Firefly, a television show now in syndication, an odd assortment of characters (TV people call this an "ensemble cast"), have been thrown together because of their various but mutual "misunderstandings" with an oppressive interstellar state. In one respect or another, they are all outlaws.

Among this group are an elderly man called "the shepherd," because he is a religious person who frequently expresses uncommon spiritual wisdom, and a teenage girl named River, who has been freed by her brother from a facility where she has undergone unknown but sinister experiments by the state to develop her unusually high intelligence into weapons. Everyone aboard the spacecraft is unsettled by River's mercurial behavior. At one moment she may be serene; at the next she may erupt into astonishing violence and power.

Yet River and the shepherd have developed a kind of close, father-daughter relationship. In one scene, the shepherd enters a room with some food for River. He lays the tray on a table, without looking up, unaware of what she is doing. River is browsing through a Bible, tearing out pages here and there, and the following exchange ensues:

"What are we up to, Sweetheart?"
"Fixing your Bible," River announces, as she continues to rip pages out of the book.
"I, uh—What?" the shepherd responds in alarm.
"Bible’s broken," River goes on. "Contradictions. Doesn’t make sense."
"No," the shepherd protests, "no, you can’t . . ."
"So we’ll integrate non-progressive evolution theory with God’s creation," River says, unfazed. "Eleven inherent metaphoric parallels are already there. Eleven. Important number. . . . Noah’s ark is a problem."
"Really?"
"We’ll have it early quantum state phenomenon," River goes on. "Only
way to fit 5,000 species of mammals in the same boat."

The shepherd reaches for the book. "Give me that. River, you don’t fix the Bible."

"It’s broken," River says. "It doesn’t make sense."

"It’s not about making sense," the shepherd sighs. "It’s about believing in something. And letting that belief be real enough to change your life. It’s about faith. You don’t fix faith, River. It fixes you."

Like River, the character in Firefly, our culture is trying to "fix" the Bible, to bring it into conformity with what it considers to be a higher authority: science. A few individuals and groups are, like River, literally going through the Scriptures and methodically removing content that they consider to be unsupported by human research.

This kind of project has been attempted before. Thomas Jefferson, for example, the author of America’s Declaration of Independence, meticulously edited out any mention of the miraculous in the four Gospels, producing what we know of today as the Jefferson Bible. It includes no reference to prophecies, the Trinity, angels, genealogy, or the resurrection. In Jefferson’s view, Jesus Christ was undeniably one of the great teachers of humankind, but this divinity thing just wouldn’t do. And there have been many other such attempts to envelop Christ among the other major contributors to the great human curriculum: Moses, Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, Mohammed.

But today scientists, educators, the media—even many Christian theologians—are also making every effort to change the way they have previously interpreted the Bible. In this way there’s no apparent need to delete anything in Scripture; all you have to do is change the way you read it. Very neat—very convenient!

Because of this change of view toward the authority of Scripture, until very recently the media have presented a very unsympathetic portrayal of religion—especially of Christianity. More than a decade ago, media critic Michael Medved, a voice crying in the wilderness, complained that “every time you see a member of the clergy or a religious figure [in the entertainment media], he’ll be portrayed as crazy or crooked or both. Hollywood, “said Medved, “sees traditionally religious people as some kind of an enemy.”

And, for some time, this is a depiction that people of faith have had to endure. Being the butt of so much ridicule is no fun, but Jesus did say that we would be reviled and persecuted. This, presumably, could include attacks on the spirit as well as the more extreme attacks on the physical. Persecution can come in more subtle ways than pogroms or physical torture.

And this is why the exchange between River and the shepherd is so refreshing. Throughout popular culture—in TV shows and motion pictures, in the lyrics of popular music, in the thought of writers of books and magazine articles—we are unexpectedly beginning to encounter an ever-growing rejection of the divine status that the Enlightenment has ascribed to human reason and a much more sympathetic depiction of spiritual issues and people of faith. The creative community, at least, has become increasingly willing to return to the frequent depiction and discussion of the transcendent.

U2, four Irish musicians considered to be probably the most popular rock group in the world, sends up a prayer in “Yahweh,” the penultimate song on its live album recorded in Chicago:

Take this city
A city should be shining on a hill
Take this city
If it be your will
What no man can own, no man can take
Take this heart
Take this heart