

Simpson Ethics

By *John Sohn*

In January of 1990, "The Simpsons" debuted on American television, introducing the nation to the dysfunctional, nuclear cartoon family. Created by Matt Groening, the series originally broadcasted as 30-second shorts on the "Tracey Ullman Show." With growing popularity, the Simpson family was given a weekly series, attracting a wide audience of children and adults. While the children made a model of Bart and his "Eat my shorts" attitude, the show's keen writing appealed to adults. Today, in its eleventh season, "The Simpsons" continues as history's longest running prime-time animated show, and currently, longest running sitcom. The program has triumphed as "TV's most consistent and best written series over the past decade (Feran)."

Despite the show's animated appearance, having yellow-colored characters with odd hair, "The Simpsons" is a profound parody of life, "achieving the true essence of satire (Mullin)." The writers' use of "incongruity, sarcasm, exaggeration, and other comedic techniques" gives the show its true genius. Although with "pratfalls and stupidity that is, at times, nothing short of brilliant," the show appeals to those "who can laugh at the low comedy, yet understand the biting satire that truly drives the series (Mullin)." All different aspects of life are scrutinized to a hilarious effect.

The Simpson family is the heart of the show. James L. Brooks, the series' executive producer, describes the Simpsons as a "normal American family in all its beauty and all its horror (Steiger)." Indeed, the Simpson family is a reflection of the American lifestyle, each member following the stereotypes and cliches of society. "The Simpsons" seems to express "almost every facet of American public life and at the same time, in its most condensed humorous ways, appeal equally to the blue-collar worker from Small-Town, USA, as to the businesswoman Joanna Smith from the Big Apple (Steiger)."

With popularity comes controversy. Many people have taken offense to "The Simpsons." They claim characters like Bart, the adolescent delinquent, and Homer, the beer-gulping, ape-like father, present a bad influence on society ("Biographies"). Comments and jokes made on different social institutions are received as insulting.

Much of the conflict surrounds the issue of religion. "The Simpsons" has received negative criticism throughout the nation from the church's pulpit, denouncing the series as immoral, sacrilegious, and damaging to traditional family values. Former President George Bush stated in 1992, "We need a nation closer to the Waltons than the Simpsons (Pinsky)." As evidence, protestors cite excerpts from the show. In one scene, Homer Simpson is praying to God.

Dear Lord, the gods have been good to me and I am thankful. For the first time in my life everything is absolutely perfect the way it is. So here's the deal: you freeze everything as it is and I won't ask for anything more. If that is okay, please give me absolutely no sign. (pause) Okay, deal. In gratitude, I present to you this offering of cookies and milk. If you want me to eat them for you, please give me no sign. (pause) Thy will be done (Sillars).

In a more severe case, lines made on an episode caused a complaint from the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. With pressure from the network officials, "The Simpsons" producers altered the line when later airing on reruns (Pinsky).

One church minister says "The Simpsons" "portrays Christians as being out of touch with reality. It makes anyone who follows God look like a fool (Kisken)." He is referring to the character of Ned

Flanders, who plays the part of the goody-goody next-door neighbor. His pious family is the perfect contrast to the Simpsons' jumbled household. Flander's children, Rod and Todd, play games such as "Clothe the Leper" and "Build the Mission." Influenced by Homer, Todd swears during one episode. Ned's punishment is sending him to his room without a Bible story, causing Todd to cry. When asked by his wife if he was not too harsh, Flanders replies "You knew I had a temper when you married me (Bowler)." Critics voice that Flanders makes the Christian life too holy, and want people to know that "You can be a normal person and still love God (Kisken)."

Others defend that "The Simpsons" uses religion merely as a satirical element, with no harm intended. Reverend Lovejoy, the devout pastor of the First Church of Springfield, is often used to depict the hypocrisy of Christianity. While he preaches against "Gambling: the Eighth Deadly Sin," the church holds Bingo, Reno, and Monte Carlo nights. The reverend is also criticized as being judgmental, calling Ned Flanders the "fallen one" when he receives a mere traffic offense. He also leads a mob, burning Krusty merchandise, when "the clown prince of corruption" is accused of a crime, for which he is innocent (Bowler).

Acknowledging the satire of "The Simpsons," some have claimed that the series is actually the most religious, non-evangelical, show on television. While other programs avoid the issue of religion, "The Simpsons" "takes religion's place in society seriously enough to do it the honor of making fun of it (Sillars)." Matt Groening contends, "Right-wingers complain there's no God on TV. Not only do the Simpsons go to church every Sunday and pray, they actually speak to God from time to time. We show Him, and God has five fingers—unlike the Simpsons who only have four (Doherty)."

