

TV's favorite serial killer finds religion

by [Piet Levy](#)

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(RNS) That whole "Thou shalt not kill" part of the Ten Commandments seems pretty clear -- except maybe to Dexter Morgan, the beloved serial killer protagonist in Showtime's hit drama, "Dexter."

Dexter lives by his own commandment -- the "Code of Harry," bequeathed by his father to help his sociopathic son survive -- by ridding the world of killers before they can harm anyone else.

But for the series' sixth season that begins on Sunday (Oct. 2), the unbelieving Dexter appears ready to find religion.

Forever wrestling with his inner demons, the new season finds Dexter exploring issues of faith and spiritual conviction as he tries to enroll his son in a Catholic preschool and squares off against two men who are killing in the name of God.

"It's outrageous enough to make really good television," said Emory University professor Gary Laderman, a follower of the show and an expert in -- of course -- American death rituals.

The edgy "Dexter" marketing campaign features the lead character (Michael C. Hall) mimicking Christ's crucifixion in a pool of blood. He walks amongst religious statues to the sounds of Leonard Cohen's

"Hallelujah" as he contemplates whether his urge to kill might be a "calling" that serves "a higher purpose."

"It's very provocative to put Dexter, whose goodness is always under debate, in these typically religious scenes," said Diane Winston, who teaches about religion, media and TV at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. "It's like daring the audience to imagine him as a fallen angel -- or possibly a real angel."

The new season's themes are deliberately designed to build on last season's series high. At an August press conference in Los Angeles, Showtime president David Nevins suggested it was good for business for "Dexter" to "push into taboo subjects."

The new season's major villains are a religious professor (Edward James Olmos) and his protege (Colin Hanks), who quote the Book of Revelation and commit some of the most gruesome murders in the show's history. There's also the ignorant murderer with the Jesus tattoo on Dexter's killing table in the season premiere who pleads, "If you let me go, God will give you life everlasting and whatever you want."

Winston, for one, worries that such caricatures "remove the show from the realm of intelligent discussion and into sensationalism."

"I don't blame the `Dexter' producers. People love religious hypocrisy," she said. "But I doubt it's going to be a thoughtful expression of ideas."

But the season's depiction of faith isn't so simple. Countering the killers is another archetype -- the redemptive sinner -- in the role of Brother Sam, a murderer-turned-minister played by Mos Def. In the second

episode, Dexter suspects Sam may be more of a wolf in sheep's clothing, but Sam seems determined to prove he's a changed man.

Does Sam's example inspire Dexter to put down his knives and pick up a cross? Only three episodes have been released to reporters, but the answer is not bloody likely.

Nevertheless, spirituality may inspire Dexter to develop a more mature morality, at least as a single father.

"His son is growing from infancy into being a little boy and is only going to get older and more in need of guidance," Hall said during a panel discussion at this summer's Comic-Con in San Diego. "Dexter is ill-equipped to provide that, so as a result is motivated to find ways to do that, including maybe giving him some sort of spiritual grounding, something Dexter has never really cared about or been preoccupied with, but recognizes his son might need."

In the season premiere, Dexter asks a Catholic preschool's admissions director to consider enrolling his son even though Dexter admitted to having no faith and being "pretty ignorant in spiritual matters."

Dexter's search for a spiritual grounding for his son, and its effect on his own convictions, potentially could transcend more commonplace, simplistic depictions of spirituality on TV, Winston said.

"It speaks to most of us. What do we pass on to our children? How do we model our own life?" Winston said. And that, she added, "has the potential for being more of a thoughtful discussion starter."