Hal Boedeker, "New Series Could Pose 'Revelations': NBC Exploring Religious Theme to Attract Prime-Time Congregations," *Houston Chronicle*, April 13, 2005, Star section, 6.

12. *Newsweek*'s cover story on September 5, 2005, was "Spirituality in America," a nineteen-page spread that opens with the news that 79 percent of those polled described themselves as "spiritual" and only 64 percent as "religious." For the authors, "spirituality" is an immediate personal experience of the divine. They note that every major religion in the United States is undergoing subtle transformations in that direction, including interest in Kabbalah in Judaism, eco-Christianity in Protestantism, the Charismatic Catholic movement, recommitments to prayer among Muslims, and the deepening interest in Buddhisms that emphasize meditation. While they also mention new religions like Wicca, the article was interestingly free of discussion of New Age spiritualities.

13. Goodale, "When Dogma Meets Drama."

14. My working definition of *theological* is quite simple, though it will become more complex: "having to do with God, or with questions of ultimate significance and value as they are seen in reference to the issue of God."

15. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966); Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967); David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

16. V. N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 13; Clifford Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View: On

the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

17. Eduardo Mendieta, Introduction to *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, ed. E. Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.

18. Minus the Marxist sense that the world is progressing toward some moment of perfect synthesis, this approach has much in common with the work of Bruno Latour, whose commitment to Actor Network Theory renders the world open and dynamic. Besides *We Have Never Been Modern* (trans. Catherine Porter [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993]), see Bruno Latour, "The Promises of Constructivism," in *Chasing Technoscience: Matrix of Materiality*, ed. Don Idhe (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003). See also Nick Couldry, "Media as Practice," *Social Semiotics* 14, no. 2 (August 2004): 115–32. I differ slightly from Couldry in leaning further toward the critical-theoretical preoccupation with a critique that seeks hopeful and utopic possibilities even as we cope with ever-present issues of power in mediated culture.

19. Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney, *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

20. Marcel Mauss, "Body Techniques," in Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*, ed. and trans. B. Brewster (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

21. William Mazzarella, "Culture, Globalization, Mediation," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 345–68.

22. For indigenous communities' efforts, see: Faye Ginsburg, "Shooting Back: From Ethnographic Film to Indigenous Production / Ethnography of Media," in *A Companion to Film Theory*, ed. Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 295–322; Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, eds., *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). For religious communities in India, see: Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

23. In a more practical vein, religion and TV have two things in common: they both tell stories, and they both soak up a lot of leisure time. See A. James Rudin, "On Bringing Religious and Television Communities Together," and Joan Brown Campbell, "Tuning into Common Concerns: An Invitation from the Churches to the Media Industry," both in *Religion and Primetime Television*, ed. Suman. Clergy and scholars consult on plots, even producing TV themselves. Rev. Frank Desiderio, a Catholic priest, has produced numerous History and Discovery Channel shows. He is Chief of Paulist Productions, a small production company based in Malibu, California, whose mission statement reads: "Paulist Productions creates films and television programs that reveal God's presence in the contemporary human experience. Our mission is to challenge our viewers to love others and to liberate one another from all that is dehumanizing. We encourage other entertainment professionals to help unify the human family *through the power of the media*" (my italics; James Verini, "Divine Purpose: As More Shows Feature Faith and Spirituality, Priests, Ministers, Monks, and Rabbis Are Taking on Paid Roles as Religion Consultants," *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 2004, Sunday Calendar section, 40.

24. James Carey, *Communication and Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 87, as quoted in Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (London: Routledge, 2003), 19. See also Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, for similar detailed discussion on world creation and maintenance.

25. Jim Bawden, "CBS Show Jugglers Prefer Ghosts to God," *Toronto Star*, May 19, 2005, Entertainment section, A27.

26. "Goth" is an adolescent movement that began as a subculture of punk in the 1970s: its followers wear black, use heavy eye-makeup, and have tattoos and piercings. They are interested in

Edwardian and Victorian culture and listen to music that critics have decried for its violent or depressed lyrics. Visit http://www.religioustolerance.org/goth.htm.

27. Bob Gale, "Ramblings on Why Things Are the Way They Are," in *Religion and Primetime Television*, ed. Suman, 137–42.

28. Nancy Haught, "Channeling God," *Oregonian*, September 24, 2004, Living section, D01.

29. Nancy Franklin, "Down to Earth: Conversations with God in *Joan of Arcadia*," *The New Yorker*, October 13, 2003, 110; Michael E. Hill, "God Speaks, Viewers Watch," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2003, TV Week, Y06; Joel Rubinoff, "Joan of Arcadia Helps Ritter's Healing," *Toronto Star*, February 18, 2005, Arts, C6; Verini, "Divine Purpose"; Charlie McCullon, "Fall schedule—and replacements—are swimming in spirituality," *San Jose Mercury News*, September 9, 2003, Entertainment News.

30. Douglas Leblanc, "Hip Mission: A High-School Girl Further Increases God's Prime-Time Exposure," posted April 16, 2004, at http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/004/26.101.html.

31. Andrew Greeley, "TV Show Raises Questions about God: In *Joan of Arcadia*, God Is Unpredictable, Unfathomable, and Ineffable," *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 5, 2005, Editorial, 45.

