

Religion in The Simpsons

By Jeff Shalda

The Simpsons is a television sitcom that premiered in 1989 and "[uses] the cartoon format to disarm the viewer and to encourage a slightly askew but ultimately clearer look at the world" (Bowler, par.1). The show revolves around the lives of Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie Simpson who live in the town of Springfield, U.S.A. The show's social satire and hilarious characters has made it a hit among viewers and critics alike. Created by Matt Groening, the show began as 30-second shorts on *The Tracy Ullman Show* before the first full-length episode aired in the form of a Christmas special in 1989. It is no surprise that the first episode of this long running series looked at Christmas; the show is one of few on Television where "God has a place at the table now and again" (Robert Thompson qtd. in Kiskan, par. 6). While other shows "avoid faith as if it were a mortal sin," *The Simpsons* make it a central part of their world (Kiskan, par. 4). In doing so, they are not only able to offer up hilarious criticisms of religion in America, but they are also able to give incredible insights into spiritual areas that are very crucial to many viewers.

The town of Springfield depicts Any Town, U.S.A. The actual location of the city is never revealed and has been a running joke throughout the show. Many of its locales have been central settings for the show, including the elementary school, city hall, the local tavern, and the First Church of Springfield, to name a few. The latter is attended by the Simpsons and the majority of the town every Sunday. It is a non-denominational, "middle-of-the-road Protestant church" (Bowler, par. 2). The First Church of Springfield is ground zero for the show's biting satire of organized religion. The church is often shown as a hotbed of hypocrisy. Although the church preaches against gambling as the "8th Deadly Sin," it holds Monte Carlo, Reno, and Bingo nights (with the "loosest cards in town") (Bowler, par. 18). When Bart and Millhouse are debating whether or not humans have souls, Millhouse asks, "Why would they lie Bart? What would they have to gain?" The next scene shows Reverend Lovejoy counting bags of money collected during the day's service (Bart Sells His Soul).

Lovejoy himself is often the aim of criticism. Representing the clergy, he is often shown as judgmental and apathetic towards his congregation. When Krusty the Clown is framed for armed robbery, Lovejoy calls for a public burning of all Krusty merchandise, even though Krusty ends up being innocent (Krusty Gets Busted). Also, during an Alconon meeting, after Homer confesses that "[he] was so desperate for a beer, [he] ate the dirt under the football stadium," Lovejoy "casts him out" of the meeting (Duffless). When Seymour Skinner calls Lovejoy for advice, he recommends that Skinner read his bible, when Skinner asks if there are any passages in particular that may be helpful, Lovejoy replies, "Oh, there all good." When asked why he did this and droned on in sermons about constancy, Lovejoy admitted that he had "just stopped caring" (In Marge We Trust). These examples do not paint a very good picture of organized Christianity. However, the Christian church is not the only outlet for religion in Springfield. Other residents of the town are "Jews, Catholics, Hindus, Hare Krishnas, and snake-handlers" (Bowler, par. 2). There is the radio talk show "Gabbn about God" featuring a Christian minister, a Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi (Like Father, Like Clown). Many of the supporting characters are of different faiths as well. When Krusty the Clown is invited over to the Simpson house for dinner, he prays in Hebrew, to which Homer replies, "He's speaking funny talk" (Like Father, Like Clown). When Reverend Lovejoy speaks on how God works through anyone whether they are "Christian, Jew, or Miscellaneous" the latter refers to local Quik-E-Mart clerk Apu Nahasapeemapeitan, to which he responds, "Hindu, there are 600 million of us" (Homer the Heretic). When Homer sees Apu's shrine to the Hindu God Ganesha at the Quik-E-Mart he comments, "No offense Apu, but when they were handing out religions, you must

have been out taking a whizz" (Homer the Heretic). This variety of religious beliefs in Springfield not only portrays it as a diverse American town, but it also gives the writers many targets.

Religious diversity exists not only within the town, but also amongst the Simpsons themselves. Within the family there exists a tenuous balance between holiness and sin, usually with Marge and Lisa representing the family's sense of morality, while Homer and Bart show the group's depravity. However, in the end, the scales almost always tip toward the good. Robert Knight says, "What I do appreciate about *The Simpsons* is that evil often -- if not always -- is punished with consequences . . . and, while the show seems to make fun of moral standards, it often upholds them in a back-handed way" (qtd. in Pinsky, par. 43). The family dynamic amongst the Simpsons is so diverse it is sometimes hard to believe they are related. This is no truer than in their feelings on religion.

Marge, the 34-year-old mother of the family, is the glue that holds the family together. Her sense of morality and selfless commitment to her family is the only thing that keeps the Simpsons from falling apart. This directly affects her views on religion. She is a devout Christian, who looks to God and religion to give her the strength necessary to keep her family going. Because of this, her prayers are often bargains with God, such as when the town is facing a nuclear meltdown Marge prays, "Dear Lord, if you spare this town from becoming a smoking hole in the ground, I'll try to be a better Christian, I don't know what I can do . . . Mmm . . . oh, the next time there's a canned food drive, I'll give the poor something they'll actually like instead of old lima beans and pumpkin mix" (Homer Defined). She views the church as the only place to curb Homer and Bart's appetites, if not for only an hour a week.

