

Worst Paper Ever

The Simpsons, Morality, and Religion

By *Josh Cashion*

"Oh, Marge, cartoons don't have any deep meaning. They're just stupid drawings that give you a cheap laugh."

- Homer Simpson

Television is a major influence on our culture today. Over the years, viewers have been given some very negative images of our culture and some positive ones as well. Television has both served our culture well and helped plummet it to new depths that most did not know could be reached. Most television shows can be classified as good or bad for the viewer to watch. For example, "Bay Watch" has been regarded (generally) as bad for the common good, while "Little House On the Prairie" has been regarded as wholesome and good for the society.

What about "The Simpsons"? Where does this show fit on the grid of morality and ethical values? Over the years, those responsible for determining these standards have fluctuated on their view of the show. At first, when the show focused on Bart's "badness" and his rebellious attitude, most considered this show harmful for the family and youth to watch, including then-President George Bush. [1] Since the show shifted from that emphasis and on to the family at large and their relationship to the community, most critics have changed their opinion.

The show has taken on such issues as adultery, gambling, alcoholism, father-son relationships, divorce, poverty, evil, death, love, and political rights, to name a few. Not many other shows have been able to discuss these issues successfully. How have the writers been able to discuss these issues successfully? From what perspective have they written these key episodes?

In this paper I hope to explore how five key episodes are written and how the issues in those episodes are handled. I hope to determine if they are looking at the issues through postmodern eyes, or if they are looking to the Christian/religious perspective. After determining the perspective, I wish to explore the merit of either perspective on the issue at hand.

Homer the Heretic

In this episode, Homer has a dream in which God visits him. Homer is watching TV (as he is usually found), when suddenly the roof of the house is torn off and God (with five fingers, as opposed to the normal four the rest of the characters have) steps into his living room. God's first words to Homer are: "Thou hast forsaken my church!" giving the viewer the impression that Homer is in for it. But remember, this a dream, and more specifically, it is Homer's dream. Homer, in all confidence replies, "I'm not a bad guy... I work hard... I love my kids... so why should I spend my Sunday hearing about how I'm going to hell?... I figure I should try to live right and worship you in my own way."

This is actually a very serious question that is raised by those who are searching for a deeper meaning to life outside of traditional religion and philosophy. In today's postmodern world,

religion and philosophy no longer hold the corner on finding meaning and fulfillment. Many look elsewhere and within themselves to find that meaning. Homer is no different. In *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, Homer is described as an “American spiritual wonderer. Though linked culturally... to biblical tradition, he regularly chooses a mosaic of other traditions, mythologies, and moral codes. In the face of these ever-shifting layers of meaning, he stumbles along, making the most of his limited understanding of their complexities.” [2]

A perfect example of this appears in a debate between Homer and Marge. Homer, now enlightened, addresses the kids as they depart for church: “Let me tell you about another wicked guy... he had long hair and some wild ideas, and he didn’t always do what other people thought was right and his name was... I forget... but my point is... I forget that too... Marge, you know who I’m talking about... he used to drive that blue car...” It seems as if he is talking about John the Baptist or Jesus, but he really doesn’t know. He has heard of this person, but can’t remember who it is or where he heard it. To Homer, this person is nothing more than a cultural reference point that he will try to use to justify his lifestyle. Homer is ignorant of the changes he is making in his life. All too often the noble purposes that we have are nothing more than our own desires and values masked in philosophy and religion. In this case, it is Homer’s own religion.

Back in Homer’s dream, God actually is won over by Homer’s logic (again, *only* in Homer’s dream): “You’ve got a good point there... you know sometimes I’d rather be watching football... It’s a deal!” As a result of this conversation in Homer’s head, Homer decides to not go to church anymore and form his own religion. Unfortunately, not everyone else around him is as easily persuaded as God is. Marge is especially discontented with his newfound religion. Here, Marge plays the role of protective mother against the harmful father: “I have a responsibility to raise these children right and unless you change I’ll have to tell them that their father is... wicked... don’t make me choose between my man and my God because you just can’t win.” In this episode, it seems that Marge and Homer are representing a marriage where the husband and wife are “unequally yoked” and at opposite ends of the spectrum in a marriage when it comes to religion.[3] Those like Marge are dedicated to God to the point of sacrificing her own well being, and those like Homer who is willing to sacrifice his family and love for the chance to live his life in a Godless universe. How far will he be willing to go? Will Marge have to choose? Can their marriage last without a common ground?

