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**Prophets in the Margins: Fantastic, Feminist Religion in Contemporary  
American Telefantasy**

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American Telefantasy**

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**Thesis**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at Austin  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin  
May 2011**

## **Abstract**

# **Prophets in the Margins: Fantastic, Feminist Religion in Contemporary American Telefantasy**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

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In this thesis, I will examine the connected representations of religion and gender in the context of contemporary American telefantasy (a term for science fiction, fantasy, and horror television genres) programs that include characters who experience fantastic visions that can be explained as originating from either divine or medically materialist origins. The fantastic mode, facilitated by telefantasy's non-verisimilitudinous genre, presents these visions in a liminal space in which religious and gender representations can potentially subvert or challenge patriarchal and hegemonic representational norms. I analyze *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci-Fi 2003-2009), *Eli Stone* (ABC 2008-2009), and *Wonderfalls* (FOX 2004) for their formal presentation of visions, representations of visionary characters, and the religious representations that form the context for the visions and visionaries. I focus on visionary characters that are directly implicated by the television text as being potential prophets: Laura Roslin and Gaius Baltar on *Battlestar Galactica*, Eli Stone on *Eli Stone*, and Jaye Tyler on *Wonderfalls*. Though each visionary

character explores the possibility of subverting patriarchal religious norms, Roslin, Baltar, and Stone's prophetic roles ultimately privilege patriarchal readings of their narratives, but Jaye, by avoiding the language-symbol systems of traditional religions, maintains the fantastic liminal space and thus the potential for subversion, even if it is only a possibility in the narrative. This thesis seeks to contribute to the scholarship of religious representations in fictional television, with a special emphasis on telefantasy.

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## Introduction

Seers, psychics, and visionaries are staples of telefantasy, a broad television genre including science-fiction, fantasy, and horror fiction (Johnson 2). They provide plot motivation and a vague sense of higher calling to support the action of the hero or heroine, even when the seer is the hero. Most programs that host such visionary characters accept the visions' veracity by building plot and characterization via the diegetic truth of the characters' ability to see supernaturally. Telefantasy shows with psychics, like *Medium* (NBC 2005-2009, CBS 2009-2011), *The Ghost Whisperer* (CBS 2005-2010), and *Angel* (WB 1999-2004), operate on the assumption of the truth of the vision and plots move forward based on the seer's messages. Studies about this televisual phenomenon—particularly the propensity for this character type to be female—notably include Karin Beeler's *Seers, Witches, and Psychics On Screen*. However, little research addresses the more complex perspective on visionary characters that only a few telefantasy shows include: fantastic visionaries whose "truth of the vision" is always in question. It is this fantastic mode of visionary representation that I argue opens space for complex and contradictory discourses about religion and gender and their intersections and interrelations on television. I examine both religion and gender as identity markers being negotiated through their television representations in the fantastic.

On *Eli Stone* (ABC 2008-2009), *Wonderfalls* (FOX 2004), and *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci-Fi 2003-2009), prophetic characters exist in the ambivalent tension of the fantastic mode.<sup>1</sup> Literary theorist Tsvetan Todorov originally theorized the fantastic as a genre. He explains the fantastic through analogy:

The person who experiences the [fantastic] event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. [. . .] The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. (Todorov 136)

I classify the fantastic as a mode of storytelling in which that period of uncertainty—the hesitancy the subject experiencing the fantastic event engages with before either they or the narrative they exist in decides the explanation—can create a liminal space of possibility. In this space, the fantastic event becomes imbued with potential. In my project, the fantastic event is the prophetic vision, and the hesitancy is created through questions of its origin: religious or scientific, divine or medical. In the fantastic mode the potential for either explanation is equal, allowing for all the possibilities of both. Faith and doubt exist simultaneously. This equal potential for the origins of the vision allows for the liminal space of what feminist Teresa de Lauretis calls the “space-off,” in which feminist work can be done. The “space-off” [refers to . . .] spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the

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<sup>1</sup> I did not include *Joan of Arcadia* (CBS 2003-2005), a show that featured a young woman who saw visions of God because her visions were not positioned in a fantastic hesitancy with a medical materialist option and were assumed to be divine and not pathological.



chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparatus” (25). The “space-off” of the fantastic is liminal, but it maintains the possibility of movement out of the fantastic and into one explanation or the other. Operating in the liminality of the fantastic, the visionaries’ betwixt-and-between position perhaps allows for greater flexibility and power over the rigid categories of the “either/or” options: either religion or science, either masculine or feminine, either gay or straight. In “and/or” constructions seemingly contradictory notions coexists with equal validity while acknowledging the eventual movement out of the fantastic that will force the choice between options. What happens when the fantastic mode’s liminal space creates the potential for “and/or” constructions that subvert such binaries?

The main research questions I will consider are: How can the use of the fantastic mode in contemporary telefantasy programs provide a viable feminist alternative for accessing and representing religion (especially through vision)? What form does the fantastic allow for gender and sexuality representations? How does the fantastic interact with non-normative representations of gender in telefantasy? How are those representations impacted by the shows’ religious frameworks, and how do they influence traditional notions of religion? To answer these questions, I will consider contemporary American telefantasy programs featuring at least one character with religiously-framed fantastic visions who challenges patriarchal gender norms. For this study, the programs are *Battlestar Galactica*, *Eli Stone*, and *Wonderfalls*.

All three programs share telefantasy’s foundational generic characteristic: they displace verisimilitude so that the narrative world created within the show is not beholden

to conventions of naturalism or realism that correspond with norms of socio-cultural verisimilitude. Their non-verisimilitudinous genre facilitates allegorical and ambiguous readings in relation to real-world topics and issues. *Battlestar Galactica* follows the human survivors of a multi-planet (the Colonies) nuclear decimation and the cylons, humanoid cyborgs who perpetrated the attack, as they search through space for a prophesized homeworld: Earth. The human-cylon war is ongoing throughout the series as the human fleet and cylons chase each other and try to survive and thrive in space; the underlying quest is for peace. The two visionary characters who share the potential of being the salvation for the humans and/or cylons are Laura Roslin, cancer-ridden President of (human) Colonies, and Gaius Baltar, the scientific genius who unknowingly gave the cylons the access needed to attack the Colonies. *Eli Stone* initially appears more verisimilitudinous, but enters the realm of telefantasy when Eli begins seeing visions even as the series continues as an episodic law procedural following Eli's San Francisco civil casework. *Wonderfalls* similarly appears verisimilitudinous—if stylized—until twenty-four-year-old slacker and sales clerk, Jaye Tyler, begins hearing voices and seeing inanimate objects speak to her. Cyborgs, space travel, musical interludes, speaking *tchotchkes*, and prophetic visions all allow these three programs to present reality askance thereby allowing for a wide range of readings of their fantastic visions, visionary characters, and religious representations in relation to reality.

These texts were chosen from among a group of both popular and cult Anglo-American telefantasy programs from the early twenty-first century that foundationally engage with Western religion. I chose to focus on television texts because their extended

narratives allow for greater exploration of the fantastic and its operation over both programming and narrative time. Chief among the shows not included in my study are *Lost* (ABC 2004-2010), *Supernatural* (WB/CW 2005-present), and *Doctor Who* (BBC 2005-present) because they do not explore the fantastic hesitancy in their representations of visions. If I widened my definition of religion to questions of fate or destiny as a guiding suprahuman force, the list grows longer, including *Alias* (ABC 2001-2006), *Dead Like Me* (Showtime 2003-2004), *Pushing Daisies* (ABC 2008-2009), *Heroes* (NBC 2006-2010), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN 1997-2003), and *Angel*. I chose *Battlestar Galactica*, *Eli Stone*, and *Wonderfalls* because they foreground the potential of religious challenge and subversion by exploring prophets as sites where personal and communal relationships with religion meet. These three programs, unique among the others mentioned above, deal explicitly with the fantastic mode by dramatizing it as a battle of prophetic legitimacy between medically materialist and divinely inspired visions. Within the liminal frame of the fantastic, the visionary characters at the heart of this work prove fertile sites of analysis in terms of religion and gender representations. Moreover, all three programs use the displacement of verisimilitude associated with telefantasy to explore issues important to their cultural surround: religious extremism, religious prejudice, and violence following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks; prejudices facing Americans in the twenty-first century, including those against transgendered individuals and the metaphorical “little people” constantly under threat from “big business;” and even increasing cynicism and apathy among Generation Y. Though I will analyze neither the personal and industry motivations that lead to these real-world focuses nor the

reception or influence of the shows' politics, I feel it is important to acknowledge their contextual connections as distinguishing features. Although my thesis primarily focuses on the texts' formal and narrative attributes, television programs do not exist in a vacuum, and I do not want to imply that they do because of the limitations of my study.

Understanding genres as discursive categories, as Jason Mittell argues we should, telefantasy and cult television are genres created by those who engage with them; their meanings are fluid (Mittell 1). According to Catherine Johnson, the term "telefantasy" itself originates from fan discourse instead of industry terminology, operating as a useful umbrella term for a grouping of genres that share similar traits of displacement regarding verisimilitude (2). Thus, these genres occupy space between margin and mainstream, a position that allows for more play and critique among representations and those interpreting them. Telefantasy embraces the potential of its non-verisimilitudinous mode, "conflict[ing] with accepted notions of 'reality'. As such, all texts that represent the fantastic ask questions that push the boundaries of socio-cultural verisimilitude" (Johnson 4). This mode—and its facilitation of the fantastic—opens space for potential challenges to religious and gender representational norms, among other things.

Telefantasy programs have a long history of being linked allegorically with religion—from *Star Trek* on. So too does cult television have links to religion, and the fan practices associated with it resemble religious praxes. Matthew Hills explicitly argues for such a link in "Media Fandom, Neoreligiosity, and Cult(ural) Studies," writing, "I will examine the extent to which the term 'cult,' . . . relates not to the interpretive models of scholastic reason but rather to modes of fan practice (practical reason) which

can be described as ‘neoreligious’” (74). Religious scholar Lynn Schofield Clark in her ethnographic work argues similarly, “In this era of irregular attendance at religious organizations, stories like Jodie’s [a teenaged subject in Clark’s study] suggest that, whereas the local synagogue, mosque, and church may be sources of information about the realm beyond, so are television programs like *The X-Files*” (795). Both Hills and Clark, while their studies are interesting and useful in opening dialogue between religious studies and media studies, focus on reception and fan practices as analogs for religious praxes.

Before I can analyze the texts for their visions and visionaries, I must review the literature seeking to define religion, a necessary step when entering the discourse of religious studies. For my project, religion must be defined—or at least organized into a working concept—in order to position it against the more empirically “known” medical materialist explanation of fantastic visions that posits visions as merely (mis-)firing neurons. In analyzing these shows, I first had to decide why and how I would use “religion” in my argument. As a feminist looking at the resistance to Christian patriarchal construction of religion in the United States, I call the divine power<sup>2</sup> that is accessed through potentially feminist spaces “religion.” Calling this divine power “religion” gives it the same weight as the vernacular usage of “religion” in the United States. Feminist scholars of religion often use “spirituality” as an alternative term for feminist theological philosophy—consciously avoiding the term “religion” to distance

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<sup>2</sup> Defining power as an agent’s ability “to ‘act otherwise’ mean[ing] being able to intervene in the world or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs” (Giddens 14).

themselves from its patriarchal connotations—but I draw inspiration for my project from second-wave feminist Mary Daly’s project in *Beyond God the Father*. Daly writes:

The method of [religious] liberation, then, involves a *castrating* of language and images that reflect and perpetuate the structures of a sexist world. It castrates precisely in the sense of cutting away the phallogocentric value system imposed by patriarchy. (9)

In using “religion,” I place the potentially-alternative ideologies of religion in *Battlestar Galactica*, *Eli Stone*, and *Wonderfalls* on equal footing with the vernacular, patriarchal construction of religion (“God the Father”) and attempt to subvert—or at least complicate—that sexist construction, to castrate “religion.” While my project does not align with Daly’s gynocentric conception of religious reform—I do focus my analysis on two male and two female visionaries—Daly’s argument that religion has become tied with phallogocentric language and symbols that perpetuate patriarchy offers an excellent starting point for my analysis of gender and religion as represented (and reconceptualized as possibly working at such castration) through the language and symbols of telefantasy.

My definition of religion for this project draws from a definition by scholar of religion Thomas Tweed, particularly his focus on images and artifacts. Tweed defines religions experientially and spatially while leaving room for looser interpretations: “Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries” (54, emphasis in original). He further writes, “Religions mark and traverse not just the boundaries of the natural terrain and the limits of embodied life but also the

*ultimate horizon*—a phrase that, with *suprahuman forces*, distinguishes religions and not religious cultural forms” (Tweed 76). In a thorough explication of his definition, Tweed introduces the concept of tropes as a cultural mediation of religion. These tropes include “metaphors, similes, myths, allegories, personifications, and symbols . . . that function as figurative tools for making and remaking imagined worlds” (68). This particular aspect of his definition is key to my analysis of television representations of religion. For my purposes, tropes—and the artifacts (television texts) that “anchor” them—are the lens through which I read religion’s mediation and construction.

Artifacts that tie religion to lived experience, in this case, television programs, constitute elements of religious visual culture. In his book on the subject, David Morgan condenses his definition of visual culture into two assertions:

Visual culture is what images, acts of seeing, and attendant intellectual, emotional, and perceptual sensibilities do to build, maintain, or transform the worlds in which people live. The study of visual culture is the analysis and interpretation of images and the ways of seeing (or gazes) that configure the agents, practices, conceptualities, and institutions that put images to work. (33)

Morgan’s definition of visual culture—which he later enhances with a practice-oriented definition of religion—appears incredibly apt for television, and particularly telefantasy, as an object of study, not only the visual culture enacted by the medium in the practice of watching but also within the textual worlds that are watched. Television, especially serialized programs or narratively complex programs that mix serial and episodic forms, require repeated practices of viewing that invoke ritual (see my discussion of Hills

above).<sup>3</sup> I will focus mainly on the gaze within the text, the characters' engagement with religious visions, but I cannot ignore the mutual influence between the fictional worlds created by the visual culture of the text and the contextual worldview held or challenged by viewers. Religious visual culture, especially in my analysis of religious visions on television, relies on its "constructivist emphasis," specifically the ability of both producers and viewers to create their own reading of the world, their own interpretation through gazing (Morgan 32).

To examine the construction of religion, I draw from religious historian Ann Taves' recent work, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*. Though Taves argues against the narrowness of "religion" as an ultimate term for extraordinary experience, instead favoring "specialness," she highlights the role of ascription in defining religion:

A focus on things deemed religious in turn allows us to make a distinction between *simple ascriptions*, in which an individual thing is set apart as special, and *composite ascriptions*, in which simple ascriptions are incorporated into more complex formations, such as those that scholars and others designate as "spiritualities" or "religions." (9)

Compounded with her later assertion that scholars "can simply consider it [religion] an abstraction that many use to allude to webs of overlapping concepts," Taves approaches a constructivist definition of religion (165). She draws from and elaborates on William James' stipulative definition from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

[R]eligion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine*. Since the relation may be either moral, physical, or

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<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth analysis of narrative complexity, see Jason Mittell's "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television."



ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow. (42, emphasis in original)

For James, as well as for Taves and Tweed, there is nothing inherent about religion. We find meaning where we make it.

Following this constructionist line, I define religion as a contested discursive site through which individuals, groups, or institutions can ascribe meaning through tropes that point to—as Tweed labels them—“suprahuman forces and ultimate horizons” (68). Including “contested” as a modifier for “discursive site” may seem redundant as such sites are always polysemous, but I want to emphasize the struggle for meaning that underscores my ideological analysis of these shows’ presentations of religion through vision. No meaning is stable with tropes as the central site of religious ideological analysis, for tropes are inherently interpretive. This definition is not a universal definition of religion; it is an operational definition for analyzing religion in media representations through ideological analysis.

Religion is often seen as controversial territory for television representation. As television scholar Horace Newcomb argues, “Producers avoid the specifics of belief, the words of faith, and concrete images of the transcendent like the plague. Such specificity could cost them audience. In the meantime, we are given the deeply, powerfully embedded notions of the good that must come from . . . somewhere” (41). Newcomb’s argument is a few decades old, and the political and economic factors it draws on have changed since he wrote it. There is a lingering sense that producers of texts that engage religion still search for an inoffensive attempt to gain a mass audience—or at least an

economically desirable audience that resembles the middlebrow masses of an imaginary television past—despite the narrowcasting trend in contemporary television. My definition of religion fits with this idea in that it allows for both implicit and explicit representations of religion on television.

When religion is expressed through the fantastic it operates in a web of liminal representations. As anthropologist Victor Turner writes of comparative symbology, to study the liminal, the goal is “to catch symbols in their movement, so to speak, and to ‘play’ with their possibilities of form and meaning” (“Ritual to Theater” 23). This concept of symbols in their movement between two meanings supports my conception of religious visions and visionaries moving through liminal space. Where Turner finds “play,” I examine narrative power, which partially arises from the ability to “play” with meaning. Audiovisual religious tropes on television can operate in realistic (often explicit religion) or marvelous (often implicit religion) modes as well as in the movement through the fantastic mode, which exists in the hesitation between the two.

Specific literature regarding the relationship of individual series in my study with religion is minimal for all but *Battlestar Galactica*. In the only academic writing on *Wonderfalls*, Karin Beeler argues that the text engages in dialogue with the form and archetypes of the Joan of Arc narrative (96). Though Beeler claims to complicate alignments of characters with archetypes, she barely moves beyond comparing and contrasting the figures. *Eli Stone* has garnered no academic discourse that I could find. Popular press and blog discussion of *Eli Stone* and religion ranges from comparing Eli’s visions to *Ally McBeal*’s hallucinations to investigating the significance underlying the

visions, but such discourse exists in a very small sample of writings (Sepinwall n.p.; Gertel n.p.).

*Battlestar Galactica*, however, has merited a great deal of religious discussion because of the central conceit that the Cylon-Human war is also a monotheism-polytheism war. Chris Klassen writes a research note in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* that synthesizes and analyzes the primary trend of the monotheism-polytheism debate in *Battlestar Galactica*'s religious scholarship. He explains that though polytheism is expected to be more tolerant than monotheism and appears so initially on *Battlestar Galactica*, the show undermines that assumption by portraying intolerance from both sects (Klassen 361). Jason T. Eberl and Jennifer A. Vines bring atheism (and practical concerns) into the discussion in "‘I Am an Instrument of God’: Religious Belief, Atheism, and Meaning," similarly discussing the role each religion plays in the evil actions caused by humans and cylons while pondering if atheism, like that of Admiral Adama, is the more practical tack (159). Very few of these studies of religion in *Battlestar Galactica* directly address visions, focusing instead on religious praxes and conflicts.

The few articles about *Battlestar Galactica* that do address the visions, however, focus on the visionary characters situated within principal arguments of ethical conflicts and politics. Matthew Wooding Stover, similar to Eberl and Vines, argues against both polytheism and monotheism on *Battlestar Galactica* in his article, "The Gods Suck" (Stover 24). He identifies Roslin and Baltar as "[t]he two putative prophets of the respective gods in question [who] are both irretrievably and morally compromised,"

arguing that their religious visions corrupt their humanity (Stover 31). While Stover places the visions in a moral context, Heather Hendershot analyzes the show's religion, including its visions, within a political context. Hendershot focuses on the parallels with contemporary American right-wing politics surrounding abortion. She briefly discusses Roslin's visions as an example of the interplay between religion and politics on the show, but she mostly analyzes the coexistence of different groups of believers and skeptics on *Battlestar Galactica* in contrast to the current American political scene (Hendershot 224-5). Anthea D. Butler and Diane Winston also discuss religion and gender on *Battlestar Galactica*, but they oppose Roslin as a "Madonna" figure—privileging her religious position because of her prophetic visions but generally focusing on her "motherly" aspects—to Kara "Starbuck" Thrace's "whore," leaving little room for complicating the religious aspects of the comparisons (261). Though these articles are too specific to directly shape my analysis, they make it clear that there is a gap to be filled by addressing the visionaries specifically and examining their role among other liminal representations, such as those of gender.

Many telefantasy programs challenge traditional language-symbol systems through their non-verisimilitudinous approach. I posit that the challenges to socio-cultural verisimilitude asked by telefantasy align with similar boundary-pushing perspectives of some feminist criticism. As feminist bell hooks writes, "To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body . . . Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out" (xvi). Both hooks and De Lauretis conceptualize the margin

as offering a liminal space between being a true outsider and being central. The margin is still part of the whole. hooks's placing of feminist consciousness on the margins relates to De Lauretis's notion of the "space-off." Feminists writing about religion pays similar attention to marginality. Feminist religious scholar Ursula King writes of women's religious marginality in *Women and Spirituality*, consistently using the metaphor of vision to address the transformation needed for both women and religion, implying that the ability to see the whole from the margins will illuminate the path toward feminist religious liberation (3). Addressing gender dynamics in religion, Ursula King writes, "[There is a] genuine religious quest within feminism. This seeks to overcome women's sense of alienation through a profound experience of liberation which extends not only to the external social and political sphere, but also to internal mental and spiritual life" (9). King is connecting one of the axioms of feminism, "the personal is political," with the spiritual search for understanding and power. King, like Daly, sees feminists' position on the margins as a potential for challenging the dominant patriarchal center, and allocates more power and space to the margin, pushing at the central and patriarchal "normal" demarcations of language and symbols (King 15; Daly 9). Beeler ties together all three of these marginal positions—women, feminist religion, and telefantasy—when she writes:

The female psychic or woman of vision in recent visual media represents a new kind of woman warrior who occupies a unique alternative space (a "third space") that allows her to serve as a cultural and feminine mediator between different worlds of experience (e.g., the living and the dead) while also acting as a subversive force that resists the limitation of the ordinary or the status quo. (16)

Though she does not explicitly address religion, Beeler's "different worlds of experience" relate to the "suprahuman forces" and "ultimate horizon" of Tweed's definition of religion by extending the connection between the material and the transcendent.

Men who perform non-hegemonic masculinities can also find power in the margins. To examine that phenomenon, I will draw on queer theory and the notion of "queer straight men." In "Guy Love," Ron Becker examines how on television "heterosexual men sometimes cautiously, sometimes uneasily, sometimes playfully, and sometimes ironically explor[e] and . . . [transgress] the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity long guarded by homosexual panic" (129-30). This notion of "queer straight men" is a liminal designation that fits with the arguments of queer theory that "television regularly configures queerness as excessive, as spectacle, as interruption," with "queer straight men" as figures of rupture between previously static representations of masculinity and sexuality (Davis and Needham 7). Such men reflect the "logic of undecidability, incongruity, and allusion—that seems most to mark [television programs] as somehow queer" (Joyrich 30). When analyzing *Eli Stone*, this use of queer theory will be especially helpful, as Eli sees his visions through a queer lens exemplified by pop singer George Michael's presence. Though I would like to extend my examination of fluid gender and sexuality representations on *Eli Stone* to the female characters, they operate mainly as foils or romantic partners for Eli, doing little character and narrative work beside either buoying or challenging Eli's position as a potential prophet. His homosocial interactions with the other male characters are engaged more with the questions of religion and representation. Understanding "queer straight men," feminist

religion, cult and telefantasy genres, and the fantastic hesitancy as interconnected spaces of potential liminality, I will examine them in relation to the fantastic visionaries and their negotiation of hegemonic gender norms.

