

BLUEY: THE RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION OF THE WORLD'S FAVOURITE CARTOON DOG

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Abstract

Bluey, the world's favourite cartoon blue heeler, has a lot more to say about religion than it appears. This article will first, examine the references to real-life religions in the show, such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Second, it will examine the evidence in the show for a religion which the Heeler family (or at least Chilli and the kids) appear to follow. Third, it will survey the other spiritual beliefs in the show, such as references to simulation theory and crystals. Fourth, it will look at what the show explicitly teaches about religion focussing on the series 2 episode "Flatpack." And fifth, it will explore how a wider definition of religious belief (namely William James' definition: "the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto") plays out in the "religion of play" in Bluey's world.

Keywords

Bluey, cartoon, religion, representation, imagination

Introduction

Bluey, the smash-hit cartoon about a family of heeler dogs is beloved by the young and not-so-young alike. Created (and mostly written) by Joseph Brumm of Brisbane-based animation studio Ludo Studios (2018–), it centres around a family of anthropomorphised blue and red heeler dogs playing and learning. Its charming writing, relatable characters, colourful animation, energetic music, and bone-dry Aussie humour would be enough alone to worm its way into many hearts. But the thing that raises the show to another level for many is the way it is unafraid to tackle hard topics and show the world as a diverse place. Some notable difficult topics it has addressed so far in its three-season run include: infertility (season 3 episode "Onesies"), childhood trauma (season 3 episode "Space"), miscarriage (season 2 episode "The Show"), and death and grief (season 1 "Copycat"). Some of

the wonderfully diverse characters include Jack, the Terrier with ADHD, Dougie, the deaf non-speaking Cavoodle who uses Auslan with his mother, Snickers, and Pompom, the differently abled dachshund and Pomeranian, Jean Luc, a French Canadian Labrador, Mackenzie, a Border Collie from New Zealand, Pretzel, a child of queer mothers, Winton, a bulldog pup of divorce, and Maynard, an Irish Wolfhound who is an Indigenous Australian, as well as the wide variety of dogs and personalities across the show.

The questions this paper sets out to answer are: Does *Bluey* also engage with religious and spiritual diversity, and, if it does, how might this engagement impact its predominantly preschool viewership and how might this help us understand Australian religious and spiritual culture?

This study will examine the depiction of religion and spirituality in *Bluey* thus far, starting with a brief literature review covering both recent work in representation of religion in children's media to establish methodological norms and existing academic work on *Bluey* itself. The paper will then move on to using a qualitative content analysis (QCA), whereby it will explore how *Bluey* portrays religion and spirituality in Australia in different categories. This study reveals that *Bluey*, despite first appearances, has a complex relationship with religion, spiritual belief, and unseen orders, which may reflect something of Australian religious culture.

Literature Review

Media shapes much of how people think about themselves, others, culture, and the wider world around them, including how people think about their own and other people's religious beliefs.¹ In particular, children's attitudes, beliefs, and cognitive, moral, and behavioural development are highly influenced by the media they consume. The social cognitive theory of child development, first developed by Albert Bandura and now widely supported, puts particular emphasis on how children learn to understand themselves, others, and the world through observational modelling, especially that which is modelled through visual media.² Bandura showed that observing behaviour, and thus vicarious experience and reward/punishment, including through intermediary mediums such as television, is a major influence on the development of children's "personalities." More recent studies on the influence of television programs on preschoolers have shown that television can

1 Gordon Lynch et al., *Religion, Media, and Culture: A Reader* (Routledge, 2012); Megan Eide, "Religion in Children's Visual Media: A Qualitative Media Analysis of PBS Kids' Holiday Specials" (thesis, Gustavus Adolphus College, 2017), 109.

2 Albert Bandura, "Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioural Change," *Psychological Review* 84, no. 2 (1977): 22; Albert Bandura and Richard H. Walters, *Social Learning and Personality Development* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963); Mitch J. Fryling et al., "Understanding Observational Learning: An Interbehavioural Approach," *Analysis of Verbal Behaviour* 27 (2011): 191–203.

“both introduce children to the sociopolitical and cultural environments of their time as well as encourage children to change these environments in the future.”³ This is correlated with how much the children trust and identify with the characters in the program,⁴ and how much adults engage with children about the content.⁵ This factor in particular led me to consider *Bluey* an important text to analyse, as its popularity with and identification by children and adults alike suggest that the cognitive-behavioural impact may be greater than average.

Despite the impact of children’s television on development being known, relatively little has been written in academia about religious themes in children’s television.⁶

Bluey is created by Joseph “Joe” Brumm of Brisbane-based animation studio Ludo Studios and is commissioned by ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) and the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), the national broadcasters of Australia and Britain. It is now also distributed internationally on Disney+. Joe Brumm writes the majority of episodes himself,⁷ also directing from 2018 to 2019 until Richard Jeffery took over in 2020.⁸ The show has won many awards, including Best Children’s Program at the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) four years running (2019–2022), an International Kids Emmy (2020), two Logies (2019, 2022), Prix Jeunesse International Award (2022), a BAFTA (2022), and a host of others. It is the most popular program ever across all broadcast-on-demand platforms in Australia, ranked in the top ten in the US by minutes watched (beating out *Gilmore Girls* and *Seinfeld*), and is watched in over sixty countries.⁹ For such a popular and critically acclaimed program, relatively little study has been dedicated to it.

