

Springfield's Sacred Canopy:  
Religion and Humour in *The Simpsons*

by

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## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines religion's satirical portrayal in *The Simpsons*. Building upon a sociological theory of humour developed from Peter Berger's sociological theories of knowledge, religion, and humour, it assesses how *The Simpsons* criticizes America's major religious traditions and their social roles. Arguing that the program presents a spectrum of acceptable religious practice, this dissertation demonstrates how *The Simpsons* constructs its arguments by selectively interpreting each tradition through its most recognizable characteristics and the common sentiments through which those characteristics are interpreted. These "ignorant familiarities" are used as a basis for understanding what Americans presumably know about religion, what is deemed acceptable "religious behaviour" in the public sphere, and what the consequences are for those religions that *The Simpsons* caricatures.

## Acknowledgements

A work of this size does not come to fruition without the help of others. First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Douglas E. Cowan, for recognizing the value of my work and encouraging me to pursue it. His relentless criticism of my writing has made this dissertation accessible, while his support saved me from despair when I wondered if this was worthwhile. In the end, he encouraged my ambitions when others thought I was stretching myself too thin, and his guidance has made my PhD experience deeply rewarding. He set the bar high, and then showed me how to meet it. Thank you, Doug.

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Continuing this theme, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for their support through a standard SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship. SSHRC's funding enabled me to travel around the world to present my research, and afforded me the time to think and write without worrying about finances. For that, I am grateful.

Doctoral studies are a lonely journey, but the people of Glen Acres Baptist Church and Kitchener Kicks Martial Arts have made Waterloo a place where my wife Krista and I will always be welcome. The people at Glen Acres accepted us from the time we arrived in Waterloo, and gave us a place to worship and feel as if we were among family. Living away from our extended families, Krista and I now feel like we have roots in Waterloo thanks to the church. I would also like to thank

the members of Dave Carr's Sunday school class for keeping me sharp and encouraging me along the way.

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Of course, this dissertation would not have come to pass were it not for the help of my parents. Their love, support, and unwavering belief that I would finish has been a blessing during the difficult times over the years. Mom, thank you for thinking that buying me books is supporting something meaningful. Those gifts made this dissertation possible and many of your presents are listed in the bibliography. Dad, you are one of my strongest critics, never letting me get away with half-formed ideas or incoherent arguments. Talking with you has helped me become a better communicator, teacher, and scholar.

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## **Dedication**

For Mom and Dad, who taught me the joy of humour

and

For Krista and Dominic, who keep me laughing

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## Chapter 1—Introduction

I remember the first time I watched *The Simpsons*. I was nine years old. My family was living in New Minas, NS while my father earned his MDiv at Acadia Divinity School. *The Simpsons* was the new hit television program and merchandising sensation and Bart Simpson intrigued me. After convincing my parents to let me watch an episode, we tuned in to “Two Cars in Every Garage, Three Eyes on Every Fish.”<sup>1</sup> Bart and his sister Lisa are fishing near the local nuclear power plant, when a reporter pulls up and asks the kids if they have caught anything. When they respond that they have not, he asks Bart for his name. Bart responds with “I’m Bart Simpson. Who the hell are you?” and my parents turned off the television. I was not allowed to watch *The Simpsons* at home again.

Flash forward to the winter of 2005. I was teaching a freshman course entitled “Religion and Contemporary Culture” at Saint Mary’s University in Halifax. In over my head without knowing it, I found it difficult to teach the students different world religions. The majority were there for course credit, not interested in the material, and only cared about what would show up on the test. When I started quoting religious examples from *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, however, they responded. These were representations they knew. References to George Harrison and the Beatles’ Hindu influences fell on deaf ears, but they knew Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, the Indian immigrant who runs the local Kwik-E-Mart in the Simpson’s hometown of Springfield and has a shrine to Ganesha in his store. Kung-fu movies did not entice the entire crowd, but references to Lisa’s conversion to Buddhism brought the class back on topic. When I taught about changing religious dynamics and “spirituality,” there was no substitute for the spiritual quest of Bart’s father, Homer, in “Homer the Heretic.” For somebody trying to teach world religions for the first time, *The Simpsons* became the *lingua franca* that facilitated instruction.

These two stories are at the heart of *The Simpsons*’ significance for this project. The first tale illustrates the controversies surrounding family values and appropriate television viewing. Eighteen years after “Two Cars in Every Garage, Three Eyes on Every Fish” first aired, I played it again for my mother. Even though the episode is a brilliant piece of satire mocking today’s political campaigns, she stood by her decision. There was no way my parents would let me watch *The Simpsons*, and in this they were like other parents who worried about the program’s moral content (see Alters 2002, 203-260).

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation *Simpsons* episodes are cited by their full title and listed chronologically in the bibliography.

*The Simpsons* has featured in various debates about the corrosive role of media on family life in the United States. In his January 27, 1992 speech before the National Religious Broadcasters, former president George H. W. Bush famously stated that “We need a nation closer to the Waltons than the Simpsons” (*New York Times*, 28 January 1992, sec. 1, page 17). Elsewhere, the American Family Association (AFA), a Christian media watchdog organization that encourages its readers to boycott advertisers as a way of controlling media content, has argued that various episodes of *The Simpsons* promote anti-Christianity, include profanity, advocate substance abuse, and encourage the homosexual agenda (*AFAjournal* 2000, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Further afield, Venezuelan television station Televen TV removed the show from its 11:00 a.m. timeslot because parents complained the program was inappropriate for children. It was replaced with *Baywatch: Hawaii* (Associated Press 2008). To this date, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regularly receives complaints about references to violence, sex, homosexuality, profanity, and drugs in the program, arguments frequently framed in the language of protecting children (governmentattic.org 2008).

My parents acted according to their values regarding what was appropriate for their children. Although inappropriate media content did not inspire them politically, they still reinforced a particular vision of Christian life upon me through their decision. This battle over appropriate content, how it is determined, and how *The Simpsons* challenges it runs throughout this dissertation. As religious groups and ideologies have gained social prominence, they have been selectively interpreted and incorporated into *The Simpsons*' content, making the show a product of its culture that can tell us about significant cultural tensions over the last twenty years.

The second story stresses another important theme: The sociology of religious knowledge. How significant is it that a group of young adults did not know the basics of most world religions beyond what they knew from *The Simpsons* and other television shows? Boston University religious studies professor Stephen Prothero contends that Americans are remarkably ignorant about religion—both their own (if they have one) and others' (2007; a point a 2010 Pew Forum illustrated [2010]). Arguing that this is a civic problem, he suggests teaching biblical literacy and world religions in secondary schools and making world religions part of the core curriculum of postsecondary studies (Prothero 2007). While Prothero's analysis can be extended to Canada, my students apparently learned *something* from *The Simpsons*. But what does *The Simpsons* teach? How does it teach it? And what are the assumptions about religion undergirding the program's depictions of it? Tying into the

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<sup>2</sup> The *Simpsons* episodes the AFA critiques are “Three Gays of the Condo” and “Simpsons Bible Stories.”

previous discussion of religious opposition to *The Simpsons*, we start seeing that *The Simpsons*' significance lies in its popularity, pervasiveness, and recountability. It frames a lexicon of references that people can draw upon to make sense of the world, a lexicon that includes a significant amount of material about religion. Indeed, out of 463 episodes in the first twenty-two seasons, only twenty-three lack a clear reference to religion. This suggests that the show's creators find it useful to draw upon a body of religious knowledge for humorous purposes. Furthermore, these jokes convey complex ideas about religious behaviours and their social significance quickly and simply.

I want to know what these references to religion are and what they tell us about religion's role in the contemporary United States. *The Simpsons* promotes a liberal vision of religion, where deinstitutionalized "spirituality" is heralded as the religious ideal and religious practices characterized by conservatism and institutionalization are marginalized and ridiculed.