Lisa is, without a doubt, the smartest eight-year-old in Springfield. She is light years ahead of anyone else in her family intellectually, and this shows on many levels. Her intelligence causes her to view religion as a matter of a set of morals and tradition rather than of pure faith. She views things as causes and effects. For example, if she watches stolen cable, she will go to hell; therefore she should not watch it (Lisa vs. Homer and the 8th Commandment). Or, when she cheats on a test she feels she must confess because her morals dictate that she should, even though if she does the school will lose funding (Lisa Gets an A). Although she is rather incapable of taking leaps of faith, her strong sense of morality leads her to live a good life anyway, and to try her best to influence other family members to do so.

Bart is the ten-year-old anarchist whose goal in life seems to be to rebel against any form of authority he can find. These include his parents, his teachers, the town, and the ultimate authority, God. However, like most rebellious kids, Bart ultimately seeks the control of the very things he rebels against. That is why most of his "pranks are either thwarted or turn to ultimate good" (Bowler, par. 27). Bart is the prodigal son of the family, and through him, the others' good nature is allowed to shine. For example, when Bart ruins Christmas for the family, and then lies about it, they end up losing everything to the angry townsfolk. However, from this they learn to appreciate each other and realize that Christmas is not about material possessions (Miracle on Evergreen Terrace).

Homer is the 36 year-old patriarch of the Simpson family. He is the dimwitted nucleus of the family, but he depends on the others far more than they depend on him. His views on religion are best described as confused. He constantly misreads the bible, such as when he tells Lisa, "your mother has this crazy idea that gambling is wrong, even though they say it's okay in the bible" when Lisa asks where, Homer replies, "somewhere in the back" (\$pringfield). He also mistakes God for a waffle stuck to the ceiling (Homer Loves Flanders), and believes that Hercules and the Lion is a bible story (Blood Feud). This confusion leads Homer to constantly fall into sin, however, "Catholics would say his sins are venial, rather than mortal. He willingly does wrong, but never rejects God or the idea of divine justice. He's

simply weak" (Kisken, par. 31). And although he is, for the most part, a sinner, his dedication to his family is why he ultimately ends up choosing good over evil.

So, if "*The Simpsons* does portray a family searching for moral and theological ideas" (Beth Keller qtd. in Pinsky, par. 10), and if "statistically speaking, there is more prayer on *The Simpsons* than on any sitcom in broadcast history" (Pinsky, par. 11), then why do many religious organizations attack the show? The troubles began for the show in the early nineties, with outcry over Bart Simpson and his underachiever attitude (Rebeck, 622). Teachers, parents, and religious leaders alike were upset over children wearing T-shirts depicting Bart and his famous slogans such as "Eat My Shorts." The public outcry eventually waned as the T-Shirts and catch phrases went out of style.

The latest controversy has come from Catholic organizations about several jokes in the show. The first was when Bart asked Marge if they could "go Catholic" so he could have communion wafers and booze. To this Marge replies, "no, no one is going Catholic. Three children is enough thank you" (Lisa Gets an A). Catholic organizations were in an uproar after this episode aired, but the Fox network stood by the show. However, they were not so steadfast when another joke about Catholics aired later that season. The controversy centered over a spoof of Super Bowl commercials:

Inspired by an old ZZ Top video, the commercial spoof showed a dusty service station where a car pulled up to the pumps and the nerdy driver got out, looked around and hit the horn. Gyrating to rock music, three scantily clad babes emerged from the station seductively . . . The driver [became] even more excited when spotting a glittering cross hanging in one of the wiggling female's ample cleavage.

Voice-over: '*The Catholic Church: We've made a few . . . changes*' (Rosenberg, par. 15)

The controversy caused Fox to change the voice-over line in later airings of the show, eliminating the word Catholic. Although Executive Producer of the show Mike Skully identified the joke as "an observation on crazy Super Bowl commercials, not a comment on the Catholic Church" (qtd. in Rosenberg, par. 25), he understood that religion is a very sensitive issue in American society. Skully mentions that "people can say hurtful things to each other about their weight, their race, their intelligence, their sexual preference, and that all seems up for grabs, but when you get into religion, some people get very nervous" (qtd. in Rosenberg, par. 12).

Another constant criticism of the show by Christians is the show's treatment of the ideal Christian, who takes the form of Ned Flanders. The Flanders family, Ned, Maude, Rod, and Todd, live next door to the Simpsons and are devout Christians, often to a fault. For example, they have a satellite dish with over 200 stations locked out (only religious shows are allowed); Ned doesn't have insurance because he considers it a form of gambling; a punishment in the Flanders' house involves going to bed without a Bible story; Ned's bible collection includes the Aramaic Septuagint, Holy Bible!, Good News Bible, Today's Family Gnostic Bible, The Living Bible, The Vulgate of St. Jerome, Who Begat Whom, and The Bible According to Hoyle, among others. All this portrays the Flanders as a group of nerds who are totally out of touch with today's society. Although for the most part this criticism stands up, in later years Ned has shown characteristics that would be considered closer to normal. For example, he went on a heated rant at the townspeople who tried to help him after his house was destroyed by a hurricane (Hurricane Neddy), he went on a drunken trip to Las Vegas with Homer (Viva Ned Flanders), and he showed interest for another woman after his wife had died (Alone Again, Natura-Diddly). While Ned is still made fun of constantly for his overzealous devotion to his religion, he is shown as a normal person some of the time who is capable of making mistakes.