3 Eide, “Religion in Children’s Visual Media,” 110; Anna Akerman et al., “Educational Preschool Programming in the US: An Ecological and Evolutionary Story,” *Journal of Children and Media* 5 (2011): 204; Jobia Keys, “Doc McStuffins and Dora the Explorer: Representations of Gender, Race, and Class in US Animation,” *Journal of Children and Media* 10 (2016): 366.

4 Molly A. Schlesinger et al., “US Preschoolers’ Trust of and Learning from Media Characters,” *Journal of Children and Media* 10, no. 3 (2016): 321; Sonia Schiau et al., “How Do Cartoons Teach Children? A Comparative Analysis on Preschoolers and Schoolchildren,” *Journal of Media Research* 6, no. 3 (2013): 37.

5 Sandra L. Calvert and Barbara J. Wilson, eds., *The Handbook of Children, Media, and Development* (Wiley, 2011); Amy I. Nathanson et al., “The Relation between Television Exposure and Executive Function among Preschoolers,” *Developmental Psychology* 50, no. 5 (2014): 1497.

6 Eide, “Religion in Children’s Visual Media,” 109–10.

7 There are 142 episodes written by Joe Brumm, two episodes written by Francis Stanton, and one episode each written by/or story by Tim Bain, Lorin Clarke, Beth Harvey, John McGeachin, Claire Renton, Chris Bennett, Dan Brumm, Michael Griffin, Dave Lowe, and Mark Paterson. IMDB, “Bluey Full Cast and Crew,” https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7678620/fullcredits/?ref=tt_cl_sm.

8 Beth Harvey also directed two episodes, and Claire Renton and Tony Walsh directed one each.

9 David Taylor, “Bluey’s International Success Is on Track to Eclipse That of Crocodile Dundee. So What Does That Mean for Us?,” *The Drum*, February 5, 2023.

Language is one of the major themes among those studies which are currently published. Amaya Arigita-García, Lidia Mañoso-Pacheco, José Luis Estrada-Chichón, and Roberto Sánchez-Cabrero analysed how the show might be useful for teaching Australian English and Australian linguistic culture to non-native speakers in Australian primary education.¹⁰ Kerry Bender centred her doctoral thesis exploring the effects on children's language development on *Bluey*, showing that *Bluey*'s rich and varied demonstration of pragmatic skills led to more co-viewing and mediation from parents, which as we have seen leads to higher cultural engagement and cognitive-behavioural engagement.¹¹ Children's development around complex concepts is also a key theme in the literature, including classical music, economics, disability, and neurodivergence.¹² This paper aims to move towards including religion and spirituality in the literature as a first step towards examining the influence of religious themes in popular preschool television, including *Bluey*, on the development of children.

Method

To examine *Bluey*, this study uses qualitative content analysis (QCA), sometimes known as qualitative media analysis, qualitative data analysis, or qualitative document analysis, to investigate the religious themes present in the current three-season run (2018–2022). QCA is a “method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material . . . by classifying material as instances of the categories of a coding form.”¹³ This well-established methodology, “offers a solid, systematic approach for religion and media studies scholars to begin to analyse religion in children's visual media.”¹⁴ The protocol was drafted to record how the run of 161 episodes portray religious themes through visuals, dialogue, music, and lessons in five key categories; first, the depiction of real-world religions and religious ideas (such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism). Second, the study was prompted by the observation of a belief system which appeared to be an imaginary religion unique to *Bluey*, so the depiction and structure of this belief system was analysed. Third, the depiction of

10 Amaya Arigita-García et al., “Mapping Australian Culture and Society in the Animated Series *Bluey* —The Use of Audiovisual Material in Early EFL Learning,” *Societies* 14, no. 12 (2024): 252.

11 Kerry H. Bender, “Exploring the Effects of the Television Shows, *Bluey* and *Blippi*, on Young Children's Language Development: A Mixed Methods Study” (EdD diss., Fontbonne University, 2024).

12 Alfonso Amendola et al., “The *Bluey* Version. A Cartoon Between Mediology, Educational Processes and Imagination,” paper presented at the International Conference of the Journal Education for Social Justice, Cagliari, Italy, 2025, 69–75; Alexa Quinn et al., “‘*Bluey*-conomics’: It's Not All about the Money,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 37, no. 4 (2025): 26–32; Alexander Smith et al., “Childhood ADHD and the Importance of Empathy and Understanding—Lessons from *Bluey*,” *Australasian Psychiatry* 33, no. 4 (2025): 1–10.