My project seeks to understand the confluence of liminalities that become linked in shows that feature fantastic visionaries, who are situated in the hesitancy between a medical and a religious explanation of their visions. In addition to the liminal space of that fantastic hesitancy, I will analyze its relationship to the shows' potential for feminist religious work in the "space-off," disruptive representations of masculinity that exist between queer and hegemonic, and the shows' representations of religion in the context of genre conventions that use displacement to move between the reality outside the text and the imaginary worlds of telefantasy. I argue that the programs in my study create a potentially legitimizing space in the interstices of genre, representation, and discourse for feminist religious work by moving beyond and outside of the standard patriarchal language-symbol system of religion in America.

The core of my theoretical framework will be two-fold: (1) theory regarding the fantastic, drawing from Tsvetan Todorov; and (2) feminist theory, especially feminist scholarship regarding religion. Connected with my examination of the fantastic, I will also use Victor Turner's theorization of liminal indeterminacy. The theory of the fantastic underlines my question regarding the polysemous presentation of religion in telefantasy. Telefantasy represents worlds not beholden to realism or mimesis; therefore, it allows for either or both marvelous or uncanny explanations of extraordinary events to be diegetically true. Feminist theory (including scholarship on postfeminism) will help

me to analyze the construction of religion in the West as patriarchal as well as the implications of non-patriarchal gender representations that allow for accessing religion through the fantastic. My examination of gender will be informed by Judith Butler's conception of gender performativity, using her idea that "gender is a performance that *produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it *produces* on the skin . . . the illusion of an inner depth . . . [that] is always a surface sign, a signification on and with the public body" to shape my gender analysis (28). I will not be making arguments based on any essential gender characteristics (though I will recognize traits associated with gender essentialism) but will instead focus on the surface signs of gender that are performed by television characters, vessels of representation whose bodies are subsequently—via the viewers' underlying knowledge that characters are constructed—self-consciously public. I will also use queer theory, particularly regarding the concept of the "queer straight man," to examine the non-hegemonic masculinities exhibited by both the prophet and the representation of God on *Eli Stone*.

I will perform an ideological and discursive analysis of *Battlestar Galactica*, *Eli Stone*, and *Wonderfalls*, analyzing the religious and gender ideologies, tropes, and discourses present in each. To do this, I will analyze the implicit and explicit representations of religion and gender on these programs in terms of both religious and gender meaning. As media scholar Christine Gledhill argues in "Pleasurable Negotiations," "[T]he textual critic analyzes the *conditions and possibilities of reading*. Approached from this perspective, the cultural 'work' of the text concerns the generations of different readings; readings which challenge each other, provoke social



negotiation of meanings, definitions and identities” (74). The programs in my study display a constant struggle because of the hesitancy of the fantastic mode in which gender and religion are in play. This struggle appears through the fantastic uncertainty of divine presence in characters’ visions due to alternate explanations of medical materialism.

My chapters will be organized along thematic lines, allowing me to compare and contrast the shows within the parameters of one particular element per chapter. The first chapter will focus on the visionary characters’ visions included in the three shows, the second will address the visionary characters’ potential as prophets, and the third chapter addresses the religions shaping and shaped by the visions and the visionaries. Gender issues will be studied throughout because gender representations and discourses inform all three thematic elements.

For the chapter on visions, I will examine the visions’ *mise-en-scène* for religious and/or hallucinatory symbols and signals, but mainly I will focus on the visions’ narrative interaction with the fantastic and religion. With a focus on the fantastic, I will analyze the apparent equality between religious and medical explanations for the visions, an ambivalence founded in the interpretations offered by the programs’ characters, visionary or not. I will examine the issue of verisimilitude regarding the visions and their place in a telefantasy program and how that may affect reception of the visions within the text. Key issues in my analysis will include when, how, and to what purpose the visions appear within the narratives and whether the visions themselves appear gendered. I will draw on genre analyses of musical films to distinguish two general forms of visions: integrated and separated. These two forms provide useful distinctions between visions that appear

at first to be part of the visionary's realistic context (integrated visions) and those that are formally marked as outside the normal narrative (separated visions). With regard to *Battlestar Galactica*, I will analyze Laura Roslin's visions and Gaius Baltar's visions as warped reflections of each other, with opposite trajectories shaped by their gender performances. Regarding *Eli Stone*, I will analyze how the use of George Michael as a representation of God in Eli's fantastic visions pushes the boundaries of religious and gender representation. Finally, in my study of Jaye Tyler on *Wonderfalls*, I will approach the seemingly paradoxical form of her visions, for they are primarily auditory, not visual. To this end, I will also look at whether the bric-a-brac that speak to Jaye in her integrated visions use masculine or feminine voices for each discrete directive and how those directives imply religion (or not) in the fantastic mode. This chapter lays the foundation for my study of the visionary characters that requires a thorough understanding of how the visions appear and are framed.

In the chapter on the visionaries, I will analyze how the characters resist or accept to varying degrees the mantle of "prophet," and how the existence of the choice is a result of the fantastic mode of their visions. The "prophet" designation is not fixed but can be privileged for certain characters, and I will use Max Weber's theories about charisma to discern this privilege. Roslin uses her status as a prophet to help cement her political power and connect power to her illness, but her prophetic status is not only utilitarian for her. She uses her religious position for political gains, but she also appears to truly believe in her religious power, maintaining the truth of her own prophecy until her death. I will also examine Baltar as Roslin's counterpoint: one who accepts the role of prophet

with arguably disingenuous belief but is then privileged as a prophet by the narrative in such a way that ossifies patriarchal power structures. Eli Stone accepts the role of prophet, but he does so publicly only when it will cause the outcome he wants; otherwise, he searches for another way to convince non-believers of his visions. The fantastic hesitancy necessitates such an approach because of its ambivalence; the visions could be either earthly or divine, so the fantastic prophet must appeal to both. I will argue that Roslin and Eli arrive at these points due to their perception of how they *should* act regarding norms for their genders (centering the locus of visionary power externally and internally, respectively, that recall essentialist gender characteristics, such as female humility and male religious power). Jaye differs from both in that she never fully accepts that her visions are religious let alone that she is an instrument of the divine, marking her as a resister of her familiar patriarchal religions. However, she acts as the visions direct her, performing her duties as a fantastic prophet by appealing to either suprahuman or material explanations depending on the context. She resists patriarchal religions by extending the liminal space of the fantastic hesitancy.

The religions represented in the texts are not in themselves fantastic, but the shows use the possibilities opened by characters' fantastic visions to complicate traditional notions of religion and gender. In the third chapter, I will analyze the texts' conceptions of religion that can allow or disavow the fantastic visions of their possible prophets and how that uncertainty—a simultaneous viability for both faith and doubt—affects the idea of religion within the text. *Eli Stone* includes various episodes in which the legal drama involves a religious group: Eli sues the Catholic Church, a Methodist

church, and a female Rabbi as well as argues amnesty for a Pakistani woman who will be killed on religio-cultural grounds if she is deported. Religion on *Wonderfalls* faces the same multifaceted address if not scrutiny, as Jaye encounters Catholicism through a runaway nun and Satsuma tribal religion through a dead female shaman. A discussion of religion on *Battlestar Galactica* requires attention to the polytheism-monotheism-atheism debate within the text. The tension among these religions allows for them all to be equally true or false, making the interstitial space between religion and material, secular logic more powerful.

All three shows, to varying degrees, present these religions through gendered lenses. Eli Stone's religious clients—as well as his early visions presented through George Michael songs—often subvert expectations of religious performances of gender, including a female rabbi, a transgendered preacher, and a woman in an open marriage with a gay man. In *Battlestar Galactica*, President Roslin is a female prophet with a female priest as her main religious consultant, and *Wonderfalls* frames Catholicism as patriarchal while the animist Satsuma religion is presented as matriarchal. All three shows present the mix of religion and gender as no longer adhering to patriarchal binaries; the shows take the power of the liminal activated by the fantastic visions and parlay that power of possibilities to the representations of religion.

In my conclusion, I will telescope out from my textual analysis to address the larger questions arising from my study of religion and gender as represented through telefantasy. These questions include: What are the potentials and limitations of religious and gender representations operating in the fantastic mode? What happens to progressive

potential for subverting patriarchal structures when the fantastic hesitancy ends, and how might the privileging of one explanation of the fantastic visions over the other alter that potential? How might telefantasy open sites of discourse regarding religion in terms of both belief and doubt and gendered access to religion? In what ways might growing attention to religious representation in telefantasy—and television in general—affect scholastic and industry assumptions of audience viability and generic expectations? In the hundred or so pages of my thesis, I cannot answer all of these questions. Moreover, these questions are raised as points for further study and theorization that I hope will continue to fill gaps in the literature about religion and television, both religious and gender representations, telefantasy's generic conventions, and the subversive potential found in muddling the generic and representational discourses of telefantasy with discussions of modern religion.

## Chapter One: The Visions

Fantastic visions were the originating seed of this study, a small element of telefantasy storytelling that I saw connecting seemingly disparate shows and allowing both weighty and whimsical interactions with religious concepts and potentially subversive gender representations. While *Battlestar Galactica* has received its share of popular discussions, *Wonderfalls* and *Eli Stone* seem dismissed as cult or merely cancelled shows, yet all three programs shared a fantastic mode of presenting visions with similar religious stakes. In *Battlestar Galactica*, *Eli Stone*, and *Wonderfalls*, visions mark characters as special: either as delusional sufferers of medically-caused hallucinations or as potential prophets chosen by the divine to see or shape the future. The visions on these programs form the specific base of my analysis because their presentation and the shows' explanations of their origins activate the discourse of the fantastic. As Tsvetan Todorov described, the fantastic is a space of mental hesitancy between "the uncanny or the marvelous" (in my analysis, the medically materialist or the divinely inspired origin) following an extraordinary experience (136). The hesitancy of the fantastic that the visions open then determines the representational spectrum for both the visionary characters (discussed in chapter two) and the religions (discussed in chapter three) on these telefantasy series. Thus, I will use this chapter to formally analyze the visions on these three shows and place them in context of their diegetic worlds and in relation to their seers' gender norms. In doing so, I will analyze two modes of formal

presentation: integrated visions and separated visions. Both forms of visionary experience foreground the fantastic hesitancy. Integrated visions heighten the moment of hesitancy by bringing the vision into “reality,” leaving both the visionary and the viewer briefly unsure of what is real within the narrative. Separated visions are more clearly distinct from the characters’ everyday experience, but because they are often presented as dreams or dream-like, they highlight the hesitancy between the marvelous or uncanny explanation. The separation into semi-discrete forms allows me to access the ways fantastic visions interact with the formal and narrative conventions shaping each individual program.

The visions depicted in *Eli Stone*, *Wonderfalls*, and *Battlestar Galactica* can be categorized as integrated or separated visions. Regarding the former, I am borrowing and altering slightly terminology from studies of the musical. As film scholar Rick Altman explains in *The American Film Musical*:

As a historical category, the “integrated musical” is the product of numerous attempts to develop closer ties between narrative and musical numbers; as a theoretical category, the notion of integration provides a method for describing the structures and style of individual texts . . . though the very notion itself champions a standard of realism which I believe to be antithetical to the spirit of the genre as a whole, the notion of integration nevertheless constitutes the *type* of term which genre history/theory/criticism cries out for. (115)

As Altman rightly points out, the standard of realism exists in tension with the requirements of the musical drama, and to a certain extent this is true of telefantasy as well. Generically, musicals could be identified as non-verisimilitudinous, similar to telefantasy, because their musical interjections often undermine assumptions of mimesis.

Musicals and telefantasy share the generic characteristic of blurring the boundaries between fantasy and realism, but in telefantasy the standard of realism is too constraining. As literary theorist Carl Freedman describes science fiction, “The science-fictional world is not only one different in time or place from our own, but one whose chief interest is precisely the difference that such difference makes. It is also a world whose difference is concretized within a cognitive continuum with the actual” (xvi-xvii). Though Freedman discusses only science fiction, I believe telefantasy occupies a similar place on a continuum with the actual. Catherine Johnson explains that telefantasy “construct[s] fictional worlds that do not correspond to the norms, rules and laws of everyday knowledge” (4). As a result, telefantasy challenges assumptions of reality and its attendant regulating knowledge (Johnson 4). Telefantasy operates in a framework of verisimilitude created by generic conventions instead of by realistic ones; each world created on a telefantasy program has its own rules for what is and is not realistic that may not adhere to realistic conventions. Thus, the verisimilitudinous context for *Battlestar Galactica* includes space travel and cyborgs but not necessarily prophetic visions. For *Wonderfalls* and *Eli Stone*—because most of the plot affected by the visions is supposed to occur in a world similar to our own—the rules of verisimilitude resemble realism in ways very similar to what Altman discusses.

Although Altman identifies the integrated musical as an attempt to regain realism within the musical genre by connecting song to narrative, the line between earlier non-integrated and integrated musicals relies on such conceptions of realism to remain distinct. However, such clear distinction regarding the visions on the programs in my



study is untenable. The visions are never truly separated from the plot like the musical numbers in older musicals that the integrated musical sought to incorporate. Thus, my distinction between separated and integrated visions does not refer to their linkage or lack thereof to the plot. Instead, I seek to analyze the visions in terms of their separation from or integration with the assumptions of formal verisimilitude unique to each program that creates the representation of the world in which the plot occurs. The point of the visions for all of the visionaries is that they affect the plot, or at least have the potential to do so, to support the visionaries' possible roles as prophets. This occurs not only when the visions act as parables or directives, but also when non-visionary characters must interact with and react to the visionaries, often as they are experiencing integrated visions.

In integrated visions, the images of the vision are a part of the normal visual representation of the world, at least initially, with the visionary reacting and interacting as if they are "real" while other people surrounding her or him react only to the visionary's actions. The narrative world of the visionary and the audience is collapsed and differentiated from the "reality" of the narrative (i.e. that which is accepted as "real" by others within the narrative world).

The other category of visions I identify and analyze are those that are clearly and overtly signaled as set apart from the normal "reality" of the narrative world: separated visions. They are marked by non-verisimilitudinous formal attributes, such as a swift shift in *mise-en-scène*, color palette, sound design, or camera angle. To a degree, this set-apartness enables religious readings of separated visions, for their marked specialness runs parallel to religious scholar Ann Taves definition of religion as something that can

be arrived at only following attention to "special" separation from quotidian experience.

She writes:

If we want to understand how anything at all, including experience, *becomes* religious, we need to turn our attention to the processes whereby people sometimes ascribe the special characteristics to things that we (as scholars) associate with terms such as "religious," "magical," "mystical," "spiritual," et cetera. (Taves 8)

By using Taves in this manner, I do not want to imply that separated visions in telefantasy shows are necessarily or even more readily aligned with a religious reading. Her theory does provide, however, one path toward understanding visions as possibly religious while still allowing for their fantastic presentation.

Each program in my study features examples of both variations of visions, and this chapter will explore and analyze their presentation regarding the verisimilitude of the worlds created by their narratives. To do this, I will pay particular attention to the formal aspects of their presentation—particularly to their relation to verisimilitude in telefantasy and its limits—and how these formal aspects operate regarding the fantastic. The integrated vision ostensibly appears more clearly situated in the fantastic hesitancy because it undermines the distinction between fantasy and reality that separates an uncanny (where the laws of the familiar still hold) and a marvelous (beyond familiar and known reason) reading of the visions (Todorov 136). However, for much of *Battlestar Galactica's* run, the integrated vision of Baltar's Head-Six (an image of his former cylon lover) seems to push against a religious (marvelous) explanation in a way that minimizes the possibilities of an "and/or" fantastic reading. Regarding the separated vision and its alignment with religion, that appears most strongly regarding Roslin's visions in

*Battlestar Galactica*. However, they also move closer to a physiological explanation of visions when Eli Stone employs the Dark Truth method of acupuncture to induce a vision. These complications of the distinctions between separated and integrated visions and between the religious and medical explanations are key to my project and central to an examination of the fantastic as a space of possibilities.

Finally, this chapter will endeavor to bring gender into the conversation by examining the gendered presentations of both types of visions and how gendered characteristics of the people and anthropomorphized animals in the visions themselves or the *mise-en-scène* that could be read as gendered affect the perceived legitimacy of the visions as possibly religious. All of the visions presented in these programs are fantastic, and because they exist in the ambiguous space between religious and medical materialist explanations of such phenomena, one explanation can be—and often is—privileged. Though the fantastic, as I utilize it, provides space for subverting hierarchies based on patriarchal constructions of power, the way in which other characters in these shows conceptualize the visions often position them into either religious or medical categories of origin. More often than not, this positioning conforms to gendered power structures and aligns the privileged explanation of origin with patriarchal power structures. I argue, however, that the discourses within the shows' narratives that privilege one category over the other can nevertheless strengthen the visions' fantastic position by creating a dialectical relationship between the two explanations.

### **SEPARATED VISIONS: PROPHETIC DREAMS ARE MADE OF THIS**

*Battlestar Galactica's* President Laura Roslin sees visions that are often overtly marked as separate from the verisimilitudinous realm of the narrative: they are positioned as dreams but with prophetic implications. The first level of separation that frames Roslin's visions is her ingestion of chamalla extract, a drug treatment for her breast cancer that has known hallucinatory side effects (“Act of Contrition”). Four episodes following her request for the drug—the narrative span of a few days—she has her first vision. In “Flesh and Bone,” Roslin sees the newly discovered cylon, Leoben, a man she has not met yet, rapidly pulled back, up, and away from her in a blue-tinged forest, but she believes it is just a dream, a side effect of the chamalla extract. The vision is set apart formally due to its rapid, parallel cutting, the pace of the cuts conducive to the montage of dream representations. While it is initially set up as a particularly vivid dream due to the medication, when Roslin meets Leoben and decides to execute him via the airlock, the dream becomes retroactively read as prophetic. The image from the dream of Leoben rapidly flying back and up is recreated exactly, but this time against the backdrop of space instead of a forest.

This vision remains questionably prophetic, however, because Roslin's decisions and actions act as the main impetus for the fulfillment of the vision; it could be a self-fulfilling prophecy. After seeing the vision, the following narrative events occur: Roslin decides to kill him; she chooses the airlock as the means of execution; and she waits until he is positioned correctly in front of the window. This course of events could be understood as Roslin acting (sub-)consciously so that her dream becomes reality. The

chamalla extract, the dream-state in which the vision occurred, and Roslin's own agency support a materialist reading of the vision, and yet she saw Leoben's face before she met him and heard vision-Leoben say, "I have something to tell you" before he actually said it to her prior to his execution. Moreover, as he is pulled from the airlock, the scene is briefly intercut with the same motion but in the blue-tinged wilderness seen in Roslin's vision. Formally, this intercutting highlights the similarities between Roslin's vision and the eventual real action, implicitly suggesting their linkage and emphasizing their fantastic traits. Thus, the fantastic is activated on *Battlestar Galactica* even in this first, less religious but possibly prophetic vision.

Roslin's most clearly separated vision is also her most religiously symbolic vision and occurs during the final season when she is in the hospital wing battling cancer. A fellow patient, Emily, recalls a near death experience:

It happened the night after [Doctor] Cottle told me my cancer had spread to my liver and I'd never be leaving this place. I was on a ferry crossing a river, and as we were approaching the other side, I saw all these people standing on the bank. And we got closer and I recognized them: my parents, my sister Kathy who died when I was twelve, my husband, my girls. I was scared for a moment: how is this happening. Then I felt it, this presence, hovering all around me, it said, don't be scared Emily, I'm with you, hold my hand and we'll cross over together. . . there's more to this existence than we can see with our naked eye, there's power that we can't begin to understand. ("Faith")

Shortly after Roslin hears this story, she dreams of herself and Emily traveling down the river. She sees Emily reunited with her family on the other shore, and after seeing her own family waiting for her, Roslin refuses to join them. She wakes up knowing that Emily died as she slept, activating the possibility of prophecy in this separated vision-

dream. Both Emily's description of her vision and Roslin's similar experience employ strong religious symbolism. The ferry crossing a river resembles the Hellenic mythological conception of the River Styx ferrying dead souls to the underworld. The presence Emily discusses also recalls Abrahamic traditions of crossing the River Jordan to the Promised Land, a metaphor for Heaven. Though there is no Priestess to sanction the vision as religious (as there is after Roslin's first integrated vision, discussed below), Roslin adopts enough of a religious position over the four seasons to legitimize her vision's religious meaning.<sup>4</sup>

The vision that activates Roslin's fantastic prophetic potential occurs only two episodes after her vision of Leoben, in "The Hand of God," and is the moment when religion is explicitly addressed as an explanation. Unlike her earlier separated vision of Leoben, in this vision Roslin sees snakes around her podium at a press conference, marking her first—and one of her only—integrated vision. It is still somewhat separated from the standards of verisimilitude in that it uses Roslin's perspective as a frame for the first-person point of view held by the camera. This technique stands apart from the show's usual formal context because the show usually uses steady-cams and third-person visual perspectives. Roslin does not react at all to the snakes as they coil around her microphone and arm, but merely appears distracted. She understands that no one else in the room can see them and expends great effort to hide any reaction to the vision. The

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<sup>4</sup> Roslin knowingly plays the "religious card" to gain fleet loyalty and even convinces Admiral Adama (occasionally nicknamed "Admiral Atheist") that she is a prophet.

attempt to hide the visions also instigates Roslin's first consultation with the Priestess of the colonial fleet, Elosha, who explains the religious symbolism:

Three thousand six hundred years ago Pythia wrote about the exile and the rebirth of the human race, and the Lords' anointed leader to guide the caravan of the heavens to their new homeland. And unto their leader they gave a vision of serpents numbering two and ten as a sign of things to come. ("The Hand of God")

From prophetic dreams to waking visions, this explanation moves Roslin closer to the mantle of prophet, yet even Roslin admits to the possible hallucinatory effect of chamalla playing a role. She begins her consultation with the Priestess by discussing her use of the drug; it is a preamble and a forewarning. The narrative of "The Hand of God" and the ostensibly integrated form of the vision draw parallels between Roslin and Baltar. In the final scene of the episode, Baltar's vision of Head-Six explains the same Pythian prophecy to Baltar, but reconfigures him as the visionary who saw the Viper jets on the *Galactica's* view screen. He moves more quickly than Roslin to the mantle of prophet, declaring, "I am an instrument of God" by episode's end. The similarities between Roslin's vision of the snakes and Baltar's continuing visions of Head-Six create a formal equanimity that nevertheless reveals the vast differences in character between the two potential prophets. Roslin recognizes the fantastic ambiguity of her visions, but Baltar does not. This is but one instance in *Battlestar Galactica* in which Roslin and Baltar are set up as fractured reflections of each other.

