

Quarreling with God

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [June 6, 2001](#) issue

God so rarely is taken seriously on television that it came as a shock when President Josiah Bartlet on *The West Wing* orders his Secret Service detail to block all entrances to the National Cathedral so that he might have a little one-on-one with the Lord. The president wants to talk about divine justice following the funeral of his longtime friend and personal assistant, Mrs. Landingham, killed when her car was hit by a drunken driver.

The day has not gone well for Bartlet. The American embassy in Haiti is under siege. The country is about to learn that their president has multiple sclerosis, a fact he kept from voters at election time; his party doesn't want him to run for reelection; and his enemies are calling for a special prosecutor to see if he violated any laws by keeping his illness from the public. Then, just when he needs her the most, Mrs. Landingham is taken from him.

In a flashback to 1960, we see the emerging relationship between Bartlet, the prep school student, and Landingham, the school's administrative assistant. She recognizes his promise and sees through his defensive shield and his effort to avoid confrontation with his father, the headmaster, who, as she later tells him, "is a prick."

This season's final episode of *The West Wing*, titled "Two Cathedrals," considers God's role in human affairs. A typical television script touches lightly on conventional emotions, just enough to hold a viewer's attention between ads, but not so much that any serious thought is required. When religion shows up, it's usually in the form of sweet angels answering distress calls or seasonal programs that offer either bland portrayals of piety or literal stories of a bearded young Jesus on a walkabout in a first-century desert.

The West Wing, which for two seasons has insightfully examined the personal and political lives of staff members working for a liberal Democratic president, is different. The program is a joy to watch, a reminder of what television might be had it not descended into the "vast wasteland" of exploitative mediocrity.

With the cathedral doors closed to all, Bartlet (played by Martin Sheen) begins an angry confrontation by addressing God as “you son of a bitch,” followed by a sarcastic “gratias tibi ago, domine” (“Thank you, Lord”). Speaking in a mixture of English and Latin, he offers a checklist of the Job-like woes that have struck him.

There are no subtitles for the Latin, but Michael Myer has offered this translation on a Web site:

Haec credam a deo pio, a deo justo, a deo scito? (“Am I to believe these things from a righteous god, a just god, a wise god?”). Cruciatus in crucem (“To hell with your punishments!” [literally, “Put/send punishments onto a cross”]). Tuus in terra servus, nuntius fui; officium perfeci (“I was your servant, your messenger on the earth; I did my duty”). Cruciatus in crucem (with a dismissive wave of the hand)—eas in crucem (“To hell with your punishments! And to hell with you!” [literally, “May you go to a cross”]).

Bartlet, a strong Catholic and a graduate of Notre Dame, has revealed his religious side before. Once, while interviewing a person seeking asylum from the People’s Republic of China who claimed to have suffered religious persecution, Bartlet led his visitor into a discussion of Judges 12, looking for the correct pronunciation of “shibboleth.” When his visitor passes the test, the president knows at least that his visitor has a grasp of the Bible.

In the cathedral episode’s concluding moments, Bartlett, briefly forgetting that Landingham is dead, shouts for her to come close a door, which has blown open in a storm. Evoked in memory, she comes into his thoughts, and her voice rebukes him for his faulty theological reasoning: “God doesn’t make cars crash and you know it. Stop using me as an excuse.”

With Dire Straits’ song “Brothers in Arms” playing on the soundtrack, the president, his courage restored, is driven through the storm to a State Department auditorium where he confronts the media. Asked if he will run for reelection, he smiles slightly, and shoves his hands into his pocket—body language which, we have learned earlier from Landingham, means that he has made up his mind to do the right thing. But we will have to wait until next season to see what it is.

Mrs. Landingham won’t be back as his secretary, but look for her to return as his conscience, the voice of the one friend who knew him well enough to know that his anger with God is really unresolved anger toward his father. She will also be around

to remind him of words he used in the cathedral, a quotation from Graham Greene:
“You can’t conceive, nor can I, the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.”