Others, however, would disagree. Among them is Mark Pinsky, author of *The Gospel According to The Simpsons* (2001, 2007).<sup>3</sup> A journalist for the *Orlando Sentinel*, Pinsky started watching the program with his children and was surprised the "modern cartoon sitcom turned out to be family-friendly and full of faith" (2007, 1). His work documents religious diversity in *The Simpsons*, acknowledging religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism and starts tracking some of these representations' importance. Pinsky's final assessment of the show is that it is "not at all dangerous or threatening to the status quo, it is a sweet funny show about a family as 'real' as the faith lives of many Americans. It is a show that does in fact give hope and joy and, yes, inspiration to millions. But mostly, as my wife reminds me, it's funny. And as Homer says, 'it's funny 'cause it's true'" (226). Pinsky's most useful insights are into the way that the program's creators have incorporated their own religious views into the program (199-215), and where an episode satirizes a significant social issue (e.g., same-sex marriage in the episode "There's Something About Marrying" [192-198]). This allows him to comment on the larger social patterns influencing religion's depiction in the program. Pinsky's analysis, however, only captures surface issues that arise around individual episodes of *The Simpsons*, and he lacks any deep assessment of the complex social and political networks that make the caricatures in *The Simpsons* plausible (the exception being his treatment of evangelicals). Throughout this dissertation I engage Pinsky's work as a first level of analysis about religion in *The Simpsons*. However, I challenge the assumption that the show is funny "because it's true." *The Simpsons*' truth claims are always debatable and are inherently contentious.

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<sup>3</sup> Pinsky's book was substantially changed in the 2007 edition, which I refer to primarily.

Reformed theologian Jamie Heit's *The Springfield Reformation* (2008) presents a different perspective. Heit offers numerous illustrations from *The Simpsons* to articulate the program's critique of contemporary American Christianity. The problem with Heit's analysis is his thesis that *The Simpsons* is calling on Christianity to reform because there is no reason to hold *The Simpsons* to any particular theological or moral standards. As a product of American<sup>4</sup> culture with no stated religious agenda it is an insightful look into that culture, but the program itself is not a voice that offers theological solutions to contemporary Christianity's situation, nor is it calling for specific solutions like Heit's.

By tackling the challenges that *The Simpsons* raises, Heit questions how Christianity's moral authority can be restored. Approaching the issue from a Christian theologian's vantage point, he assumes that because *The Simpsons*' Springfield's residents are depicted in the pews on Sunday mornings they are Christian, that Christianity is the program's religious voice, and Christians' concerns are fundamental to religion's presentation in the program. I see *The Simpsons* presenting religion in a pastiche manner and ascribing any theological perspective (in the sense of addressing a religious tradition as participants) to the program attributes a religious voice to it that not only reflects the scholar's concerns, but appropriates the program for Heit's moral agenda (cf., Keslowitz 2006, 207-211). *The Simpsons* is significant because its depictions of American life resonate with its audience and it is seen as an excellent summation of contemporary America (Dalton et al. 2001). That does not mean that it carries an explicit theological agenda. Rather, *The Simpsons* captures religions as they appear to people from the inside and outside, making jokes based on these portrayals. The moral agenda Heit ascribes to *The Simpsons* is his own.

Heit's fellow theologian David Dark offers a similar assessment of *The Simpsons* in his *Everyday Apocalypse* (2002, 42-62). Dark assumes that a Christian truth of loving others and accepting people as they are is revealed in *The Simpsons*' depictions of everyone as a broken individual. While he usefully points out that *The Simpsons* reveals the paradoxical state of human nature (60), this does not necessarily reveal God's grace as he thinks it does. It reveals that humans fall short of their moral proclamations, but we still find something significant in that fallen state. While *The Simpsons* may reveal grace to somebody who has a framework receptive to that theology,

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise qualified, I use the terms "America" and "American" to refer to the United States rather than North America, South America, Latin America, or any other ways of conceptualizing "America."

there is no proof that the program reveals God's grace. Theological arguments like Heit's and Dark's are limited because they presume unprovable ontologies.<sup>5</sup>

While Pinsky and Heit offer book-length treatments of religion in *The Simpsons*, a variety of articles and book chapters need to be briefly discussed. Historian Gerry Bowler's article "God and the Simpsons" (1996/1997) is one of the earliest discussions of religion's role in the program. Evaluating the program's first seven seasons, he identifies the general patterns of religious adherence, the ironic and satirical perspectives Bart and Homer facilitate, and the supernatural affirmation that comes in the form of a God who always wins. I build upon these general themes, but while Bowler's work focusses extensively on Christianity and how it is portrayed, my main concern is with religion as a generalized social and cultural category. That is, while Bowler is happy to see religion portrayed on television, sees both positive and negative elements in *The Simpsons'* portrayal of Christianity, and tries to explain why some Christians did not like the program (15-20), I explain how *The Simpsons* portrays a particular series of ideas about "religion" and its roles in contemporary American life.

Bowler's and Heit's concerns with Christianity's portrayal in *The Simpsons* can be usefully contrasted with religion's treatment in sociologist Tim Delaney's *Simpsonology* (2008, 189-217) and journalist Chris Turner's *Planet Simpson* (2004). According to Turner, "faith is usually treated with sincerity and uncommon respect on the frequent occasions when it comes up on *The Simpsons*. *Organized* religion—like all authoritarian institutions—is a target for snarky asides on the show, but topics such as the nature of belief, the use of ritualistic worship and the meaning of existence are approached seriously and discussed in depth" (266; emphasis in original). He then examines the way individual religious experiences are treated, while challenging the increasing complicity that institutionalized religions have with American consumerism. Turner's treatment of religion differs from Bowler and Heit in that he is concerned with "religion" in *The Simpsons* as a social and cultural phenomenon in contemporary America, rather than with the treatment of a particular religion.<sup>6</sup> Contra Turner, I see religions portrayed along a continuum of acceptability; and where a religion is

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<sup>5</sup> This should not be confused with those authors who defend the show to a Christian audience by illustrating consonances with *The Simpsons'* content and those religious groups' beliefs. For example, Keller (1992) argues that certain episodes in season two are agreeable with evangelical beliefs, although not presented in a way that is completely consonant with how evangelicals would live or present those concepts. The difference lies in the fact that she is not presuming *The Simpsons* does religious work, but that it can be useful for religious groups.

<sup>6</sup> Turner also declares *The Simpsons* as his personal religion (2004, 274). While I discuss the phenomenon of popular culture as religion in the next chapter, I will not be taking this route in this study because even though Turner claims that *The Simpsons* is his religion with my current data set I have no way of proving if this is a common phenomenon among *Simpsons* fans.

positioned in *The Simpsons* is significant. While I agree with Turner's basic premise, when we look at what kinds of spiritualities are applauded and how institutionalized religion is denigrated, religion's depiction in the program becomes more complicated than Turner's simple dichotomy.

Delaney's assessment is antagonistic to religion, arguing that the program juxtaposes religion and science. He contends that *The Simpsons* reveals a world where religious ideas are basically human projections. The program thus slays sacred cows and leaves the supernatural exposed as irrational (2008, 189-217). Delaney stresses hyper-rationality in sociological assessments of religion, but my analysis demonstrates that his reading is not representative of the program's different depictions of religion. This will become especially apparent in chapter four.

Finally, the academic treatments of *The Simpsons* that come closest to the way I approach this project are by religious studies scholars Lisle Dalton, Eric Mazur, and Monica Siems (2001), and humanities scholar Matthew Henry (2008). I agree with Dalton and his associates that "there is a persistent message of a loss of institutional authority (although institutional practice and loyalty linger) coupled with diverse forms of personal and noninstitutional religiosity" (2001, 245) in *The Simpsons*. An in-depth study of these representations means addressing the historical circumstances that have brought about these changes and analyzing the way the program presents the changes through its characters. However, I disagree with them when they write, "it is precisely *because* the program fails to offer us any sustained ideals of its own—least of all desirable ideals that challenge the majority—that it serves as a negative model for mainstream ideals of family and religion, if only by default, and offers instead a catharsis generated by a good laugh" (241; emphasis in original).<sup>7</sup> I argue that the program offers sustained ideals built on a specific set of assumptions about late modern American culture. Henry's dissertation is a clear statement of *The Simpsons*' left-wing politics. However, while he echoes my central hypothesis that spirituality is supported and institutionalized religion is criticized in the program, he does an insufficient job analyzing how the show promotes institutionalized religions which facilitate spiritual insight (2008, 233-292).