Roslin's first vision is established as separate from her reality, implicitly aligning with Ann Taves's argument that "scholars can situate what people characterize as religious, spiritual, mystical, magical, superstitious, and so forth in relation to larger

processes of meaning making and valuation, in which people deem some things special and set them apart from others" (12). Taves synthesizes one of the main discourses of religious studies: the separation of religion or the sacred from the profane experiences of everyday life and the often contiguous conception of religion as *sui generis*. Though many more religious scholars have complicated this separation (Russell McCutcheon is a prominent contemporary example), the discourse persists, and I argue, becomes reactivated in *Battlestar Galactica*'s formal representation of Roslin's visions, especially when considered in relation to Baltar's visions (discussed below). The set-apartness of Roslin's first vision allows the formal portrayal of the visions as dreams to color a reading of her second vision's POV frame that brings the sacred into the profane but still maintains a degree of her vision's special character even if it is not wholly separated. This reading is tenuous because of the fantastic ambiguity of the vision—I could just as easily read the second vision's hallucinatory character as impinging on the special character of the first vision—but this fantastic ambiguity also shifts the emphasis from inherent meaning to meaning-making. Because her visions' origins could be either medically or religiously explained, the way in which Roslin reads and reacts to her visions becomes more important than their formal presentation alone. Throughout the series, Roslin most ardently argues her visions are religious with the support of a priestess and some believers among the surviving humans.

The integrated vision of the serpents becomes key to Roslin's perception of herself as prophet and the aversion in the viewer to seeing Baltar as one. Instead of reading this vision as hallucinatory, Roslin seeks counsel from the Priestess Elosha.



Although Elosha is the first person to position Roslin as a prophet and a subject of prophecy, Roslin's reaction is not definite. Unlike Baltar's quick acceptance of his important role as an "instrument of God," Roslin takes in the possible explanation but does not seem to understand it as proof of her personal significance. Though she later uses it to buoy her political clout, in the initial moments of her representation as a visionary, she seems skeptical and humble, in direct opposition to Baltar, the villain thus far in the narrative. But this humility must be troubled if it is to be portrayed as a virtue because it is linked with the female potential prophet while confidence in the extreme form of hubris characterizes the male prophet. Baltar epitomizes hubris, but his easy acceptance of the mantle of prophet can also be read as based on the long history of male prophets in monotheistic religions (which the cylon religion is). Although the humility Roslin displays is admirable, it also might be adhering to essentializing gender stereotypes of women, especially in the context of religion: that piety demands modesty and demureness. Humility may seem virtuous in *Battlestar Galactica*, but we cannot forget the gender factors that inform our understanding and the narrative construction of Baltar and Roslin as potential prophets.

Roslin's humility, moreover, becomes validated in such a way that undermines her potential power through the separated vision of the Opera House, shared by Roslin, Baltar, and two cylons, Caprica-Six and Sharon Agathon, and its narrative realization in the series finale. The Opera House vision recurs intermittently throughout the series, beginning in the final episode of season one, "Kobol's Last Gleaming, Pt. 2," and continuing to the series finale, "Daybreak, Pt. 2." Baltar is the first to see a vision of the

Opera House while he is unconscious on Kobol—marking it as separated in context as well as form—but in the vision’s later iterations, Roslin, Caprica-Six, and Sharon share the vision (“Kobol’s Last Gleaming, Pt. 2;” “Crossroads, Pt. 1;” “Crossroads, Pt. 2”).<sup>5</sup> Formally, the vision always displays a hazy glow with overexposed illumination on lights and whites. Baltar’s initial vision shows him and a beatific version of Caprica-Six entering the glowing Opera House theater to find a baby—later revealed to be Sharon’s human-cylon child, Hera, still *in utero* at the time and unknown to most of the fleet, including Baltar—that they take as their own (“Kobol’s Last Gleaming, Pt. 2”). Later iterations of the vision, shared among the female characters (and notably *not* Baltar) show the same baby as a toddler that Roslin, Sharon, and Caprica Six are all chasing through the hallways of the Opera House, with Caprica-Six finally catching Hera and entering the theater alone among the women (“Crossroads, Pt. 1;” “Crossroads Pt. 2”).

As with Roslin’s first vision of Leoben, when the vision and “reality” meet, the scene uses parallel cutting to interlace the two modes of experience and somewhat integrate the separated vision through the function of character memory. This intercutting implies that Sharon and Roslin are remembering their actions in the vision as they are performing them on the ship. The editing method heightens the separateness of the earlier vision by replicating the action and framing of the characters, allowing only the *mise-en-scène* to differentiate the two levels of experience. The Opera House theater

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<sup>5</sup> The Opera House also acts as a location for the Cylon Three’s vision of the “final five” cylons. Though Three’s vision and Caprica Six and Sharon Agathon’s shared experience of chasing Hera through their vision places more emphasis on the Opera House as a cylon signifying location, I am unsure if cylons fit into a medically materialist explanation for such visions because of their cybernetics. Is it their cyborg interconnectedness that lets them share visions and is that an element of the fantastic for them?

becomes the brig, the location of the conclusion of the Human-Cylon war, and, as in the vision, both Roslin and Sharon are excluded from the action and figuratively cut out of the prophecy. Baltar and, to a slightly lesser extent marked by less dialogue, Caprica-Six become the agents of prophecy and presumably God's plan ("Daybreak, Part II"). Baltar delivers a religious speech, and his actions save Hera and defeat the cylon aggressors to end the war. Roslin is excluded from this narrative denouement, and, as an extension of the Opera House vision, this course of events implies that her humility about her role as a prophet is deserved. The cylon's vessel of prophecy, a hybrid connected to their ships, foretells, "[The] dying leader shall know the truth of the Opera House." Yet by the realization of the Opera House vision, Roslin does not know the truth because she is locked out of the room ("Faith"). Baltar figures out the "truth" and uses it in his speech that ultimately ends the war. The privilege of prophecy appears to split from Roslin and be redirected to Baltar because of the Opera House vision. The ambiguity regarding the visions' fantastic hesitancy on *Battlestar Galactica* allows for both Roslin's and Baltar's visions to appear possibly prophetic and religious, providing space for challenges to patriarchal assumptions of male prophets. However such hesitancy also allows the privilege of prophecy to deny Roslin's challenge to the convention of male visionaries and rearticulate humility as a feminine virtue.

On *Eli Stone*, the titular character faces a similar humble resistance to his potential as a prophet, but, interestingly for Eli, his separated visions are often associated with false prophecy and hubris. Most of Eli's visions are integrated (as discussed below), but there are a few instances of clear separation from the narrative's verisimilitudinous

aspects. The extreme examples of Eli's separated visions are those instigated by the "Dark Truth" acupuncture method, which are marked formally by a red wormhole special effect ("Unwritten"). Though Eli regularly uses acupuncture to "go deeper" into visions after he initially sees them or to explore events from his own past that might inform his interpretation of the visions, he asks for the Dark Truth—a supposedly dangerous method—in order to force visions. He first asks his friend and regular acupuncturist, Frank, who complies only once. When Frank refuses to continue, Eli pursues the method, defying Frank's warnings that he cannot force God's hand. Eli says, "Am I supposed to just blindly follow these visions? I'm not just a messenger" ("The Humanitarian"). The results of his hubris injure both his body and his connection to the religious explanation. The visions cease for a time. These consequences of the Dark Truth could equally mean that he is temporarily cut off from the divine or that Eli's body has to recuperate from the physical toll of the Dark Truth. The medical materialist explanation of his vision is ostensibly privileged because of this ability to induce visions through a physiological stimulus; however, his stalled visions could also be seen as punishment for trying to impose his will over God's. Regardless of the reading, Eli bears punishment for his hubris in thinking that he holds power over his visions, especially those that are separated. Separated visions on *Eli Stone* further the narrative's assertion that the medically materialist and the divine are not mutually exclusive. This concept buttresses the fantastic hesitancy and allows for the challenges to gender norms posed by George Michael's connection with the visions to subvert patriarchal religious representations while providing a "safe" alternative in the medical materialist explanation.

Distinct from *Eli Stone* and *Battlestar Galactica*, *Wonderfalls* features only one separated vision, and it belongs to Diana Littlefoot, a character present for only one episode. In "Totem Mole," Littlefoot's separated vision of the Satsuma tribal holy woman, Gentlefeather, is marked formally by soft focus, bright white light, and a nondiegetic Cherokee version of "Amazing Grace." The vision is—just as all of Jaye's visions are—fantastic, for the vision's origin can be located in divine matrilineal selection or in the extreme heat and subsequent dehydration after Diana is accidentally trapped in a gym sauna, a modern and somewhat irreverent interpretation of a Native American sweat lodge. One could also read the vision as anointing the new spiritual leader of the tribe, a reading supported further by mystical feathers—associated with the power of Satsuma spiritual leadership earlier in the episode—following in her angelically lit wake. Littlefoot's vision aligns closely with Roslin's visions, for both associate set-apartness with the religious, drawing especially in contrast with other visionaries of their diegesis.

This extreme—for *Wonderfalls*—example of separated vision, as seen by Diana Littlefoot, contrasts in "Totem Mole" with Jaye's most extreme integrated vision experience, a vision in which she interacts with the spirit of Gentlefeather (discussed below). I describe this vision as an extreme example because *Wonderfalls* is perhaps the most casual among the three programs in its presentation of visions. Littlefoot's vision is so separated from the narrative that it instantly transforms the character herself. The vision formally lingers through the use of the angelic light and following feathers, but its impact persists as well. Because of one vision, Diana is transformed from a stern modern lawyer to a soft, gentle holy woman whose intonation has even changed to reflect

Gentlefeather's speech. In contrast to Jaye's persistent resistance to any notion of being called as a prophet, Littlefoot conforms instantly, and in doing so, she becomes feminized. With Gentlefeather as a precedent, religious leadership also becomes feminized due to the apparent matrilineal succession of spiritual leadership. Thus, even though Western, Christian assumptions of masculine prophets are still active, the Satsuma are presented as somewhat outside of those conventions. (It was, after all, Jaye, a white Christian, who attempted to raise a man to the role of spiritual leader.) Though the two visions of Gentlefeather are seen only by women, implying a matrilineal power line, the final image of Gentlefeather implies that full acceptance of religious power requires a certain degree of gender conformity that Jaye's place in the fantastic hesitancy does not.

There is no direct link in these three series between separated visions and religious explanations (or between integrated visions and the medical materialist explanation), but there are some affinities. In both *Wonderfalls* and *Battlestar Galactica*, the visionaries' separated visions ally more closely with religious readings, but this is mainly in contrast to other characters within the shows who see integrated visions and who are—initially or partially—framed either by themselves (Jaye) or by the narrative (Baltar) as not-prophets. Eli Stone flips the paradigm, associating the separated visions caused by the Dark Truth with false visions and visionary hubris. For all three shows and their visionary characters, separated visions highlight the fantastic hesitancy by foregrounding the medical materialist and divine explanations for the visions while ultimately using them to privilege an explanation that aligns with gender norms. Eli's

separated visions support the integration of divine and bodily experience that allows his visions to be understood as religiously subversive or merely diverting and medically-induced, which will configure his queer integrated visions of George Michael. On *Battlestar Galactica*, the fantastic separated visions initially highlight Roslin's religious potential then confirms her humility by privileging Baltar's visions through the reality foretold by the Opera House vision. And the lone separated vision in *Wonderfalls* illustrates matrilineal religious power while allowing Jaye to remain separated from such a possibility. All of these separated visions help build the world of fantastic visions by widening the experience of the fantastic beyond integrated visions, allowing separation to facilitate how the visionaries understand their visions and their roles as visionaries. In my next section, I will analyze the formal characteristics of the integrated visions in these programs and the meanings that can be found therein.

#### **INTEGRATED VISIONS: BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES**

Though I have touched on integrated visions in my analysis of separated visions, I now want to provide a deeper analysis of the formal aspects of integrated visions on *Battlestar Galactica*, *Eli Stone*, and *Wonderfalls*. I particularly want to focus on the interplay between the series' formally signaling the visions outside the standards of verisimilitude and obscuring the visions' beginnings. In contrast to the separated visions' spectacular interruption of the narrative, integrated visions' primary characteristic is that the visionary experiences them while in his or her normal, everyday narrative context. Music strikes up and distracts Eli Stone from kissing his fiancé ("Faith"). A wax lion speaks to Jaye Tyler while she restocks the tourist shop where she works ("Wax Lion").

Baltar's Head-Six both feeds him dialogue and distracts him from conversations with other characters (“33”). These characters all experience the visions while navigating the "reality" of their respective diegeses; the fantastic becomes almost tangible in their position between the material world—whose rules dictate they ignore the visions as hallucinations—and the marvelous world that requires they listen and heed the visions' messages.

Jaye's visions are perhaps the most statically fantastic because she firmly remains in her verisimilitudinous context throughout her visions. Formally, this owes a great deal to the small scale of her visions. Instead of drawing Jaye into whole worlds and settings, the voices within the visions speak to her through objects that surround her. The emphasis on dialogue in Jaye's visions complicates the very term “vision.” Though the objects move as they speak to Jaye, sound is their primary formal medium. In “Sound Bites: Fragments on Cinema, Sound, and Subjectivity,” Bhaskar Sarkar presents examples of film narratives that privilege sound as “alternatives to the western thought system with its stress on visually oriented reason. They remind us that Enlightenment rationality is neither the best option nor the only one. It is normalized through certain constructions . . . and by the privileging of vision” (31). I continue to call what Jaye experiences “visions” because there is a visual element to those moments, though it is secondary to the voices in the visions, and because of the shared characteristics and purposes with the other visions described in this chapter. However, their formal distinctiveness poses, as Sarkar argues, a challenge to certain western epistemological norms. Where Sarkar focuses on vision as part of Enlightenment conventions, I see a



throughline to religion and gender. The disruption of “western thought systems” via Jaye’s primarily auditory visions opens space for alternatives to western religious thought systems and to patriarchal notions of prophecy and vision. For Jaye there is nothing as primarily visual as a burning bush, merely inanimate objects opening their mouths and speaking to her.

In *Wonderfalls*, the voices speaking through cartoonish and material animal representations convey gender superficially, primarily through vocal pitch. Aside from the *Playboy*-esque cartoon image of a cocktail bunny on a box of bar napkins, none of the objects through which the voices speak to Jaye are physically anthropomorphized (“Cocktail Bunny”). They retain the form of the animal they represent—from felt iguanas to monkey bookends—and they rarely move beyond facial expressions and small gestures. The only gendered element of their presentation is their voices, which may be cartoonish but always convey masculinity or femininity, often in line with colloquial assumptions of each animal's gendered character. The wax lion, the first and pattern-setting muse, speaks with a gruff, sarcastic baritone, fitting for the “king of the jungle,” even if his wax face is deformed. Similarly, the eponymous caged bird in the final episode, “Caged Bird,” speaks with a high, flighty, and thin alto. Though the voices of both toys perhaps fit with the noises their real counterparts would make—the low roar of a lion and the high tweet of a canary—there is clear gendering occurring that must be problematized. The articulation through voice of assumed essential gender types (bears, beasts, and monkeys are masculine; birds, bunnies, and flamingos are feminine) expands

from the micro to the macro in supporting essential conceptions of gender among humans.

Although the genders of the voices are important to understanding *Wonderfalls*'s formal elements of the visions' relation to gender, Jaye's visions are primarily characterized as "hearing voices," a term for her visions that is often used to invoke the medical materialist explanation for them. Jaye repeatedly visits her family psychologist, Dr. Ron, and in "Wax Lion" her family offers potential treatments for her psychological "'sode." Jaye fainted following her first vision, and her father, a surgeon, suggests she masturbate to alleviate the stress he assumes caused her episode.<sup>6</sup> Jaye, and eventually her brother Aaron, both configure her visions, particularly the voices she hears, in the framework of "crazy" because that is the context in which they ascribe "hearing voices" ("Wax Lion;" "Muffin Buffalo"). This explanation, moreover, places the onus of gendering on Jaye, identifying the voices as extensions of her individual psyche.

In contrast to the superficially gendered voices, Jaye's most extremely integrated vision does evoke powerful gender meanings; her vision of Gentlefeather in "Totem Mole" evokes Jaye's position as a potential female spiritual leader. At the beginning of the episode, Jaye enters Gentlefeather's teepee, not knowing that it is a house of mourning for the Satsuma spiritual leader. Jaye speaks with Gentlefeather, who reveals she knows of Jaye's visions, saying, "They speak to you in many voices and many forms. You have been sought out for a great purpose. You have been chosen." Although

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<sup>6</sup> The recollection here of Victorian masturbation "cures" for hysteria is likely merely meant to be amusing, causing both Jaye and her sister, Sharon, to interrupt their father in embarrassed disgust.

Gentlefeather surprises Jaye with this knowledge of her visions and reading of them as sacred, that shock is eclipsed when their conversation is interrupted with the reveal that Gentlefeather is dead. This vision is even more of an integrated vision than Jaye usually has because it was a human being speaking with her, not a man-made collectible. Moreover, this is the only example in which one of the voices in Jaye's vision comes from the mouth and body of a human being, giving more spiritual importance to this vision that explicitly calls to Jaye's religious chosenness than to the whimsical gendered voices of the inanimate objects.

The emphasis on sound in Jaye's visions shifts the visions' formal emphasis from the standard visual to the audible; what is most important about Jaye's visions are what she hears not what she sees. The audible emphasis achieves a similar shift from the meaning of the visions to the meaning of their consequences. In other words, when the voices in the visions speak to Jaye directly and concisely, each vision's particularities become less relevant to the narrative than the way Jaye enacts the voices' directives. On *Wonderfalls*, the integrated visions support (immediate) action over analysis. In her western context with the primacy of vision Sarkar describes, voices are easier to ignore than images, and so Jaye's choice not to ignore her integrated auditory visions shifts the onus of power to herself. Within the fantastic hesitancy, Jaye has the power to believe that they are hallucinations caused by a psychotic break and/or divine directives meant for her action. Though she acts as though the visions have agency outside of her, she never fully accepts a divine explanation for them because their even superficial gendering minimizes the concept of God, confining it to western conventions that require gender.

Compared to those of Jaye Tyler, Eli Stone's visions are presented in a very similar integrated form, but they add a layer of long-term consequences to his vision-motivated actions. These consequences are represented through sporadic visions of a future featuring Eli as a renowned leader, presumably because of his visions (“Patience”). Eli's visions often transition from full integration in the mode of *Wonderfalls* to a somewhat more fantastically separated vision. Even in Eli’s most vivid visions, such as when he enters a warscape, the elements within the vision interact with Eli, but more importantly, Eli is still operating bodily in his “real” space, ducking under his desk instead of into a foxhole (“Father Figure”). Formally, this is done through parallel editing so that Eli’s body remains stable within the frame as his *mise-en-scène* changes; if he dives into a foxhole in a vision, when the vision ends, he emerges from under a conference table amongst his fellow lawyers instead of soldiers. This formal technique ties him to the show’s verisimilitudinous context even when the visions veer toward separation from that reality. Mostly the visions transform into musical numbers, featuring Eli's friends, family, and colleagues as key singers and dancers, and throughout the first season the music focuses on George Michael's oeuvre.

Eli's first vision in the pilot, “Faith,” begins with an organ instrumental introduction to the George Michael song "Faith" in such a way that it appears to be nondiegetic. Similar to Jaye’s sonic visions in *Wonderfalls*, many of Eli’s visions initially privilege sound, but unlike Jaye’s visions, Eli’s quickly transition from musical chords to spectacular visual presentations that incorporate the initial sound. Eli—and notably Eli alone, even when he is in the process of making love to his fiancé Taylor—

begins to react to the music, marking it as diegetic and signaling the beginning of a vision. He walks toward the room from where the music emanates to find George Michael singing and dancing on his coffee table. This vision is elaborated on later in this episode when the music starts while Eli is at work and draws him into a choreographed performance in his law firm's lobby. The performance incorporated in the vision defamiliarizes the familiar and ordinary space, transforming the staid lobby into a concert, complete with stage, singer, dancers, and colored show lighting. The fantasy of the performance allows Eli to participate in the vision until he finds himself dancing and singing along to music only he hears in the center of his colleagues, a direct continuation of the vision into his normal context. The continued importance of George Michael, an out gay man, to Eli's visions—and the extreme example of this when George Michael represents God in the first season's final vision in “Soul Free”—challenges dominant ideas of gender and sexuality in the context of religious power.

The visions themselves carry queer signifiers, and so do the initiating moments of the visions, but the latter I will analyze more in chapter two, “The Visionaries.” The musical form itself is colloquially associated with queerness, particularly when involving men, and George Michael—with his notorious arrest for male solicitation and a large gay male following—provides an additional signifying layer of queerness. The combination of the two prompt a number of Eli's friends, after hearing Eli describe his visions, to implicitly question his status as heterosexual through teasing. The relationship between queerness and Eli's visionary status, connected in the first vision when it interrupts Eli's heterosexual coupling, becomes more complicated when Eli realizes during an

acupuncture appointment that he lost his virginity to his would-be client, Beth, while George Michael played on the tape deck (“Faith”). This cooptation of George Michael’s music and musical form of the visions places these ostensible queers vision elements in a complex tension between queer signifiers and Eli’s heterosexuality and the pursuant narrative requirements toward heterosexual coupling. Eli’s dancing to George Michael songs becomes a suspect euphemism for male homosexuality among the other characters, but it is in tension with Eli’s heterosexual desires and a queer expression of not only gender but also of possibly religious prophecy. I will more fully explore this tension in chapter two.

Integrated visions emphasize the medical materialist explanation because they share representational qualities with hallucinations—both visual and auditory—more than the separated visions do. On *Eli Stone* Eli’s visions are explicitly linked to his brain aneurysm in two powerful institutional ways. At the end of the first season in “The Path,” Eli undergoes brain surgery to remove the aneurysm, and the second season’s first episode picks up the plot a few months later, with Eli floundering following months without a vision. The same episode reveals that Eli’s brother, Nate, has begun seeing visions and is diagnosed with an aneurysm in the same part of his brain as Eli’s vision-inducing aneurysm. The possibility of prophecy switches from one brother to the other through the respective disappearance and appearance of medically mediated aneurysms. This linkage becomes explicit when the psychologist whom Eli has been seeing post-surgery reveals herself to be, as she says, “God can be a narrow term. Let’s say hypothetically that I am, or to use a term from your line of work, that I’m His fiduciary.”

She goes on to tell Eli, “You had the aneurysm removed. You were quite clear that you wanted your life to return to what you consider normal. But you’re meant for so much more, Eli. You’re one of those people for whom normal is a failure of potential.” Eli decides to take back the possible mantle of prophet from Nate, but he explicitly affirms his visions’ medical materialist origin, not the divine. He says, “Give it to me. Just give me back the aneurysm. I’ll do it [be a visionary].” Though it appears that Eli accepts the divine origin of his visions, he still maintains their fantastic position by figuring their link to medical origins and asking for the aneurysm back because of the medical dangers to his brother more than his allegiance to religious responsibilities. It is a moment that activates the “and/or” potential of the fantastic by Eli focusing on one explanation, “God’s fiduciary” offering another, and both explanations maintaining equal possibility—separately or together.