13 Margrit Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (SAGE Publications, 2012), 13.

14 Eide, “Religion in Children's Visual Media,” 113.

non-formal religious beliefs and spiritualities, defined as any spiritual belief which does not fall into a formal recognised religion, is discussed. Fourth, this study also examines what *Bluey* has to say explicitly about religion and spirituality. And, finally, the definition of religion was widened to include any depicted belief in an unseen order to which the characters align themselves to for their greater good, in line with William James' definition of religious belief.¹⁵ After the data for all 161 episodes was recorded, it was analysed for patterns within those categories. The most salient findings in each category with their most archetypical examples are discussed below.

“For Real Life” Religions

“For real life” organised religions are not a feature of the show. In season 2 episode “Christmas Swim” the Christmas depicted is very much a typical Aussie secular family Christmas celebration, featuring a swim and a BBQ at the cousins' house. The closest the show gets to referencing Christianity here is the carol “We Three Kings” playing wordlessly in the background at the end of the episode. On a similar level, the Easter special contains a visual reference to the stone being rolled away from Jesus' tomb in the form of an exercise ball being rolled away from a desk. In a Facebook exclusive short, “Silent Night,” Bandit hums the titular carol also.¹⁶ Music and myth tend to be the show's main connections to real-world religions and spiritual practice (see the following section). The song *Lazarus Drug* at the climax of special episode “The Sign” references the story of Lazarus being called back to life by Jesus as a metaphor for the euphoria of love and revival.¹⁷ In several episodes set at the cousins' house, various Buddhist statues can be seen in the background in the cousins yard, and in season 3 episode “Rag Doll,” Bandit (Bluey's father, voiced by Dave McCormack) recites several Zen Buddhist sayings such as “obstacles don't block the path, they are the path” alongside quotes from various other sources. In season 1 episode “Backpackers,” Chilli (Bluey's mother, voiced by Melanie Zanetti) and Bandit are shown wearing the Hindu bindis in their backpacking photo in India. In this episode we also see a few other markers of Hinduism such as the decorations on the tuktuk and Chilli's good luck charm. The common thread among

15 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Modern Library, 1999), 61.

16 Brumm recounts how he was asked to remove a reference to Jesus and his ability to walk on water from the season 1 episode “Shadowlands.” In this episode Bluey is frustrated with her friend Coco making the game too easy, where the sunlit grass is water and the shadows are land. In the joke, Coco would have said, “Maybe I can walk on water?” to which Bluey would respond, “No one can walk on water, Coco!” to which a third friend, Snickers, would have replied “Jesus can,” and Bluey just says, “Who's Jesus?” before the episode goes on as broadcast. Brumm meant this to reflect his own childhood playing at a Catholic school with a mix of kids who variously did and didn't know anything about religion or Jesus, but agrees that the joke was superfluous and happily took it out. Jeremy Hanna, “Disney Made ‘Bluey’ Remove a Reference to Jesus,” *Inside the Magic*, July 24, 2023.

17 This song is written and performed by Megan Washington, who also plays the character Calypso in *Bluey*. Megan Washington, “Washington Takes Us Through Her New Album *Batflowers*,” in *Double J* (ABC Listen, 2020).

these depictions of real-world religions is that they occur at the level of pop culture understanding and engagement rather than anything resembling real practice or belief.

Throughout the show, Chilli is depicted as more interested in spiritual matters and activities, such as visiting temples, while Bandit groans at the thought of “another temple photo.” Perhaps this reflects the worldwide trend of women being generally more likely to affiliate with a religion than men.¹⁸

While most references to real-world religion are at the level of tourist-level, pop culture, or solely aesthetic engagement, the show does feature deeper engagement in several instances. In series 1 episode “Hide and Seek,” Bluey tries meditation by imitating a statue “practicing not getting distracted” by sitting in the same pose as the statue, and finds that it works for her.

One of the most explicit references to a real religious belief is in season 1 episode “Bumpy and the Wise Old Wolfhound,” in which Bingo is sick in hospital, so Bluey and Bandit make a video telling a story to cheer her up. In the story, a young woman called Barnicus has a puppy called Bumpy,¹⁹ who gets very sick. She brings the child to lots of people to ask for help, and eventually takes Bumpy to the Wise Old Wolfhound, depicted sitting in a lotus-like meditation position, with white monastic style robes made of towels, a flower crown and purple brooch on the chest, mystical music, emphatic lighting, and a brief psychedelic sequence. When Barnicus asks for magic help, the Wise Old Wolfhound offers another kind of help, asking for a pair of purple underpants from someone who has never been sick. When she can’t find anyone who has never been sick, she realises that the Wise Old Wolfhound was teaching her that everyone gets sick sometimes; it’s just a part of life.

This is clearly a softer version of the Buddhist story Kisa Gautami, wherein the titular mother’s one-year-old son dies. After asking lots of people for help, she brings him to the Buddha hoping for a way to bring him back to life. The Buddha tells her to gather four or five mustard seeds from any family in which there has never been death. Through trying to complete this impossible task, Kisa Gautami learns that death and suffering are inevitable, and so she can stop her grieving.

Through this episode children learn a Buddhist teaching and the behavioural impact of that teaching, though without the real-world labels associated with the belief system, through storytelling and modelling of Bingo’s response to the story.