By drawing upon not only the literature concerning religion in *The Simpsons*, but also studies of *The Simpsons* in American culture which help me locate the program in its larger cultural matrix, I

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<sup>7</sup> This statement echoes Carl Matheson's hypothesis that "*The Simpsons* does not promote anything, because its humor works by putting forward positions only in order to undercut them. Furthermore, this process of undercutting runs so deeply that we cannot regard the show as merely cynical; it manages to undercut its cynicism too" (2001, 118). While this accounts for the diversity of interpretations of *The Simpsons*, the show has a political position regarding religion which is leftward leaning and reinforced, rather than undercut, through the program's irony.

demonstrate how *The Simpsons* satirizes contemporary American culture (e.g., Alberti 2004; Dobson 2006; Gray 2006; Henry 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008; Hull 2000; Irwin, Conard, and Skoble 2001; Knox 2006; Wood and Todd 2005). *The Simpsons* is often compared to a fun house mirror; but it is a mirror shaped by particular people, at a specific point in time, for reasons that suit the program's creators. Aside from the obvious reason that *The Simpsons* is made the way it is because it is profitable, we have to ask what ideological assumptions it conveys. After all, those ideologies resonate with audiences, which means they come back for further entertainment, which allows television networks to charge for advertising. Ideology, entertainment, and profitability are intimately interwoven in *The Simpsons*.

That said, the significant question is what is *The Simpsons*' vision of religion in the United States and what are its implications? Three broad fields in religious studies and sociology inform my answer: the study of religion and popular culture, the sociology of religion, and the sociology of knowledge. *The Simpsons* is a television program, mass marketed to people of all ages (especially young adult males and teenage boys) in over 100 countries (McDowell 2006), and it constantly references other popular culture media. Films, music, popular fads, and other television programs are part of its internal lexicon. In chapter two I discuss religion and popular culture's importance for this project, focussing on the key ideas of lived religion and cultural intertextuality. Further, I draw upon symbolic interactionism and the increased focus in religious studies on lived religion to describe how depictions of religion in *The Simpsons* are connected to the everyday religious lives of contemporary citizens of the United States—the raw data which observant comedy writers use to craft jokes.

Chapter three introduces my theoretical foundation. Building on sociologist Peter Berger's work and other sociologists of knowledge, religion, and humour, I construct a theory of religious satire. Outlining satire's ability to quickly convey information to attack ideological opponents and reinforce pre-existing plausibility structures, this chapter forms the theoretical base from which I will analyze *The Simpsons*. Using examples of Catholicism in the program, I demonstrate that *The Simpsons*' satire draws upon certain assumptions and texts about Catholics, selectively interpreting the religion and projecting it for consumption by a broad audience.

Chapters four through seven extend this analysis to the different religions portrayed in *The Simpsons*, establishing an evaluative range of religions from acceptable to hated.<sup>8</sup> Chapter four

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<sup>8</sup> Tracking humorous depictions from an ideological centre to the periphery is inspired by Christie Davies' work on ethnic humour. Arguing that ethnic jokes are told about minorities, depending on how the jokes are classified (stupid or canny), we can learn a lot about their relationships with dominant ethnic groups

contains an evaluation of religious beliefs and ideas *The Simpsons* portrays positively—“spirituality,” Buddhism, Native American religions, and scientific rationality. I criticize these presentations in light of theories of appropriation, consumerism, and the limits of rationality, but more importantly outline their significance for *The Simpsons*’ understanding of religion’s role in contemporary America. Chapter five discuss Christianity, examining how the characters Reverend Timothy Lovejoy, pastor of the First Church of Springfield, and the Simpsons’ neighbour Ned Flanders are stereotypes of liberal and evangelical Protestantism respectively. I focus on how the major institutional religious traditions of contemporary Christianity are criticized while also highlighting their important ethical contributions. Moving between laudable and damnable traits in these two characters, I build upon chapter four’s argument about positive and negative religious traits as portrayed in two caricatures. Chapter six is concerned with immigrant religious traditions and the question of pluralism in Springfield. Discussing the Jew, Krusty the Clown, and the Hindu, Apu, I propose that *The Simpsons* advocates an America in which different religions are welcome, but marginalized both in terms of numbers and influence, which I interpret through contemporary concerns about immigrant religious life in the United States. Finally, chapter seven discusses *The Simpsons*’ treatment of new religious movements, secret societies, and Muslims, arguing that it replicates many of the most pernicious fears about these groups in contemporary American media while working under the guise of being appropriately critical.

Why do we need a dissertation about religion in *The Simpsons*? The answer is twofold. First, no book-length academic study examines religion’s role in the program even though, as Henry states, it is the topic that has generated the most discussion about the program (2008, 29). Similarly, no book-length study investigates how *The Simpsons* uses satire to promote a specific vision of religion’s place in the United States and criticize it with adequate depth and breadth. Pinsky has breadth, but lacks the depth that prolonged academic reflection and analysis offers. Heit has some of that depth, but uses it to promote his vision of Christianity rather than trying to explain the views put forth in the program. This dissertation addresses these problems. Secondly, as chapter three discusses, there is a dearth of social scientific writing on religion and humour. This is an area ripe for study. As a first study of religion and humour, specifically as a way of critiquing religion from the outside through satire, this dissertation sets the groundwork for future studies in this field. *The Simpsons* is a significant example of the larger phenomenon of religious satire and “Springfield’s Sacred Canopy”

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(1990, 1998, 2002). Here I map religion and humour moving from the centre to the periphery, using Davies’ “stupid” label, but also incorporating the “accepted but marginalized” and “hated” categories.



both explains what you have to believe to find *The Simpsons* funny and what the implications of those beliefs are for religious life in the contemporary United States, while demonstrating the benefits of a sustained criticism of religion's satirical depictions.

## Chapter 2—The Study of Religion and Popular Culture: A Literature Review

Scholarly work is built upon the concepts, theories, methods, and arguments of preceding generations of thinkers (see Parkhill 1997, 1-16). This chapter presents the key concepts of religion, popular culture, and cultural intertextuality; the study of religion in popular culture and its significance; and the social phenomenological method used in this dissertation, assessing them in light of three overarching questions: *What are the different ways to study popular culture? How do they allow us to access the religious lives of the United States' contemporary residents? And how can they help us answer our significant questions effectively?* In conjunction with the next chapter, my goal is to establish a “toolkit” of analytical concepts, methods, and theories that explain religion’s significance in *The Simpsons*.

### 2.1 Religion in Theory and Practice

Studying religion and popular culture requires working definitions of these terms. Defining religion is a nigh impossible task, given religious studies scholar Jonathan Z. Smith’s argument that religion is “solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization” (Jonathan Smith 1982, xi).<sup>9</sup> “Religion” is a constructed category without ontological content, a way of classifying disparate ideas, activities, and objects as relevant in the scholar’s imagination. However, a working definition provides a necessary framework for comparing and analyzing divergent ideas and behaviours. As such, I agree with religious studies scholar David Chidester that defining religion is an intensely self-reflexive process of determining limitations and boundaries (2005, 68).

Boundaries are essential for any definition because while demarcating them is often difficult, we need to know what can usefully be included and excluded from “religion.” However, once we start including essential traits into our definition we quickly find that “religion” is a broader category than its popular conception.

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<sup>9</sup> Smith has also tracked the concept of religion’s history (1998), a process that reveals shifting definitional boundaries and locates “religion” within the Western enlightenment tradition. For other accounts of the concept’s history see, e.g., Asad (1993), McGuire (2008, 19-44), and Wilfred Smith (1991). While this is a valuable critique, a definition is still important because I am discussing things which are commonly compared in the popular imagination. As such, whether or not religion is an empty category, it remains a meaningful concept in our culture with significant social consequences. Therefore, it is worthy of study and needs to be defined for my work to proceed.

For example, sociologist Emile Durkheim defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (1995, 44). Durkheim’s definition is concerned with boundaries, where the sacred is included and the profane excluded, but he was also aware of the sacred’s contagious nature (224). Once something has been classified as sacred and set apart as meaningful, everything associated with that thing is interpreted through its relationship with it. Including or excluding certain kinds of beliefs and practices on paper is easy, but it is more difficult to do when we look at actual human behaviour. Some scholars argue popular culture can be a religion or something religious, pushing the boundaries of what most people would consider “religion” (see, e.g., Callahan et al. 2010, Ingersoll 2001, Jindra 2005, Lelwica 2005, Lyden 2003, Plate 2008, Price 2005, Sylvan 2003). Based on his definition of religion as “ways of being a human person in a human place” (Chidester 2005, vii), Chidester suggests that baseball, Coca-Cola, rock and roll, and Tupperware (among other things) are religious or, at least, do religious work. At the same time, he calls them “fake” religion because they are not legitimated in popular consciousness as “religion,” thereby capturing the tension between what is commonly acknowledged as religion and the range of behaviours that fulfil different criteria ascribed to the category (2005, 9; see also Chidester 1996). While certain traditions of thought and practice are classified under terms such as Daoism and Judaism and customarily considered “religions,” once we start investigating how people treat other activities as “sacred”—that is, setting them apart and treating them as special—the boundaries between religion and non-religion that once seemed distinct become increasingly blurry.