Perhaps the most important formal attribute of Eli’s visions is that they include explicit—if still fantastic—representations of God. Three times over the course of the series’ twenty-five episodes, Eli has visions that include God. The female representation of “God’s fiduciary,” noted above, is the second representation, bracketed on either side by George Michael and Eli’s own father. The musical link with George Michael in the first season culminates in his appearance as the personage Eli thinks is God in “Soul Free.” In that vision, George-Michael-as-God emphasizes his homosexual status. Eli asks, “Are you God?” and he replies, “Some men have said so.” This exchange is ambiguous: it could refer to the deity’s reaction to the human-coined term “God” or it could—and I argue more likely—be a thinly-veiled reference to the singer’s

homosexuality, specifically his sexual prowess with men, and his large male fandom. Because the visions exist in the fantastic mode, it is possible for God (or God's messenger) to be a gay man. The next vision of God is a woman as discussed above. However, in his final vision of the series in "Flight Path," Eli sees God, not as a woman or gay man, but instead as a literal patriarch, his dead father. While this makes sense narratively by resolving some of Eli's issues with his father for series' closure, thematically in terms of religion, it reifies the marginalization of the earlier non-patriarchal representations of religion. The patriarchal vision of God gets the last word and image of the series. Where *Wonderfalls* conveyed gendered representations in and relationship with fantastic religion through superficial vocal characterization, *Eli Stone* establishes a clear progression from a queered subversive representation of God and a feminized and still somewhat subversive representation to a final—and implicitly conclusive—representation of God as the ultimate patriarch. In *Eli Stone*, the fantastic hesitancy and its progressive potential are disrupted and ultimately rearticulated as patriarchal.

Similar to Eli's visions, Baltar's visions on *Battlestar Galactica* also carry sexual signifiers, but his all point to heterosexual—even chauvinistic—masculinity. His integrated visions always portray Head-Six as an object of his lust, often in a skin-tight keyhole design red dress meant to emphasize her bombshell qualities. Baltar's vision of her is persistently and manipulatively sexual, an extension of his actual relationship with Caprica-Six. Though there may be room to argue Caprica-Six exhibits power in these types of interactions with Baltar in a "postfeminist sexual contract" vein, Head-Six is not



Caprica-Six, merely a vision of her, either via hallucination or as a divine mouthpiece (McRobbie 111).<sup>7</sup> Some transference of sexualized power from Head-Six to Caprica-Six may occur, but Baltar's visions are almost uniformly strongly identified as being only in his head. The only instance of a vision wherein Head-Six appears to be replaced with a projection of Caprica-Six (a different, more demure visionary iteration of Caprica-Six that is linked to the real Caprica-Six, who also sees the vision) is in the Opera House vision, a vision in which she wears a white dress and appears more a mother than a bombshell. In the majority of Baltar's visions, Head-Six's formal presentation not only evokes heterosexuality and the objectified female trope but also indicts *Battlestar Galactica's* integrated visions with that power dynamic. Because Baltar sees visions only of Head-Six and because his visions are almost entirely integrated, the heterosexual chauvinism collapses into the characterization of integrated visions within the program. They are initially mistrusted by Baltar and throughout the series are difficult to read as legitimate or religious because they are framed as sexual and power fantasies, hallucinations created from Baltar's inflated ego and hubris.

## CONCLUSION

In these three telefantasy programs, both separated and integrated visions operate in a mode that facilitates fantastic reading by inherently stretching the standards of verisimilitude beyond the expectation of realism. Within the fantastic hesitancy

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<sup>7</sup> I use McRobbie's term because, as she identifies it, "a post-feminist sexual contrast... seeks resolution to sexual inequality without challenge to or contestation of masculine hegemony and the heterosexual matrix" (McRobbie 111). Caprica-Six, and as a result, Head-Six, impose their power over Baltar within a strongly masculine and heterosexual context.

illustrated by the show's visions, religion and gender representations and conventions face the potential for challenge as well as reification. Potentially subversive representations of God, as in *Eli Stone*, are more acceptable because of the fantastic hesitancy because the visions are never confirmed as religious. Fantastic visions can challenge gender and sexuality assumptions regarding God and prophets because the possibility that such challenges are mere hallucinations remains active in the fantastic. The fantastic visions can also support the privileging of patriarchal religious narrative, such as in *Battlestar Galactica* when Roslin is unable to experience the "real" culmination of the Opera House vision, ensuring Baltar is seen as the chosen male prophet and savior. Even visions, like those in *Wonderfalls*, that formally challenge western assumptions of visual primacy by focusing on auditory and actionable directives are gendered in such a way that brings the divine into the material, continuing the fantastic hesitancy but at the expense of progressive movement into actuality.

Categorizing the three shows' fantastic visions into separated and integrated visions allows for careful scrutiny of the interaction of gender and religion within the visions and in the characters' understanding of them. Separated visions allow for multiple readings of their origins as either religious or medical, and while characters may settle on one or the other explanation, the text itself mostly resists such conclusions even when it might privilege an explanation. Integrated visions, however, are presented as more clearly fantastic, in that they destabilize the distinction between "reality" and the world of the vision, allowing for the visions to occupy the fantastic in-between longer than in separated visions. Other characters often arrive at pragmatic interpretations of the

visions ("if it's true to them . . .") that refocus narrative attention on the visionaries' characteristics and relationships, which is the topic of my second chapter.

## **Chapter Two: The Visionaries**

After examining somewhat broadly the form and fantastic framing of the visions on these three contemporary telefantasy shows, I will now turn to the characters who see the visions. This chapter will analyze the visionaries, the fantastic prophets whose visions occupy this liminal place not only between medical materialism and divine power but also within the margins or interstices of religious institutions and gender representations. The visionary characters experience the visions described in chapter one and form the backbone of the represented religions that I will discuss in chapter three. I will analyze the visionary characters as sites of negotiation for gendered power dynamics within a fantastic framework. By power I mean “being able to intervene in the world or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs” (Giddens 4). I will refer to personal power throughout this chapter to highlight the visionary as an individual agent working to affect change primarily through her or his actions; personal power places the primary locus of power within the individual, not within institutions of power, such as politics or religion, though it can affect institutional power. Personal power is the foundation of charisma. In the frame of this chapter—examining personal power in relation to potential prophecy—personal power exerted by the individual visionary often translates to wider power through charismatic leadership in their community or beyond. How do these characters represent the concept of a religious prophet and power gained through prophecy? How do the visionaries’ gender

performances inform or react to the fantastic or the privileging of either medical materialist or divine explanations for their visions? Expanding on the theoretical framework of chapter one—the fantastic hesitancy existing between medical materialist and divine explanations for the visions—this chapter will address the visionary characters' access to and use of power and charisma. The concepts of power and charisma require attention to not only the visionary characters but also the characters that surround them, either as followers or opponents; however, my attention will always return to the visionary.

Visionaries have a long history of being the subjects of religious study because of their ability to enact religion as an exceptional experience on an individual scale; they enable an earthly and often bodily experience of the transcendent. Visionaries also display the ability to gain followers and expand their individual religious experience to a communal scale. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James focused on extraordinary religious experience, even touching on the relationship between pathological and religious explanations for such experience. He writes:

Even more perhaps than other kinds of genius, religious leaders have been subject to abnormal psychical visitations. Invariably they have been creatures of exalted emotional sensibility . . . and frequently they have fallen into trances, heard voices, seen visions, and presented all sorts of peculiarities which are ordinarily classed as pathological. Often, moreover, these pathological features in their career have helped to give them their religious authority and influence. (James 25)

In James's discussion of religious leaders, he links visions with power, and not just the divine power that religious readings conceive as a vision's originator. The visions may be pathological, but they more importantly allow aspects of that power to transfer to the

one who experiences them. He extends beyond "religious leaders" when he writes, "There are moments of sentimental and mystical experience . . . that carry an enormous sense of inner authority and illumination with them when they come. But they come seldom, and they do not come to everyone" (James 31). Although this still limits who can be a visionary, visions that are interpreted as religious, regardless of their origin, grant the visionary access to power not only through institutions but also through affective individual experience.

The distinction between pathology and divinity and the simultaneous connection between them that James implies lays the foundation of this chapter's study. All four of the main visionary characters in the shows I analyze grapple with the implications of their potential religious power as prophets—on both micro and macro levels—as well as the tenuousness of such power because of their place in the fantastic hesitancy. Each visionary character must face their calling as a possible prophet when the label—either explicitly as religious "prophet" or vaguely when they are called "chosen"—is bestowed on them or denied by other characters. On *Battlestar Galactica*, Laura Roslin uses her religious mantle to shore up her political power, and Gaius Baltar finds or forces purpose on his genocidal actions through his visions. On *Eli Stone* Eli Stone's acceptance of the prophet mantle shifts depending on his (and the show's) functionalist needs as both a character trait and a plot device. On *Wonderfalls* Jaye Tyler resists the title of "prophet" all together because of its links with the patriarchal language-symbol systems of religion. For some of these visionaries the macro level of their power is as wide as the future of humanity, while for others it is only as wide as their family and community. Regardless

of their reach, my analysis of them looks beyond the implications of the visionaries' potential power within the text to wider issues of gender and religious representation that imply the dynamics of and access to power.

Some scholars argue that telefantasy's foundational generic elements not only allow for the power to challenge normative constructions, such as those of gender, but also foster a propensity for such challenges to norms through their representational strategies. In *Telefantasy*, Catherine Johnson writes, "One of the characteristics of studies of non-verisimilitudinous genres is that fantasy is seen to have subversive potential because it represents the 'unreal'" (7). Though Johnson is not addressing gender directly, the subversive potential she identifies is easily applied to gender norms. Rebecca Feasey explicitly adds gender to this argument in her study of masculinity on television. She writes, "Because telefantasy is not confined to either naturalistic or realistic conventions, this genre is in a position to offer alternative representations of sexuality and gender on the small screen" (Feasey 56). Television's potential power of meaning-making via representations of gender is both muddied and strengthened in telefantasy: it is complicated because the "unreality" of its conventions forces interpretation of the unfamiliar narrative worlds, but also strengthened because common assumptions about gender must face the same interpretation in the strange context. Whether due to possibly religious—but more definitively prescient—visions or the context of displaced representational worlds, telefantasy often uses defamiliarization of what is considered the "real" to undermine the idea of a truth of gender, religion, or any other aspect of viewers' socio-cultural verisimilitude that we often take for granted.

Thus, characters—particularly visionaries due to their engagement with religion—within telefantasy can represent a challenge to the assumptions of both gender and religion through the non-verisimilitudinous conventions of the genre. In this chapter I will analyze the challenges to religious and gender representations posed by the shows’ visionary characters and facilitated by their fantastic visions. My goal is to illuminate the similarities and differences among the visionaries’ performances of gender and roles as potential prophet to understand how and why certain visionaries are privileged as prophets in the narrative and how they negotiate power within the fantastic hesitancy.

#### **LAURA ROSLIN: PROPHECY AND POLITICS**

Laura Roslin of *Battlestar Galactica* ostensibly represents the clearest feminist identity among the visionaries I am analyzing, yet she disavows a degree of personal feminist power to work within the institutions of power: politics and religion. Physically she resembles images of liberal feminists, often displaying a confident, direct posture while wearing women’s business suits, with both skirts and pants, and similar modern but feminine business attire. She is in her middle age but still very attractive and has a strong, commanding voice. Roslin usually strikes a balance between confidence in her own power and a performance of a sexual femininity out of the public eye.<sup>8</sup> Cognizant of the skepticism and sexism she faces as she transitions from Secretary of Education to President of humanity in exile and from President to citizen and back again, she constantly engages feminist struggles for equality and authority.

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<sup>8</sup> For more information regarding the representation of liberal feminism on television see chapter one in Bonnie J. Dow’s *Prime-Time Feminism*, “1970s Lifestyle Feminism, the Single Woman, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.”



In *Women and Spirituality*, Ursula King writes, "Some people consider the voices of feminists as truly prophetic as they express a vision which links together the personal, social, spiritual, and political dimensions of human life" (3). Though King writes metaphorically, elements of her characterization of feminists resonate with Roslin linking the various elements of her life together through her visions. She works within established systems and institutions—religion, medicine, politics, and the military—to gather and utilize whatever power she is allotted within those often patriarchal confines. Roslin uses the power granted to her as sole surviving cabinet member-*cum*-President and the power gained from her possible fulfillment of an ancient religious prophecy to buttress each other, herself, and her goals. However, this power is somewhat contained within these institutions; she faces sexism because she is a woman and because she was a schoolteacher and the Secretary of Education, both feminized occupations, before the destruction of Caprica. She both uses religion for her own ends and truly believes in the gods of Kobol and her place within their scriptures, but such tension between belief and utility do not go untroubled. The locus of her authority, however she chooses to use it, rests in the mutuality of religion and politics, not in her individual subjectivity. She positions herself as a conduit for the larger power-granting institutions, and her humility both strengthens and undermines her power as a (feminist) character. Roslin's construction of power through institutions overwhelms her personal potential, a foundational element of King's description of feminist visionaries. In this section, I will investigate Roslin's self-positioning in this way, its ambivalent relationship with gender

conventions, and the ways in which it shapes and is shaped by the fantastic nature of her visions.

Roslin's introduction as a character connects her with illness. She sits in a doctor's office on Caprica and receives a breast cancer diagnosis and an unhelpful prognosis. Her illness and her assumed proximity to death become the key elements of her religious experience. As she edges toward liminality between life and death, her affiliation with the liminal space of the fantastic hesitancy grows. Her visions are often explained as the results of her cancer and its treatments. This aligns her visions with a medical materialist reading, yet her possible power as prophet requires that she be dying, assigning her illness equal significance for both explanations. She tells Kara Thrace of the prophecy in "Kobol's Last Gleaming Pt. 1," "May I tell you the part of the story that I believe I am playing? . . . The scriptures tell us a dying leader led humanity to the promised land. If you go back to Caprica and bring me the arrow, I will show us the way." Though Roslin strongly implies that she is the leader from the prophecy, she does not fully or explicitly accept the role. In that same scene, however, Roslin reveals to Kara her illness in order to support the implication that she is the dying leader. This is an early instance of Roslin's simultaneous use of both illness and vision to meet her goals as prophet and president (in this case, convincing Kara to retrieve the Arrow of Apollo from Caprica), fully employing both explanations of origins available to her through the fantastic to convince Kara to accept the mission. Were she merely dying and adhering only to the medical materialist explanation for her visions, she would not believe herself to be part of a religious prophecy that requires the leader to be dying. Yet, if she relied

on the religious explanation alone for her visions, she would not hold the required humility to submit to the prophecy and reveal the perceived weakness of her illness. This revelation could cost her institutional place as “the leader,” for even in a world displaced from ours, few would elect a dying leader were it not for the religious power granted the position by the Pythian scripture. By utilizing both explanations she more easily attains the power granted to the dying leader of prophecy.

I have discussed power in willfully vague terms so far because the form it takes depends a great deal on how it is used. In broadest strokes, I am using it to describe the basis for charisma, the ability to gather supporters to an individual and achieve one's desired ends. Power for Laura Roslin, though it adheres to this stipulative definition, is both undermined and supported by her humility, or at least her posturing towards humility. While I discussed this briefly in the chapter on visions, the seemingly counteractive tension wrought by Roslin's humility necessitates deeper analysis. She invokes such humility when she first explicitly accepts the mantle of prophesized leader—and inherent in that role is the mantle of prophet and power of religious leadership—saying, “I humbly believe that I am fulfilling the role of the leader” (“Valley of Darkness”). Her humility may be genuine, but I argue it is primarily functionalist because she relies on gender conventions—particularly the religious linkage between femininity and humility—to downplay her potential individual and feminist power to the benefit of her institutional power within both religion and politics. She loses some personal power when she submits to these historically patriarchal institutions to gain access to their structures of power.

The troubling aspect of Roslin's humility regarding her visionary potential stems from the history of Christianity linking humility as a virtue to female submission to religious male figures (God, priests, fathers and husbands). In their book on the history of women in Christianity, historians Lynda Coon, Katherine Haldane, and Elisabeth Sommer write: "Submission, compunction, nurturing, obedience, humility, and purity were generally characterized as positive feminine characteristics . . . through the patristic definition of masculine and feminine, late antiquity set the stage for future differentiation of gender roles" (5). Drawing from their analysis of these traditional feminine virtues and their durability in Christianity, I am suspicious of Roslin's formulation of her role as the humble dying leader of prophecy. Though she does use this construction of herself for her own political ends—seen most clearly when she snaps the fleet back under her control after a military coup by admittedly "playing the religious card"—when Roslin speaks about her possible role as prophet, declaratively to the public and somewhat more conflictedly in private, her attitude is more submissive than usual ("The Farm"). In the same episode that she admits to playing the religious card, she shies away from blessing some men, saying, "No. It's not right; it's not who I am" ("The Farm"). It is a moment of self-doubt that implies humility while hinting at the functionalist use of her religious charisma to gain followers, for she denies her role as the "dying leader" soon after using it to wrest followers back to her after the coup. She can utilize the charisma needed of a prophet on a mass scale, using her position within religious and political institutions to support it, but she resists using charisma to gain individual followers or to rally others around her as an individual and not just a role. I read her hesitation as her realizing the

personal consequences of her officially accepting the mantle of prophet; blessing the men makes them her responsibility on an individual scale and calls on her heretofore unexplored charisma. Because she dissociated her individual self from the responsibilities of the “dying leader” role, using the political results without realizing the religious ones, such as sanctifying another’s life, that would require her to be more than divine conduit and fulfiller of prophecy. The soldiers asking for blessing force Roslin to accept what she had not yet considered. As the Priestess Elosha tells her, “Laura, this is your path, the one the gods picked for you, the one you picked for yourself” (“The Farm”). As a prophet, Roslin must be a leader complicit on both the macro-religious and -political level and the micro-personal, charismatic level.

Yet, Roslin's role as prophet is entirely contingent on her illness; she cannot be the "dying leader" if she is not dying. Therefore, bodily weakness undergirds her religious power (a situation similar to that of Eli Stone); but for Roslin, the tension between bodily weakness and spiritual strength becomes too encompassing. She positions her illness as the source of her power at the expense of personal and potentially feminist non-institutional power, and the narrative's structure echoes that linkage. She subsumes her own bodily being into the religious power of the prophecy. When her cancer goes into remission (following a treatment using the embryonic stem cells of a human-cylon hybrid), it coincides with her reelection loss and her return to civilian life. She still is looked to as a leader, but she holds significantly less power both politically and religiously. When she is reinstated to the Presidency, her cancer soon returns (“Collaborators,” “Crossroads Pt. 1”).

With the return of her illness, Roslin once again holds and demands power. She is questioned at Baltar's treason trial about her visions and her illness, and in that exchange, she reaccepts her role as prophet, even explaining the fantastic nature of her visions:

LEE ADAMA: Isn't it true that one of the side effects of taking chamalla is a propensity to experience hallucinations? [. . .] Isn't it also true that the visions that you once described as messages from the gods were actually the result of a pharmacological reaction from taking chamalla?

ROSLIN: The chamalla did enable me to see certain things that were foretold by the scriptures, things that will help this fleet find its way toward earth.

[. . .]

ROSLIN: Ask me why. Finish what you started.

LEE: Why are you taking the chamalla again Madame President?

ROSLIN: I am taking chamalla again because my cancer has returned.  
("Crossroads Pt. 1")

This is another example of Roslin's operative mode regarding her prophetic potential; she plays both sides of the argument, saying that the visions are both religious and medical so that she can use her medical prognosis to support her religious position. It is a tactic that is both admirable and cunning, illustrating the potential for subversion (e.g., Roslin turning her bodily weakness into a strength within religious and political structures) that I argue can be mobilized through the fantastic.

However, only a few episodes later in "Six of One," Admiral Adama identifies her self-doubt in private, saying, "You're afraid you might not be the dying leader you thought you were. You're afraid that your death will be as meaningless as everyone else's." By this point in the series, Adama and Roslin have an established romantic relationship. For years they shared emotional and intellectual intimacy, though their

relationship was mostly limited to the public sphere of politics. In “Six of One,” their shared quarters support Adama as her equal and intimate partner in the private sphere as well. Their relationship, and particularly his understanding of her and her role as a political and religious leader illustrated by the above quote, allows Adama to illuminate Roslin’s individual and personal side for the viewer. Her response to him reemphasizes her illness because she notices that her hair has begun falling out from her cancer treatment, and she begins crying. Her illness is again paramount to her role, and the narrative reinstates its importance as an answer to the possibility of Roslin’s self-doubt, but in private, with the man she loves, she shows the pain, fear, and vulnerability caused by her illness, not just the public, institutional power she draws from it.

Until her death and beyond, Roslin resists using personal power except in so far as it can be funneled through religious and political means. She shifts potential access to feminist power or sexual power that might affect her personal experience of the world to her agency as a leader. The breakdown of her physical body, an outward extension of her personal self, is usually secondary to her governmental or religious effect on the fleet. In their discussion of Roslin as a complicated Madonna figure, Anthea Butler and Diane Winston see only strength:

On two key counts—gender and religion, Laura has turned potential liabilities into great strengths by embodying a pragmatic maternalism with a whiff of sexuality. She also has the advantage of being seen within a sci-fi tradition of strong women leaders . . . She is a believable prophet but the role does not define her. (283)

I argue, however, that Roslin and the show’s narrative structure problematize this reading by tying her personal power so tightly to her political and religious power that it is

consumed by institutional power. In many ways, her role as prophet does define her, or at least frames how she seems to define herself. This is guided by liberal feminist ideologies that downplay women's private lives by focusing on public roles and power, and for Roslin this comes at the expense of her individual subjectivity and personal charismatic power.

Perhaps there is nothing inherently gender normative in Roslin's humility, but it relates to histories of feminine submissiveness hailed as religious virtue, and it minimizes the element of charisma necessary in a possible prophet. In *The Sociology of Religion*, Max Weber defines prophets and identifies their central characteristic as charisma. According to his definition, a prophet is "a purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment" (Weber 256). He goes on to explain the difference between a prophet and a priest—a priest "lays claim to authority by virtue of his service in a sacred tradition, while the prophet's claim is based on personal revelation and charisma"—and between prophet and magician—the former "claims definite revelations, and the core of his mission is doctrine or commandment, not magic" (Weber 257). Weber's focus on charisma and personal revelation highlights the connection between power in the individual and religious power; his conception of a prophet relies on the individual as a necessity for religious power and pushes the personal power of the prophet beyond mere earthly conduit. My skepticism of Roslin positioning herself as vessel for religious power at the expense of personal charisma results mostly from comparison, not only with Weber's ideal type of prophet described above but also among the other fantastic visionaries analyzed in this chapter.



Baltar's ego is too inflated to ever truly offer himself to the power of his visions—and he barely acknowledges them as religious visions until the finale—yet he uses his charisma to build a cult of followers, and Eli Stone predominantly appeals for understanding of his visions through charisma.

Although I began this section on Laura Roslin discussing her approximation of traditional feminist narratives of power, politics, and religion, she also represents an oft-repeated criticism of some of those traditional patterns: by working within the institutions of power, she runs the risk of perpetuating the status quo of gender relations and performance. As bell hooks writes in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, "Feminist activism called attention to the need for social equality of the sexes, yet ruling groups of men are willing to endorse equal rights only if it is clear that the women who enter spheres of power will work to uphold and maintain the status quo" (89). On multiple occasions, Roslin makes choices that verge on tyranny in the name of religion or politics: She convinces Sharon (an imprisoned but defected cylon) and Helo (human officer on the *Galactica*) that their hybrid child died soon after childbirth because of its potential use as a cylon weapon; she destroyed an entire ship full of innocent civilians because it was necessary to ensure the survival of the rest of the fleet ("Epiphanies," "33"). She takes responsibility for such decisions, but it is always in deference to political or religious dictates, maintaining the militaristic status quo that supports her governmental and religious power.