A similar reference occurs at the beginning of 2024’s extended special episode “The Sign.” Here, Calypso, Bluey’s teacher (Blue Merle Australian Shepherd voiced by Megan Washington) reads a storybook which contains a fable from the second-century BCE Daoist text *Huainanzi*. The fable is often called “The Old Man Lost His

18 Conrad Hackett, “The Gender Gap in Religion around the World” (Pew Research Centre, 2016).

19 Bandit’s description of the child as “gentle and mild” could be read as a glancing reference to Jesus.

Horse” in English, or 塞翁失馬, translating roughly to “A Blessing in Disguise.” The tale recounts a series of events that happen to this old man, after each his neighbours tell him what good or bad luck the event was, to which he responds, “We’ll see” in the *wú wéi* attitude. This illustrates the Daoist view of fortune or luck, that all things are equal, and it is only human, or in this case canine, judgement that makes something good or bad, so the proper response is “inaction” or “serenity.” Bluey initially misunderstands the message, but by the end of the episode learns to adopt the *wú wéi* attitude for the better. Again, this shows how *Bluey* can teach real-world religious ideas through modelling as children observe Bluey learning and applying this lesson, and as parents discuss the special with them.

This gentle referencing of religion and religious diversity is a good step. But as yet we haven’t seen any characters wearing religious garb, practicing, or talking about “for real life” religions as a part of their daily lives. This is despite 53.9 percent of Australians reporting a religious affiliation in the 2021 census, with 10 percent of Australians reporting a religious belief other than mainline, historically familiar, Christianity.²⁰

Bluey’s Religion

There does seem to be a religion in Bluey’s world to which the Heeler family, or at least Chilli, Bluey, and Bingo (Bluey’s sister, voiced by an unknown child actor) are subtle adherents.

This is first introduced in the season 1 episode “Calypso” when Bluey’s teacher, Calypso, sings a song about Sister Rain, Father Sun, and Brother Wind at the end of a story. The lyrics are:

*Sister Rain has left,
And Father Sun is home,
Brother Wind comes blowing in,
To welcome home the gnome.*

A longer version was released under the title “The Gnome Song (featuring Meg Washington)” on the soundtrack album *Dance Mode!* in 2023,²¹ credited to Meg

20 Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Religious Affiliation in Australia: Exploration of the Changes in Reported Religion in the 2021 Census,” ABS, July 4, 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia>.

21 Full lyrics: Sister Rain and Father Sun, make the flowers grow. Brother Wind blows his boat, the gnome has far to go. Father Sun is shining bright, Brother Wind is warm. Sister Rain is pouring, a sudden summer storm. Sister Rain is colder now, Father Sun is small. Brother Wind comes blowing, leaves begin to fall. Brother Wind is turning, Sister Rain to snow. Mother Earth is winter white, Father Sun is low. Sister Rain has left, and Father Sun is home. Brother Wind comes blowing in, to welcome home the gnome.

Washington, Jonathan Bush, and Joseph Brumm.

The presence of this belief system is made more explicit in the season 2 episode “Favourite Thing.” This episode begins with a short vignette at the kitchen table where the girls sing a prayer to Mother Earth, complete with actions which they learnt at school, and Chilli is enthusiastic about it. Bandit calls this out as a new behaviour for the family, but goes along with the prayer and actions, though swiftly moving on. The prayer goes:

*For the golden corn,
And the apples on the trees,
For the golden butter,
And the honey from the bees,
For fruits and nuts and berries,
That grow beside the way,
We praise our loving Mother Earth,
To thank her every day,
Hooray!*

This grace prayer or blessing is a version of “For the Golden Corn” also known as “A Hymn for Harvest Thanksgiving” written by Elizabeth Gould and Edwin Smith, published in *Morning Has Broken—Hymns to Play and Sing* in 1974, a collection of Christian hymns.²² The version present in *Bluey* has since become very popular in Waldorf/Steiner schools, which is the model of school Bluey and Bingo attend.

The Waldorf/Steiner school model is somewhat controversial, in part due to its unique philosophy of spirituality, known as anthroposophy. This model highly values spirituality and religion without favouring any specific tradition or religious practice. It is a highly syncretic belief system. At the core it is an attempt to expand science into the realm of spirituality. In practice it is often moulded to the community and culture around it in how it expresses spirituality, incorporating a variety of ideas and beliefs, with nature often being a key theme. In a country like Australia, with historically high Christian adherence or nominal affiliation but with a growing non-religious population and a growing awareness of Aboriginal nature-centred spirituality, a class such as Calypso’s might be expected to be theistically oriented, perhaps with a Christian flavour, but would not be expected to be religiously explicit. In this context, a theistic approach to nature-based spirituality, as we see in these episodes, may be quite typical of spiritual belief among those who do not adhere

22 Elizabeth Gould and Edwin Smith, “A Hymn For Harvest Thanksgiving,” in *Morning Has Broken—Hymns to Play and Sing*, ed. D. Maxwell Timmins (Schofield and Sims, 1974), 66.

to a traditional organised religion, and therefore quite typical of Waldorf/Steiner practices.

