

ABC's *Fresh Off the Boat*

For its first season, ABC's *Fresh Off the Boat*, which has an Asian American family at the center of the story, made a lot of buzzes around pop cultural critics, both from professional pundits (e.g., a New York Times critic) and amateurs (e.g., my wife). Some voices are positive about the show while others are not. Yet still, the second season is highly likely to come back this fall and more talks are expected over the show, again from both sides. Why? Why should you like it, or why not? What brings the show to the second season? Any theological importance of the show? This review provides a commentary on that four-fold questioning.

Why should you like it? As both my wife and Neil Genzlinger from the New York Times realize, no major TV network has produced this kind of show over the past 20 years. For a season in 1994-95, Margaret Cho's *All-American Girl* was the same kind prime TV network witnessed, but it survived only one season. Alex Abad-Santo writes in *Vox* how much he enjoys the show because "*Fresh Off the Boat* is the first time I saw my childhood on TV. That's why it's important." He also points out that when your people or race do not appear in pop culture, it feels as if society in general regards you as outsiders. My wife also exclaimed, "Now, finally there is a show I can really identify with." It is so obvious then that those of the Asian descent who enjoy the show see a realization of their social and cultural visibility in the wider social realm. Or in a similar yet more significant vein, they welcome the show on the network because they think a prime network is now finally recognizing the weight of the Asian presence in North America, which has been ignored for many reasons. Finally, it should be noted that not only Asian Americans but also a broader American audience are watching the show. Why do they watch? There are many reasons, but just to mention one crucial one, as Genzlinger points out, the show "shows" the genuine American multiracial experience today.

Now, why should you dislike it? Ironically, Eddie Huang himself, on whose memoir the show is based, has been a harsh critic of the show from the beginning, despite being one of the executive producers. He finds that the show has neutralized his original book for the sake of the wider audience the network targets, in terms of loosened racial critique, stereotyped cultural biases, much comedy-driven description of Asian family life, etc. Genzlinger sees the same issue in his stern voice. The show stays in the safe zone by subtly avoiding racial issues and presenting the general, century-held perception of Asian American family life. Even worse, in the show there are "a lot of [distracting] doofuses [including Eddie's dad, the neighborhood Caucasian women, the principal, the employees at the restaurant, etc.], and it makes for unfocused comedy." Eventually, Genzlinger finds, the show is/will be "just" another sitcom, that is, just one of many similar kinds. Apparently, these critiques somehow cannot be justified, especially from the network's stance whose primary (even sole) purpose is to get the broadest audience for and so the maximum profit from the show. The neutralization must be a compromise between Huang's original intent of the book and the network's for-profit operation. Notwithstanding various pessimistic voices including Huang's and Genzlinger's, however, the show is up for the return of the second season. How come? Why do people like myself still want to watch the next season of the show?

Because, as Cornell West would remark, in North American society then and now, *race matters*. This is not a simple matter, however, of showing more Asians on TV, nor a matter of a vision toward a racially colorful society. Asians today already connect with other Asians through so many other media channels (e.g., internet communities), and society itself has already grown to be more racially colorful or harmonious. So, the real matter is now *how* the TV show will

depict Asian American life and *what kind* of color or harmony should be sought (for some majority, even the dominant-submissive racial relation can be considered “harmonious” depending on points of different views). For those who like the show and for whom the second season comes back, the show has proved that it conveys a good deal of genuine description of Asian American life. Moreover, they appreciate Huang’s (or the show’s) Asian cultural lens that explores Asian American life and broader American life as well. This is a task which *All-American Girl* failed to perform before because of its interpretive lens borrowed from the mainstream Caucasian culture. Like *Black-ish*, an African American family-centered sitcom from the same network, *Fresh Off the Boat* has its own particular Asian American agenda regarding how race matters should be dealt with in our society, not simply toward a racially colorful society, but toward a society that takes the matter of race more seriously, unbiasedly, and through a multivalent point of view. Viewers like myself will expect more of this in the second season, which potentially will have the show go on in the future.

Finally, why does our talk on the given show matter theologically? Does theology have anything to do with the show? Certainly. The show is at the most basic level all about human beings’ recognition of being different, their struggles to live together despite and beyond differences, and their continued agony in that seemingly impossible task of living together, yet with a ceaseless hope for it. Since the mythic event of Babel Tower, the same struggle and agony has never left the human psychology, and ironically now we have laughter-driven sitcoms about that unhappy fate of humanity. Interestingly, then, we might have figured out a possible solution for our struggle, which is nothing but laughter or “laugh it out!” Let people from different cultures and backgrounds come together and laugh out loud at their unknown mistakes, ungrounded biases, and unintelligent prejudices against each other in the past and the present. Laughter, as we know it, breaks down “the ice” and consequently any psychological and emotional boundaries among strangers. This may be why Jesus performed his very first miracle at the wedding at Cana in John 2, where that occasion of great joy and laughter brought people together, removed boundaries, and created bonds between them. This also may be the reason why we will need to get together before the TV screen when *Fresh Off the Boat* comes back this fall for some more joy and greater laughter, and eventually for the sake of *American* humanity. Let it be so.

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