Outside of these two key arenas of Roslin's life, she performs herself as an independent and strong woman, but not necessarily a powerful one, at least not powerful

enough to see her individual charisma on equal footing with her role as prophet. Butler and Winston similarly fold her personal characteristics under the umbrella of her politics: "Laura's performance of gender is delimited by circumstance and volition: she is not a wife, lover, or mother, and her political style runs from dispassionate to ruthless" (266).<sup>9</sup> They position her gender performance in opposition to the standard feminine roles and instead turn to her religious—as a neo-Madonna figure—and political roles. Their analysis of her does not address the issue of charisma in her religious calling. Through their contrast of Roslin with Kara Thrace, who does appeal on a personal charismatic level for others to accept her visions of Earth, Roslin's position becomes secondary to Kara's despite Roslin's more obvious interaction with religious leadership.

However little Roslin articulates her own charisma, that does not stop others, particularly Admiral Adama, from believing in her and the religiousness of her visions because of her individual personality instead of despite or regardless of it. Throughout the early seasons, Adama is the strongest voice of atheism and religious doubt within the show. He pays lip service to religion in order to fortify his troops' belief and hope, taking a pragmatic approach to understanding others' religious beliefs. He initially describes Roslin's visions in these pragmatic terms, "Well, maybe she's seen it in a vision. I'm serious. She says she sees things. Images, prophecies, whatever. The point is, she believes in them, so do the people who are with her" ("Home, Pt. 2"). Importantly, Adama maintains his personal atheism—and his belief in a medical materialist reason for

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<sup>9</sup> Though Roslin eventually becomes Adama's lover, their relationship only moves from flirtation to actualization near the end of the series, allowing her initial characterization as a dispassionate political leader to sustain.

Roslin's visions—until the final season. After years of searching for Earth, years of doubting Roslin's visions, and finally committing to a romantic relationship with Roslin, Adama tells Kara, "The president is right. She's been right all along . . . I'm tired of turning away from the things I want to believe in" ("Six of One"). He goes on to tell Roslin that she is the reason he changed his mind, that she is why he finally chose to believe ("Faith"). This raises a key question in my analysis: Which is more important, how the visionary positions herself, or how others position her regarding a prophet's charisma and personal power? Adama eventually believes Roslin is a prophet, and Kara believed enough to return to Caprica for the Arrow of Apollo ("Kobol's Last Gleaming, Pt. 1"). Beyond Roslin's personal circle of believers, she gains a third of the fleet's allegiance by "playing the religious card," indicating that she has a many of the surviving humans' support as a religious leader ("The Farm"). This question, however, leaves out one more important factor: how the narrative itself positions the visionary. If Roslin and Adama balance each other out in their approaches to Roslin's charisma as prophet, the narrative diminishes the potential of her charisma by raising Baltar above her as the narratively more powerful/truer prophet, or at least one with more apparent personal charisma.

#### **GAIUS BALTAR: HETEROSEXUAL BUT NEITHER NORMATIVE NOR NORMAL PROPHET**

Gaius Baltar of *Battlestar Galactica* proves a unique case among the visionaries of my study because he accepts his role as a prophet fairly early, and once he does, he performs the role more traditionally than any of the other visionaries, complete with a cult-*cum*-harem of followers. Though he is seen as more villain than potential hero by his

fellow characters—perhaps undermining viewers’ ability to believe him as a prophet—the narrative ultimately privileges his visions, positioning them and their results as true beyond the interpretation of any of the characters. Baltar’s visions are exclusively of a representation—either interacting with Baltar’s world or drawing him into visions of his former home on Caprica—of Caprica-Six (referred to as Head-Six when represented in Baltar’s visions because she a manifestation for Baltar alone), his cylon lover for whom he granted cylons access to the Colonial defense mainframe, allowing them to nuclearly decimate humanity. His visions begin following the destruction of Caprica and are originally conceived by Baltar as manifestations of his guilty consciousness (“Miniseries”). He believes a medical materialist explanation for them as a form of psychosis created by his role in the genocide of humanity, but Head-Six insists that she is a manifestation of God (the singular God of the cylons) to guide Baltar as a religious leader (“Miniseries”). Head-Six maintains that he is God’s chosen leader, aligning him with the traditional role of monotheistic prophets who have historically been men.

Baltar is perhaps the most actively heterosexual character among the visionaries in my study, for his folly and salvation are visually connected with his sexual relationships with women, especially Caprica-Six. Media scholar Rosalind Gill provides a brief but thorough description of analyzing masculinity in the media that will prove useful in analyzing Baltar’s (and in the next section Eli Stone’s) represented masculinity:

Most contemporary writing takes a constructionist perspective, is concerned with specific, contextual studies examining masculinities in different sites, and focusing on masculinity as a performance or masquerade rather than an essential identity. It starts from the notion that masculinities need to be understood relationally. Masculinity in general

derives some of its meaning from being constructed against femininity, heterosexual masculinities are constructed against homosexual ones, and all specific forms of masculinity get their meaning from being defined against others. Thus masculinities are classed, raced and aged, but also coexist and get meaning in a global postcolonial context. One of the most important notions in masculinity studies is the idea of hegemonic masculinity. (30)

Though Baltar performs heterosexuality to an extreme, he is not hegemonically masculine, meaning he does not conform to idealized yet normative image of heterosexual masculinity that establishes gender conventions in American society.<sup>10</sup> The actor who plays him is short, rail thin, and has long hair. Moreover, Baltar defers to his mental genius over physical prowess. Baltar's masculinity is constantly undermined by his interactions with more normatively masculine performances by the *Galactica's* other crew members. (Even Kara Thrace performs hegemonic masculinity better than Baltar, but that is an argument for another paper.) As sociologist Michael Kimmel writes regarding hegemonic masculinity, "In contrast to women's lives, men's lives are structured around relationships of power and men's differential access to power, as well as the differential access to that power of men as a group" (70). In addition to Baltar's non-hegemonic performance of masculinity, the "not normal" subheading of this section also refers to Baltar's conception of himself—and others' legitimization of that conception—as a genius, a man with talents beyond normal humans. His genius and his ego are the cause of his off-putting hubris but also his charisma, and both operate together to construct him as a conflicted fantastic visionary.

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<sup>10</sup> See also: Connell, R.W. and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender and Society*. 19, 6 (2005): 829-859.

Baltar is constantly in tension with his fantastic visions. On the one hand, his ego allows him to entertain the thought of his religious importance, but on the other hand, his genius is so grounded in masculinist adherence to scientific reason and intellect, that his atheism is difficult to alter. Caprica-Six tells him regarding granting her access to the Caprican defense mainframe, "You believe me because it flatters your ego . . . you alone were chosen for my mission" ("Miniseries"). This explanation transfers to Baltar's fantastic visions of Head-Six, but in his visions Head-Six alters the idea of his chosenness from Caprica-Six's practical mission to Head-Six's stated task convincing him that he is a prophet chosen by God. He vacillates surprisingly often between atheistic denial—saying, "There is no god or gods" in "33"—and ostensibly genuine belief. Only six episodes after that denial of divinity, in "Six Degrees of Separation," he prays to God while imprisoned in the *Galactica's* brig. He can switch back and forth in his beliefs because of the fantastic nature of the visions. With the medical materialist explanation of his visions fitting his atheism and the divine explanation supporting the idea of him as chosen religious prophet, Baltar's visions—though interestingly only of Head-Six—allow for such polar swings in belief.

The doubt about his role as a potential prophet Baltar shows allows for a degree of humility required of prophets. They are meant to be serving supreme divine being(s), after all. However, Baltar balances his humility with supreme confidence in himself and his continued acquiescence to playing the role of a charismatic prophet. He affects the earnest religious leader to gain a bevy of female followers after he fails as president; they become his constant supporters, willing to take up arms at his defense ("The Road Less

Traveled”). By the series finale, his followers number in the thousands (“Daybreak, Pt. 1”). Despite whatever doubt he feels regarding his fantastic visions and Head-Six’s insistence that he is God’s chosen prophet, Baltar’s faith in his genius and his resulting personal power and charisma rarely waver. Even as he is the puppet president for the cylon regime on New Caprica, he still listens to his vision of Head-Six—even over the actual Caprica-Six—and momentarily resists ordering the execution of 200 suspected human insurgents until Head-Six convinces him that he must live for he has more to do (“Precipice”). Head-Six successfully appeals to his ego, his belief that he serves a greater purpose, and his belief in his power as an individual in that moment. The same appeal would not work on Roslin, I argue, because she does not position herself as individually important—without the power of the will of the gods or the will of the people—as Baltar does himself. While Baltar’s level of pride initially seems counterintuitive to the role of prophet as a servant of God(s), it is supported and, to an extent, privileged by the narrative.

Despite Baltar’s long list of underhanded and immoral deeds—a list that begins with nuclear annihilation and continues with treason and sabotage of the surviving human race—he (and his visions) outlasts Roslin (and hers) as the ultimate prophet of the series. In the culmination of the Opera House vision shared among Baltar, Roslin, Sharon Agathon, and Caprica-Six, the cylon leader uses Sharon’s hybrid child Hera as a hostage during the final battle of the Human-Cylon war. Baltar and Caprica-Six appear to be her only hope, and Baltar—in part as stalling tactic and in part genuine revelation—delivers a

long speech to those in the brig explaining what he believes to be the true nature of his vision:

I see angels. Angels in this very room. Now, I may be mad, but that doesn't mean that I'm not right. Because there's another force at work here. There always has been. It's undeniable. We've all experienced it, everyone in this room has witnessed events that they can't fathom let alone explain away by rational means. Puzzles deciphered in prophecy, dreams given to a chosen few, our loved ones dead, risen. Whether we want to call that God or gods or some sublime inspiration or a divine force that we can't know or understand, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. It's here, it exists, and our two destinies are entwined in its force. ("Daybreak, Pt. 2")

This speech is Baltar's expression of belief and his interpretation of his fantastic visions as finally marvelous and divine, as "angels." He deliberately evokes the language of the Abrahamic religions because they are the strongest monotheistic signifiers for the show. Baltar finally settles on a divine explanation for his visions and fully believes himself a prophet. This being the finale, it is understandable. The narrative, perhaps in an attempt to rehabilitate the character with his final acts, allows this speech to remain unchallenged as truth. Baltar's actions lead to Hera's safety and the end of the Cylon-Human war.

Baltar's belief in his visions as "angels" is further supported in the epilogue to the narrative. In "Daybreak, Pt. 2" text proclaiming "150,000 years later" precedes images of twenty-first century North America. The narrative strongly implies that the crew members of the *Galactica* were our ancestors and that Hera is our "mitochondrial Eve," the forebearer of the current gene pool of the human race. The camera rests on a man, portrayed by series creator and showrunner Ronald D. Moore, reading about new discoveries regarding "Eve," and over his shoulder, Head-Six and Head-Baltar (who



Caprica-Six began seeing toward the end of the series) are wearing the same outfits as when they were the "angels" Baltar saw on the Galactica. (Because there is no longer a character in whose "head" these visions could be placed, I will henceforth refer to them as Angel-Six and Angel-Baltar.) Moore does not notice them; they are visions for only the viewer. The semiotics of the tableau are captivating: the creator of the show—God, in a sense, to the characters within it—is flanked by two "angels," formerly of fantastic visions but now independent of any visionary. They exist beyond even the representation of the "God" of the narrative, Ronald D. Moore who cannot see them, and continue to exert power and influence in what is meant to be the "real" world of the viewer. More than power and influence, they outright claim to know God and imply that they understand or are part of God's will. Angel-Baltar says, "God's not on any one side. God's a force of nature." Angel-Six replies, "You know he doesn't like that name." Angel-Baltar says, "Silly me. Silly, silly me" ("Daybreak, Pt. 2"). Though Angel-Six says the most significant line about God's preference—and do note that references are to the monotheistic God of the cylons, not the polytheistic gods of the humans—Angel-Baltar gets the truly last words of the series, and they are deliberately asinine. He is a version of Baltar, complete with his fallibility and his propensity toward dandyish sayings, but the way he says "Silly, silly me"—strangely self-satisfied and seemingly humble—implies that for Angel-Six to say that was his plan all along.

Baltar, through his "angel" iteration, exerts the final power of the narrative, positioning him as the ultimate prophet and ultimate incarnation of divine power on the series. Though Angel-Six similarly attains a position of power, Caprica-Six and her

iterations (both physical cylons and metaphysical “Head-“ or “Angel-“ manifestations) made no claims to the role of prophet and instead were often configured as supporting figures to Baltar’s prophetic destiny. Ultimately, Baltar’s self and the remembrance of his visions in the form of Angel-Six somehow continue beyond Baltar’s material being, and he ends the series as the entity likely closest to God. This position retroactively legitimizes his path and decisions on Caprica, the Galactica, New Caprica, and finally on Earth. Baltar becomes the hero-visionary of *Battlestar Galactica* by divine right. I find this troubling because it comes at the cost of Roslin's potential religious power: She may have lead the human race to earth—with the help of Kara Thrace's spirit<sup>11</sup>—but because she minimizes personal power through charisma and rarely incorporated the potential of the fantastic into her individual power, her death marks the end of her potential. Where Baltar's ego seemingly outlasts his body when he is articulated as a mostly-invisible and immortal angel, Roslin's body—and the power granted to her through illness and her resulting fantastic visions—was the only reason for her ego.

Roslin embraces the link between her body—as a vessel for both medical materialist and divine explanations for her visions—and her religious and political power, but in ultimately embracing fully the religious explanations for her visions that required her to be a “dying leader,” she subsumed her individuality into the prophetic role. This cost her the position as the narrative’s privileged prophet, in part because of her submission to the institutional powers that required her to move away from the

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<sup>11</sup> Kara is an important element of the show’s dialogue with religion, but like Caprica-Six, she never claimed or clamored for the role of prophetic leader. Her resurrection appears to be an element of the Pythian prophecy, not the subject of it.

subversive potential in fantastic hesitancy in favor of their circumscribed gender roles. Yet Baltar, despite maintaining the fantastic hesitancy of his visions until the finale, also ultimately moves out of that liminal space. In doing so, he becomes the agent through which the narrative reinscribes patriarchal representations of gender and religion that were suspended due to the subversive potential of the fantastic.

#### **ELI STONE: THE POWER OF CHARISMA OVER THE QUEERNESS OF GEORGE MICHAEL**

Like Gaius Baltar, the titular lawyer on *Eli Stone* presents the image of a non-hegemonically masculine visionary, but Eli's relationship with heteronormative signification is much more fraught. Eli, like Baltar, appears unlike hegemonic masculinity superficially dictates: his is short and has subtly thinning hair. Over the course of the series' two seasons Eli's visions undermine then reestablish both his heteronormative couplings and the troubling of God's representation that I analyzed in chapter one. Both Eli and Baltar represent different aspects of what Rebecca Feasey sees as elements of representation in telefantasy that "both challenge and confirm common sense assumptions about hegemonic masculinity and the male role in society" (56). Eli's performance of masculinity is foregrounded because most of his visions call for his interaction with the heightened performance found in musicals. Gill's relational approach to analyzing masculinities that I discussed more thoroughly in Baltar's section will be my primary method for analyzing Eli Stone. I explore Eli's transition from a hegemonic masculine corporate ideal to a queered possible prophet and finally to a nuanced but ultimately patriarchal mix of the two.

Like Baltar, Eli is an atheist before he is a visionary. In the first episode, "Faith," he tells Frank, his acupuncturist and later spiritual guide and friend, "I don't believe in God," and also like Baltar's, Eli's religious position eventually changes based on the functionality of belief. That is, Eli uses God as referent of his visions when it best suits his goals. By the fourth episode, "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go," Eli begins to believe in a divine explanation for his visions, saying, "I'm starting to think that they're not just 'cause of my aneurysm. I'm starting to think they have some greater significance." However, only a few episodes later, Eli's basic functionalist relationship with the possible divinity behind his visions becomes clearer. In one scene, he amends Frank's characterization of him as touched by the divine by saying, "Possibly touched by a theoretical divinity," yet in the next scene, he says to his devout receptionist, Patti, "It's God I'm trying to help. That's who I think these visions are from" ("Heal the Pain"). Eli uses religion as the origin of his visions when he thinks it will best serve his purposes, but he also minimizes the possibility of divine origins when addressing those individuals who are more resistant to the idea of a prophet among them. In the climax of the first season, Eli appeals to the men and women of his law office, one such resistant group, on a personal instead of religious level:

I know that most of you—if not all of you—think that I'm crazy. The lawyer with a hole in his head and the inappropriately timed song in his heart. And I know as lawyers we're trained to rely on fact and empirical evidence. But I'm asking you, I'm asking each and every one of you, this one time with the stakes so completely high, to believe me and take something on faith. Trust me, you won't regret it. So who's with me? ("Waiting for the Day")

Tellingly, he never appeals to the aneurysm in his head—the medical materialist explanation—as a legitimate reason for following him or his visions. Eli's most powerful tool is his charisma, his personal power to get people to follow him without *needing* the institutional power granted to a prophet, and it is most easily transferred to his role as a prophet.

Eli is the most charismatic of the possible prophets in my study, for he wields his personal power to gain followers more than any other visionary. Where Baltar appeals to his charisma via his scientific genius, Eli asks that people believe in him without any reason other than personal connection and faith in him. His followers are friends, family, colleagues, and clients, a group comprised of men and women, people of various sexualities and races. In his final conversation with Eli, Jordan—his boss, mentor, and father figure—brings this (not institutionally religious) charismatic foundation of Eli's enactment of his visions to the fore:

ELI: My aneurysms, they're visions, and they guide me. I believe they're sent to me by a higher power.

[. . .]

JORDAN: Eli, I'm aware of your beliefs, just as I'm aware that you believe that you saved my life earlier this year. The reason I don't ask and you don't tell is that we both instinctively know that having this conversation would be detrimental to our relationship.

ELI: Why?

JORDAN: Because there's the risk that you'll feel that my not believing you could be confused with not believing in you.

ELI: So after what happened at the bank, you don't—

JORDAN: You convinced search and rescue to believe the possibility that I took the stairs instead of the elevator, a hunch that proved correct but did not prove the existence of God.

ELI: So you think I'm crazy?

JORDAN: No more than anyone who believes the earth was created in six days. ("Flight Path")

This exchange highlights Eli's personal power regardless of religion, at least for Jordan; Jordan believes in Eli-the-individual but not in Eli-the-prophet. The fantastic nature of his visions allow for such “and/or” relationship with power: Eli can be both a prophet and a charismatic individual without having to sacrifice either or he can be either if the situation calls for one or the other. The differentiation between belief in Eli and believing Eli is a necessary one and one that is made throughout the series, usually by those resistant to the religious explanation for his visions. But this distinction often reiterates the same result: Eli's personal power trumps any possibly religious power in the eyes of his friends, family, and peers. The theme of Eli's personal power—buoyed but never eclipsed by his possible religious power—is further strengthened by his visions of his own future as the figurehead of a vast social movement called "Live Brave" ("Patience").

While this personal power rarely translates to hubris (as it often does with Baltar), it is not entirely positive, for such appeals to Eli's non-institutional charisma minimize his religious role and its responsibilities while conforming to certain essentializing stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity. In sociologist Michael Kimmel's article, "Masculinity as Homophobia," he describes masculine relationships in terms of power and the ability to give orders. Kimmel contends that those few who fit the very narrow definition of hegemonic masculinity are those who can and do give orders as “the biggest of wheels” among men (71). From his appeals to believe in him regardless of belief in his divine visions to his future role as leader of the Live Brave movement, Eli is a man who exerts power over others; he doesn't give orders, but people follow him and his

instructions regardless. Close friends, complete strangers, and even the mayor of San Francisco listen to Eli and heed his council because of the possibility of his divine prophecy but also—and more powerfully—because of the power Eli wields as an individual approximating the ideal of the hegemonic man.

Eli begins the series describing himself before his visions as the man other men want to be: He had a lucrative and elite job, an expensive car, a penthouse apartment, and a beautiful fiancée ("Faith"). His descriptions of himself begin the first few episodes of season one, ostensibly in voiceover then revealed to be Eli relating his story up to that point to some hapless stranger. They illustrate the way Eli saw himself before he began experiencing visions, and they adhere closely to Kimmel's description of hegemonic masculinity as an ideal, white, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity (57). The method of delivery for these descriptions is edifying in that they emphasize the relational understanding of Eli's masculinity. He was hegemonically masculine before the visions because other men aspired to his construction of masculinity. The visions cleave Eli's performances of both his masculinity and his subjectivity into Old-Eli and New-Eli, appellations Eli uses to differentiate himself ("One More Try"). Though Eli does not voice it—when he seems self-aware enough to voice other elements of his transformation—the queer elements and dominant musical form of his visions create this interruption in his seemingly secure masculinity and subjectivity. They, more than the possible religious origins of the visions, invite rupture into Eli Stone's life and self.

The visions and Eli's interaction with them separate him from his fiancée, Taylor, but connect him further with his clients. This communal connection culminates in the

first season with a trial that takes place almost entirely in his mind but is connected to the other occupant of his hospital room. This vision is further raised in its significance to Eli's gender performance by a final life-affirming coda to the vision starring George Michael as God, a subversive representation. The vision is queered not only by George Michael's presence but also by the shared spiritual experience between the two men who presumably share the vision in Eli's head. The queerness of Eli's visions changes in the second season as his visions push him toward heteronormative couplings with female characters, culminating in a vision-meeting with God in the form of Eli's dead father. I argue that the visions' roles as connective agents for Eli's community—especially those that act at first in conflict with then in support of heteronormative couplings—are inextricably linked with the queerness represented within and by them. Eli's visions throughout the first season interrupt his romantic relationships with women, ultimately ending his engagement to Taylor, but some visions in the second season instigate romantic couplings with women—fellow lawyer Maggie and supposed soul mate Grace—that imply future marriage and family. The queer forms the visions present, discussed in chapter one, force Eli from the expected heteronormative path so that he can better appreciate the bonds of community beyond romantic coupling: His relationships with his coworkers, his brother, and his friend and spiritual guide Frank all strengthen in the wake of his break-up with Taylor. Even his relationship with Taylor seems deeper once they move on from their attempted romance.

