

# Angel invasion

by [Melissa Wiginton](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

*From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural.* By Lynn Schofield Clark. Oxford University Press, 284 pp., \$29.95.

Into each generation a Slayer is born. One girl in all the world; a Chosen One. One born with the strength and the skill to fight the vampires, to stop the spread of their evil and the swell of their numbers." So begins the story of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, one among many current television series that portray angels, aliens, witches and paranormal phenomena as part of everyday life. Do these supernatural representations shape the religious lives of teenagers?

This is the question Lynn Schofield Clark, a scholar of media, religion and culture at the University of Colorado School of Journalism and Mass Communication, attempts to answer. She concludes that it depends on what you think religion is. Teens shaped by Protestant Christianity are only minimally influenced. Clark's inquiry reveals what she calls a "religion of the possible"--a belief in and an openness to the possibilities of the supernatural, a belief that often coexists with religious traditions.

While adolescents' interest in supernatural phenomena long predates *Buffy*, Clark correlates the increasing number and intensity of supernatural stories in television and the movies with the rise of evangelicalism in the political arena. Evangelicals brought good and evil--as they defined them--to the fore in public discourse and, in doing so, heightened public imagination about those categories. Media producers seized this opening and began crafting their own stories of good and evil, with angels, aliens and supernatural entities as characters. Clark names this the "dark side of evangelicalism." Thus her question: How do teens determine religious meaning when *Buffy*, *The X-Files* and *Touched by an Angel* stand alongside religious stories in popular culture?

She concludes that teens draw from many different sources to interpret media representations of the supernatural, including their personal experiences, parents and peers. Media characters play lesser roles. Nevertheless, Clark claims, representations of the supernatural do play a role in young people's meaning-

making.

Clark classifies teens into five categories according to how they relate to religion, media and the supernatural: Resisters, Mystical Teens, Experimenters, Traditionalists and the Intrigued. The teens' interpretations range from hostility toward organized religion and an unsystematic embrace of supernatural legends (the Resisters) to making a kind of blurry pastiche of the supernatural and the religious (the Mysticals) to repudiating the supernatural as irrelevant to the personal morality protected by their religious tradition (the Traditionalists). Parental beliefs, strength of religious affiliation and socioeconomic status predict where teens will land in their interpretative position, Clark concludes.

Analyzing these three factors, Clark contends that the further a family is from the dominant culture and the institutions that regulate its power--specifically government and the church--the more likely they are to include supernatural possibilities in their understanding of the world. For example, Clark tells the story of the Pickeringtons, who regularly watch *The X-Files*. Financially successful but not well educated, they feel at odds with what Clark names the "liberal norms of the cultural elite." Therefore, Clark argues, they distrust culturally authoritative sources and consider the alternative realities suggested by television stories as plausible. By giving credence to media-generated supernatural images, these families resist the authority of the dominant culture.

Though Clark acknowledges that media representations of the supernatural lack any liberating political force, she fails to consider the political impact of media, itself an institution of the dominant culture. We need critical reflection on media as a cultural authority if we are fully to understand media as a shaping force, whatever images it presents. Had Clark reflected on the ways in which media breeds passivity and re-inscribes the marginality of those far from the centers of power, she might have been able to provide some clues about how we are to go about empowering youth.

Clark claims this is a work of reflexive, feminist scholarship, but she fails to recommend any concrete responses or actions. Her love of teenagers shines through the book. She tells us that she has spent many years working with youth, particularly in the church, but we never see her commitment to youth fully materialize. While she gives us information about the texture of youth culture and invites us to talk with teens about their media interpretations, she nowhere offers a faithful response to the "religion of the possible." She rightly avoids any overly simplistic labeling of the effects of supernatural representations as good or bad;

however, by stopping short of asking theological questions and extending them into the practical life of the church, she left this reader dissatisfied.