The answer comes in the next few minutes in a brilliant scene, when Homer is left to himself at home while the rest of the family is at church. Reverend Lovejoy, aware of Homer’s religion, addresses each of the issues that Homer is dealing with, namely pride and lack of a moral code. At the same time, Homer has offended every major religion (except Islam) and proclaimed that he is smarter than anybody else. While uttering these haughty words, he falls asleep with a cigar in his mouth and starts a fire.

In a wonderful scene, representatives from the three major religions that he previously offended come to Homer’s rescue. Apu (Hindu), Krusty the Clown (Jewish), Ned Flanders and

Reverend Lovejoy (Christianity) are all part of the volunteer fire department, and they all save Homer's life without reservation or bitterness. In response to this merciful act, Homer turns heavenward and says, "There's a lesson here... the Lord is vengeful, show me who to smite and I will smite them..." Ned and Lovejoy stop Homer and reassure him that God did not set his house on fire.

Lovejoy goes on to say, "No, but he was working in the hearts of your friends and neighbors when they went to your aid..." Homer replies to their generosity by saying, "I was rude to everyone of you... and you saved my life." Here, each of these religions persuades Homer by validating the *essence* of their faith rather than telling him that they "told him so". Next week, Homer is back in church, sleeping and dreaming of God again, and this time God has *four* fingers, just like Homer.

William Romanowski believes this episode to illustrate the role of God and religion in people's everyday lives.^[4] How does religion play a part in our lives? Do we attend church, synagogue, the mosque and walk away transformed, or do we conform what we hear and see into our own belief system? Are we using our cultural symbols, images and religious background to enrich our lives, or are we simply using them to justify our own position and lifestyle, as Homer attempted to do? Is there a standard of how God should participate in our lives, or is it up to the individual? The answer lies at the end of the episode, when we see Homer asleep in church again, dreaming of his own God again. Despite all of the miraculous events that just happened, he did not change.

Bart Sells His Soul

Do we have a soul? If so, what role does it play in our lives? Does it live on after we die? These questions and more are tackled in this key episode. Any philosopher or budding philosopher would do well to watch this episode and learn from the Simpson kids and Milhouse just how important the soul is. It isn't very often that the issue of the soul is handled in a television show, yet alone a cartoon. According to Jason Holt, "the show is not intended to be 'philosophical' in any way that... existentialist literature is... The Simpsons provides much animated grist for the philosopher's mill... the result is not only reliably entertaining, it is also, on occasion, illuminating."^[5]

That is what makes this show so unique: it tackles hard topics, difficult topics that no other show can. It can do this because it's a cartoon. Somehow, cartoons disarm us and tear down barriers we have in discussing religion, morals, politics, and philosophy. Lisa, Bart and Milhouse can carry on a philosophical discussion of the soul because they are "being used as a 'satirical vehicle' and fit well into an established tradition of using children in satire to fly 'under the radar' of viewers who dislike... social commentary per se".^[6]

Bart and Milhouse get into a debate over the existence of the soul after they get into trouble at church for inserting "In the Garden of Eden" by Iron Butterfly into the church hymnal. Okay, Bart inserted it, and Milhouse told on him, but the latter got in trouble for snitching. The following is their dialogue/debate over the state of the soul:

Bart: You shank! How could you tell on me?

Milhouse: I didn't want hungry birds pecking my soul forever.

Bart: Soul... c'mon Milhouse. There's no such thing as a soul. It's just something they made up to scare kids, like the Boogie Man or Michael Jackson.

Milhouse: Every religion says there's a soul Bart. Why would they lie, what would they have to gain?

Bart: Well, if your soul is real, where is it?

Milhouse: It's kind of in here (pointing to chest) and when you sneeze, that's your soul trying to escape. Saying "God bless you" crams it back in...

Bart: How could someone with glasses that thick be so stupid? Listen, you don't have a soul, I don't have a soul, there's no such thing as a soul!

Milhouse: Fine. If you're so sure of that, why don't you sell your soul to me?

Bart agrees to the wager and sells his soul to Milhouse for five dollars. This dialogue is a perfect illustration of how the Simpsons can discuss topics that are hard for people to handle in common, everyday situations. Here, two children are debating the existence of the soul - something that only happens in the church or in the halls of academia, or maybe in a coffeehouse.

The next dialogue on the soul happens between Lisa and Bart after she discovers that he just sold his to Milhouse:

Lisa: Where'd you get five dollars?

Bart: I sold my soul to Milhouse.