This has been the problem with anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s famous definition of religion as “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (1973, 90).<sup>10</sup> Geertz’s definition, often summarized as “a system of symbols” finds its way into various discussions about religion and popular culture (see, e.g., Dalton et al. 2001,

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<sup>10</sup> There are other critiques of Geertz that are not directly related to this definition’s usage in the study of religion and popular culture. Asad argues that Geertz’s definition essentializes religion apart from its historical manifestations and, therefore, becomes the privileged gaze of the academic rather than an accurate assessment of the way historically contextualized humans make sense of their world (1993, 27-54). Elsewhere, Frankenberry and Penner critique Geertz’s reifying metaphysical meaning as problematic because there is no way to prove that meaning’s ontology (1999). For a critique of these positions see Schillbrack (2005).

Lelwica 2005, Scholes 2004). The problem here, as religious studies scholar Jean Graybeal illustrates, is that “system of symbols” is too broad a concept to be useful. Noting that Geertz (1973, 98) acknowledged that just being passionate about an activity is insufficient for it to be a religion and that there had to be transcendent truths revealed through it as well, Graybeal demonstrates that women’s weight loss culture constitutes a comprehensive worldview to its members. She argues that women learn how to suffer through failed dieting while concurrently paying attention to and caring for their bodies, something about which they might otherwise feel guilty (2001). Graybeal proves that Geertz’s definition can be extended to any system of symbols which generates emotional responses and could be considered a “worldview” for people. In other words, the definition’s undefined boundaries make it too broad to be analytically useful.

To overcome the problem of breadth other scholars propose strong boundaries. Sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke’s definition of religion as “very general explanations of existence, including the terms of exchange with a god or gods” (2000, 91) is one such example, as identifying a “god or gods” in popular culture is difficult. However, religions often contain superhuman characters (Chidester 2005). Including gods and goddesses becomes problematic for a definition of religion. After all, there are specific religious traditions such as Theravada Buddhism which do not consider exchanges with gods and goddesses important. While I am not suggesting that Theravadan Buddhists do not engage in contact with divine beings in their popular religious practice, *theoretically* the gods are not essential to being a good Theravadan Buddhist. Achieving *moksha* through entirely human means is plausible, excluding an exchange relationship with the gods. In this case, Stark and Finke’s definition has erected such strict boundaries that a recognized religious tradition has been rejected.

A third problem is to assume mistakenly that because things are classified as “religions,” they are all basically the same. For example, media studies scholar Mara Einstein argues that branding religion hinders its ability to effectively change our worlds by allowing us to elevate ourselves beyond the everyday. However, “We are less able to do this because all products—religious and otherwise—are presented as quick and easy fixes . . . Moreover, religion isn’t supposed to be comfortable, and it is through discomfort that we find new parts of ourselves” (2008, 210). Einstein’s objections are based on normative assumptions about what religion *should* do, not on what it *does*. She argues that in the contemporary marketplace religions have to become brands to survive, eventually risking becoming consumer products. This analysis is based on faulty assumptions, namely that “religion is a commodity product. The majority of religions offer the same end benefit for the consumer (salvation, peace of mind, etc.). Though packaged differently, fundamentally they are the

same product, no different than buying one shampoo versus another” (13) and “religion is a commodity. Religion is personal and religion is packaged and sold the same way as other marketed goods and services” (78). Assuming that all religions offer the same thing ignores the fact that only in the most general terms do all religions offer things such as “salvation.” Nirvana for a Theravadan Buddhist and heaven for an evangelical Christian are two different concepts accompanied by different ethical, moral, and epistemological structures. Societies with an evangelical history have a conception of a supernatural entity acting in people’s lives and guiding the world towards a particular end. Conversely, the Theravadan tradition presents the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path which facilitate achieving enlightenment, and it is through our own actions and ways of overcoming our karma that we escape the cycle of rebirths. There is no reliance on a supernatural being. One’s own behaviours determine the course of spiritual development. These are two different worldviews and, as such, they lead to different ways of being in the world. While they may compete in the marketplace of ideas about how to live, part of what they offer is their difference. Treating all religions as essentially the same ignores the historical differences which have affected each religion’s development. This makes comparison tricky, but awareness of difference is pivotal to understanding and properly interpreting our data.

Psychologist William James defined religion as “belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto” (2002, 61).<sup>11</sup> This definition guides us towards identifying people’s cognitive frameworks regarding a specific order of the world and the ethical imperative to adjust our behaviour towards it. However, James’ psychological framework makes insufficient concessions to social influences on our thinking. Social interactions shape our cognitive frameworks; therefore, we are looking for the webs of significance people have built around their notions of an unseen order. However, unlike Geertz, the unseen order is not an abstract system of symbols with its own agency. A society’s unseen order is communicated among people, inspiring religious actions, but need not exist in a metaphysical sense. For our purposes, all it has to be is a shared perspective communicated by human means. Sociologists of religion Douglas

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<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Rita Gross writes “all religions share . . . an attempt to provide meaning and orientation in a chaotic world. Thus, I locate the essence of religion in its impulse toward world-construction of great significance to those who live in those worlds. What lies behind or drives that impulse to find meaning and orientation, to construct a world in the face of chaos, is not a question that needs to be settled in order to study religion non-reductionistically” (1993, 316). However, I prefer James’ definition because of its ethical imperative towards harmonious adjustment. This indicates that the unseen order is not only intellectually significant, but that it impels adherence, structuring life so that its disruption generates negative emotions (such as fear), and compels people to respond to these feelings (see Cowan 2008b; Cowan and Bromley 2008).

Cowan and David Bromley argue that James' definition captures the way a religious vision inspires people to develop intellectual frameworks explaining the unseen order which stimulate a variety of actions—from mythmaking and the development of personal devotions and beliefs, to rituals and abiding by ethical systems—that adherents find rational (2008, 11).<sup>12</sup> This illustrates the shift from belief to action and from individual actions to institutionalized patterns of behaviour. My working definition of religion as *institutionalized systems of beliefs and actions relating to an unseen order which compels harmonious adjustment thereto*, tempers James' original insights and allows concrete examples to be isolated and analyzed. The social dynamics inherent in the creation and dissemination of unseen orders now become objects of analysis.

The processes by which religions are created—the ways in which things are made *religious*—is also at work in the institutionalization of unseen orders. Berger and Luckmann's theory of externalization, objectivation, and internalization—which I discuss in detail in the next chapter—allows us to see that the social construction of any religion is a dynamic process. Indeed, institutionalizing acts, living within the institutionalized orders which reflect and reify the unseen order, and contributing—whether constructively or destructively—to the order's ongoing maintenance is part of being a socially engaged human being. As a product of human activity, *The Simpsons* is engaged in an ongoing dialogue about how differing unseen orders should exist within the United States' geographical, social, and cultural borders. To do this, it draws upon depictions of American religious traditions and arranges them in a particular way so that it creates its own unseen order—to use Peter Berger's phrase, its own “sacred canopy” (1967)—through such an arrangement. This is not to say that *The Simpsons* is a religion, but it does a kind of religious work which invites consideration from those who share its viewpoint and from its opponents. The next chapter deals with the theoretical approach I employ in analyzing how *The Simpsons* arranges American religions' symbols in a way that both conveys and critiques these unseen orders. That said, how should we identify these religions?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Religious visions need not take on the characteristics of Otto's *numinous*, that presence which is powerful, majestic, urgent and wholly other than ourselves (1950) or Eliade's *hierophanies* which occur when the wholly other reveals itself to humans (1959). All that is required is an understanding of an unseen order to the universe which is shared among people. Whether or not that unseen order actually exists is immaterial. Its significance is established when people believe it exists and act accordingly.

<sup>13</sup> For further discussions of the difficulty of defining religion, see Griel and Bromley (2003).

