

With TV Religion, It's Bart Imitating Life

By Michael Paulson

© The Boston Globe, September 9, 2001.

Mark I. Pinsky is not a big fan of television, but when his children expressed an interest in watching "The Simpsons," he decided to give it a try. Pinsky, religion reporter for the Orlando Sentinel, was stunned by what he saw: a cartoon family that prays, goes to church and says grace at meals, that interacts with an evangelical Protestant next-door neighbor, as well as a Jewish clown and a Hindu firefighter. The show had been roundly denounced in its early years as a bad influence on children, but it turns out that in recent years "The Simpsons" has increasingly been embraced by Christians as a rare positive depiction of religion on television. Pinsky, 54, has written a new book on the subject, "*The Gospel According to The Simpsons*," and is now at work on a Sunday school curriculum and Bible study using the Simpsons as object lessons.

Q. Why does it matter how religion is portrayed in a television cartoon?

A. It appears that popular culture is one of the few avenues left into the brainpan of the American people. Although I bemoan this fact, it's what people care about. And when you have an element of popular culture that includes religion as a part of life, I think that's a good thing. What stands out on "The Simpsons" to me is that the role that religion plays in their life is more reflective of the lives of the people on the other side of the screen than any other programme on commercial television.

Q. When the show first came out, it was viewed by some as anti-family.

A. The first two or three seasons, the narrative focus was on Bart, the disrespectful 8-year-old, and that generated a lot of controversy, even though the disrespect was presented in an ironic way. By about the third season, when the writers shifted the narrative focus from the boy to Homer, his dad, and the themes and situations became more subtle, they had already driven off much of their potential audience among religious people.

Q. Why would there be more religious themes in a cartoon than in a dramatic show?

A. When people watch animated comedy on television, they let their guard down. A cartoon can be absurdist. They can go into outer space, they can go to Paris, they can do any weird thing. In that context, people will accept lots of things they would never accept in a live-action situation comedy.

Q. Did the creators of this show have an evangelical purpose for including religious themes?

A. It was the opposite impulse. It was an act of intellectual desperation. Religion, because so many other TV shows feared it for the way it might offend, was unexplored territory and was rich for them. Many or most of the writers consider themselves nonbelievers, skeptics, agnostics, or atheists, but they knew about religion at a very sophisticated level. The two writers who had a religious commitment said it would have been suicide to try to advance that cause in the writers' room - you just would have been shredded.

Q. How would you describe the Simpsons' religious beliefs?

A. The family members and friends represent a spectrum of belief. The next-door neighbour, Ned Flanders, represents evangelical Christianity. The Rev. Lovejoy represents the conservative

wing of mainline Christianity. Marge is a true believer in the decent sense, almost a saintly character. Homer is a borderline pagan. His religiosity is based on fear; when he gets in trouble, he believes. You have Lisa, who is an advocate for the social gospel, and in some cases the socialist gospel. She identifies with the poor and the powerless, is vegetarian, and environmentalist. And Bart - some people believe he's the devil incarnate, but I think he's sort of a primitive believer. Even he prays sincerely when he gets in big trouble.

Q. There's been some concern about the show's depiction of Catholicism, and the writers eventually backed away from Catholic jokes.

A. A healthy percentage of the writer-producers were raised as Catholics, and they have some baggage from their upbringing which they have from time to time tended to work out in lines. The first time they did it involved a joke about birth control and Communion wafers, and the second time it was about some orders of the Catholic Church launching an advertising campaign to get more priests. The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights complained, and the network [Fox] folded, changing a line in reruns. People at "The Simpsons" hit the roof. Now there is no direct confrontation [with Catholics].

Q. Aren't the depictions of Jews, Hindus, and evangelical Protestants stereotypes or caricatures?

A. This is a show that rewards intelligence. This is not vulgar satire; this is very sophisticated satire. If you treat it at surface level, you can find lots to be offended by. They do satirize most institutions of American modern life, including institutionalized religion, but it's a very knowing and subtle satire.

Q. What does the character of Ned Flanders say about the show's depiction of evangelicals?

A. What you need to know about Ned is that he has a good heart. He is prone to excess and zealotry, but his heart is always good. For his faith he is scorned and mocked, usually by Homer, and in almost every case he returns that scorn with love. The chief undermining sin of American Protestantism of the last century has been hypocrisy, and Ned is not a hypocrite.

Q. There are some religious topics the show doesn't touch - salvation, crucifixion, resurrection.

A. There are certain red lines that they won't cross. To make a joke about God is OK. To make a joke about Jesus is a little touchier. The crucifixion and the resurrection do not lend themselves to humour particularly. And the concept of salvation by grace, which is the central belief of American Protestantism, they said it's just too difficult to show on screen.