Lisa: How could you do that? Your soul is the most valuable part of you.

Bart: You believe in that junk?

Lisa: Well, whether or not the soul is physically real it represents everything fine inside us... your soul is the only part of you that lasts forever.

Lisa is acting as the moral agent of the family once again. More often than not, it is Lisa who comes to the rescue and saves her family from the brink of destruction. She is the most informed, logical component of the show. According to Mark T. Conard, Lisa takes on the character of Socrates, the theoretical optimist. Here and in other episodes, she feels her duty is to transform everyone's behavior, be it Homer, Bart, Marge, Nelson, Mr. Burns, and even the Malibu Stacy doll. [7] But even here, her words have no effect on Bart.

However, Bart discovers that life without his soul (real or not) is weird. He can no longer operate automatic doors, leave breath marks on cold glass, he can't laugh at Itchy and Scratchy cartoons or pranks on Homer, and the pets in the house regard him as an intruder. They sense something he does not.

After these and other occurrences, Bart sees the importance of his soul and sets out on a quest across Springfield for his soul, or any soul in general. After discovering that his soul had been sold at the comic book store for Alf pogs, Bart comes back home and addresses God directly. Why God? Why did Bart assume that God would be able to help him? Does having or needing a soul presuppose a belief in a Supreme Being? What does this say about those who don't

believe in a Supreme Being? Do they not have souls? Unfortunately, these questions are not answered in the show or by the writers. Bart's conversation with God is simple and to the point:

"Are you there God? Is 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 some crazy person has my soul and I don't know what they're doing to it..."

This is a very powerful scene where Bart addresses God directly and passionately through tears begs him for his soul. He truly is desperate and needs God to intervene in his life. This scene betrays the classic portrayals of Bart that we are used to. We were introduced to Bart as the bad boy who terrorized his sister and Homer. Countless t-shirts, posters and action figures told us to "Eat My Shorts", or "Don't Have A Cow, Man." Here, Bart is seen as being vulnerable and scared. Mark Pinsky says of this scene, "Bart does most things a praying Christian would do... He speaks directly and personally to God from the heart. He confesses his powerlessness. He admits his sinfulness. He voices faith in God's ability and power to grant his petition..."^[8] But, Bart's prayer for his soul is answered when a slip of paper with "his soul" on it magically drifts down in front of him. Lisa had broken into her piggy bank to buy back his soul at the store. While Bart is gleefully "eating his soul", Lisa sermonizes once more: "... But you know Bart, some philosophers believe that no one is born with a soul, you have to earn one through suffering, thought and prayer like you did last night."

This tiny little statement opens up a philosophical can of worms. Are we born with a soul as Calvin asserts, or are we born with a blank slate, as Locke asserts? Do we earn our soul or do we nourish it as we go through life? In the end, what has this episode said about the soul? On the surface, it claims that we all need a soul and that we all have one, even bad people (both Nelson Muntz and Bart have souls). At least in Bart's dream, everyone needs their soul to "get across the lake", an apparent reference to the afterlife. What does this say about those who do not believe in a soul? Do they have one anyway? Or because they don't believe in a soul, do they not experience an afterlife?

Bart nods his head in agreement, but the viewer is left with the notion that somehow the lesson was wasted on the boy. Even then, a more vulnerable side of Bart is revealed to the viewer. Gerd Steiger noticed this as well in his article on the Simpsons Archive: "... while he may be full of mischief, Bart also has an extremely sensitive and vulnerable side: While Bart loves his family, he also needs to be loved."^[9] In this episode, not only have we been able to discuss the merits of possessing a soul, but we have also seen the "softer side" of Bart Simpson. It is very apparent that the writers believe that everyone (or at least children) good or bad has a soul and it represents everything good in us, and somehow God is connected to it and it determines where we spend eternity.

In Marge We Trust

This episode addresses the problems associated with people who claim to be adherents to a particular faith, but don't act like they do. In other words, hypocrites. In this episode, the hypocrite being looked at is Reverend Lovejoy, pastor of the First Church of Springfield.

The opening scene puts the viewer into a packed church full of sleepy and bored parishioners listening to Reverend Lovejoy droll on about the benefits of “constancy”, whatever that is. Upon arriving at home, the Simpson family cannot wait to change clothes while voicing their satisfaction at finally being out of church. Lisa enjoys this part of Sunday the most, because “it’s the farthest point away from next Sunday.” Marge is indignant about her family’s lack of enthusiasm for church and berates them for it: “Church shouldn’t be a chore. It should help you in your daily life.” To which Homer replies, “It should be, but it doesn’t”. Now, while Marge is addressing her family and *their* attitudes towards church, it seems as if she is talking to herself and possibly even the Reverend about *his* attitude towards church.