Though Eli's musical visions and the incorporation of George Michael's songbook and his personage have strong homosexual associations, and, despite Eli's



reliance on charisma discussed above, his visions force him to look at the importance of his life within a community. They mark a break from his image of himself as a hegemonic masculine ideal, a "big wheel" that supersedes his responsibilities to others in his community. In one of the queerer episodes of the series—due to its interruption to "dominant and pervasive time structures" through the compressed time of the vision—Eli lives within a sustained vision while in a coma after having his aneurysm removed (Davis and Needham 7). In "Soul Free," the events of his vision mirror the real world as he counsels a man, David, suing for his right to refuse chemotherapy and "be at peace." As Eli argues David's case and slowly realizes that the events are all in his head, the show inter-cuts scenes with Eli's friends and family explaining how he touches their lives (especially since he started seeing visions). After Eli wins the case, the hospital room shot pulls back to reveal David, dying in the same room as Eli, with his wife by his side. This reveal implies that Eli somehow transcendently connects with David, winning his case as a way of sanctioning David's death. Because David dies, the viewer cannot know if Eli's visions are medically constructed by his ambient environment, or if David and Eli do in fact interact because Eli is a prophet with such superhuman powers. If Eli has the power to ferry David on, so too does he have the power to either will himself awake or die and be at peace. In the first step toward fully accepting his role as prophet, Eli realizes that he has "more to do" and chooses to wake up ("Soul Free").

The George Michael-inflected visions of the first season allow for Eli to explore more non-normative and non-heterosexual relationships. In a sense, he becomes one of what media scholar Ron Becker calls "television's queer straight men [in whom] we see

heterosexual men sometimes cautiously, sometimes uneasily, sometimes playfully, and sometimes ironically exploring and transgressing the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity long guarded by homosexual panic" (129). Not once during the series does Eli fret over his heterosexuality or others' perception of it. He knows he is straight, but by contrasting the "New-Eli" with the "Old-Eli," he establishes a dichotomy between the strict performance of his former hegemonic masculinity with his "new," more open exploration of basic human connections instead of those marked by heteronormative labels. His focus on the most basic connections among humans appears to be the *raison d'être* of his visions in the first season, invoked in a religious framework during the Live Brave vision of the future where he is introduced as "The Man who reminded us that every one of us, the least of us, is still divine" ("Patience"). Frank even tells him as much, saying, "Your journey as a prophet is going to bring you closer to people, not further from them. It's about connecting" ("Happy Birthday Nate").

As the series progresses, Eli, like Laura Roslin, believes more strongly that he is indeed a prophet and that his visions originate in the "and/or" locus of the fantastic. He understands the medical materialist explanation of his visions as a necessary expression of the religious, focusing on the aneurysm as the cause of his visions while still entertaining the possibility—and as his journey continues, probability—of religious power working via the medical. When Eli asks for the position of prophet back after he abdicated in favor of a normal life, he doesn't say, "Give me back the visions," but instead he tells a version of God, "Just give me back the aneurysm" ("The Path"). His path toward accepting the role of prophet ends in the series finale with the reconciliation

of an atheist heart-transplant recipient and the devout parents of the donor. The procedural plot of the episode reflects the ongoing tension between the unbelievers surrounding Eli and his growing sense of religious purpose as a result of the visions, and it ends with the atheist client telling Eli, "I may not believe in the divine, but after all you've done for me, it's easy to see why people do" ("Flight Path"). Like Jordan, she is not converted, nor is she meant to be, but she vocalizes the key underlying message of *Eli Stone* and its dealings with the fantastic religion: empathy. The fantastic requires empathy in order for either explanation—medical materialist (aligned with atheism both here and on *Battlestar Galactica*) or the divine and religion—to be valid enough to sustain the hesitancy.

However, like *Battlestar Galactica*, *Eli Stone* ultimately denies the sustainability of the fantastic hesitancy by closing the series through the privileging of one explanation alone. Though on *Eli Stone* the final minutes do not hold the same power of connection to the real world as in *Battlestar Galactica*, they still provide narrative closure and power through the religious explanation for the visions. In his final vision of the series, Eli sees God, not as a woman or gay man as the two previous images of God were represented on the show, but instead as a literal patriarch, his dead father. While this makes sense narratively by resolving some of Eli's issues with his father for the series' closure, thematically, in terms of religion, it ossifies religion in patriarchal norms. The patriarchal vision of God gets the last word and image of the series, telling Eli, "Life's a test. And you, my boy, are passing with flying colors" ("Flight Path"). This final remark is likely meant to be affirming, but it implies that accepting the role and responsibilities of

prophet—and thus the religious explanation for his visions—is the reason for his excellence in the test of life. With this as closure to this episode and the series as a whole, Eli's increased leaning toward the religious makes the call for empathy ring a bit hollow. Empathy for the faith of the believers is called for from nonbelievers on the show, but aside from Eli's charismatic pleas to believe in his personal power, there is little appeal to believers to understand and follow the atheistic explanation. The fantastic possibilities lessen throughout the series as religious explanations eclipse the medical materialist—and queerness is reinscribed in patriarchal forms—by the series finale.

#### **JAYE TYLER: MAINTAINING THE FANTASTIC THROUGH RESISTANCE**

*Wonderfalls*'s Jaye Tyler is an outlier among this grouping of visionaries. She begins the series as a literal outlier, living on the edges of acceptability within her white upper-middle-class family. She lives in a trailer park and works at a tourist gift shop, cultivating her slacker persona despite having graduated from Brown University. She has one friend, proclaims she does not like anyone, and has no serious romantic relationships though she is attractive and intelligent. Her most prominent piece of clothing is a large leather coat with a pronounced sheep's wool collar, effectively hiding the petite, athletic frame of the actress who portrays Jaye; this costuming downplays Jaye's femininity while also establishing the setting as Niagara, New York. These isolating elements of Jaye's gender performance change when she begins hearing voices and seeing visions, for the voices' directives help reestablish her as a member of her community, if only extending within the private sphere, despite her resistance.

Though she shares the fantastic nature of her visions with the other visionaries of this chapter, she actively resists privileging either explanation of her visions (the religious or medical), and in doing so maintains the position of personal and potential power within the hesitancy. She neither swings between the medical materialist and religious explanations with as much assurance as Gaius Baltar does, nor does she increasingly side with the religious explanation and resulting co-optation of the medical materialist origin as Eli Stone and Laura Roslin do. She maintains the possibilities of both while remaining ensconced in the potential for subversion afforded the fantastic.

Within the narrative of *Wonderfalls*, the voices Jaye hears are never given a label. Different characters at different times call them God, Satan, figments of Jaye's psyche, or spirits. Jaye refers to them always in pronouns—you, they, them, but rarely it—and the credits name them "muses." Jaye explains her relationship with the voices: "I believe in something, sort of, and it does talk to me and may actually be God, but has never said so specifically . . . They sometimes keep me up all night . . . I don't even know what they are. However, I do know they talk—or something talks through them" ("Wound-Up Penguin"). The thrust of Jaye's monologue is not what is doing the talking but how the talking affects her, bracketed by her indeterminate hedging on the matter of who or what. On *Wonderfalls*, more than on any other program in my study, the effect of the visions is more important than the visions themselves.

Though similar to *Eli Stone* in that the visions instigate and move forward the episodic plot, *Wonderfalls* shrinks Jaye's sphere of influence to her immediate surroundings in such a way that does not provide her the opportunity to be a prophet.

Jaye, unlike the other visionaries, has few followers and no disciples, nor does she save humanity (as on *Battlestar Galactica*) or San Francisco (as on *Eli Stone*). Like *Eli Stone*, however, her growth as a visionary and as a character results from her relationships with her family, her friend, her love interest, and anyone who happens into her proximity in Niagara Falls. Where Eli took the communal connection and following and expanded it to larger groups and institutions, Jaye maintains a smaller sphere of influence extending only to those with whom she directly interacts.

In only two episodes of the series' thirteen-episode run does Jaye approach anything close to the mantle of prophet. In "Wound-Up Penguin," Jaye's attempts to re-inspire faith in a doubting nun first leads to an attempted exorcism of Jaye's "demons" (the voices) then to the nun's belief in Jaye as an instrument of God. After Jaye follows the voices' instructions to "Bring her back to him," which results in the reunion of a priest and the daughter he never knew about, the nun, Sister Katrina, tells Jaye, "A miracle happened because of you." Jaye, resistant to such labels, replies, "A miracle? Maybe a happy coincidence." Similarly, in the episode "Totem Mole," during a conversation with the dead spiritual leader of the Satsuma tribe (the only instance of a voice speaking through any form other than a manufactured animal face), Jaye is told, "They speak to you in many voices and any forms. You have been sought out for a great purpose. You have been chosen." Jaye resists both attempts to place her within the path of prophet or religious leader—though moreso within the historically patriarchal Christian lineage of which the nun is part than the matrilineal Satsuma—seeking only to placate the

immediate instructions of the voices instead of contemplating her place within any system of prescribed meaning.

Beyond resistance to religious explanations for her visions, Jaye at points entertains the medical materialist possibility with equal weight as the religious, but ultimately rejects both explanations. Where Eli Stone initially wants to be crazy more than "chosen," Jaye often questions her own sanity, wanting her friends and family to either confirm that she is crazy or to abate her fears that she is (*ES* "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go;" *WF* "Wax Lion"). The visions maintain their fantastic nature as Jaye never fully admits or denies the medical materialist (or religious) explanation for them. In the first episode, "Wax Lion," she asks her best friend Mahandra if hearing the wax lion's voice is crazy, to which Mahandra replies:

I think it's natural to embody the world around us with consciousness . . . it's all that tree-hugging crap. Like when the Native Americans—[on a glare from Jaye] Indians—say that everything has a soul. This is all a repressed psychological response . . . if you act like that little wax lion doesn't have a soul then that little wax lion gets revenge when you freak out and think it's talking to you.

Jaye then asks, "So I'm not crazy?" but Mahandra's reply fits the fantastic, "I don't know. Maybe" ("Wax Lion"). Toward the end of the series, Jaye has a similarly purposed exchange with her family's therapist, Dr. Ron:

JAYE: It's crazy that a person would think inanimate objects were talking to them, telling them to do things. And crazier that a person would feel compelled to do the things that the inanimate objects were telling her to do. Please tell me it's crazy.

DR. RON: Do you want it to be crazy?

JAYE: I want it to be over. ("Barrel Bear")

To be crazy would allow Jaye to abdicate any responsibility required by hearing the voices and might produce an easier solution to the “problem” of hearing voices.

Following the voices’ directives forces Jaye to help a variety of people, most of whom respond to the results of her aid by proclaiming that they feel free in some form and are able to live their lives more richly thanks to Jaye (“Pink Flamingoes,” “Crime Dog,” “Muffin Buffalo,” “Barrel Bear”). This aligns the purpose of her visions with the purpose of Eli Stone’s visions. More importantly for Jaye, following the instructions of the voices requires Jaye to enlist the help of her family and friends, forcing her to break down her self-imposed distance from them. (As her brother Aaron describes her relationship to their family, “You are insulated. You wear your trailer park, hillbilly lifestyle around your neck like a ring of garlic. Are you trying to ward us off?” (“Crime Dog”).) For example, after bonding with Jaye in “Crime Dog” during an escapade instigated by a cow creamer's directive to “Bring her home,” Aaron becomes Jaye's sole confidant regarding the voices. Jaye becomes the only family member to know that her sister, Sharon, is a lesbian as a result of following the voices' instructions (“Wax Lion”). Jaye saves her father's life and appreciates the wisdom of her mother because of the voices, too (“Pink Flamingoes,” “Cocktail Bunny”). Throughout the series, Eric, Jaye's love interest, falls deeper into love with her because of his role in many of her seemingly charitable acts, all performed at the behest of her visions. In all of these ways, Jaye's community ties become richer and deeper, small in scale though they are, and they are just as important to Jaye's power as a visionary as being able to save a city or the world.



Though Jaye's sphere of influence is small, it is significant as a marker of her charisma as well as a comment on her role as a gendered visionary. In contrast to Eli Stone whose charisma attracts numerous people to him from the public sphere as well as the private sphere of his family and close friends, Jaye's charisma appears bounded by the private sphere. By her own choosing, very few people know that she hears voices, but her acts at the behest of the visions engender a small following of friends, family, and the occasional outsider who interacts with Jaye directly. Though a magazine article titled "Who Is Jen Why?" written by her and about her opens space for wider charismatic influence, Jaye subsumes herself in it, using the name "Jen Why" to refer to the article's subject and attributing authorship to the young investigative journalist who decided to become a slacker after meeting Jaye. With these strategies, Jaye abdicates whatever public notoriety or power the article may have granted her. Jaye's influence, limited to the private sphere, reiterates the long history of women's confinement to the private sphere of family and homelife. Although this limitation is of Jaye's own choosing, the gendered history it invokes troubles the idea of Jaye's resistance to patriarchal norms.

Despite the apparent limitation, supposedly of her own choosing, of Jaye's visionary influence, Jaye draws power on the macro-level from her ability to label her visionary experiences and her feminist resistance to doing so. As Ursula King writes, drawing on Mary Daly's idea of castrating the language-symbol system of Christianity:

The power of naming is one of the most decisive human activities in constituting the world as experienced. That power has been an almost exclusive male prerogative throughout most of human history . . . Contemporary feminists rightly claim the power of naming as one of their

most fundamental rights for expressing and shaping their own experience and worldview which, in turn, includes the power of transformation. (42)

Yet for Jaye, she draws personal power from resisting such naming. She refuses not only to side with either explanation for her visions but also to name them beyond pronouns. They are merely "they," nothing more and nothing less. Jaye hears them because she listens ("Cocktail Bunny"). They and she occupy space together in the fantastic hesitancy where potential—but not necessarily power or action—exists. Whether she is crazy or chosen, her visions push her to establish stronger communal ties, linking her with other humans on a basic level that defies categorization beyond "kindness." And her refusal to label her experience allows her—and *Wonderfalls*—to maintain an openness to feminist personal and religious power that is closed down in the finales of *Eli Stone* and *Battlestar Galactica*.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, I have analyzed the visionary characters in relation to their visions with three main themes emergent: how they react to, adopt, accept, or resist the role of religious prophet; how they formulate their role as visionary through gender performance; and how the narrative ultimately privileges a particular reading of their fantastic visions and thus their role as visionaries. The first two themes are heavily influenced by the characters' interaction with other characters. The role of prophet must be supported by both a religious structure (to be analyzed in chapter three) and a group of people to believe (in) the prophet. Laura Roslin, Gaius Baltar, and Eli Stone all have their share of followers, characters willing to proclaim and sanction their roles as

prophets, and because their series ended with some degree of closure for their visions, one explanation for their fantastic visions could be privileged. Jaye Tyler does not find such closure—both by choice and by the circumstances of *Wonderfalls*'s cancellation—which is why she never encounters the term let alone the role.

Regarding gender representation, Roslin obtains access to a great deal of institutional power through political and religious structures but performs humility that borders on the stereotypical feminine religious virtue of submission to the detriment of her own personal power. Baltar, however, uses his ego in conjunction with the influencing frame of the history of male prophets to draw personal power from his possible role as prophet while also amplifying his heterosexuality through his visions to counteract his non-hegemonic performance of masculinity. Eli Stone, too, draws personal power from his potential religious power as a fantastic visionary, but his performance of a heterosexual and hegemonic masculinity is complicated with the interdiction of the queering rupture resulting from his visions. While his visions move him away from heteronormative coupling and more toward a "queer straight man" exploration of non-normative and non-heterosexual intimacy among his fellow human beings, Eli's visions ultimately reinscribe him into a path of heteronormative coupling and a patriarchal conception of religion. Jaye Tyler, too, is forced into deeper *communitas* with her family and friends through her visions that recalls women's historical confinement to the private sphere, yet it is her resistance to naming her visionary experience that enacts a gendered performance in relation to religion, namely, the maintenance of the fantastic hesitancy as a powerful feminist act.

The final narrative privileging of a particular reading of the visions and visionaries cannot be separated completely from these gender performances. The *Battlestar Galactica* narrative constructs Baltar as the arbiter of truth and the true prophet of humanity with the persistence of his "angel" visions into the viewer's context, while Roslin pays the price for her humility by being forgotten to human history. On *Eli Stone* Eli's queered visions and resulting possibilities for subversion become fodder for the patriarchal representation of religion that gains the ultimate importance through closure on both the personal and the serial level. *Wonderfalls*, however, does not face such closing down of possibilities, perhaps because of its swift cancellation, or, I believe, because it allows Jaye to maintain the power of the fantastic and the connected feminist power of naming that she holds throughout the series.

### **Chapter Three: The Religions**

The visions on *Battlestar Galactica*, *Eli Stone*, and *Wonderfalls* contain within them explicitly religious possibilities. They build the fantastic hesitancy between this potential and a religious one, creating space for visionary characters to navigate within the representational webs of gender and religion. Visionaries can obtain potential as prophets only if there is a religion to imbue "prophet" or "chosen" or "special" with meaning. As discussed in the introduction, my use of the term religion is stipulative, providing enough elasticity to apply to the various religions that find articulation through and in relation to the visionaries on *Battlestar Galactica*, *Eli Stone*, and *Wonderfalls*. Just as the visions are necessary markers for visionary characters, the religions read into or created from the visionaries' conveyance of their visions are equally important in understanding the complicated relational meanings among gender, religion, and the fantastic.

All three shows in my study engage with—and often challenge—discourses of traditional religion, representing traditional religions through either direct confrontation or the distance of allegory. My purpose in this chapter is to tease out the tension between representations of traditional religions and their relational impact on the overall representations of religion produced on the shows. Traditional religions (and their television representations) produce powerful language-symbol systems that often buttress normative gender performances with which the visionaries on these shows often directly

contend. *Battlestar Galactica* deals in both explicit and implicit representations of religion, but it uses the displacement of allegory to resist traditional representations of religion. Presenting a monotheistic religion that resembles the extremes of Christianity or Islam and a polytheistic religion that reflects ancient Greco-Roman mythology allows *Battlestar Galactica* to invoke fluidity among faiths, which means that the show can deal with religion explicitly without fearing outright reprisal from real-life adherents to any particular faith tradition. *Eli Stone* presents a similar fluidity of faith, using the context of explicit and traditional religions to play with both implicit and explicit representations of Eli's place within those traditional religions and perhaps a new or amorphous representation of religion. To a lesser degree, *Wonderfalls* also uses explicit representations of traditional religions engaging Jaye Tyler to build her position within an implicit and avidly nontraditional representation of religion. Though each program employs a wealth of examples of explicit religious representation, they ultimately share the fantastic framework that allows for implicit religious meanings about the potential power of visionaries and the role gender plays in such potential.

Among the studies investigating religious meaning on television through textual analysis, the tension between explicit and implicit representations of religion is the most prevalent theme. Televangelism and overtly religious-themed fictional programs, like *7th Heaven* or *Outsourced*, garner attention for their representation of explicit and traditional religions. *Battlestar Galactica*, *Eli Stone*, and *Wonderfalls* convey implicit representations of religions that also happen to be allegorical or willfully vague. While the dichotomy between implicit and explicit representations of religion—and its link to

traditional or amorphous representations of religions—is useful, most studies troublingly collapse the distinction between implicit religion and a watered-down, inoffensive, and vague representation of religion. Television scholar Horace Newcomb articulates this tension between acknowledgement and denial of religion in television representations in his article, "Religion on Television:" "Producers avoid the specifics of belief, the words of faith, and concrete images of the transcendent like the plague. Such specificity could cost them audience. In the meantime, we are given the deeply, powerfully embedded notions of the good that must come from . . . somewhere" (Newcomb 41). Scholar Wade Clark Roof expands on this characterization in the article "Blurred Boundaries: Religion and Prime Time Television." He writes:

[T]elevision operates in a context that encourages "religion a la carte," cafeteria religion, pastiche, bricolage, to list a few labels now in vogue. People are presented with a menu of religious and spiritual themes, and they are put in the position of picking and choosing among them or of mixing elements eclectically. Experience is privileged over belief, exploration takes precedence over certitude; coherence and inner meaning are more important than rational consistency. (Roof 65)

Both Roof and Newcomb imply that the implicit expression of an amorphous amalgam of religions or religious themes distances that expression from the power and meaning often associated with traditional religion. They imply that representations of religion on television are somehow diminished through such fluidity of representation and meaning. My attention to the fantastic, a mode that demands plasticity of meaning, is meant to problematize assumptions like these by examining the wealth of meaning and power related to religion that can be found through the flexible verisimilitude of the fantastic.

Yet, even the programs I chose, with their fantastic visionaries, can still be relegated to discrete categorization. In a popular press article discussing the cancellation of religiously-themed fictional television programs, Joshua Alston wrote for *Newsweek*:

The untimely demise of *Kings*, which ends its 13-episode run this month, raises questions about why, in a culture where a vast majority of us say we believe in God, so few of us seem to want to watch him on television. No religiously themed show has found its footing on the major networks since CBS's *Joan of Arcadia*, about a teenage girl who got visits from God, was canceled in 2005 after only two seasons. ABC's *Eli Stone*, about a prophetic lawyer, looked poised to end the curse but was also canceled after 26 episodes. (Alston n.p.)

Alston's question—and the point of his article—relies on an assumption that representations of religion on television, in order to be deemed religion, are expressed through understood and widespread traditional symbol systems. Implicit in his pairing of *Kings* and *Eli Stone* is the assumption of legitimized religion on *Eli Stone* on par with the acknowledged Biblical allegory in *Kings*, an assumption that I would argue against. Where *Kings* was explicitly marketed as a Biblical allegory for the story of David, *Eli Stone* positioned its visionary in the context of the Abrahamic religions but also within the constantly negotiated frame of the fantastic.

Though much of the discourse surrounding representations of religion on television works in dichotomies—explicit or implicit, traditional or allegorical—I think it is more valuable to examine the religions in the programs of my study via interrelated spectra. *Battlestar Galactica* operates in a constantly shifting tension among polytheistic and monotheistic representations of religion that require a fluid ideation of religious tolerance. *Eli Stone* uses its courtroom procedural structure to argue explicitly for or



against elements, especially gendered elements, of traditional religions while still representing a flexible faith through bricolage. Similar in structure to *Eli Stone*, *Wonderfalls* employs episodic plots to facilitate Jaye's interactions with representations of traditional religions, but Jaye maintains resistance to the language-symbol systems they reflect.

### ***BATTLESTAR GALACTICA: POLYTHEISM, MONOTHEISM, AND TOLERANCE***

*Battlestar Galactica* garnered a great deal of critical attention because of its treatment of religion. The miniseries-turned-pilot premiered at the height of the War on Terror, as the United States began its war in Iraq and continued its war in Afghanistan and American citizens dealt with terror alerts and attack preparedness programs. The ostensibly futuristic war between cylons and humans recalled our political post-9/11 moment, with *Time* magazine's James Poniewozik describing it as "a ripping sci-fi allegory of the war on terror, complete with religious fundamentalists (here, genocidal robots called cylons), sleeper cells, civil-liberties crackdowns, and even a prisoner torture scandal" (n.p.). On *Battlestar Galactica*, just as in the United States following the September 11th attacks, the lines between the political and the religious blurred.

Critics, fans, and academics pointed to the allegory on *Battlestar Galactica* as particularly incisive in this regard, and many popular and academic articles analyzed the way in which *Battlestar Galactica* utilized its religions to make a statement pertinent to contemporary American viewers. In its movement away from the Mormon symbolism of the original 1978 series, the new *Battlestar Galactica* fleshed out the Lords of Kobol in polytheistic terms instead of an expression of the plurality of God (Klassen 356).