### 2.1.1 Lived Religion in America

One mistake we can make in studying religion is to commit what sociologist Christian Smith calls the “representative elite fallacy” (2000, 7-9). That is, we should not privilege religious leaders as their religion’s sole and authoritative interpreters. Group leaders, prominent thinkers, and people in positions of institutionalized authority (e.g., priests) can be invaluable sources of information, but we risk distorting the picture of a people’s religiosity if we privilege these perspectives as more authoritative than the laity’s. For example, one could read the Catholic encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (Paul VI 1968) and say that Catholics do not practice birth control because the church officially forbids it. This is certainly not true. The majority of American Catholics use birth control and do not follow this authoritative document’s instructions. While knowing “official” sources is important, how people use these interpretations of the unseen order—if they use them at all—is essential for understanding lived religion. I draw upon the concept of “lived religion” to discuss how *The Simpsons* represents different religious traditions. That said, I am also aware of the irony of using lived religion to discuss a fictional representation. I am not discussing anybody’s lived religion, but the concept and its theoretical arguments give us insight into *The Simpsons*’ crafted portrayal (cf., Heit 2008, 11; Ott 2003, 58).

Scholars use the concept of “lived religion” to explain how people actually go about being religious. This often means looking at people’s behaviour as “incoherent,” at least when we compare it to their tradition’s theological and ethical teachings (McGuire 2008, 15). As sociologist Meredith McGuire reminds us, it may only be scholars who care about the dissonance between what a religious tradition purportedly teaches and what people do (16). Numerous studies demonstrate that people’s religious practice varies greatly, making it unreasonable to rely upon “official” arguments for people’s religiosity (see, e.g., K. Brown 2001; Clark 2003; Goulet 1998; D. Hall 1997; Neitz 1987; Primiano 1995; Roof 2001; Tweed 1997a, 2006; Wilson 2009).

Robert Orsi, a scholar of American Catholicism, is one of the foremost voices in the study of lived religion and his work offers valuable insights into how religions in the United States appear differently in practice than they do in theory. For example, in *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street* (1985), Orsi argues that the Catholicism of Italian immigrants in East Harlem from 1880-1950 was shaped by the intersection of their home lives in their *domus* (a term implying the relationships between people, their extended families, and their possessions [xix-xx]), by the Italian concept of *rispetto* (respect encompassing all proper conduct in interpersonal relationships and the duties people have to each other [92-94]), and their experiences as poor immigrants who were not welcomed by the established

Catholic Church in America during that time. The annual festival honouring the Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street demonstrated both a love for this entity, whom the people called upon for favours rooted in their family's needs (e.g., employment, healing), and their Italianness. The Madonna was popularly conceived as an Italian: She was a concerned mother, a woman with incredible power in the home, and also trapped in the relationships of the *domus* which structured the lives of her followers. If she did not fulfil her responsibilities according to the interfamilial codes of *domus* and *rispetto* the people became angry with her. She was part of the family and a link to the unseen order. While the Irish Catholic authorities in New York were embarrassed by this display of popular Italian religiosity, Orsi demonstrates that this devotion was a way into the sacred and profane's intersection through the relationships between individuals and their social networks, which included natural and supernatural beings that made life in Italian Harlem *meaningful* (163-218). In this case, lived religion takes us into people's complicated lives and demonstrates that our identities are integrated in many competing arenas, including work, family, religion, and entertainment. Were we to follow the "authorities" in this discussion, we might deride this practice as the Irish Catholic leadership did. Instead, looking at lived religion lets us see the way that human lives are integrated and the unseen order incorporated into people's understandings beyond "official" definitions.

Orsi's *Between Heaven and Earth* (2005) makes these connections even more explicit and brings us into the complexities of explaining and understanding unseen orders. Using the examples of marginalized people in twentieth-century American Catholicism (the handicapped, children, and women), Orsi argues that both humans and supernatural beings populate religious worlds. In Catholicism this includes the saints and angels, although the saints are more prominent in his case studies. Drawing upon his own experience growing up Catholic, Orsi argues that religion is but one tool people use to make their lives meaningful (168-169). As this example demonstrates, people weave religion in and out of their lives, drawing upon it when necessary, revelling in its festive moments, and mourning through it when loved ones die. Orsi's significant point is that religious studies scholarship rarely shows religious people where they stand and often distorts their experiences to render them acceptable for the academy (177-204). However, religious lives continue and academic explanations often fail to capture those lives in their messy meaningfulness. Orsi's challenge is to uncover those meanings and bring them to people's attention, whether we judge them



good or bad, and explain their significance for the people being studied, not for an abstract body of academic theory (202-203; see also Orsi 1997; cf. Tweed 2006).<sup>14</sup>

Religious studies scholar Russell McCutcheon, however, criticizes Orsi's work (2006a, 2006b; see also 1997, Courtright 2006). While Orsi advocates writing about religion in a way that echoes people's lives as they understand it, McCutcheon argues that this leads to accepting their interpretations as authoritative (2006a). That is, if scholars conform their interpretations to what their informants think, then the critical distance required for scholarly work is compromised. I treat lived religion as a concept that tries to capture religious life's complexity so that the densest data set is available for interpretation. Data, according to McCutcheon, is a "four-lettered word" (721) for Orsi because it dehumanizes people. However, scholarship need not dehumanize people to accept their lives as data for testing our theories. Theories are explanations, and the scholar's job is to explain something convincingly based on evidence. If people disagree and can disprove the theory, then our knowledge is advanced and the scholar's contribution (inspiring further reflection) noted. Practitioners' voices are important and should not be obscured, but their interpretations of the larger phenomena are not the final authority in academic work.

Lastly, lived religion does not need to be studied exclusively through ethnographic methods. While examining how people live if we want to study "lived" religion makes sense, sometimes this is impossible. Orsi uses historical documents extensively in his work, in conjunction with personal interviews. Historian David Hall (1989) further demonstrates that the material culture of a people lets us view their relationships with the unseen order. Studying religious life in early New England, Hall illustrates that the people were not strict Puritans in the theological sense. They also believed extensively in signs and wonders in the natural world, and interpreted these phenomena through almanacs and other popular documents (71-116). Early New England was a more diverse religious landscape than was previously supposed, largely because scholars relied upon representative elites instead of trying to analyze the cultural perspective as a whole.

Religious studies scholar Thomas Tweed provides a compatible theoretical framework for explaining the importance of artifacts in *Crossing and Dwelling* (2006), although his work is based in his ethnographic research among Cuban Catholics in Miami (1997a) and artifacts are but one part of his theory of religion. Arguing that religion should be seen as an ongoing process which allows

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<sup>14</sup> Orsi's work also includes a historical-ethnographic study of how women engage St. Jude in complex devotional relationships, speaking to his relevance in resolving crises in their lives, and with enduring ongoing suffering (1996). He has also contributed to mapping urban lived religion (1999). For a discussion of lived religion's political importance see Orsi (2003).

people to dwell in a meaningful world while also crossing boundaries—whether “terrestrial, corporeal, and cosmic” (2006, 76)—Tweed reminds us that religions are constantly changing through an ongoing dialectic between traditions and the changing worlds in which people dwell (2006, 54-79). He also emphasizes the importance of objects, suggesting that “*artifacts* anchor the tropes, values, emotions, and beliefs that institutions transmit, and that the religious create artifacts and prescribe procedures for their use—from domestic furnishings and ordinary dress to ritual objects and sacred buildings. Making and using artifacts are *practices*, and as many theorists have noticed, religions are performed” (68; emphasis in original). While this is not a study of the practice of making *The Simpsons*, there is an important point to be taken from Tweed’s discussion. Viewing the program as an anchor for tropes, values, and emotions that reflect particular ways of viewing the world helps us to understand the program’s cultural relevance. *The Simpsons* cannot make jokes about religion without being grounded. The program transmits ideas that are distilled from real people’s experiences with everyday religions, interprets these concepts through a humorous framework, and broadcasts those notions in the form of jokes to its audience. Similarly, the contributors to Diane Winston’s *Small Screen, Big Picture* use “lived religion” to explain “the ways in which television characters express, in words and deeds, their spiritual commitments and moral dilemmas, as well as the ways that viewers structure television watching and integrate it into their daily experience of meaning making” (2009, 5). In other words, television programs comprise another important data set for examining lived religion. While Winston is right that lived religion informs television content, television characters are not independent from the people who script their lives. That is, writers, actors, directors, and producers convey things *through* characters on the small screen. When discussing religion in *The Simpsons*, realizing that what the characters say and do reflects the way that a group of producers interpret lived religions is important. The program is a cultural point of contact between producers and the program’s audience, a node in the larger cultural conversation about religion’s role in modern life.