This earth-centred spirituality appears throughout the series as a deep reverence for nature, which is often manifested through magical or spiritual close-ups with small bugs, leaves, and the like, as the characters pause in awe of them. A particularly clear example of this is the silent film episode “Rain” in season 3, as Bluey playing in the rain and Chilli eventually joining in is depicted as incredibly beautiful. Other examples of this are series 1 episodes “The Creek” and “The Weekend,” and series 3 episode “Born Yesterday.”

Later in season 2, in the episode “Postman,” Bluey and Bingo also whisper a thanksgiving prayer to Brother Wind. The modelling of specific religious behaviour, prayer, singing, meditation, and reflecting on nature, may impact children in their willingness to perform or accept such behaviour and beliefs from themselves and others, particularly if their identification with Bluey, Bingo, Chilli, or Calypso is high.

Other Religious Beliefs

There are some other references to religious or spiritual beliefs in the series that do not constitute formal religions. The show generally takes an “agnostic” view of spiritual matters. References to typical “hard questions” children ask which may have religious answers, such as “Where did the first baby come from?,” “Where was I before I was born?,” and “Will there be a time when the weekend is forever?” occur throughout the series. The typical approach the characters have is “You’ll have to figure that out for yourself” or letting the moment flow by with a joke, rather than providing a specific belief statement or teaching a specific spiritual viewpoint. Likewise, in the season 1 episode “Markets,” Afghan Hound Indy (voiced by an unknown child actor) and her mum (voiced by Myf Warhurst) sell gluten-free cakes at a stall adorned with Tibetan prayer flags and a peace symbol. Indy’s mum wears dreamcatchers and a crystal, and she does an añjali mudrā namaste prayer gesture in thanks to a customer. These elements are presented without comment, unlike the later prayer moment in “Favourite Thing.” This suggests an attitude of viewing religious and spiritual belief as a matter of personal choice which may coexist alongside other beliefs within oneself and other people. Particularly, a matter which parents ought not to dictate directly to their children. This theme is also present in other aspects of the show’s approach to belief and behaviour. Bandit does not stop the prayer in “Favourite Thing,” and it is made clear that Chilli was not the instigator either; the children lead the spiritual engagement. This will be further discussed in the following section.

At other times, the show appears to take a far less agnostic approach to certain spiritual beliefs. We have already discussed the pervasive wonder of nature

throughout the show, but three other spiritual beliefs are shown to be true within the show's universe. First, interpersonal dream interaction is present in two of the most popular and highest critically acclaimed episodes of season 1, "Fruitbat" and "Sleepytime." In these episodes Bluey and Bingo, respectively, have interactions with other members of their family as they dream. For example, Bluey, in her dream about being a fruit bat, visits Bandit in his dream about playing rugby. There is also speculation as to what the various elements of Bingo's space-themed dream in "Sleepytime" represent. This includes the speculation that the depiction of Mercury, the first planet, as "unhatched," unlike Venus (the second planet representing Bluey) and Earth from which Bingo hatched, represents a miscarriage which occurred before Bluey was born. This discussion is generally stymied by the fact that Bingo could not know about the miscarriage.²³ However, if understood through a spiritual lens, the show could be suggesting a lasting spiritual connection within the family, able to be expressed through dreams, to the unborn sibling.

Second, the show seems to confirm the existence of mythical creatures, in particular, fairies. During the season 1 episode "Fairies," most of the narrative leads the observant viewer to conclude that Bingo is doing all the mischief which she and the family attribute to the fairies. However, some of the results seem impossible for Bingo to have achieved on her own or in the time the verisimilitude of the show suggests. Finally, in the last moments, a real fairy appears to Bingo. Notably, this episode is one of the few of the first three seasons which was not written by Joe Brumm, and the only one where the fantasy elements of a game appear to break into the real world.

Third, in season 3 episode "Puppets," the girls' puppet, Unicorse, has an identity crisis when he realises he is just a puppet and therefore not anyone. Chilli teaches him that the magic of being no one is that he can be everyone. Unicorse then asks Bluey how she can be sure *she* isn't a puppet. The frame then pauses and zooms out to animation software and a live-action human hand puppeteering her through the next sequence. This could be read as a reference to simulation theory, a belief that our lived reality is a computer simulation and that we are digital constructs within it. This belief has been present in many forms for millennia—for example, Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* may be read as a particularly influential early version. The more contemporary philosophical version was codified by Nick Bostrom. He posits a probabilistic argument that since a theoretical "posthuman" civilisation would have "enormous computing power" capable of running extremely complex civilisation simulations that are, for all intents and purposes, indistinguishable from reality from the inside, and we do not currently have that level of technology, either the number of these civilisations or the number who are interested in ancestor simulations is

23 See, for example, this Reddit discussion board: AnythingAlfred613, "Note about What the Planets Represent in Sleepytime," Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/bluey/comments/k5pv9s/note_about_what_the_planets_represent_in/.

close to zero, or these simulations do exist and therefore the probability that we happen to be in “reality” is very low.²⁴ If we understand this episode as depicting Bluey as a conscious puppet, a construct within a simulation who is sentient but does not know they are a construct, then we must conclude that a “correct” or “true” spiritual belief in the show’s text is simulation theory.