Religion is plentiful on "The Simpsons." The Simpson family is actively Christian, attending the First Church of Springfield every Sunday and praying at mealtimes. While Homer may sometimes listen to football at church and Bart's prayers consist only of "Rub a dub, dub, thanks for the grub," God is present, showing that "this is a family where God has a place at the table now and again (Kisken)." God is never mocked. The Simpsons always turn to God when facing a crisis (Pinsky). Some of the show's most sincere moments are when characters are praying to God. When Bart has sold his soul to Milhouse and tries to gain it back, he finds that his friend has traded it for pogs. Bart, desperate, looks toward God. "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 right now. I'm afraid some weirdo's got my soul and I don't know what he's going to do with it (Bowler)." In many cases, God intervenes for the good of the Simpson family. In fear of failing the fourth grade, Bart prays for a miracle so he may have time to study. God answers his plead with a snow day, allowing Bart to pass his exam. Bart thanks God saying, "Part of this D-minus belongs to God (Pinsky)."

The Simpsons are a family "searching for moral and theological ideals (Pinsky)." Each member has a separate approach to religion. Homer, who was described as a "lovable oaf" by creator Matt Groening, wants a "take-my-order kind of God (Kisken)." Homer is lazy, fat, and incompetent. He once purposely gained enough weight to be considered handicapped to avoid working. His temptations are numerous, all prompted with a savoring "Mmmmm." In one episode, Homer sells his soul to the devil for a doughnut. Although he knows by leaving the last bite alone he will not go to hell, Homer stills consumes the "forbidden doughnut." Homer "never rejects God or the idea of divine justice. He's simply weak (Kisken)."

Bart, like Homer, knows God exists, but cannot defy his impulses of mischief. On one occasion of misbehavior, Bart, having been struck by a car, is ascending to heaven on an escalator where he spits off

the side despite warning. Bart is the classic underachiever, rebelling against the society to which he cannot conform. He is excited by the topic of hell, makes prank calls to the local bartender, and is constantly plotting a defiant scheme. His devilish antics though, are "either thwarted or turn to ultimate good (Bowler)." When Bart's escapades cause a teachers' strike, his conscience eventually leads him to right his wrongdoing, leaving a glimmer of hope for Bart's future. Bart is an adolescent overwhelmed with immaturity.

The most faithful of the Simpson family is Marge. She represents the foundation on which Homer and the children depend on for love and comfort. Her affection for her family is expressed in comments such as "Oh, Homie, I like your in-your-face humanity. I like the way Lisa speaks her mind. I like Bart's ...I like Bart (Steiger)." Although she is capable of accomplishing higher goals in life, Marge sacrifices her ambitions in devotion to the family. She acts as the stable moral consciousness of the household. When Homer gloats about skipping church, Marge states her divine commitment. "Homer, please don't make me choose between my man and my God, because you just can't win (Vogl)."

Lisa is clearly the most intelligent person in the Simpson household. At the age of eight, she is a scholarly honor student and an accomplished saxophone musician. A genius unrecognized, Lisa shows the maturity of an adult, yet still has the childhood affections of ponies and Malibu Stacy (Biographies). Like her mother, she possesses strong ethical virtues. Although Marge has accepted the lesser sins as part of society, Lisa advocates morality in any situation. Her disapproval of Homer stealing cable television, breaking the eighth commandment, plagues him of guilt, leading him to eventually sever the line. With her honest principles, Lisa is disillusioned by corruption in society, often making her "the saddest kid in grade number two (Steiger)."

Although "The Simpsons" may seem "to make fun of moral standards, it often upholds those standards in a back-handed way (Pinsky)." Each show ends on an uplifting note or moral integrity. Good always triumphs over evil.

Some members of society have complained over the show's reaffirming morality. Atheists have voiced that the series "is more of a Sunday school program than ever (Sillars)." They feel it preaches "that the only good people are religious and that those who are not are immoral (Sillars)."

Whether it is blasphemous or uplifting, "people's honest attitudes about religion" are depicted on "The Simpsons" (Pinsky). The fact remains that religion is more evident on "The Simpsons" than any other television show. Watching Homer misquote a Bible verse as "Thou shalt not take...moochers into thy...hut" might be offensive, but watching Homer work day and night to buy Lisa a pony can be considered noble (Bowler). The decision is for the viewer to choose. Regardless of the critics, "The Simpsons" has made a "mark on television and social history that is ever-growing in distinction, and may never fade (Mullin)."

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