Lived religion’s usefulness for this project is, therefore, twofold. First, the people who write *The Simpsons* are themselves embodied individuals who interact with lived religions. They have absorbed the contradictions between official and lived religion, watched friends and neighbours doing “irrational” things, and observed people mixing and matching religious beliefs to suit their needs. These are resources for writing jokes. Official religious proclamations and the way people respond to them—ignoring them, following them dogmatically, or selectively appropriating from them—are all available as raw data for humour. When jesters consider these decisions irrational they become fodder

for jokes. This is discussed further in the next chapter, but we must remember that *The Simpsons* draws widely from lived and official religion for its humour. Ignoring the way people actually behave does not take us any closer to understanding the program's jokes.

Second, popular culture exists in dialectic tension with lived religions. Historian Colleen McDannell's work (1995) is illustrative in this case. Working with generations of American Christians' material culture, McDannell argues that "Christian material culture does not simply reflect an existing reality. Experiencing the physical dimension of religion helps *bring about* religious values, norms, behaviors, and attitudes" (2; emphasis in original). A good example of this is her treatment of the Bible in Victorian households. While many scholars treat the Bible as scripture, very few treat it as a meaningful object. However, Victorian Christians knew differently. The Bible was the centre of the parlour, a record of family life, and a way of bringing the family together. As Victorian art demonstrates, fathers were expected to show themselves as heads of the household by instructing their children from the Bible while mothers were to give their children "spiritual milk" by reading to them from the family Bible. Bibles were big, bound books, conspicuously marketed to people to match their tastes and wallets (67-102). McDannell makes it clear that living religiously includes interacting with meaningful objects. To this I would add images, sounds, smells, tastes, and all other sensory information. Religion is something embodied humans do, drawing upon all our senses to make the unseen order present.<sup>15</sup>

Because people use popular culture for religious purposes I turn to the next major question: *What is popular culture and what is its significance in this project?*

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<sup>15</sup> Other scholars connect material culture and dwelling within an unseen order. Morgan's work (2005, 2007a) argues for religion's transmission through visual culture. The unseen order is represented through images we are trained to see using what he calls the *sacred gaze* ("a term that designates the particular configuration of ideas, attitudes, and customs that informs a religious act of seeing as it occurs within a given cultural and historical setting. A sacred gaze is the manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with spiritual significance" [2005, 3]). This historically contextualized way of approaching images explains how humans train their senses to encounter the sacred through cultural products. Beal's *Roadside Religion* (2005) recounts his experiences travelling through America's religious-themed attractions and encountering the people who create them. Especially significant here are the examples of people who felt religiously compelled to recreate the landscape to reflect their religious visions, projecting themselves into a material universe, and inviting others to participate in their unseen orders. Finally, Plate (2008) argues that religion and cinema each engage in the act of creating worlds which people use to understand their lives.

## 2.2 Popular Culture and Its Significance

When defining popular culture, scholars studying religion and popular culture tend to restrict it to mass produced culture, with an emphasis on mass media. Theologian Kelton Cobb defines popular culture as “the amalgamation of these delivering media *and* the delivered cultural symbols” (2005, 41; emphasis in original), while religious studies scholars Eric Mazur and Kate McCarthy argue that the “popular” in popular culture is usually “taken to refer to the wide diffusion of the product, usually via mass media; its acceptance by the majority of a given population; or its source in non-elite segments of the society” (2001, 7). For religion and media scholar Lynn Schofield Clark it is “anything that can be successfully packaged for consumers in response to their desire for a means to both identify with some people, ideas, or movements, and to distinguish themselves from others” (2007, 9). Chidester sees popular culture more expansively. It “encompasses the ordinary—the pleasures of our lives, which we may even take for granted, such as the creative and performing arts, sports, and leisure activities” (2005, 1).

Scholars focussing on aspects of popular culture beyond religion alert us to material culture’s importance in defining popular culture. In the introduction to *Rethinking Popular Culture* (1991), sociologists Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson argue that popular culture is “the beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population” (3). Similarly, British cultural studies scholar Dick Hebdige defines popular culture as “a set of generally available artefacts: films, records, clothes, TV programmes, modes of transport, etc.” (1988, 47). Furthermore, he emphasizes mass production’s role in our contemporary definitions of popular culture, allowing us to discuss the economic changes that make mass popular culture possible (47). These concerns shape the discourse about popular culture, but Hebdige’s discussion still does not accurately identify what “popular culture” includes and excludes.

Similarly, popular culture scholar Russel Nye defines popular culture as “those productions, both artistic and commercial, designed for mass consumption, which appeal to and express the tastes and understanding of the majority of the public, free of control by minority standards. They reflect the values, convictions, and patterns of thought and feeling generally dispersed through and approved by American society” (Nye 1982, 24). While he shares Mazur and McCarthy’s concern that popular culture reflects consumers’ values and cultural patterns, there are two problems with this definition. First, “American society” is too broad and ambiguous to be useful. Popular culture products often appeal to much smaller subcultures within the broader context of the United States. For example, a program with a regular viewership of 20 million people is a popular culture success. But in a country

of roughly 307 million people those 20 million individuals represent roughly 6.5% of the population, which is hardly representative of the whole country.<sup>16</sup> The other problem is Nye's assertion that popular culture is free from minority control. As I will demonstrate later, a comparatively small group controls *The Simpsons*' content and distribution relative to its consumers.<sup>17</sup>

Other scholars propose definitions based on the distinction between high, popular, and folk culture. For example, religious studies scholar Gordon Lynch suggests that we should treat popular culture as the "shared environment, practices, and resources of every life" (2005, 17) as a way of negotiating between elite high culture, mass mediated and distributed popular culture, and regionalized folk culture (see also Browne 1982; Mazur and McCarthy 2001, 7-9; Nye 1982; Forbes 2005, 2-4; cf. Romanowski 2007, 20-22). While the distinction between high and popular culture is discussed later, I do not use the "folk culture" distinction because I treat artefacts such as handmade quilts and home recipes as small scale popular culture. That is, they are non-elite culture on a much smaller scale than is usually ascribed to "popular" culture (cf. Browne 1982, Kidd 2007, Nye 1982, Strinati 2004). Acknowledging mass culture's relevance for definitions of popular culture is important because *The Simpsons* is mass marketed and distributed to a broad audience. However, distinguishing between "folk" and "popular" culture as separate categories is not useful. Using "folk culture" and "mass culture" as subcategories of "popular culture" is more productive because they focus our attention on the ways that small groups create culture for larger groups to consume. The main difference is scale. That said, sociologist Herbert Gans (1974) differentiates between high and popular culture because of the class differences that distinguish these two kinds of culture in the social imagination. Because these distinctions create significant material discrepancies between people, I use them as separate categories for analytical purposes.

This focus on definitions emphasizing popular culture's mass mediated nature, everyday quality, and broad acceptance is relevant to this project because *The Simpsons* meets their criteria. First, *The Simpsons* is a *product*. It is a television program a small group of people (writers, animators, directors, producers) creates and which the FOX network—a component of conservative billionaire media mogul Rupert Murdoch's multinational News Corporation—distributes.<sup>18</sup> While this

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<sup>16</sup> The CIA's *World Factbook* website estimates the American population at 307, 212, 123 as of July 2009 (The World Factbook).

<sup>17</sup> For further sociological definitions and discussions of popular culture see, e.g., Bar-Haim (1990), Fluck (1987), Gans (1974), Gillespie (1972), Kidd (2007).

