

TV Protestants

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [April 2, 2014](#) issue



An episode of AMC's *The Walking Dead* features a scene in a Baptist church that has a Catholic-looking crucifix. HBO's new series *True Detective* includes a scene in which a fundamentalist preacher crosses himself. These are two isolated examples of how the people involved in making television shows and movies don't know or don't care about the differences between different forms of Christianity.

I always cringe when I see this kind of incongruity on television or in film. The theology nerd in me wants the media to get it right. Why don't the producers check their portrayals of religion with somebody who is actually religious?

If I am annoyed by media missteps related to my area of expertise, I can only imagine how medical doctors, lawyers, and police officers must feel. I'm also aware that, on one level, my annoyance doesn't really matter that much. It shouldn't be surprising that visual media, in the quest to tell a good story, fail at theological accuracy.

The iconoclastic vein that runs through Protestantism may simply have made some Protestant traditions more difficult to portray than Catholic Christianity. Protestant suspicion of imagery may have made us hard to see. The act of tracing the cross over one's body is both recognizable enough to make the character religious and strange enough to make the character countercultural. It's hard to think of a

distinctly Protestant equivalent.

Protestants who don't cross themselves might want to consider how we go about the work of "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor. 4:10). I'm not suggesting we jettison the whole Reformation tradition regarding images. That tradition is focused on rejecting idolatry, and rejecting idolatry has to be central to how all Christians think about visual images. But we may want to consider what exactly about our faith is visible.

It may also be the case that the meandering history of American denominationalism and nondenominationalism has left the world at large with an impression of Christianity as a generic muddy soup. It may have become impossible from the outside—where more and more people live—to tell various Christianities apart.

We could say this is because Christians have become better at showing Christian unity, but I don't think that's the case. More likely, we look indistinguishable because we've both failed to realize unity and failed to embody the beautiful particularities of our various Christian traditions.

The visual imagery used to portray Christianity is not, in fact, our biggest image problem. Christianity is often portrayed as anti-intellectual. Or joyless. Or hypocritical. NBC's *Dracula* features a quasi-Christian "order of the dragon" and identifies Christianity with murderous power-mongering. It is one thing for a producer at HBO to disregard the differences among Christians traditions. But it is another thing if the world can't tell the difference between disciples of Jesus Christ and those who twist the name of Christ into something vicious and ugly. It's not unreasonable for Christians to be interested in telling a truer story.

In 1939 Dorothy Sayers noted that "whenever an average Christian is presented in a novel or a play, he is pretty sure to be practicing one or all of the Seven Deadly Virtues." The disastrous virtues Sayers has in mind? "Respectability, childishness, mental timidity, dullness, sentimentality, censoriousness, and depression of spirits."

The solution, Sayers insisted, is not to convince the media to get us right. It is instead to witness to what is good, beautiful, and true. Some good may come of the media misrepresentations of Christianity if it encourages Christians to give a more faithful witness, showing Christ to a world that doesn't even know him well enough to mock him properly.