Does Homer’s reply echo that of most modern churchgoers? Most evangelical churches have been trying to be more relevant to the parishioners needs over the past few years. Mainline churches are following the trend in the more recent past. However, Reverend Lovejoy has not followed that trend and continues to perform his duties the same way he did when he became a pastor back in the 1970’s.

The next scene has her in Lovejoy’s office, telling him that the church should be doing more to reach out to people. Lovejoy replies defiantly, “Well, I don’t see you volunteering to make things better”, to which Marge replies, “Okay, I will volunteer.” Lovejoy is stunned that someone would accept his challenge. Immediately, Marge begins to clean the church from top to bottom. While cleaning she overhears a phone conversation between Lovejoy and Principal Skinner:

Skinner: What should I do?

Lovejoy: Well, maybe you should read your Bible.

Skinner: Any particular passage?

Lovejoy: Oh, its all good...

Marge is again stunned by someone’s attitude about the church. This time she is even more shocked because it is from a supposed servant of the church. How could someone who has been given charge of a “flock” disregard his or her responsibilities so? How could he give such flippant advice to someone who urgently needs his counsel? In the Simpsons, organized religion “is rarely depicted as helping to solve spiritual problems at all, another indicator of the inadequacy of the church.”^[10] To Mark Pinsky, Reverend Lovejoy represents the collective failings of the church and Christian conservatism, and is portrayed as “a shallow, intolerant, pan-denominational windbag.”^[11] Is this the picture that most people get when they think of evangelical conservatives? Obviously the writers on the Simpsons do.

Marge confronts Lovejoy on the issue, and he begins to tell her his story of being a young, idealistic seminary grad on the way to his first church. He was excited about his job and helping people until he met Ned Flanders. Ned constantly pestered Reverend Lovejoy with questions and concerns that were trivial, such as coveting his own wife, wanting to be meeker, and swallowing a toothpick. He frequently called the reverend at inconvenient times like dinner, the middle of the night, and on the reverend’s vacation in Paris. After all these years of

pettiness, he “finally stopped caring.” Was the burden too heavy for him, or did he never have the ability to last in the church?

After this rebuke by Marge, he hands the counseling duties over to her. Immediately, Moe calls from the bar. He’s lost his will to live. Marge lovingly tells him that he has lots to live for. This brightens his day and he tells her “that’s not what Reverend Lovejoy’s been telling me.” Marge, in one phone call made more of an impact on someone’s life than Lovejoy did in his career. As stated above, the church is depicted as powerless, even resistant to help people with their spiritual and emotional issues. An outsider who cares (Marge) had to “invade” the church to do its job.

Marge, according to Steiger, represents the “stabilizing element” within the Simpsons family.^[12] In this episode, she performs this duty for the entire town. Erion and Zaccardi believe that Marge is driven by Aristotle’s model of virtue, which is doing good things because they are good for those around her, and therefore, herself. “She makes these decisions not because she hopes that they will be reciprocated, but because they are reciprocated by their very nature; what is good for them is good for her.”^[13] Marge thrives on doing good things for others because it makes her happy. In this episode, she makes others happy as their counselor. In turn, she enjoys fulfillment and happiness because they are happy.

What about Reverend Lovejoy? What are his issues? In other episodes, he is seen as uncaring, unmerciful and boring. We see an actual identity crisis in this episode as he deals with who he is and how he can improve himself. After being ignored at church one Sunday, and seeing how the congregation preferred the counsel of Marge, he saunters back in to the sanctuary, wondering about his future as a pastor, when suddenly the stained glass images on the windows come to life and engage him in conversation:

Lovejoy: What have I done to lose them?

Saint #1: What have you done to help them?

Saint #2: To inspire men, you must be brave.

Saint #3: Tell us, what great deeds have you done to inspire the hearts of men?

Lovejoy: Well, I had the vestibule recarpeted...

Saint #1: I’ve appeared in over 8,000 visions and that’s the lamest reply I’ve ever heard!

Saint #2: You’re just lucky God isn’t here.

Three observations: First, the “saints” tell him that he must help people. Secondly, they tell him he must inspire them, and third, without those elements, they conclude that “God isn’t here.” Is this true, or is this an outsiders’ perspective on what the church *should* look like? Is it a Christian’s duty to help and inspire in order to usher in the presence of God? Or is God always present, even if his servants are unworthy of his presence?