Those spiritual elements which the show is agnostic regarding and those which it seems to confirm as “true” may equally influence the beliefs and attitudes of the audience, particularly if they identify with the characters who hold such beliefs or if children’s parents engage in discussion of these beliefs with their children.

What *Bluey* Has to Say about Religion

There is an episode of *Bluey* which directly addresses the topic of religion, though it is often read primarily as a commentary on Darwinian evolutionary theory. The series 2 episode, “Flatpack,” features Chilli and Bandit building a flat-pack swing chair in the backyard while tossing the packaging down from the deck to Bluey and Bingo to play with on the grass. Their game acts out the process of evolution starting out as mamma and baby fish in water, then crawling onto land as mamma and toddler frogs, then lizards, then dinosaurs, then mamma and big girl birds, then mammals, then monkeys, then cave dogs with cave-mamma and cave-teenager. They then grab a pen and start making cave drawings in their caves in which cave-Bluey teaches cave-Bingo that they evolved under arguing gods who threw resources down from above in the clouds. Chilli sees this and says “we made them” to Bandit, which inspires them to build the chair without arguing. As the parents finish, they toss extra materials and allen keys to the kids, who learn how to use tools and become builders, progressing from cave dogs to contemporary dogs. At this point Bingo announces that she’s a grown up and is ready to explore space. Bluey acts old, bending over like she needs a cane to help walk, and is called to join Chilli and Bandit up on the deck on the swing chair. The music swells as she reaches out to Chilli in a shot very reminiscent of Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam*. The episode ends with Bandit saying, “ah, this is heaven,” in golden sunlight, while the three look down from the deck watching Bingo fly her spaceship around the grass. In this episode evolution and religion are depicted side-by-side in harmony, both true and both beautiful. This episode does not promote one worldview over another but rather posits that both can and should co-occur and cooperate happily. Here, evolution could not occur without the gods providing the raw materials, and modern dogkind, complete with religion, could not occur without evolution. Beyond being able to coexist, this episode suggests that perhaps these worldviews, which are so often depicted as mutually exclusive, rather need each other and may in fact constitute a cohesive whole.

24 Nick Bostrom, “Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 53, no. 211 (2003): 234–55.

This cohesion goes deeper within the show. As we have seen, Chilli is interested in spirituality and religious practices, meanwhile Bandit has a doctorate in archaeology, specialising in dog evolution,²⁵ two personality and interest types which may stereotypically be presented as incompatible. Throughout the Heelers' house, prints and casts of historic archaeological finds can be seen, from dinosaur footprints from the stampede in Winton, outback Queensland, to a print of *Pig 1* from the Sulawesi Warty Pigs cave painting from Leang Tedongnge in Indonesia. This painting is the oldest cave art found so far, at a minimum of 45,000 years old, and was discovered by a team in 2021 which included Professor Adam Brumm, Joe Brumm's brother and the inspiration for Bandit's occupation.²⁶ Perhaps the show is implying Bandit was part of that team in *Bluey*'s universe. The show thus implicitly teaches that science and religion can and should coexist within the world but also within a family and an individual, "without all the argy-bargy" as Chilli says.

As previously discussed, the show is not interested in telling its viewers what they should believe. "Flatpack" does not identify the religion depicted beyond a surface reference to "heaven," a stereotypically Abrahamic take on the afterlife, but by no means exclusively so.²⁷ But more tellingly, in the series 1 episode "The Dump," Bandit answers Bluey's tricky question about existence with "You'll have to figure that out for yourself." When she asks, "How do I do that?," he responds, "I'm sure you'll work it out." This is also supported by the sentiment in the series 3 episode "Fairytale," where Bandit tells the kids they'll have to decide for themselves whether they think the story retelling how Bandit thinks he and Chilli met is true or not but that Chilli believes is incorrect.

Overall, the show's take on religion is that it can be beautiful and coexist with science but that it's up to individuals to work out what they believe for themselves. In other words, the text of *Bluey* has an agnostic but positive view on spiritual/religious belief which does not oppose or undermine areligious or scientific belief and encourages exploration and self-determination in the spiritual and philosophical space.

A Broader Look at Religious Belief and Behaviour in *Bluey*

So far, we have looked at how *Bluey* depicts traditional religions and spiritual beliefs, but now we will widen our definition of religion. William James defined religion

25 In a Facebook exclusive bonus clip, Bandit is shown to present his latest find at an academic conference: a bone belonging to the first dog to walk upright, "an early canid who lived 4 million years ago, a primitive but intelligent toolmaker," which proves modern dogs' evolutionary decent from a quadrupedal antecedent.