Synthesizing these arguments, Chris Klassen wrote a research note for the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* in which he lays bare the most common assumptions and arguments regarding *Battlestar Galactica's* monotheistic cylon religion and its human polytheistic opponent. Klassen writes:

The assumption about the tolerance of polytheism is not unique to [series creator and showrunner Ronald D.] Moore; there are elements of it percolating through wider Western society, both in religious and philosophical arenas. The idea of multiple deities seems to strike a chord with some proponents of religious pluralism and thus seems a suitable contrast to monotheistic constructs of one God, one Truth, one Way. It seems at times, in fact that the support of polytheism is more about a rejection of monotheism, or at least a certain understanding of monotheistic intolerance, than it is about actual polytheism. (Klassen 355)

Klassen goes on to articulate the repercussions of such binary antagonism when he writes, "It is not hard to see who is supposed to be read as the 'bad guy', especially when the cylons continually claim that they are acting according to the will of their God" (Klassen 356-7). Though complicated as the series continued, the cylons cannot escape their designation as enemy because the initiating action of the narrative is the cylon annihilation of the human planet, Caprica. They more than decimated the human race, leaving less than sixty thousand survivors from all twelve planetary colonies. Attempted genocide not only marks the cylons—at least *en mass*—as permanently villainous but also introduces the monotheism of the cylons as tainted by the blood of humanity. The God of the cylons who ordered such destruction is vengeful and bloodthirsty. In his essay, "The Gods Suck," Matthew Wooding Stover points out that the cylons are positioned in "a point-for-point allegory of the mythic role of the Israelites in the Old Testament," and their conception of God is as vengeful as Yahweh of the *Tanakh* (23).

While many comparisons have been and can be made between the cylons' religion and those founded in the Old Testament, especially regarding the twisting of religion to justify extreme acts of violence, the Colonial polytheism of the humans on *Battlestar Galactica* should not be untroubled. As Klassen notes above, in many studies of *Battlestar Galactica*—and arguably the text itself initially points to this—polytheism is seen as an avenue to religious tolerance. The choice among gods, however, does not necessarily lead to religious equality. Monotheism becomes tied to the cylons and thus tainted through the original sin of near-genocide. It is, in the eyes of the majority of humans, forever under suspicion. Later in the series, Baltar publicly adopts the monotheism of the cylons and gains a group of followers for the One True God via his role as messiah. Not only is this group called a cult by many within the fleet, especially those in powerful positions either through the military (Admiral Adama) or through the Lords of Kobol (Laura Roslin), but its members also face outright hostility among those other civilians, polytheists, they live close to on the *Galactica*, particularly the fundamentalist Sons of Ares (“Escape Velocity”).

In addition to the fact that the polytheists and atheists among humanity's survivors prove generally intolerant toward the monotheists, polytheism does not escape being an excuse or legitimizing ethos for violence. Kara Thrace is one of the most successful agents in the war against the cylons, someone who repeatedly and often joyously kills cylons in their various forms, and she is also one of the most overtly religious characters on the show. She prays to Aphrodite and Artemis and counts their idols among her few personal effects (“Flesh and Bone”). Moreover, she is one of the strongest believers in

Roslin's visions, accepting the mission born from them to retrieve the arrow of Apollo from Caprica. This mission is not the only result of Laura's visions that has a strong potential for human casualties. During her attempt to find the Tomb of Athena as a means to find Earth, two members of her expedition are killed, including the Priestess Elosha ("Home pt. 1"). There is a vital price to be paid for her journey of faith, even or perhaps especially on missions sanctified by the polytheistic religion, and Roslin's visions that fit within its frame. On *Battlestar Galactica*, endeavors in the name of the Lords of Kobol cost lives just as those done in the name of God do; the differences lie in scale and perceived legitimacy.

Monotheism, as I've already discussed, is inextricably linked on *Battlestar Galactica* to the cylons and all the related connotations therein, but it faces questions of its legitimacy as much as—if not more than—assumptions of its ill will. To many humans on the show, belief in a singular god seems delusional, especially when it originates among machines. As early as the miniseries, characters voice their doubt about the validity of a cylon religion. Admiral Adama says, “God didn’t create the cylons; man did. And I’m pretty sure we didn’t include a soul in the original programming” (“Miniseries”). The mere idea of a cylon religion is undermined in this statement because the origin myth of their monotheism is founded on God as a creator (implicating traditional monotheistic religious outside of television). Yet Adama rightly points out that humans are the creators of cylons, even if they evolved technologically beyond metal to flesh. Humanity acts as an interdicting force between cylons and the Holy, with the implication that they can therefore be arbiters of legitimate forms of

sacrality. If souls are the connective string between the material and the transcendent, Adama implies, the transcendent creator must deign to include that in the design of the material, which humans did not—and had no means to—do for cylons.

Stover is among the more ardent and blunt voices discussing the coexistence and equal criticism of both paths of religion presented in *Battlestar Galactica*. He argues in "The Gods Suck" that the program provides "objective verification of the existence of both The Lords of Kobol and the One God" (Stover 29). Both the Lords of Kobol and the cylons' God are justified through the completion of prophecies attributed to their power. Stover doesn't discuss the implications of objectively proving true two supposedly exclusive religions, but I take his idea further. By using the prophecies as elements of "objective justification" for religious faith's veracity, Stover collapses the distinction between a scientific materialist conception of religion (as a hypothesis to be proven or disproven based on objective and materialist outcomes) and a divine transcendent conception of religion (emphasizing faith through belief and/or sentiment). The latter, according to Paul Tillich in his discussion of symbols in *Dynamics of Faith*, practically requires the lack of the former. Tillich writes, "God is the basic symbol of faith, but not the only one. All the qualities we attribute to him, power, love, justice, are taken from the finite experiences and applied symbolically to that which is beyond finitude and infinity" (54). He goes on to warn, "Faith, if it takes its symbols literally, becomes idolatrous!" (Tillich 60). Such a path to idolatry differs only by degrees from Stover's argument for "objective verification." Both verification and literalization undermine faith by bringing the infinite into lesser terms of the finite or material. The point of faith,

especially in God or gods, is that there is no *objective* proof; faith can only be subjective. This is why the fantastic hesitancy is so useful to my study and to the presentation of progressive religions. It can maintain the possibility of both the knowable material and the unknowable transcendent because it does not seek objectivity. The fantastic is—by Todorov's definition and his example of an individual's hesitancy—subjective.

In her article about gender, religion, and the sacred fetus on *Battlestar Galactica*, scholar Heather Hendershot better articulates the point Stover tries to make. She writes of the show's presentation of the two religions, "Perhaps most importantly, it allows for the possibility of competing religious points of view without lapsing into Manichean reductionism. The show never clearly maintains that any single religion is more legitimate than another" (Hendershot 223-4). This equality of ambivalence is a clear—and oft cited—strength of the show's presentation of religion, and is more true to the overall tone of the program than Stover's assumed equality of veracity. However, it is also a strength that runs the danger of being retroactively reduced after the closing of the narrative. I discussed some of the repercussions of the series finale, particularly the epilogue, in my previous chapters, but its implications for the viewers' perception of religions necessitate attention here as well.

The epilogue establishes the narrative of the series as ancient history despite the assumed futuristic elements of cyborgs and space travel. As a result, the religions presented on the show invite evaluation based on the culture of the "present day" that is 1.5 million years after the events of the narrative. In addition to the implications of the continued presence of Baltar and Six "angels," the epilogue raises the question of

“survivals,” a concept defined in E.B. Tylor’s *Primitive Cultures*. Though problematic in its Victorian approach to religion, Tylor’s concept is apt for the epilogue. Tylor writes, “When in the process of time there has come general change in the condition of a people, it is usual, notwithstanding, to find much that manifestly has not its origin in the new state of things, but has simply lasted on into it” (7).<sup>12</sup> Which religion in the epilogue most closely resembles the religions practiced in the real-life “present day”? Though millions in the “present day” represented in the epilogue practice polytheistic religions, such as Hinduism (presumably, but the only image of the “present day” is predominantly white Anglophone and first-world), the Lords of Kobol seem to have an expiration date because of their similarities to Hellenic mythology, a religion that is so far in the past that it has generally lost the label of religion. In contrast, the cylon monotheism appears similar to the world-spanning popular religions that find their origin in the Old Testament: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As suggested by the epilogue, in the battle of the religions, it appears the cylons won.

In the battle of the religions’ representations, gender should not be ignored. Roslin, the Priestess Elosha, and Kara Thrace are the strongest voices for the polytheistic religion of the humans, and Baltar—initially through his visions of Head-Six and later through his own role as a cult leader—is the main human proponent of monotheism. Though Caprica-Six and the other cylons also play significant roles in the establishment of monotheism as a viable religion on the show, Baltar is the character that most explicitly grapples with and apparently achieves conversion to monotheism. Ursula

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<sup>12</sup> This may have influenced Raymond Williams’s conception of “the residual.”

King's identification of historical regression of female participation in religion helps illuminate the linkage between women and the devotion to the Lords of Kobol, though the show presents only the results of said regressing, not the actual process. King writes:

The regressive participation of women in religious life historically manifests itself in two different ways. First there is the general decline of the oracular, prophetic, and priestly activities of women if one compares the situation of ancient cultures with that of more recent times. Then there is the specific regression of female religious activity in particular religions if one compares the creative time of a founder with the practices of subsequent ages. (King 39)

The presentation of the religions on *Battlestar Galactica* as ancient history mirrors King's identification of the declining participation of women in religious life. Roslin, Elosha, and eventually Kara are part of the oracular class of a religion that seems similar to the ancient Greco-Roman religions. Women's importance—particularly their lack thereof—to the epilogue implicitly argues against their lasting impression. The decline places them in an unfortunate tradition of marginalized women as religions evolve.

Along with this apparent decline of women's importance and participation in the religions of *Battlestar Galactica*, the privileging of Baltar as the prophet figure and the apparent support of his visions originating from a singular God reinscribes patriarchy onto the show's religious representations. As discussed in chapter two, God's presence is made explicit and masculine in the series' epilogue, with Baltar's "angel" analog getting the final word. This privileging moves *Battlestar Galactica*'s equivalency of religious representation toward a monotheistic conclusion as well as shifting it out of the subversive potential facilitated by the fantastic hesitancy. By ultimately presenting the religions within a context of ancient history and using Hera's position as "mitochondrial



Eve” to transition from the ancient history of the narrative to the “present day,” the ambivalence and equality in presentations of monotheism and polytheism becomes almost prelapsarian. Tolerance may not have really been achieved, but the balance of religions—and the implication of many truths—is perhaps preferable to the patriarchal privileging of monotheism perpetuated by the epilogue.

***ELI STONE: IN DEFENSE OF AND IN SUIT AGAINST RELIGIONS***

If *Battlestar Galactica* positions religion as a battle of monotheism versus polytheism, then *Eli Stone* brings religion into the courtroom for various examples of individuals versus religion and ultimately creates a movement-*cum*-possible religion around Eli. Over the course of the series, Eli's clients—those his visions lead him to—have engaged Catholicism, Methodist Christianity, Judaism, and Islam through the courtroom, and through a surprisingly central gendered lens, as most of his religious cases explore gendered negotiations of religious tenets. Beyond the procedural plots that explore traditional religions navigated by the individuals who adhere to them, the flash-forward scenes that revolve around Eli's role in the "Live Brave" movement forces the question of what separates a religion from a movement.

From the first episode's title, *Eli Stone* foregrounds its relationship with "Faith" as a tenet as well as a George Michael song. But faith and religion are different—if interrelated—concepts. Faith is a key part of conceptualizing religions, but religions, as I discussed in the introduction, are also tied to ritual and tropes. The easiest way to make religion a clear subject within a narrative is to use the rituals and tropes that are familiar to the viewers and thus to refer to traditional religions. This, however, also may be a

possibly dangerous strategy for portraying religion on commercial television. The writers of *Eli Stone* appear to embrace the danger by penning episodes that deal explicitly and controversially with traditional religions while still hedging the show's portrayal of Eli's specific place within a religious framework.

In the first season episode, "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go," Eli follows his visions to a recently awakened coma patient who employs Eli to sue the Catholic Church following its role in the annulment of his marriage while he was unconscious. Eli understands the magnitude and irony of his case, though he continuously insists that he's not "suing God . . . [he's] suing the Catholic Church" ("Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go"). Implicit in the lawsuit is the existential question of what counts as being alive; the annulment is made because the wife essentially lost her "living" husband when he lapsed into a seven-year coma, yet he eventually woke up fully functioning. During his time of stasis, was he still existentially himself as recognized by the Catholic Church? He was certainly alive—the possibility of taking him off of life support is never introduced—but the Church must have recognized as diminished some part of his self or soul that was engaged in the marriage rite. These religious issues hover around the central plot of suing the Church, but they do not engage it obviously. Eli charges the Catholic Church with nothing as bad as misconduct, instead only pessimism and myopia, and even those charges are levied only against the fiduciaries of the Church that allowed the annulment. This case does not pose any great critique to the Catholic religion and its institutions.

Similarly, during Eli's coma-vision in "Soul Free" Reform Judaism comes to the fore of Eli's case but is not challenged. I have already discussed some of the vision

involving David Green's quest for death in this episode (see chapter two). Eli defends David's right to refuse chemotherapy even as his Rabbi wife, Rebecca, argues that David is crazy for thinking God spoke to him, using Jewish teachings to support her case. Though both sides use the Torah to support their argument, Rebecca is the expert because she is a Rabbi. The religious leader of a Jewish community, Rabbis can only be women in some Reform congregations, and even that is a new concession. For much of Jewish history, men have been the religious scholars, and perhaps this history still bears influence as David ultimately wins his battle, even if some might argue he employs non-Jewish religious discourse. Elliot B. Gertel, in his review of the season for *JewishWorldReview.com* articulates what he sees as the program pitting Judaism against hodgepodge New Age religion:

For a moment, for the briefest moment, it seems that writers Agboh and Kreisberg are about to fight for Judaism and for biblical law-based monotheism in the face of the onslaught of New Age doctrines and moralities, that they were going to overturn, as it were, personal peace-seeking in favor of traditions that guide individuals in how to preserve and enhance their lives. (After all, the Bible itself offers guidance in how to determine who is a true prophet in Deuteronomy 18:20-22) But in the end David decides that his "purpose" is fighting for his life-surrendering spiritual experience. Eli comes around: "David had a feeling. I saw George Michael. Is that crazy? If it inspires us to change our lives for the better, then I hope, I pray, that we're all crazy." (Gertel n.p.)

Though Gertel, with his obvious bias for his presumably Jewish audience, disparages the religious representation of the Jewish faith on *Eli Stone*, the representation, like that of Catholicism, has no claws. It is not meant to directly challenge Judaism's tenets. Both sides use the Torah to support their positions, and the episode ends with David dying and Rebecca letting him go. The court case is not even occurring in narrative reality; it is a

vision that may connect Eli and David in the ether but has little bearing on any other character. Judaism, despite being central to the episode's plot, becomes merely another means to articulate Eli's chosenness as a visionary.

A later *Eli Stone* episode, in contrast to the show's non-challenging portrayals of Catholicism and Judaism, overtly criticizes Christianity's stance on homosexuality and transgendered individuals. In "Two Ministers," Eli takes on the case of a female-to-male transgendered Methodist pastor, Reverend Stills, who was fired from his congregation following his transition. The episode is clear in its message: Tolerance and love for fellow human beings is essential to the teachings of Christianity, but the institutions and some adherents to Christianity use religion to ostracize and condemn those different from them. It is an oft-repeated message in progressive fictional media that want to open space for all people in religion (particularly Christianity); recent examples range from *The West Wing* to *Glee*.<sup>13</sup> But *Eli Stone* gives it a foregrounded stage that, while not new or unique, is somewhat refreshing in a series that weaves religion into its essential fabric. Almost every discussion any character has with Rev. Stills is kindly didactic, with the good reverend confronting prejudices one lawyer at a time. He is less a character than a political device but nevertheless an effective and affecting one. The politics of the episode are most clearly put on display when Eli's colleague and second chair for the case, Keith, who also happens to be a member of Rev. Stills's congregation, attends a bible study led by Stills and populated with transgendered students. Rev. Stills explains, "There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." That's not a

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<sup>13</sup> "Pilot," "The Midterms," *The West Wing*; "Grilled Cheesus," *Glee*.

defense of transgenderedness, but it is an affirmation of spiritual equality, where each of us has equal access to God” (“Two Ministers”). In this scene, religion, specifically Christianity, is used to confront and comfort those who face persecution because of their non-normative gender identities and performance.

In another episode of season two, "Should I Stay Or Should I Go," Islam is the central religion represented, but not in nearly as nuanced a light as Methodist Christianity is in “Two Ministers.” Eli decides to defend a couple who are facing fraud and deportation charges because the government discovered that their marriage was for the purpose of gaining a green card for the wife, Sana from Pakistan. Though this client does not come to Eli through his visions, the frank—and somewhat simplistic—representation of Islam makes the case significant to the study of religion. Sana married a gay man, her friend Carter, to stay in the country but falls in love with Carter's straight friend, Will. Thus, she insists, she will be seen as a compromised woman should she return to Pakistan and will face the consequences of her actions—becoming "westernized," marrying a non-Muslim, and primarily, having sex out of wedlock—in the form of an honor killing.

The case engages an idea prevalent in Western feminism that while possibly true has been argued against in some postcolonial feminist discourses: that women are pure victims of patriarchal Islamic societies. Feminist scholar Saba Mahmood, herself from Pakistan, argues for a different way of viewing agency in Islamic societies. In *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Mahmood writes:

[I]f the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes “change” and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency

cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but on that can be understood only from within the discourses and structure of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. (14-15)

"Should I Stay or Should I Go?" illustrates the feminist conception of agency that Mahmood is arguing has become monolithic. In her study, it is not that women are not oppressed in patriarchal societies, but that feminist discourses—especially liberal feminist discourses—about the situations have not adequately questioned their own assumptions about power and resistance. She asks, "[D]oes the category of resistance impose a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power—a teleology that makes it hard for us to see and understand norms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms?" (Mahmood 9).

This episode of *Eli Stone* and its portrayal of a modern, educated Pakistani woman who seeks escape from honor killings through her relationships with two men (four if you count Eli and his second chair Matt) is a little troubling in its un-self-critical simplicity. Though it is far from unique for Eli's cases to conclude based on the merits and morality of love—romantic, familial, or humanistic—this plot rings particularly shallow. Sana has almost completely assimilated and shows no loss or love for her past culture. She is the paragon of what Mahmood sees as the central arrogance of liberal feminism's idea of Islamic women: once outside the reach of her patriarchal religion and culture, she resembles the liberated Western woman. As is often the case with a one-

episode character and plot in a procedural formula, Sana is less a realized character and more a plot device used to awaken moral outrage in both the viewer and regular characters. Yet the questions such a plot raises in relation to representations of gender and religion together, especially in the context of Islam on American television, are neither small nor easy, especially when engaged by post-structuralist and postcolonial feminist scholarship like that Mahmood offers.

Beyond these overt portrayals of traditional religions, beginning late in the first season, *Eli Stone* offers connection to the "Live Brave" movement, headed by Eli, through flash-forwards. The "Live Brave" movement, while ostensibly not a religion, provides Eli with a platform and an organization for his potential as a prophet, but it is also only seen in Eli's visions that maintain the fantastic hesitancy. Eli may see the "Live Brave" movement through divinely inspired prophetic visions of the future or because the aneurysm is pushing on his frontal lobe. The fantastic hesitancy, in conjunction with the paucity of visions involving "Live Brave," does not provide enough information to allow me to discuss the movement as a religion, but only as a possibly unifying institution to the various religious elements that comprise Eli Stone's place as a possible prophet.

As I have already discussed, Eli transitions from atheist to believer because of his visions, but the "religion" that he comes to believe in remains vague and undefined. The conception of religion for Eli hews closest to Newcomb's conception of television's amorphously represented religion. In "Faith," Eli's religious guru, acupuncturist, comparative religion scholar, and friend, Frank, counters Eli's proclamation that he doesn't believe in God by saying, "Sure you do. You believe in right and wrong, you

believe in justice, in fairness, and you believe in love. All those things, they're God, Eli" ("Faith"). Time and again for *Eli Stone*, religion is conceptualized as a kind of religious bricolage with concepts and tenets from Christianity, Judaism, and even some Taoism (with his father representing the continued presence of ancestors in the lives of the present) to support his position as a potential prophet. But, as he is introduced during the "Live Brave" rally, he also "reminds us that every one of us, the least of us is still divine" ("Patience"). Is that enough to conceptualize Eli as within a religious context? Or is it just playing into Gertel's criticism of the program as shunning traditional religion in favor of "New Age doctrines and moralities" (Gertel n.p.)? Eli's visions hold the key to these questions, for their existence in the hesitancy of the fantastic allows for both medical materialism and divine inspiration to exist conterminously as explanations for the visions. This interpretation can similarly extend to a both/and reading of religion on *Eli Stone*. Because his visions are only possibly divine, their presence does not require or necessarily reveal an ultimate truth. Religion in the fantastic can take the "truth" of traditional religions and marry it to the flexibility of New Age religious bricolage that by its nature allows space for both many "truths" and no single "Truth."

Among the many truths available through Eli's fantastic visions are alternative representations and conceptions of God. The representations of God transition from George Michael, a gay man, to a woman, and finally to Eli's father, an arc that reflects the trajectory of religious representation on *Eli Stone*. The traditional religious representation called on by these forms of God move from subversive to patriarchal over the course of the series simultaneous with a lessening emphasis of the bricolage religious



representation that allows for God to be conceptual but not necessarily embodied. Eli's belief in right and wrong, justice, fairness, and love ultimately seem to matter less than his belief in God and his coupling with the woman who God deems Eli's "soul mate," marking a possible shift from the idea of many religious truths to one. That one "Truth" appears to be that God can be represented as Eli's Father, reaffirming a masculinist, Christian narrative of God-the-Father and his appropriately masculine and heterosexual chosen prophet.

***WONDERFALLS: SIGNIFYING NOTHING?***

Of *Wonderfalls's* thirteen episodes, two are focused explicitly on religion: "Wound-Up Penguin" concerns Catholicism and "Totem Mole" explores the animist religion of the indigenous Satsuma tribe. Like *Eli Stone*, *Wonderfalls* examines known religions through individual episodic plots that allow for the fantastic visionary character to interact with traditional religions without necessarily accepting them. *Wonderfalls* sets these episodes in opposition to each other, one focal religion as an alternative of the other within the context of the series as a whole. "Wound-Up Penguin" focuses on a run-away nun who doubts the existence of God, and "Totem Mole" follows Jaye trying to find a spiritual leader for the Satsuma tribe while avoiding the role herself. Jaye resists both religions, but to varying and telling degrees. In these episodes especially, Jaye's varying resistance to each belief system reveals a Generation-Y accessible feminist approach to religion. Jaye has the power to open religious space for young feminists because the show explicitly creates her—and more importantly allows her to create herself—as a metonymic symbol for Generation Y and feminism. In "Karma Chameleon," Jaye

discovers herself the subject of a young journalist's investigative article about Generation Y. By the directive of the muse of that week, a plush chameleon, Jaye writes the article herself but submits it under the name of the young journalist. The image of the magazine cover is shown advertising "The Truth About Generation-Y," and with it, Jaye becomes the arbiter of that truth. It is a role that the young journalist Bianca foreshadows as she writes a brief description of Jaye: "Jaye Tyler, a philosopher, resides in Niagara Falls, where she inspires with effortless and undemanding style" ("Karma Chameleon"). Though the appellation "philosopher" refers to Jaye's Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from Brown University, it also gives Jaye some inspirational and moralistic weight albeit specifically outside of religion.