Regardless of the view of the writers and its commentary on the church, Lovejoy is inspired and has to rescue Ned Flanders from a pack of wild baboons at the zoo after Marge gives him bad advice (which proves that not even the most gifted are always right). Afterwards, Ned is thankful to the Reverend for rescuing him. For one of the few times in the show, Lovejoy is

genuinely humble and thankful: “Don’t thank me, thank Marge Simpson. She taught me there’s more to being a minister than not caring about people.” The following Sunday, Reverend Lovejoy is in the pulpit and everyone is on the edge of their seats listening to his story of how he rescued Ned from the demonic baboons, to which Homer replies, “Now that’s religion!”

It seems as if the writers are focusing on communicating common experiences to the church over doctrine and theology. In fact, at the beginning of the episode, it was theology that put the parishioners to sleep. Homer’s exclamation is seen as a cry from the pulpit to share more of these “stories” rather than sit through another boring sermon. Is the church in the postmodern age changing to meet these needs, or are we changing the culture? The traditional postmodernist thrives on experience without connecting it to any moral or theological backdrop. Why didn’t the reverend connect his brave experience to any Biblical or theological points? If he had done that early in his career, he would not have lost the faith of most of his congregation. While this episode highlights experience over faith, it also tells the viewer that caring for people is the true call of the church. When a church starts to care for people, it is successful.

Homer vs. Lisa and the Eighth Commandment

This episode is very blunt and over handed about its use of the Bible and its affects on everyday life. It deals with honesty, stealing, and the effects of sin on the household. Mark Pinsky loves this episode because, “Homer vs. Lisa and the Eighth Commandment has the structure of an exquisitely crafted, twenty-two minute sermon. It could have easily been composed in the finest of seminaries...”^[14]

It starts with a dream sequence in which Homer is transplanted back into the Sinai desert at the time of Moses and the Ten Commandments. Homer’s likeness is known as “Homer the Thief”, and his friends are known by their vices as well. Everyone is happy with their vices until Moses comes down the mountain with the Ten Commandments, “in no particular order.” Immediately, no one is permitted to “live out their identity” anymore because Moses and God have forbidden it.

Homer is awakened from his dream when his neighbor Ned is chasing off a shady cable installer who offered to install illegal cable for \$50. Homer chases him down and has the cable installed in his house. Homer has ethical questions that are easily answered in the informative pamphlet, “So, You’ve Decided To Steal Cable.” With all of Homer’s objections answered, he goes ahead with the procedure, and voila! The Simpson’s have cable.

At first, Lisa, Maggie and Bart love the idea, but Marge is hesitant. As the moral agent of the family, she has reservations about stealing cable until Homer shows her the Women’s Channel. She is instantly hooked. Lisa’s stance on the cable issue changes in Sunday school where they learn the Ten Commandments and more specifically, “Thou Shalt Not Steal”. She then has a vision of her entire family in hell for the crime of stealing cable. After a feeble attempt at convincing Homer of his crime, she turns to Reverend Lovejoy, who actually offers her some good advice:

Lisa: Should I have my father arrested?

Lovejoy: On the surface that would be an ideal solution, but remember the Fifth Commandment - "Honor Thy Father and Mother." Lisa, I would like to see you set an example by not watching the offensive technology yourself.

Soon after, we are in the Simpson house again as Bart is caught watching the "adult channel". Homer is very upset with him for doing so, not realizing the temptation wouldn't be there if it weren't on television in the first place. Sin has entered into the Simpson household. Homer's "apparently benign occasion of sin begins to have wider implications on the family... The rot has clearly set in, and it is spreading."^[15] Could this be upholding the principle of "letting a little yeast work its way through the dough?"

After this incident, Lisa reports to Bart and Homer that she no longer approves of having illegal cable and will not watch television with the family. Homer, forgetful of what just happened to his son, tries to tempt Lisa with the horseracing channel, knowing her love for horses. Lisa, unfazed in the face of her tempter defiantly replies, "Sorry, I'd rather go to heaven."

