(Center Valley, PA) -- Years ago a car maker piggybacked on a popular slogan to create a new marketing campaign: “What would Jesus drive?” NBC television provides us with novel answer. Jesus doesn’t drive, but he does show up as a passenger in the front seat of a station wagon.

With a two-hour broadcast premiere and a flurry of interactive viewer blogs, *The Book of Daniel* strives for religious relevancy in bringing the Savior to suburbia. These epiphanies occur to Daniel Webster, an “unconventional” Episcopalian minister who is addicted to Vicodin, whose wife enjoys her mid-day martinis, whose elder son is gay, and whose daughter is peddling marijuana. Add in an adulterous church hierarchy and an embezzling church staff, and divine counsel, wherever it comes, is quite welcome.

Voices of protest will rise against this show. Crusaders will decry the portrayal of this fictional family, which runs the risk of being upheld as a valid paradigm for society. Believers will object stridently to such a banal caricature of Christ. Many will be enraged, even if unable to articulate why.

While it may be easier to dismiss the hype as a devilish marketing ploy (it could be), and the television show itself as inane entertainment (it is), a deeper issue lingers and calls for critique. What is shown here is the vulgarization of religion in the name of spirituality, a growing trend in contemporary culture.

Quoted on Internet sites, the show’s creator, Jack Kenny, states his conviction that the characters “are very spiritual people. They believe in God, they believe in Christ as their savior, and I think that’s wonderful.” What he does not say is what that belief entails.
Giving voice to a popular dichotomy, he confesses his own belief in Jesus but hastens to add, “I don’t necessarily know that all the myth surrounding him is true.” So he creates his own version of the bearded, white-robed figure. But can one really separate the person of the Christ from the gospel story by which he is known?

Kenny further admits a typical bias when he laments that “Organized religion is, to me, almost the same organism as the Mafia.” This seems to explain how the neighboring Catholic pastor factors into the plot. The only apparent difference, in Kenny’s view, is the legitimacy with which Catholicism skirts the law.

With regard to scripting contentious moral issues, those with which religion is often engaged, Kenny balks that “I would never have Jesus give an opinion about that. But I would have Jesus encourage Daniel to search his own soul for his opinion.” Apparently, this search requires more episodes.

And therein lies the bigger problem. The Jesus created by television makes no truth claims. Religion in this realm has become a spirituality of us. In today’s new age, belief is equated with opinion and worship concerns itself only with a figurative “god” or amorphous “cosmic energy” that makes us feel comfortable.

But religion, by its very definition, binds us back (from the Latin re-ligare). Religious faith ties us to something (beliefs) and to someone (God), however specifically that is articulated. In doing so, religion makes personal demands; its truths call forth existential conviction; its beliefs engender committed action.

To appreciate the religious phenomenon is to realize that eternal truths and the divine being upon whom they are predicated, do not depend on our own opinions, preferences, or desires. The irony of belief is that only when we give ourselves over to that divine someone will we then become fully who we are as human persons.

Pope John Paul II opened his very first encyclical letter to the world with this statement: “The redeemer of man, Jesus Christ, is the center of the universe and of history.” The baldness of that proclamation underscores the fundamental truth of Christian faith and exposes the real thrust of religious belief. That God is at the center of human existence means that we are not the masters of our universe. The implications of that belief, or the lack thereof, provide the dynamics for thinking about the big questions in life, making decisions that affect our future, and relating to others on a daily basis. Overcoming the vicissitudes of our earthly existence through divine grace – this is the relevancy of religion.

Having Jesus show up in a station wagon or in a home beset with social ills need not be a matter for overwrought concern or oppositional outrage. After all, one can always change the channel. For our culture to thrive, what really matters is keeping God in the driver’s seat of one’s life.
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