32. Ibid.

33. Hill, "God Speaks, Viewers Watch."

34. Hall remained committed to this theological position the entire run of the show. In her voice-over commentary on what would become the series' final episode, she says, "Evil works on a continuum; it's not that anyone is completely evil, but each choice you make adds on. There's always light in each person as long as there is choice, free will" (*Joan of Arcadia*, "Something Wicked This Way Comes," 2006: disk six).

35. Rubinoff, "Joan of Arcadia Helps Ritter's Healing."

36. Hill, "God Speaks, Viewers Watch."

37. Elliot B. Gertel, "Joan of Arcadia: 'Innocent' Teen Drama Makes Mockery of Religion," *Jewish World Review*, August 16, 2004, http://www.jewishworldreview.com/elliot/gertel_joan_of_arcadia2.php3.

38. See: Michael F. Brown, *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Gordon Melton, "The New Age," in *The Encyclopedia of Cults, Sects, and New Religions*, ed. James R. Lewis (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1998). Even organized religionists express interest in "spirituality," and their definitions are surprisingly similar to New Age ones. Catholic priest Richard Woods, Professor of Spiritual Theology at the Institute of Pastoral Studies, Loyola University of Chicago, writes: "'Spirituality' is another way of describing the inescapable human passion to find, or create, meaning and value in life as a whole. Spirituality is not fundamentally different from religion in its pre-institutionalized, or perhaps de-institutionalized, mode. Spirituality is the personal, particular, internalized (that is, self-conscious) but shared aspect of religion which, in its simplest and most general sense, is the dynamic bond between human persons and what they consider to be sacred. If religion and especially theology are timeless, universal, and 'open,' spirituality is historical, particular, and conditioned, determinate. It is the unique way we embody the gift of Life. In the long run, it is our life" ("Religious Symbol and Spirituality in an Electronic Age," *Spirituality Today* 35, no. 1 [Spring 1983]: 26–37). Note, as we move toward the discussion of process theology below, the absence of any mention of "God" in this discussion. For the quote from Woods, see http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/833514woods.html#2.

39. Robert Wuthnow, *All in Sync: How Music and Art Are Revitalizing American Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

40. Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

41. Austin Bunn, "Are You There God? Where's the Religion in *Joan of Arcadia*?" *Slate*, October 9, 2003, http://slate.msn.com/id/2089556/.

42. Barbara Hall, voiceover on pilot episode of *Joan of Arcadia*, DVD edition of the first season, 2005.

43. Ewert H. Cousins, *Process Theology: Basic Writings* (New York: Newman Press, 1971), 1–15.

44. Alfred North Whitehead, "God and the World," in Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Macmillan, 1929). Excerpted in Cousins, *Process Theology*, 89.

45. Ibid., 93.

46. Ibid., 91.

47. Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (Boston: Shambala Press, 1975), and Gary Zukov, *The Dancing Wuli Masters: An Overview of the New Physics* (New York: William Morrow, 1979).

48. Beliefnet, May 2004, http://www.beliefnet.com/story/133/story_13322.html.

49. Gregor T. Goethals, *The TV Ritual: Worship at the Video Altar* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981).

50. Woods, "Religious Symbol and Spirituality," my italics.

51. Noted by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, "*Joan of Arcadia*: TV's Most Spiritually Literate Show," at http://www.spiritualityhealth.com/newsh/items/review-feature/item 8476.html.

52. Couldry, *Media Rituals*, 102.

53. "Fans Demand *Joan*, Fight CBS over Cancellation," *USA Today*, May 30, 2005, http://www.usatoday.com/life/2005–05–30-joan-arcadia-fans-petition_x.htm.

54. Jason Zasky, "A Plea to the Television Gods: *Joan* Fans Try to Keep the Faith," 2005, http://www.failuremag.com/arch_arts_joan_of_arcadia.html.

55. Mendieta, Introduction, 8.

56. Ibid., 9.

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1. Meister Eckhart, *Werke*, ed. Niklaus Largier (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993), 1:16 and commentary (754–57); trans. Oliver Davies as Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1994), 153–54. See: Brigitte Spreitzer, "Meister Musil: Eckharts deutsche Predigten als zentrale Quelle des Romans 'Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften,'" *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 119 (2000): 564–88; Jochen Schmidt, *Ohne Eigenschaften: Eine Erläuterung zu Musils Grundbegriff* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1975).

2. Meister Eckhart, *Schriften und Predigten*, ed. Hermann Büttner, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Diederichs, 1903–9).

3. Reinhard Laube, *Karl Mannheim und die Krise des Historismus: Historismus als wissenssoziologischer Perspektivismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 316.

4. I am quoting from Karl Mannheim's diary entry of April 23, 1911 (ibid., 305). Cf. also: *Georg Lukács, Karl Mannheim und der Sonntagskreis*, ed. Éva Karádi and Erzsébet Vezér (Frankfurt a. M.: Sendler, 1985); Lee Congdon, *The Young Lukács* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Ernst Keller, *Der junge Lukács: Antibürger und wesentliches Leben—Literatur- und Kulturkritik, 1902–1915* (Frankfurt a. M.: Sendler, 1984).