<sup>18</sup> For a brief political biography of Murdoch and *The Simpsons*' relationship with FOX and News Corp., see Henry (2008, 34-46).

study deals mainly with the television program's content and *The Simpsons Movie* (Silverman 2007), *The Simpsons* brand extends to, among other things, comic books, advertising for other corporate products (e.g., Burger King, Butterfinger chocolate bars), DVDs and VHS cassettes, clothing, toys, Christmas ornaments, books, candy, bumper stickers, American postage stamps, mugs, and special designs for medical inhalers. *Simpsons* products generated two billion dollars in merchandising revenue alone in its first fourteen months (January 1990 to February 1991) and *The Simpsons'* global merchandising empire is now valued at five billion dollars (Grala 2007, Griffiths 2000). This does not include the bootlegged "Black Bart" merchandise that media scholar Peter Parisi (1993) found in the African American community shortly after the program's debut, which speaks both to the program's popularity and its use beyond FOX's control. It is clearly something that is produced, reproduced, and generates profit in the market.

Second, *The Simpsons'* financial success alerts us to the fact that while the program is popular, its consumers do not create it. A powerful corporation owns *The Simpsons*, and a small group of writers, producers, and animators shape its content. Creators Matt Groening and James L. Brooks, writers including Ian Maxtone-Graham, George Meyer, Mike Reiss, Mike Scully and John Swartzwelder, and showrunners (producer-managers responsible for the program's daily operations) Al Jean and David Silverman are among the most prominent contributors to the program's humorous perspective. This comparatively small group of individuals are important because *The Simpsons* is consumed by a greater number of people than those who create it, agreeing with Mazur and McCarthy's contention that while most popular culture is produced by a relative few, it is only successful if it resonates with their audience, which makes popular culture "of the people" (2001, 7-8). However, a salient point is that mass-produced popular culture's means of production are not available to "the people" because it is expensive, making it difficult to think of popular culture as "the people's" property. In other words, consumers may find something in the program that resonates with their values, but they do not have the privilege of creating and altering it. Those who have the resources to produce popular culture can disproportionately project their ideas into mainstream society where consuming the product funds the ideas' continued propagation.<sup>19</sup> While a product's visionaries may have modest origins, those who can fund and distribute it select which messages are

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<sup>19</sup> Fluck contends that popular culture does not work because of ideological manipulation but "because society constantly reproduces social relations with which the recipients have to come to terms symbolically" (1987, 39). As the above discussion demonstrates, while popular culture resonates with people this does not disqualify it as a system of ideological dissemination (cf. Bar-Haim 1990).

propagated. Groening was an underground cartoonist before creating *The Simpsons* as a series of shorts for *The Tracey Ullman* show in 1987. He would never have become an iconic sitcom creator were it not for Brooks hiring him and FOX deciding to turn *The Simpsons* into a half-hour feature. He needed the experience and money of those connections to bring his vision to a broader public. Without their help he would not have his current audience.

Third, *The Simpsons* mediates cultural symbols that different people appropriate differently. It transmits a vision of American culture that viewers selectively interpret. In the introduction, I mentioned disputes about *The Simpsons* as a corrupting force, but it has also been co-opted by Christian groups. Pinsky's *The Gospel According to The Simpsons* (2001) was so successful that he and youth pastor Skip Parvin created a small group study guide for churches (2002). In the same vein, Bowler turned his article about *The Simpsons* (1996/1997) into a small booklet in Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship's *Dare* series which is dedicated to helping students "explore the relevance of Christian faith for today's culture" (2001, back cover). The Anglican Church in England also produced a booklet for pre-teen small group activities built around the show as a means of evangelizing (O. Smith 2007).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Willow Creek pastor Lee Strobel used Bart's prayer in "Bart Gets an F" as an illustration of something Jesus would use positively when teaching people how to pray (1994, 29-41).<sup>21</sup> However, it is not just Christians appropriating religion in *The Simpsons*. Philosopher Daniel Dennett, a prominent member of the "New Atheist" movement, quotes the Simpsons' evangelical neighbour Ned Flanders as a way of demonstrating religious adherents' ignorance about scientific truths: "Science is like a blabbermouth who ruins a movie by telling you how it ends" (2006, 12; original quote in "Lisa the Skeptic"). This echoes Delaney's arguments from the introduction about *The Simpsons* favouring science over religion (2008, 197-218) and shows how the program can be variously interpreted.

Beyond religious appropriations, we can also examine *The Simpsons*' different political usages. Groening's secret motto is "To entertain and subvert" (Griffiths 2000), a call to his viewers (especially children) not to trust authority figures because they do not have viewers' best interests at heart (Griffiths 2000; see also A. Duncan 1999, Hull 2000). Yet, with its promotion of a united family, Marge Simpson as a stay-at-home mother, portrayal of small town community life (see Wood and Todd 2005), and Mayor "Diamond" Joe Quimby as a parody of the Kennedys, some

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<sup>20</sup> Although I am not analyzing how groups have used these resources, that would be another fruitful area of scholarship in the religious reception of popular culture.

<sup>21</sup> Specifically, Strobel felt that Jesus would approve of Bart's praying from the heart, approaching God fondly, confessing, and concluding in a way that stresses Bart's friendship with God.

conservatives have come to love the show (Andrews 2007, Murdock 2002; cf. Cantor 2001). These examples demonstrate that *The Simpsons* can be used as an identity marker, which Cobb and Clark emphasized in their definitions of popular culture (see also Alters 2002; Hoover 2006, 277-280; Ott 2003). Using Clark's definition as my working definition of popular culture ("anything that can be successfully packaged for consumers in response to their desire for a means to both identify with some people, ideas, or movements, and to distinguish themselves from others" [2007, 9]), this project demonstrates that *The Simpsons*' humour is a product of the program's creators' liberal religious identities which is projected for popular consumption.

### 2.2.1 Popular Culture's Significance: A Matter of Taste

Popular culture's significance lies in arguments about its merits for either enhancing or degrading social life. This can helpfully be analyzed through the concept of "taste." The most famous discussion of this concept is French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984),<sup>22</sup> although Gans makes similar arguments in his *Popular Culture and High Culture* (1974; see also Carey 2006). Bourdieu (1984, 1-2) argues that "taste" reflects educational attainment and signifies class differences among people, with which Gans would agree. Both scholars combat the idea that "high culture" (e.g., opera, ballet, classical music, impressionist art) is intrinsically superior to popular culture on this premise. Gans is especially critical of the mass culture argument against popular culture (1974, 19-64), arguing that it "is self-serving, oriented to the interests of high culture alone, and to the maximization of its power and resources" (62). The argument that popular culture's mass production deprives it of redeeming value is actually class based propaganda that is used to influence public policy (e.g., funding for the arts, determining what is taught as "culture" in schools) in favour of cultural elites.

The mass culture argument's most famous example is the Frankfurt School's Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno's "The Culture Industry" (2007, 94-136). They argue that popular culture's mass production makes originality and enlightenment impossible. Instead, a bland sameness infects culture and degrades the individual because mass production generates artifacts which cannot elevate the human soul.<sup>23</sup> A predictable formula extricating evidence of individualism and personal

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<sup>22</sup> For critiques of *Distinction* and Bourdieu's sociology of culture see B. Berger (1986), Brubaker (1985), Dunn (1998), Gartman (1991), Gronow (1993), Holt (1997), and Veenstra (2005). For an application of Bourdieu's theories to consumption of *The Simpsons*, see Alters (2002, 234-260).

<sup>23</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno's argument against the culture industry is based in their larger argument that enlightenment should free people from the confines of social structures which repress the individual and



style from the work is required to ensure the products continue to sell (99). They think popular culture's homogeneity makes people homogeneous (95-97), and they argue that mass produced culture replicates its capitalist producers' ideology. Regardless of what we do, there is no escape from mass culture's power to shape our experiences and society.

Others echo Horkheimer's and Adorno's arguments. Philosopher Allan Bloom (1987) argued that the generation of students he encountered from the 1960s to the 1980s had lost its moral moorings that could only come from familiarity with and love for the classical traditions of literature and music. It is safe to assume he would extend the criticism to today's students. Contending that rock music's and cinema's mass produced cultures encourage students to indulge their basest desires and have no perspective for the future, Bloom's solution was to promote study of the classics of Western civilization. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Bloom looked to high culture's canons for civilization's moral direction. Anything less threatened the individual and destroyed society's foundations.<sup>24</sup>

Bloom's use of the mass culture argument illustrates Bourdieu's and Gans' concerns with taste. There is no empirical evidence that listening to Mozart or reading Plato will make you a better person. Furthermore, these are cultural artefacts and thinkers a certain segment of society uses and consumes. *Distinction* aptly demonstrates that *education* is the deciding factor in liking high culture and using it to distinguish oneself from lower classes (Bourdieu 1984, 18-96; Gans 1974, 70; see also Lizardo 2006; Veenstra 2005). Gans goes even further, arguing that there are a variety of different "taste cultures," which meet different groups' needs (1974, 10-15, 67-118). Taste cultures "consist of values, the cultural forms which express these values . . . taste cultures include the values, forms, and media of the natural and social sciences and philosophy—including their commercial popularizations and even 'folk wisdom.' Finally, taste cultures have political values; although they do not often express them explicitly, they do so implicitly, and even when not, they frequently have political implications" (10-11). When we look at mass culture theorists' motivations, we can see their taste cultures' political implications. Destroying the mass production machine and replacing it with classical content are portrayed as society's saving grace, but this reifies a worldview that empowers people with elite educations and aesthetics.