26 Adam Brumm et al., "Oldest Cave Art Found in Sulawesi," *Science Advances* 7, no. 3 (2021).

27 While "heaven" may be the colloquial term for the place where "good" people go in the afterlife for a number of belief systems, most have more specific beliefs which do not necessarily align with the pop-culture image. For example, new creation for Christianity, Jannah for Islam, and Olam Ha-Ba for Judaism.

as “the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”²⁸ When we think of it this way, a number of “unseen orders” emerge in *Bluey* to which the characters “adjust themselves” for their “supreme good.”

As with many Western children’s shows, one of the most obvious unseen orders is that of conventional Western morality. Lessons about not lying, cheating, or stealing, always being kind, and so on, occur throughout the series and underly the overall morality of *Bluey*’s world. These lessons are not only aimed at children, but the adults also, with Bandit and Chilli regularly learning to adjust themselves for better alongside the kids.

At other times, the unseen order is social expectation and Aussie culture. This can be seen in several episodes, such as the series 2 episode “Dunny,” where Chilli tries to explain that she does not want the family using the word “dunny” so that people think they are a nice family. The series 2 episode “Circus” reflects on the qualities that make the best boss (not appearances, not forcing people to do things they do not want to do, inclusion, taking turns, and listening to everyone). The series 2 episode “Swim School” carries a strong anti-dobbing message, and in the series 3 episode “Turtleboy” Bandit explains that taking a lost toy from the playground “is just not the done thing.” Many other episodes besides depict this unseen order of Aussie culture. This theme is also present in a bonus clip which shows a British couple discussing how best to make and enjoy a cup of tea.

However, the most interesting unseen order which the characters are found adjusting themselves to in the majority of *Bluey* episodes is play. If we imagine this unseen order as a series of beliefs, I posit that this belief system has four central tenets. Perhaps the central tenet of this order can be found in the series 2 episode “Stumpfest,” in the line “you shouldn’t interrupt people when they’re playing.” As we see time and time again, no one in the show willingly interrupts or stops mid-game. The secondary tenet is “follow the proper rules,” most aptly illustrated by the series 1 episode “Shadowlands” and the series 2 episode “Library.” This tenet has more nuance and is discussed more within the text of the show than the first, for example in “Charades.” The third tenet of this unseen order may be “you must cooperate and give 100 percent to the game,” as illustrated by the series 2 episode “Octopus.” The fourth tenet of this unseen order may be “games and stories should have happy endings because the real world often has sad ones,” which is the explicit theme of the 2024 special half-hour episode “The Sign.”²⁹ These four beliefs rule the world of *Bluey*, adherence to these beliefs through behaviour is rewarded, and the world itself metatextually bends toward them—most clearly seen in “The Sign” in

28 James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 61.

29 From “The Sign”: Bluey: “Why do stories always have happy endings?”

Calypso: “Well . . . I guess ‘cause life will give us enough sad ones.”

which a previously infertile woman falls pregnant, a couple's fight is resolved neatly and the wedding goes ahead, and house buyers pull out, so the family does not have to move. This episode was controversial at its release as many parents wanted the sad ending of moving, and potentially a relationship ending or a family member remaining infertile, so that they could use it to help guide themselves and their children as they went through similar life difficulties. This explicit tenet of belief helps explain why this episode went in the narrative direction it did. In this case it was the creators themselves, rather than the characters, aligning themselves to an unseen order in which they saw the good of fictional happy endings, even when reality can let us down.

In and of themselves, these principles are good and do not pose a problem. But time and time again we see the characters, particularly the parents, going too far to adjust themselves to this order to the detriment of those around them. In series 1 episodes, "Asparagus" and "Shaun," Chilli, Bingo, and Bandit all attack the neighbour Pat (a Labrador voiced by Brad Elliot), even when he protests. In the series 2 episode "Rug Island," Bandit steals Lucky's (Pat's son, voiced by Timmy Elliot) ball when it comes over the fence and refuses to give it back, even though this interrupts Lucky and his dad's game. Meanwhile in the series 3 episode "Pavlova," Bandit is willing to let Bingo ruin and eat the pavlova, despite Chilli saying she couldn't, just to stay in the game. In the series 3 episode "Whale Watching," it is implied that Bandit and Chilli are hung over from the New Year's party the night before, yet even in their misery they guilt each other into giving 100 percent to the game the kids want to play, even as they are too sick. This is to say nothing of the countless times Bandit and Chilli scare, confuse, and inconvenience people around them or make fools of themselves in every other episode.

