

Glee's very special episode on faith

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

October 7, 2010



I've never liked show choir, but I love *Glee*. Not primarily for the singing or dancing, though each is sometimes great. I like the show because it gets a lot right about being a teenager—the weird mix of intense emotion and casual pettiness, the hairpin turns of identity creation in process—without getting bogged down by studious realism. It's also hilarious and joyful and strange.

Glee's too self aware to lapse into after-school-special cliches, but it does occasionally slow down to an episode-length "issue" focus. [This week's episode](#) was all about faith. (Warning, spoilers follow.)

Several of the kids in the glee club are Christians and a couple are Jewish, but the one who most needs the group's support at the moment is an atheist. That's Kurt (Chris Colfer), the token gay character in a cast self-consciously stocked with stereotypes, whose dad is in a coma following a heart attack. Predictably, the faith the Christian kids profess reflects an evangelical vocabulary, though they don't get into doctrinal specifics. They do want to pray for and with Kurt, offer uplifting religious songs and do other faith-y kinds of things.

Kurt, who as a gay teenager hasn't had the best interactions with religion, isn't having it. He sums up his feelings in classic theodicy terms: "I think God's kind of like Santa Claus for adults. Otherwise, God's kind of a jerk, isn't he?"

Not bad for network TV, but that's about as sophisticated as *Glee*'s religion angle gets. The religious kids don't know how to reach out to their hurting friend without isolating him; the gay kid's an atheist and rebuffs them. Later, Kurt makes up with his friend Mercedes (Amber Riley) and visits her church, a black church he appreciates primarily for the fashion ("It's so Christ chic!"). She goes up front with the choir, tells Kurt that he doesn't need to believe in God as long as he believes in "something sacred" and then dedicates "Bridge Over Troubled Water" to him. He's learned not to push his friends away, while she's learned that the way to do church inclusively is to not go overly Jesus with the song selections.

[Once again](#), pop culture offers us more-or-less-evangelical Christianity meeting the secular other in the gauzy common ground of vaguely spiritual friendship. The writers' insistent respect for all their characters (at least the adolescent ones) serves them well in this episode. But it would have been more *interesting* if its treatment of faith boiled down to something richer than simply dissolving the tension between those who talk to their personal friend Jesus and those who think that's kind of stupid.

Toward the end we get this from Kurt, at his father's bedside: "I don't believe in God, Dad. But I believe in you. And I believe in us, you and me. That's what's sacred to me." This follows Kurt's earlier musical number, a rendition ([borrowed from T. V. Carpio](#)) of "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" as a slow, sad song sung to his dad.

Despite Colfer's limits as a singer, it's a powerful performance, the highlight of the episode. It's also the only song without some sort of religion theme—Kurt's the one who doesn't feel the need to make things about God. Hopefully the *Glee* writers won't in the future either, unless they manage to give us a bit more to chew on.