This show is very unique because it sets up not opposing personalities, but opposing moralities. Each character represents a certain moral stance. Sam Tingleff notes this trend in his article, "The Simpsons as a Critique of Consumer Culture": "Lisa does not have a full personality, she is 'rationality'... Homer is used to show all the contradictions and cultural myths of the American consumer lifestyle... Lisa acts as the voice of reason, questioning the motives and behavior of other characters with a critical eye... She is often at odds with the entire community, suggesting the dismissal of reason in American culture."^[16] This is not just a struggle between Homer and Lisa, this is a struggle between good and evil. Not that Homer is evil, but he is permitting evil to enter into the Simpson household. Lisa and Marge are determined not to let it in. In this episode, they act as the protectors of the household.

The next scene shows Marge and Homer disagreeing about the presence of cable. While Marge is primarily concerned with how it is negatively affecting the family, Homer is more concerned about the behavior of Lisa:

Homer: There's something wrong with that kid. She's so moral.

Marge: Bart has been watching that racy movie and Lisa's been losing a little respect for you... maybe you should consider unhooking the cable... I'm afraid that cable has become an evil presence in our home."

Despite Marge's convincing argument, Homer is undaunted in unhooking the cable and therefore unhooking his dream of having cable in his home. Snow and Snow elaborate on Marge's perception of the "evil presence" in their article: "Simpsonian Sexual Politics":

"The house on Evergreen Terrace is a bastion of domestic harmony and moral serenity. Springfield, representative of the public sphere, is marked by moral decay... the Simpson home itself... is morally challenged when the private sphere is threatened with subversion by the public. Often... the writers will allow evil to invade the house through television..."^[17]

As the show goes on, the viewer sees the progression of the effects of sin in the Simpson household. Homer is approached by the cable guy to buy a stolen stereo. This prompts Homer to install security bars around his house, keeping crime out and the family in. Could it be that Homer put the bars up to protect his family from himself? Again, Bart is caught watching the “adult channel”, but this time with a group of paying patrons. Homer is enraged that Bart went back on his promise not to watch it again, to which Bart replies, “Man, I wish I were an adult so I could break the rules...” This comment hurts Homer but does not distract him from inviting all of his friends over to watch the fight on cable.

At the fight, Homer is confronted by many of his vices, in a classic “Tell Tale Heart” moment. While Lisa silently confronts him about the stolen cable, Moe comes over, prompting Homer to hide all of the mugs he stole from the bar. Suddenly, Mr. Burns appears, prompting him to hide all of the office supplies he stole from the power plant. “The message is clear”, states Pinsky, “For every thief there is a victim of theft, buying stolen goods makes you complicit in the theft, and often the perpetrator becomes a victim-in-kind; or to return to the Bible, ‘*A man reaps what he sows*’ (Gal. 6.7)”[\[18\]](#)

Lisa says nothing and joins Marge and Maggie out in the yard in protest. Shortly, Homer and Bart (against his will) join them. Their protest worked, along with the fact that Homer’s dishonorable behavior was made clear to him in one evening. Immediately after the fight, Homer cuts the cable, but not before he cuts the power to the entire street. Despite Homer’s change in attitude, it did not change his heart. While he was convicted of his wrong, he did not want to change. He still wanted cable, and he still regretted getting rid of it. This is very consistent with his personality, as Raja Halwani noted in his article “Homer and Aristotle”:

“How exactly does Homer stand up to ethical evaluation? Homer is not an evil person. While he is not a paradigm of virtue, he certainly is not malicious. The harshest reaction we can have towards him is pity...”[\[19\]](#)

And again in the same article:

“We also must remember that in many of the cases in which Homer does do the right thing, especially as far as his family is concerned, he has to struggle against his desires to not do otherwise.”[\[20\]](#)

Why is Homer written this way? Why was he so appalled at the idea of doing right in the face of so much wrong? As he watched his family become fractured and entrenched in sin, he did nothing to change his behavior. One proposal is that Homer is an idea, as stated above. Gerd Steiger elaborates:

“The character of Homer is a powerful dramatic tool, an awareness factor. By being so completely naïve towards any influence of manipulation, he shakes the viewer, pointing precisely on the very manipulating influences relevant in our capitalistic popular culture.”[\[21\]](#)

So, just as Lisa was the voice of reason and morality in this episode, Homer was the voice of the common man who desires what capitalistic popular culture offers, and will steal to get it. What does this say about the relationship between our American culture and the morality of the Bible? Are they diametrically opposed, or is there a way to reconcile the two? Has the church

given in to the idea of popular capitalism, or have we been able to distinguish ourselves and set an example of responsibility and sensible, honest living in light of capitalism?