Most instances of this are charming and benign, a good reminder to parents not to take themselves too seriously and to engage with their kids, but occasionally it goes too far and is used to justify unacceptable behaviours from the whole cast. Often the neighbour on the other side, Wendy (a British Chow Chow voiced by Emily Taheny and Beth Durack), suffers the consequences of Bandit's behaviour. In one season 3 episode, "Sheepdog," Bandit is pretending to be a sheepdog³⁰ and tears Wendy's washing (a nightgown) from her line with his teeth, chews on it, and then headbutts her in her bottom. This incident could be considered a crime. Within the show the music stops, everyone looks shocked, Bingo says, "Oh dear," and Wendy tells Bandit, "That . . . will not happen twice." But Bandit continues with the game. He "baas" at Wendy, even as she becomes more angry and yells for Chilli, rather than immediately ending the game, owning his behaviour, and apologising properly. It takes Bluey herself stepping in to de-escalate the situation, but still Bandit does not end the game. Luckily for all involved, Wendy was not seriously traumatised by the

30 Not a dog who herds sheep, but a dog who *is* a sheep.

incident, and she quickly forgives Bandit for his error, more for Chilli's sake than her own or Bandit's—though she does take some small revenge by taking advantage of Bandit refusing to end the game and shears his mullet off. The whole incident is treated lightly, normality restored within sixty seconds, and everyone is happy again. But the fact remains that Bandit, in particular, but Chilli also, often go too far with their games, and this could have serious consequences or encourage viewers to engage in or disregard serious bad behaviour in the name of aligning oneself to “play.” A possible parallel to this could be the sentiment “boys will be boys,” often used to excuse poor behaviour in young boys, which can lead to unaddressed bad behaviour in adulthood, or even excusing bad behaviour in grown men.

Some episodes of *Bluey* do question or explore these principles. In the series 2 episode “Shop,” we see that worrying too much about how the unseen order works (the rules of the game) can stop you from engaging in the unseen order (playing the game) which is more important. Series 2 episodes “Charades” and “Helicopter” teach a level of inclusion and flexibility in play as other participants want to change the rules so more people can join in the fun. And in the series 1 episode “Copycat,” we see the benefit of stories and playing out games with sad or unexpected endings. The series 3 episode “Musical Statues” includes an in-game change of rules as Chilli consults an imaginary rule book, not being willing to simply change the rules non-diagetically. In the same series, Chilli finds it easier to adjust herself to the unseen order when she can see a clear purpose within the game in “Driving,” breaking the rule of interrupting the game in order to understand the game better and therefore better able to align her enthusiasm to the game.

This questioning and exploring of the core principles of the unseen order could be read as a parallel to the process of contextualising real-life religions as the practice and specific beliefs of religions change over time to better suit the time and place and allow more people to comfortably and positively engage with the religion. For example, many houses of worship do not require the same standing or kneeling positions for prayer they once did to more comfortably accommodate those with physical disabilities. A particular instance of this recontextualisation is found in the series 3 episode “Pass the Parcel,” as a parent wants to change the current practice of the titular game, where everyone wins a prize, back to how he played it as a child, where only one person won a prize. This change in the adjustment to the unseen order is at first taken with great difficulty by the children and parents alike; however, as the episode progresses, the older way turned out to be preferred by the kids. Perhaps we could take from this that there is more than one way to adjust oneself to the unseen order that one believes in without giving up the supreme good that we all seek. There is more than one way to play a game as there is more than one way to practice a religion.

One of the most moving moments discussing adjustment to the unseen order in the show is in the series 2 episode “Daddy Dropoff,” in which Bandit spends the

episode playing along with the games while worrying about getting the children to their schools on time. They are late to Bingo's kindy, and Bandit tries to leave without playing the last game but cannot say no to Bingo, which makes them even later for dropping off Bluey to her school. Bluey asks Bandit why he played the game, even though it made them very late. He had been worrying about being late all morning, and probably nothing would happen if he did not play the game. His response is "Mm, I don't know. Just did. Wouldn't be as fun though." Bluey hugs him saying she is glad he did play it, and Bandit replies, "Yeah, me, too." The greater good in the show is always fun and bonding, and that is what Bandit orients himself to. The episode ends with Bingo passing on the fun and bonding to a new student in her class by engaging her in the same game, and their friendship lasts through to adulthood. Therefore, we see that the tenants of the belief system are only a means to an end of aligning oneself with the unseen order for the greater good, not the greater good in and of themselves. If we bring this framework back to our understanding of spirituality and religion, we may be able to more cogently understand practical theology and the function of law, works, practices, and so on, within various belief systems relative to the deeper greater good these practices aim at aligning their practitioners to.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the religious themes present in *Bluey*. From referencing to real-world religions and teachings such as Buddhism with Kisa Gotami, to the Heelers' own beliefs regarding a nature-based spirituality demonstrated through prayers, to the show's explicit thesis on the cohesion of science and religion as shown in "Flatpack" and Chilli and Bandit's relationship, to the unseen order of play everyone in the show orients themselves toward, usually for the better and sometimes for the worse, the show weaves a surprisingly rich tapestry of a spiritual worldview. It reflects a vision of Australian spirituality which is largely agnostic but positive towards spiritual and religious belief, which is coherent with scientific and philosophical beliefs, and perhaps less important than cultural or interpersonal cohesion for the greater good.

Due to the high identification of viewers with these characters and high engagement of adults with children about this show, we might expect to see a greater influence of these messages on the children who view it with their caregivers. Further study into the specific influence of *Bluey* on spiritual exploration and discussion in Australian family contexts would be beneficial as this show continues to be extraordinarily popular with a fourth series upcoming. Further research into how childhood norms of play affect adolescent and adult behavioural development would also be beneficial.

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