Jaye's position as symbol for Generation Y fits with my analysis of Jaye as a feminist who is perhaps postfeminist in terms of generation but does not adhere to the postfeminist sensibility as described by Rosalind Gill. In "Postfeminist Media Culture," Gill identifies the themes of postfeminist sensibility as prevalent in contemporary media culture:

The notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice, and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis on consumerism and the commodification of difference.  
(149)

For Jaye, sex and sexuality are present but peripheral. She is a desiring subject, but her desire for her love-interest, Eric, is a desire for love more than sex, a desire the show implies is new for Jaye ("Caged Bird"). The setting precludes a focus on the body as

most scenes are set in the cold of Niagara Falls, with Jaye wearing heavy sweaters or jackets that occasionally hide and often deemphasize her body. Though Jaye does display “irony . . . as a way of establishing a safe distance between oneself and particular sentiments of beliefs,” this irony is not used as in postfeminist sensibility to express “sexist, homophobic, or otherwise unpalatable sentiments” (Gill “Postfeminist” 159). Instead, Jaye’s pervasive irony and sarcasm are other markers of her Generation-Y status and serve to balance out the whimsical tone of the series.

Though Jaye does not fit Gill’s formulation of the postfeminist sensibility, I posit that Jaye is a postfeminist as feminist scholars Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read define it: as a generational trait for whom “feminism exists at the level of common sense” (238). Jaye assumes a level of gender equality and often ignores power differentials that may be based in gender difference. For example, when a male coworker is promoted above her, she does not raise the issue of gender discrimination (“Wax Lion”). Instead she understands this experience as related to her general apathy and lack of effort at work; while that may be contributive, the question of gender’s role in the promotion never appears. This assumed equality and general apathy, in addition to her ironic distance, are more central to Jaye’s sense of identity than sexual difference, taking for common sense that she is basically equal to the men around her. This internalization of feminism serves as an explanation for Jaye’s resistance to the patriarchal systems of religion (and capitalism) that contradict her assumption of gender equality, a resistance seen clearly in her confrontation with Christianity in “Wound-Up Penguin.”

In “Wound-Up Penguin,” the plot-motivating directive from the titular toy penguin is “Bring her back to him.” Jaye spends much of the episode working on the assumption that the “her” refers to Sister Katrina and the “him” as “Him,” meaning God. Thus, Jaye’s attempts to cement and justify Sister Katrina’s Catholic religious convictions comprise most of the episode’s plot (but her Catholicism is flattened out to “fit the public realm” and therefore also resembles a generalized Christianity) (Roof 64). However, much of this episode reveals the desperation and depression that result from the disconnect Sister Katrina feels as a result of God not speaking to her. She tells Jaye, “The microorganisms in this cheese tell me God exists . . . God Himself, however, hasn’t told me anything. Not really, not definitively and certainly not out loud” (“Wound-Up Penguin”).<sup>14</sup> Sister Katrina’s feelings of disconnect arise from her inability to listen outside of the language and symbol system created by Christianity, in contrast to Jaye who may hear God speak through objects as inanimate as the cheese. She needs explicit, definitive words spoken by “God Himself,” revelation based on doctrinal precedent, and because of that need, she dismisses any other possible avenues of communication and connection. She says, “This cheese tells me,” but she refuses to listen to what the cheese is metaphorically saying because it is outside the codes of Christian symbols of faith. For her, truth is inexorably linked with dogma and tradition.

The directive from the voices refers neither to “Him” nor to Sister Katrina, but instead to the priest sent to Niagara to look for her and to the priest’s unknown daughter

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<sup>14</sup> Since *Wonderfalls* features many objects speaking that do not normally, I feel I must point out that Sister Katrina does not know about Jaye’s auditory visions at this point in the episode and is speaking metaphorically.

conceived before he took his holy vows. Jaye's machinations at the behest of the voices lead to the priest discovering his daughter's existence and being reunited with her and her mother. The last image of him in his clerical collar forms a new trinity, with the mother standing, one hand on her daughter's shoulder and the Father—now a father—kneeling to be level with his daughter. No longer a patriarchal conduit to faith and God, he is now a novice in a family of women. Though this discovery does reaffirm Sister Katrina's faith—she calls it a “miracle”—Jaye maintains the outcome is a “happy coincidence” (“Wound-Up Penguin”). Jaye's actions not only de-center the patriarchy of Catholicism with the creation of this new trinity, they also lead to Sister Katrina's return to what she calls the “sisterhood” of nuns, placing her at the center of Catholic community as the priest removes his collar and decides not to return to his church. Moreover, Jaye refuses to acknowledge her acts within that system of Christian language. To concede to a “miracle” or to agree when her love interest, Eric, says she is “like a saint” would counteract the openness provided her by existing with the voices in the “space-off,” for Christianity as a key western “knowledge-power” apparatus in which Jaye maintains her position in the interstices.

In contrast to Jaye's strong resistance to Christianity—at one point she says, “I didn't do anything wrong. Why do I have to go to church?”—her resistance is slightly lessened regarding the animist religion of the Satsuma tribe (“Wound-Up Penguin”). Partially due to the presentation of this religion as outside Western patriarchal-labeling religious systems in general and in specific opposition to the system of Christianity, and also due to the representation of indigenous religious power as matrilineal, the Satsuma

religion represents a model more open to women. “Totem Mole” breaks the series’ pattern in terms of the voices’ form, for Jaye converses with the dead female spiritual leader, Gentlefeather, before she and the audience realize that Gentlefeather is dead. This is the only time in the series that Jaye hears the voices through an object not animal and not manufactured, and it supports an animist reading of the voices. If all things have spirit or soul, then human, animal, or manufactured all have the potential to communicate.

At least, that is the position implied by both Gentlefeather and Jaye’s unnamed male Satsuma guide. Gentlefeather tells Jaye, “They speak to you in many voices and many forms. You have been sought out for a great purpose. You have been chosen,” and the Satsuma man says, “Lots of things seem to cling to you, including the spirits of old women” (“Totem Mole”). Both instances imply equal ground between the voices and the spirit of Gentlefeather. Jaye, however, refuses to be “chosen,” saying, “I’m not a leader. I need a leader who can talk to dead grandma and find out how to lift a particular burden of mine” (“Totem Mole”). Though she resists the position of leader, she never disparages the Satsuma religion, and unlike her experience with Christianity, her actions further support the religious system instead of de-centering it. Instead she seems open to its animism as a possible explanation for the voices, but one that she refuses to follow beyond possibility to assertion or certainty. She ends the episode with this openness, saying, “I’m not so sure if my burden’s a burden or not” (“Totem Mole”). She does not commit or even imply commitment to the Satsuma tribes’ religion, but she also does not

deny the possibility of its relevancy as she does regarding Christianity in “Wound-Up Penguin.”

Similar to the plot of “Wound-Up Penguin,” “Totem Mole” revolves around Jaye’s misapprehension as to whom the voices refer. The directive is “Show him who’s special.” She assumes “who’s special” alludes to her and which she tries to interpret as Gentlefeather’s accountant grandson, Bill Houton. In both episodes, Jaye’s assumptions are predicated on patriarchy, due to her upbringing within a Christian and capitalist context, and are revealed as false. In “Wound-Up Penguin”, she tries to affirm the patriarchal system of God, Satan, and the clergy for Sister Katrina. In “Totem Mole” she attempts to use blood lineage—historically in Western culture a way to pass on patriarchal power—to supercede the gender connection among women as the mode of religious power transference. Bill Houton does not pass any of the tribes’ tests of spiritual chosenness without Jaye’s help, but because she refused the call and Bill is not “who’s special,” the voices issue a second, minor, directive that leads to tribal lawyer Diana Littlefoot being chosen. Gentlefeather appears to Diana, and she accepts the calling, another female spiritual leader of the Satsuma.

Though Jaye avoids the language-symbol systems of traditional religions, other characters conceptualize her within known religious traditions. In a discussion between Jaye's brother, Aaron, and Dr. Ron, Jaye's psychologist, a comparison to Moses is suggested:

DR. RON: Who do you think she's talking to?

AARON: You mean who do I think she thinks she’s talking to?

DR. RON: No, I mean who do you think she's talking to.

AARON: She's not talking to anybody!

DR. RON: Aren't you getting your Ph.D. in comparative religions?

AARON: Yeah, so?

DR. RON: Moses talked to a bush, didn't he? ("Muffin Buffalo")

Aaron becomes the only regular character to know about Jaye's visions, and he is among the most fundamentally changed by them. He begins the series as an avowed atheist despite his scholastic study of religion, but Jaye's visions directly challenge his lack of belief. He says, "I was fine when existence had no meaning. Meaninglessness in a universe that had no meaning: that I get. But meaninglessness in a universe that has meaning: what does it mean?" ("Muffin Buffalo"). He faces an existential crisis as he ponders the possibility that his sister may be a prophet. He looks for meaning in the animals, placing them on his desk surrounded by cameras, waiting for them to talk. They do not, which implies that the power rests within Jaye or between them and Jaye (or that she's just having a continuous psychological episode that makes her believe the animal collectibles are talking to her). Jaye may be a prophet, a philosopher, a symbol of Generation Y, a miracle worker, or a chosen leader to others, but to herself, she is none of these things, maintaining her place outside of other language-symbol systems that are part of traditional religions. Jaye's place in the "space-off" of traditional religious systems is afforded her by the fantastic nature of her visions. The fantastic hesitancy allows for her choice to decide not only which explanation to ascribe to her visions' origins but also not to choose an explanation and resist the structures of power and perhaps patriarchy that such explanations would require.



## CONCLUSION

*Wonderfalls*, *Eli Stone*, and *Battlestar Galactica* share a sensibility that seeks engagement with traditional religions, either through direct confrontation or the displacement of allegory, but each program approaches such engagement from a different tack. Where *Wonderfalls* and *Eli Stone* use one-off episodes to enter into an explicit dialogue with traditional religions, *Battlestar Galactica* removes the trappings of religious traditions through allegory and thus forces dialogue on the level of symbols. Both methods attempt to support further the programs' formulation of their visionaries either within or in opposition to the tropes, tenets, and rituals that create the language-symbol system of their contextual religions. The fact that all three programs delve significantly into at least two religions allows for the possibility of a plurality of tolerance as well as of condemnation. For the most part, no one religion is held to a higher standard (all face challenges based on gender favoritism or prejudice) or is seen as granting access to a higher truth (all truths and/or no truth are possibilities), allowing all the potential of the various religions to inhabit the open space created by the fantastic visionary, whether they are recognizable, allegorical, or amorphous.

The representations of religion in these three series form the framework for the visionaries and their visions and are informed by the flexibility of the fantastic and the visionaries' ambivalent gender performances as well as the presumed pressures of commercial television. Controversial representations of religion are often deemed commercially dangerous, but the ambiguity of the fantastic allows for challenges to patriarchal religious norms to be seen by millions without definitively endangering

goodwill. The fantastic provides that potential power but it also always holds it in check through the possibility of the medical materialist explanation for fantastic visions. One can dismiss the subversive image of George-Michael-as-God by interpreting it as a mere hallucination, diverting but not divisive. However, the fantastic also requires the contemplation of both possible explanations for fantastic visions, even if only briefly. Even the most dismissive proponent of one explanation must hesitate to consider the other, and in that moment there is potential for feminist power of challenge or subversion.

## Conclusion

The fantastic is both rich with and constricting of the possibility of power, but such potential is not necessarily linked with progress. The tension between the potential for subverting or challenging dominant norms and structures and the inherent and necessary indeterminacy lies at the center of my study. Indeterminacy, by its nature, defies stability. Victor Turner theorizes: “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols” (*Ritual* 94). The liminal state is bound by closure; in Turner’s study of the ritual process, liminality in ritual operates in the space between two orders of societal laws and conventions, such as between child and adult. In *Battlestar Galactica*, *Eli Stone*, and *Wonderfalls*, fantastic visions operate in the space between conventional and progressive representations. The liminal state of the fantastic is both open to the potentials afforded its “and/or” position but also restricted because movement out of the fantastic indeterminacy necessarily occludes potentials.

Throughout my study—and especially due to my focus on the fantastic—I have tried to bring religion out of the numinous realm and into the material and mediated world I inhabit. Religion is so often thought of as a thing-in-itself, a sacred space that is removed by degree or kind from everyday experience. There is a long history in religious studies in which scholars debate religion’s *sui generis* characterization, an *a priori*

distinction that situates religion as a concept of its own kind and thus never completely knowable. While this debate still rages in religious studies, it occupies only the fringes of my study of fantastic visionaries. The lens of the *sui generis* debate is useful for examining the general approach to representations of religion on television—often explicit but not analyzed or obscured and implicitly unknowable—and underlines why I made the selections I did.

In the literature on religion on television there is less material on representation through a degree of displacement and allegory than I'd argue is merited. As discussed in my introduction, much of the literature discussing representations of religion on television falls into one of two categories: 1) studies discussing explicit representations of religion on television through either fictional programs, like *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*, or televangelism; or 2) studies that examine religion that is almost nothing but metaphor, the amorphous spirituality Horace Newcomb identifies. Both categories imply a *sui generis* argument because of their treatment of religion as either wholly visible or wholly obscured. That is, religion on *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* is accepted as religion because it is presented explicitly as a realistic reflection of known religious teachings. In turn, an amorphous representation of religion may help guard against dividing an audience yet presents religion as ultimately unknowable through its ambiguity. Although individual studies within these categories are more nuanced than this dichotomy, the gestalt reading I gained through my research illuminates a relative dearth of studies dealing with representations of religion that are mediated but still recognizably religious.

I turned to telefantasy as a location for the most direct attention to such a representation of religion, using this non-verisimilitudinous genre as an entry point into this debate. By its nature, telefantasy deals with narratives that require a degree of displacement from “reality.” Telefantasy’s narrative worlds facilitate interpretation and resist *sui generis* definitions of religion because representations of religion are folded into the non-verisimilitudinous stories. They must face the same scrutiny and interpretation that all other narrative aspects—including other representations—face, drawing them out of whatever numinous realm they might occupy. A concept only of its kind cannot easily exist in a world constructed by the frame of displacement. Thus, telefantasy was the most fertile ground for my study of religious representations mediated by television, and programs that hesitate in the fantastic dramatize the tension between knowable and unknowable religion. Studying religion in telefantasy programs requires ontological scrutiny that fits well with other studies of representation on television.

Representations of religion and representations of gender on television manifest in some similar ways and thus demand similar levels of examination. For both, the line between criticism of an ideology and perpetuation of that ideology can become blurred, and both require a critical examination of the foundational definitions that undergird their representations. Moreover, gender and religion have been interrelated through Western history, with many conceptions of masculinity, femininity, and proper gender performance dictated by early religious conceptions of family, church, and society as concentric circles of influence. Yet their mutual influence is sometimes left only to (feminist or queer) religious scholars with few scholars examining their representations in

the realms of culture. I hope that my study will illuminate some of the ways in which representations of both religion and gender can and perhaps should be discussed together. The prospect of religion entering into the realm of identity politics in academic studies was implicitly stated by Stanley Fish in a column for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in which he wrote: “When Jacques Derrida died I was called by a reporter who wanted know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion” (n.p.) Although I have yet to see such a marked change occur in the academy, I think Fish’s point holds because religion has taken such a prominent position in popular discourse but has yet to break through in critical and cultural studies (as evidenced by the relative dearth of non-religious studies sources discussing religious representations). To a degree, my study hopes to bring religion further into academic discourse by examining its representation in television texts, analyzing it as though it were gender or race or class and placing it in conversation with the gender element of identity politics.

By focusing wholly on telefantasy, my study hopes to illuminate the space for religious representation that an increasing amount of discourse finds within that genre. In this way, I hope to contribute to genre studies of telefantasy, particularly the representations and discourses of religion in science fiction, fantasy, and horror programs. Though it appears common knowledge in popular discourses about telefantasy that shows within the science fiction genre often use allegory to convey political messages, there is little attention to the similar ability to convey messages about religion. From *Star Trek* to *Battlestar Galactica*, politics has found its place in science fiction, but

there appears to be an aversion to discussing religion in the same mode. Perhaps this is due to the idea that science fiction—more than fantasy—must adhere to a degree of (secular) logic that appears outside the realm of religious thinking. I would argue, however, that there are equal opportunities to find religious meaning through the allegories of science fiction. The degree of displacement that allows for allegorical readings in telefantasy equally allows space for both skeptics and believers (or at least those looking for religious meanings) to engage with religious discourses. An extension of this aspect of my study would be a reception study among science fiction fans regarding their reading of the religious allegories in *Battlestar Galactica* (as the show in my study most exemplary of science fiction) to see how and why religious elements of the narrative may be embraced or discarded and how the identity marker of religion (or atheism) affects such choices.

Although I did not have the space for it in this work, a turn to industry studies may prove illuminating about a seemingly understudied element of industry practices: How do producers, networks, marketers, and distributors interact with possible religious meanings of television texts? Is displacement through telefantasy seen as a mitigating factor in dealing with potentially polemic or controversial texts? How might religious representation be dictated differently for two programs with shared parentage; i.e., 7<sup>th</sup> *Heaven* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*? These questions must go unanswered for now, but they could prove a useful “next step” to further study of religion and telefantasy.

To conclude I will situate my work within a constellation of examples from contemporary discourse that illustrate the growing attention to religion on television,

particularly the overlay of metaphor and meaning gleaned from telefantasy. In January 2011, the lead story in *TV Guide* magazine explored the apparent rise of religion on popular television. “Keeping the Faith” casts a wide net, exploring explicitly religious (read: Christian) characters and themes on *The Simpsons*, *Bones*, *House*, *Glee*, *Supernatural*, *Hellcats*, *Lost*, *The Middle*, *The Goodwife*, and (in a more religiously inclusive section, mentioning the various religions of characters but only in relation to Christianity) *Community*. This *TV Guide* cover story illustrates the fraught but seemingly increasing presence of religious representations on popular fictional television. The article also illuminates the apparent elision of religion and Christianity on television (the article does title itself “God on TV” on the cover and aims at inclusion with the subtitled question: “Does prime-time TV have a prayer of accurately portraying religion and spirituality?”) (15). As mentioned above, Christianity frames the article, with references to other religions only in relation to Christian representations of religion.

In academia, as already discussed, the majority of discussions of religion on television are focused on televangelism (Roof), amorphous mass-appeal approaches (Newcomb), or reception studies that focus on religious structures in fan practices (Shofield Clark, Hills). However, as recent as 2008, the University of Southern California hosted a lecture series about religion on popular television that evolved into the 2010 anthology *Small Screen, Big Picture*. Beyond traditional academic publications like that anthology, online academic journals like *Flow* and *In Media Res* have published pieces exploring religion on television, and, following *Lost*'s finale in 2010, the personal blogs of established television scholars devoted thousands of words in posts and



comments debating the presence and merits of religious bricolage in its ending. Most prominent among those is Jason Mittell's review on *Antenna* and the continuation of his thoughts on his personal blog *JustTV*. In his *Antenna* post, Mittell reads the final scene—set in a church as an antechamber to the afterlife—as more humanist than religious (Mittell n.p.). Though Mittell's reading aligns with Newcomb's point about vague representations of religion on popular television as a viable strategy of appealing to the broadest audience, it fits within a debate—about *Lost* specifically but also religion on television more generally—that explores the seeming increasingly explicit presentation of religion on popular television. Though there are various historical counterexamples, from *The Goldbergs* to 7<sup>th</sup> *Heaven*, that complicate the assumption of increased representations on contemporary television, in at least the popular press, the discourse itself about religion on television appears to be increasing. The majority of this increased attention to religion on television (at least among those focusing on its ongoing representation within a series) arises from telefantasy programs. *Battlestar Galactica*, *Lost*, and *Supernatural* are prime examples of television's relationship to religion, for each series lasted at least five years, occupying a majority of the early 2000s with religious themes tied to their main serial story arcs. A recent *New York Times* article mentioned this lineage when Bellafante wrote, “In the absence of ‘Battlestar Galactica’ which ended its run two years ago, ‘Supernatural’ is easily the most theistic series on television” (n.p.). In these series, characters face Biblical concepts, such as exile, Heaven, and Hell, as narrative realities. They were perhaps able to do so because of their status as telefantasy programs: the displacement required of their genre afforded them the

option of presenting metaphorically religion as well as their narrative representation of “reality.”

Though not all telefantasy shows explore the liminality of the fantastic hesitancy, telefantasy does allow for the fantastic more than other television genres because displaced verisimilitude makes the marvelous explanation as equally viable as the scientific one. Because the programs are already operating within generic conventions that supercede the assumptions of reality, impossible or unprovable concepts—God(s), faith, and the marvelous causation of religion—remain viable possibilities. Moreover, by using telefantasy as an umbrella term for science fiction, fantasy, and horror, I have been able to analyze shows that mix science fiction and fantasy conventions to align with the space between a medical materialist explanation of a vision (that would often fit science fiction conventions because of its extrapolation of a knowable and logical causation) and a divine explanation (that recalls the long intellectual history, especially in the works of E.B. Tylor, James Frazer, and Max Weber, that links religion and magic). The fantastic requires both possibilities; therefore, it exists most easily in telefantasy.

The fantastic requires liminality, and by this principle it can only represent potentials and possibilities. When occupying the space between science and religion, the fantastic holds both faith and doubt in equal measure. In my study, I have argued that the possibility of subversion of patriarchy has been picked up among the possibilities created by faith and/or doubt in the fantastic, but because the fantastic is only a possibility, it has also given way to the potential reification of patriarchal religious representations. For both *Battlestar Galactica* and *Eli Stone*, the indeterminateness of the fantastic allowed for

both potentials to be explored, but ultimately the representations of visionaries stabilized as the narratives concluded by moving out of the fantastic hesitancy. Both had finales (either series or season) that aimed their narratives toward to determine closures and, as a result, the end of the fantastic. Though I do not wish to fall into the fallacy of determining all meaning from a finale, the movement out of the fantastic is significant for both these programs because it privileges one frame of representation: a traditional patriarchal one over the indeterminate but possibly feminist or queer one. *Wonderfalls*, however, was cancelled in the middle of its run, resulting in a final episode that maintained the fantastic and its potentials by leaving the voices and their origins unexplained and still operative.

I hope that by exploring the fantastic visions, visionaries, and religions on these three telefantasy shows that I have opened space for discussions not only of religious representations on television but also how the representations of traditional religions engage questions of gender performance and privilege. Telefantasy is a fertile site in which creators and viewers can work through contemporary discourses regarding religion and culture and activate spaces for challenging patriarchal traditional religious forms and structures through the displacement of verisimilitude. Even when narratives close off the hesitancy of the fantastic, the moment of hesitation can challenge assumptions of what is “natural” regarding both gender and religion. From the interstices and margins of representation and genre, the potential for activation of alternative discourses rests among those who can take the visions in the fantastic and translate them into actions.

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