Hurricane Neddy

What happens when bad things happen to good people? What if these people profess a faith that believes that God will get them through anything? What happens to these people when God does not do what they wanted him to do? These are the questions that are answered in this episode when a hurricane strikes Springfield and demolishes Ned Flanders' house. As a result, he has honest questions for God to answer and does not receive the answers he wanted. He also discovers something about his past that has led him to discover who he really is. Ned serves a type character for those Christians whose faith is shaken by an event or circumstance. Mark Pinsky notes that, "Ned's portrayal as a character is complex and nuanced, enabling him to raise serious issues on a regular basis."[22]

We open the scene immediately after the hurricane, and Ned and his family are picking up the pieces of their house and their lives. Since Ned believes insurance to be a "form of gambling," they didn't have any insurance on their house or possessions. They are the only family staying at the church shelter since no one else in Springfield was affected.

At the shelter, Ned asks Reverend Lovejoy if God is punishing him for something. Instead of listening to Ned, Lovejoy offers him an Art Linkletter book from his library. He even physically distances himself from Ned while the conversation is going on. In our previous studies on the good reverend, we have already discussed his shortcomings. Its obvious here that he does not like Ned and chooses not to help him in his greatest time of need. It is also obvious that he has failed as a pastor to care for those who need his help the most, even if it is just moral support. Ned and his family are isolated and alone in the house of God. Again, this is not a good image of the church.

For solace and comfort, Ned goes to the empty sanctuary to read God's word. When he opens the Bible, he gets a paper cut. Immediately, he begins to question God:

"Why me Lord? Where have I gone wrong? I've always been nice to people... I don't drink, dance or swear... I've even kept kosher to be on the safe side. I've done everything the Bible says, even the stuff that contradicts the other stuff. What more could I do? I... feel like I'm coming apart here... I want to yell out, but I just can't... do it!"

John Sohn in his article, "Simpson Ethics", notes, "Some of the shows most sincere moments are when characters are praying to God."[23] Ned is desperately reaching out to God. This scene epitomizes every Christians' experience. We are all at some moment baffled by the will of God.[24] We don't always get the answers we want, and we don't always get what we want. This scene changes our perception towards Ned and his faith. We are now sympathetic towards his plight and his crisis of faith.

Ned's negative attitude changes the next morning when the Flanders' awake to find their home completely rebuilt by their friends and neighbors, closely resembling the closing scene to *It's a Wonderful Life*. Ned is very grateful and thankful towards God and his friends for providing this

for him. Then he takes a tour of the house. The toilet is in the dining room, the walls are supported by posters, the dirt in the hallway is painted to look like carpet, and the upstairs hallway shrinks into a crawl space. And then the entire house falls apart when the front door slams.

Ned tries to keep his composure, but every angry thought comes out. He lashes out at the people who tried to help him, telling them all of their faults, all of the thoughts he had of them and everything they've done wrong. Suddenly, he regains his composure, gets into the car, and drives himself to Calmwood mental hospital and checks himself in.

At the hospital, Ned discovers the truth about his parents and how they raised him. Because they refused to discipline him, he was spanked for an entire year until he stopped expressing his destructive behavior. After that, his anger was expressed by his ridiculous phrases and sayings like, "Hokily, dokily neighborino!" and never truly expressed through words and actions.

As an experiment, the doctor brings Homer in to get Ned to express his pent up anger. Nothing works. Finally, Homer tells Ned what he thinks of him:

Homer: You know what your problem is Flanders? You're afraid to be human.

Ned: Now, why would I be afraid of that?

Homer: Because humans are obnoxious sometimes, humans hate things.

Ned: Well, maybe a few of them do... back east.

Homer: C'mon, Flanders, there's gotta be something you hate...

Ned: You might say... I hate the post office... and my parents. Lousy beatniks. Hey, that felt good!

Homer's in your face attitude and blunt honesty actually helped Ned to recognize that he was suppressing unknown hostility and it helped him to recognize the object of his suppression.

Steiger comments on this suppression in his article, "The Simpsons - Just Funny Or More":

"... when Flanders' home got blown away by a hurricane – while all of Springfield's other homes remained undamaged – and he eventually revealed his deepest and meanest attitudes to his neighbors, it turned out that he is in no way the happy and satisfied man everybody held him to be. No, Flanders would probably be Dr. Freud's most complicated case ever – because Flanders is a master of suppression."^[25]

After this revelation, it seems as if Ned is cured. He finally found the reason for his outburst. He promised the crowd in front of the hospital that he would be honest with them and tell them everything when he is upset with them.