Although these are some examples of why Christians might take offense to *The Simpsons*, there are many reasons for Christians and people of other religions to embrace the show. The most important reason to recognize is that "God is not mocked" (Pinsky, par. 9). Although religion and piety may be, God himself is never the target of criticism. The creator of the show, Matt Groening, comments that when "we show Him, God has five fingers -- unlike the Simpsons, who only have four" (qtd. in Pinsky, par. 6). God is whom the Simpsons turn to in times of trouble, usually in the form of prayer. Perhaps the best example is when Bart loses his soul and prays:

Are you there, God? It's me, Bart Simpson. I know I never paid too much attention in church, but I could really use some of that good stuff now. I'm... afraid. I'm afraid some weirdo's got my soul and I don't know what they're doing to it! I just want it back. Please? (Bart Sells His Soul)

After praying, the white piece of paper that he had sold to Millhouse (representing his soul) floated down on to his bed. This is another reason many Christians appreciate the show, because God "answers [the Simpsons] prayers and intervenes in their world" (Pinsky, par. 9). Bowler believes "the reason that characters on *The Simpsons* have such frequent recourse to prayer is that God, the Devil, Heaven, Hell and angels are all treated as having objective reality" (par. 11). This makes it impossible for the Simpsons to avoid God in their world, meaning that everything they do will have consequences. While they don't always choose good over evil, the real presence of God might explain why they most often side with good.

Another positive aspect of *The Simpsons* is it doesn't "engage in the pretentious misrepresentation of family life that one finds in the 'model family' shows (from 'The Donna Reed Show' to 'The Cosby Show')" (Rebeck, 622). The show focuses on real life problems and acknowledges that families and parents aren't perfect. By doing this, it helps people admit that they don't have all the answers, and help them look elsewhere for them (to God, for example). The show also provides catharsis for viewers. Rebeck explains, "by laughing with Bart we take vicarious revenge on adult authority figures who emotionally abused us when we were children" (622). This gives people an outlet for their mischievous feelings, rather than having them act upon them in the real world.

Not only does the show regularly delve into religion in general, but it also often discusses specific issues that displays the religious knowledge of the show's creators and writers and their awareness of current issues concerning religion in American society. For example, *The Simpsons* looks at theodicy when the Flanders home is destroyed by a hurricane. Ned sees himself as a very good Christian, and he compares himself to Job, remarking he does "everything the Bible says, even the stuff that contradicts the other stuff" (Hurricane Neddy). This subject is also mentioned in a Halloween episode where Lisa creates a miniature world. She is viewed as God, and when her creations are able to speak with her, they ask her "why do bad things happen to good people" (Treehouse of Horror VII). This topic is more relevant in our society today than ever, and because of this, the writers of *The Simpsons* thought to include it in the show. The show also examines prayer in school. In one episode, Flanders becomes principal of the Springfield Elementary School, and he is eventually fired for saying "thank the Lord" over the intercom (Sweet Seymour Skinner's Baadasssss Song). *The Simpsons* also looks at the problem of cults in "The Joy of Sect." In this episode, Homer and many of the other residents of Springfield join a cult led by a mysterious leader. In the end, they find out that the Leader started the group to steal their money.

So, with all the good qualities present in *The Simpsons*, why are some Christians still upset? Gerry Bowler observes several factors that lead to the uneasiness. First, he notes, "Christians and Protestants in particular, manifest a certain tension on the question of humor and religion" (par. 29). Some Christians believe that Jesus never laughed, and joking about religion is something a devout Christian

would never do. Second, Bowler mentions that "the humor of *The Simpsons* is difficult to get in its entirety" (par. 31). Because many people do not understand the subtle jabs at modern culture, they are often left only seeing a "drunken father, and a rude little boy" (Bowler, par. 31). These factors, among others, lead many Christians to view *The Simpsons* as nothing more than a dysfunctional family that is just another part of a popular culture that is leading the nation awry.

In conclusion, *The Simpsons* is perhaps the smartest, most socially conscious show on television. It is one of the few shows that appeals to a very broad age range, because it is both hilarious and intelligent. Religion is present in the Simpsons' world, because it is present in our society. And, like all other parts of society portrayed on *The Simpsons*, religion is help up for ridicule. However, God's presence is always shown as a positive thing in the Simpsons' lives, and consequently, good morals and ethics are usually upheld by the characters. But perhaps most importantly, "The show always is kind to people of true faith," but "people who build their religion on words and not feelings are treated less kindly" (Kisken, par. 18). This message is very important in a society filled with televangelists and empty promises. Perhaps if every family had as much true faith as the Simpsons, the world just might be a better place.

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