Glee-wind: Grilled Cheesus

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Episode background: Major character Finn Hudson accidentally burns his grilled cheese sandwich, imprinting one side of it with the face of Jesus Christ. Finn takes this as a sign to take his nominal Christianity more seriously, irony intended by the writers it seems as Finn begins to pray to his sandwich which he now refers to as Grilled Cheesus. Every trivial and selfish thing Finn asks of Grilled Cheesus comes to pass; meanwhile, Finn's Glee Club friend Kurt might be losing his father to heart disease – it doesn't dawn on Finn to pray for Kurt or his father; instead he prays that he might be quarterback again.

Most of the Glee kids turn to their faith in trying to deal with the news of Kurt's father and more poignantly, the immense pain of their friend. Kurt refuses to be comforted with his friends' prayers or anything which derives from religious faith, which he considers ridiculous, irrelevant, and ignorant.

So… Grilled Cheesus the sacred sandwich very well may be the most sacrilegious (and hilarious) thing since *Monty Python*. But the episode as a whole really brought some very important spiritual issues to the table. Issues like: It's okay to publicly deny faith but not proclaim it. Conundrums like: You can't prove God doesn't exist and you can't prove he does. Problems like Hell; questions like: Why does it sometimes seem God answers prayers about winning football games but not about real human pain and suffering. It also highlights the fact that, for many, intellectual objections toward, and knee-jerk reactions against, religion are often on some level a shield protecting deeply painful, deeply real experiences: Sue's inability to pray hard enough to help her "handicapable" sister, Kurt's being rejected and marginalized and bullied by

those who should love him most. Sure, both Sue and Kurt misunderstand certain aspects of God's nature and the way he works in the world. But so what? That can't really be addressed until we walk with them in their pain, like Mercedes does. Mercedes didn't give up on loving Kurt even after he rejected her and ridiculed her religion out of the abyss of his pain. She wasn't pushy. She just loved him. She "had [him] at 'fabulous hat'."

This episode seems to reject Sue's wrong, but widely held, understanding of separation of Church and State. The episode seems to reject Kurt's aggressive atheism (so at least it's equal opportunity religious tolerance), growing him from this position to one that's more open – to others' spirituality and how that affects the way they inevitably relate to him if nothing else. "Grilled Cheesus" rejects the moralistic therapeutic deism rampant among Christian teens (and adults); and through Emma's talk with Finn it also rejects over-spiritualizing everything that happens. The episode affirms the reality of religious doubt and uncertainty and the often person-relative struggles of everyone's own spiritual journeying, which we should affirm. It affirms religious pluralism, which we reject. (See Bethany Keeley-Jonker's post at ThinkingChristian.com which makes this important point about Mercedes's pluralism.)

There's much, much more to dig out and explore in this episode, which isn't uncommon for *Glee*. And there are multiple possible interpretations among all that lies beneath, and that isn't uncommon for *Glee* either; things are often complicated and ambiguous. You can't judge *Glee* by a single episode, or by what's on the surface. It's a project where characters and ideas are allowed to grow and develop in real-life messiness.

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