Although nothing was said about his faith and the impact this event had on his faith, from the fact that he is still in church and raising his two sons by Christian values in ensuing episodes, one could say that his faith was not wavered. You could even say it was strengthened once he discovered the true cause of his frustration. Pinsky adds about Ned's faith: "Marge, Ned and Lovejoy are not like those collaborationist ministers of the early twentieth century who were accused by radicals of preaching 'pie in the sky, bye and bye.' Their faith is a bulwark, a highly meaningful and relevant refuge."^[26] Despite his crisis in faith and loss of his house, his faith did not waver or give.

What does this episode say about our faith? Do we live disconnected from our emotions, or do we allow ourselves to be happy, upset, and even grieve? What is the right attitude we should have towards our emotions? Do we trust them or push them aside? I believe that the writers are telling us that everything we are is connected to our faith. No matter how we try to deny it, our emotions, experiences, upbringing and thoughts all have an effect on our beliefs. We cannot separate them, despite our western ideas about separating our faith from our everyday life. The two are intertwined and have everything to do with the other.

We are called to minister to people who suffer and experience the harshness of everyday life: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Rom. 12.15). Reverend Lovejoy did not live this verse out. Homer and the others who helped Ned and his family did. Homer actually helped Ned more than any other character on the show by being honest with him, “rebuilding” his house, and showing up at the hospital to aid him in his recovery.

Conclusions

So, is the Simpsons a religious show or not? In *Homer the Heretic*, *In Marge We Trust*, *Bart Sells His Soul* and *Hurricane Neddy*, there is an obvious pro-religious slant. Many atheists have complained about the show and even claimed “it’s more like a Sunday school lesson than a sitcom.”^[27] While this could be true, it should also be pointed out that religious figures in the show are seen as completely human and completely flawed. Many evangelicals have complained about this point as well, claiming that the show makes fun of religion rather than uphold it.

Regardless of the varying opinions of the show, the Simpsons is a very powerful force in the entertainment scene. As stated in the introduction, television is very influential and capable of influencing our opinions. Reverend Donald Wildmon believes that, “... the leading evangelists in America are those people who make the TV programs.”^[28]

Can shows like the Simpsons communicate theology, Biblically based morality, and promote Christianity? Robert Short, author of *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, claims that the Simpsons “can have an impact in the postmodern world... It’s amazing how God can speak in these out of the way places... He can be very deliberate in using a medium like the Simpsons... The arts get under our skin far more effectively than direct discourse, far more effective than a sermon.”^[29]

While this is true, God is very often portrayed as a last resort for help or at the most a benefactor of meals at the dinner table. There are many who hold to this form of Christianity, but the Simpsons does communicate a different form of Christian faith that is honest, caring, very personal, and very connected to who we are. This faith is not overbearing to others, but it works in our lives to guide us and help us in our time of need. God is seen as intervening in our world with all five fingers, ready to help us when we need him.

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FOOTNOTES

- [1] Mark Pinsky, *The Gospel According to the Simpsons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 1.
- [2] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 15.
- [3] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 19.
- [4] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 20.
- [5] William Irwin, Mark T. Conard, Aeon J. Skoble, *The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh! of Homer*, (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), 179.
- [6] Gerd Steiger, "The Simpsons: Just Funny or More?," the Simpson's Archive: snpp.com/other/papers/gs.paper.html.
- [7] Irwin, Conard, Skoble, *Philosophy*, 64.
- [8] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 31.
- [9] Steiger, "Just Funny or More?"
- [10] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 60.
- [11] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 61.
- [12] Steiger, "Just Funny or More?"
- [13] Irwin, Conard, Skoble, *Philosophy*, 57.
- [14] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 84.
- [15] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 85.
- [16] Sam Tingleff, "The Simpsons as a Critique of Consumer Culture," The Simpsons Archive: snpp.com/other/paper/st.paper.html.
- [17] Irwin, Conard, Skoble, *Philosophy*, 133.
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- [18] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 85-86.
[19] Irwin, Conard, Skoble, *Philosophy*, 16.
[20] Irwin, Conard, Skoble, *Philosophy*, 19.
[21] Steiger, "Just Funny Or More?"
[22] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 43.
[23] John Sohn, "Simpson Ethics," The Simpsons Archive: snpp.com/other/papers/js.paper.html.
[24] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 51.
[25] Steiger, "Just Funny Or More?"
[26] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 149.
[27] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 144.
[28] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 150.
[29] Pinsky, *Gospel*, 151.

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