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enable them to achieve their full potential. See the first three chapters of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2007, 1-93).

<sup>24</sup> For an early discussion of the mass culture debate see Rosenberg and White (1956). See also Postman (1985).

While it would be easy to dismiss mass culture arguments as high culture propaganda (62), their insight into the disproportionate control over popular culture's production is too valuable to ignore. This takes us to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which can be summarized as the social structures which shape our decisions by shaping our predispositions towards certain choices (1977, 72). Our *habitus* shapes our taste culture. Through our social interactions with others we learn dispositions that shape our tastes. As sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) argue, human beings reproduce the social structures they internalize through basic socialization.<sup>25</sup> However, because societies are stratified, Bourdieu acknowledges that knowing the "right" kind of culture leads to substantial material rewards (1984). That said, people from all different classes and taste cultures draw upon popular culture as a way of communicating their group membership with others (Lizardo 2006) and as material for shaping their own identities (see, e.g., Binkley 2000, Gartman 2002, Holt 1998).<sup>26</sup>

Finally, because popular culture is contested ground on which major social differences are marked, it is also grounds for conflict. Censorship is a tactic powerful groups employ to control the ideas and values others project through popular culture. Film critic Michael Medved argues that Hollywood (meaning film companies, but he also extends his criticism to television and music) has lost touch with the majority of the United States' citizens who still value patriotism, a positive view of religion, and the nuclear family (1992, 10). Accordingly, "What troubles people about the popular culture isn't the competence with which it's shaped, but the messages it sends, the view of the world it transmits" (10). Medved contends that Hollywood's producers should craft media that reflects those values which he attributes to the American majority. That is, religion should not be attacked as

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<sup>25</sup> Berger and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

<sup>26</sup> This issue is often linked to consumerism, a topic discussed in chapter four. Audience reception studies further demonstrate that people consume the same products in different ways. Clark's (2003) and Hoover's (2006) work illustrate different ways people use mass media's religious content. Clark identified five types of teenage media observer through interviewing teenagers and their parents. Furthermore, teenagers draw from their families, social institutions (e.g., school, religion), social position (e.g., race, class, and gender), and the media as they shape their identities (2003). Similarly, Hoover argues that media contribute to the symbolic inventories people use to interpret their place in the modern world. Like Clark, he finds a range of responses to religion in the media. Hoover sees people as active consumers and interpreters of media who create meaning from the images and ideas they absorb from a variety of media (e.g., newspapers, television, the Internet) (39-44). Hoover's study is important because it emphasizes media's role in disseminating ideas in today's culture where a pastiche approach to constructing religious identities is considered normal. Employing a methodological approach based in interviews with media consumers, Hoover criticizes models of popular culture which denigrate it as somehow degrading the audience without testing how the audience is affected or which praise it without assessing the complexities with which people approach it. See also, e.g., Alters (2002), Hebdige (1991), and Henry Jenkins (1992, 2006a, 2006b).

pernicious or ridiculed as misguided; marriages should be presented as predominantly stable and the family should be seen as a source of stability rather than conflict; America and her troops should be celebrated; and violence and the more grotesque elements of human behaviour like sadism should be denigrated (10). For Medved, “The most significant problems of the popular culture stem from the pervasive presence of antisocial material” (242). Tipper Gore echoes similar sentiments in her book *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society* (1987). Gore argues that “porn rock” (music which is “part of an escalating trend toward the use of more explicit sex and graphic violence in entertainment industry offerings” [12]) is a leading cause of increased violence, suicide, Satanic and occult practices, and alcohol and drug consumption among American youth. Like Medved, she calls for increased industry regulation of artistic productions, accusing popular culture producers of corrupting impressionable teenagers for financial gain. Gore contends that she is not calling for censorship, but expressing her first amendment rights and challenging popular culture’s content through the market (15-17).

Prominent in Gore’s crusade are her attacks on heavy metal music as “porn rock,” which musicologist Robert Walser (1993, 137-171) and sociologist Deena Weinstein (2000, 237-275) counter. They contend that Gore’s position reflects a conservative moral bias based on assumed Christian norms and other symbolic institutions in American culture such as “the American family” (Walser 1993, 138). Walser and Weinstein responded to what has become known as the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) senate hearings in 1985.<sup>27</sup> This event stretched beyond just heavy metal to controversial content in other musical genres including work by pop artists Prince, Madonna, and Cyndi Lauper, with the PMRC’s goal being the clear labelling of albums with “explicit” content. Sociologist Amy Binder (1993) argues that in the battles over popular music’s social benefits discussions are often framed to resonate with different constituencies. Gore’s appeals drew upon the corruption, danger to society, and protection frames, arguing that explicitly sexual and violent content in music could corrupt children who needed protection from these ideas (758). The PMRC’s opponents framed their rebuttals as no harm, generation gap, and freedom of speech (759). These defendants portrayed themselves as entertainers protecting free speech from overprotective parents who did not understand why their children liked the music. This allowed them to present their music’s content as something harmless that needed protection from the vicious assaults of people who did not

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<sup>27</sup> The hearing’s official name is *Record Labeling*. See trial testimony from Susan Baker, Dr. Joe Stuessy, and Dr. Paul King for arguments in favour of record labelling. Testimonies from John Denver, Dee Snider, and Frank Zappa exemplify musicians’ rebuttals (U.S. Congress 1985).

understand them and who wanted to shape American culture to their particular moral order. Each side reached different audiences and furthered different arguments.

The PMRC hearings demonstrate that the clash between popular culture's producers and their critics revolves around popular culture's *content*, that is, what it communicates (or, rather, what people claim it communicates). Other scholars have discussed popular culture censorship at a variety of levels and the PMRC trials serve as another example in a long series of confrontations between what people portray in popular culture and what cultural gatekeepers deem acceptable content.<sup>28</sup> *The Simpsons'* portrayal of religion reflects, is shaped by, and comments on the forces that compete for the power to shape the United States' social, cultural, political, and religious orders. Arguments about popular culture's content recognize that its meanings are not only established in discourses about it, but that popular culture is created with particular audiences in mind and its content is generated by selecting and organizing significant symbols from its host culture.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Black's *Hollywood Censored* (1994) tells the Production Code of America's story and how it affected the content of Hollywood movies. Especially important here is the fact that pressures from religious groups and state film boards acted as incentives to have Hollywood producers conform to this imposed standard of morality. A similar influence can be found in Brook's (2003) discussion of how Jewish groups forced the cancellation of certain programs such as *Bridget Loves Bernie* and *Chicken Soup* for their depictions of Jewish life. *Bridget Loves Bernie* was problematic for its portrayal of ethnic intermarriage between Catholic Bridget and Jewish Bernie, which the community felt would inspire exogamy (48-54). *Chicken Soup* was pulled because the star, Jackie Mason, was deemed too Jewish and Jewish lobby groups felt that he would be too much of a stereotype (68-73). Black and Brook demonstrate that pressure on popular culture's producers (in this case Hollywood studios and television networks) can be enough to have popular culture's content conform to cultural power brokers' standards. Waldron and Bradford Wright each bring the elements of moral panic to the forefront of their discussions. Waldron outlines the crusade against role-playing games' history and failure, noting that while their arguments were compelling to some Christians (like heavy metal, role-playing games were accused of promoting suicide and occult activities) they failed to stand up to academic scrutiny and eventually faded away (2005a). Wright's discussion of Frederic Werther's 1950s crusade to have comic books censored for their content is also relevant, as this movement fell apart once the state of New York deemed that censoring comic books would not stand on constitutional grounds (2003, 86-108). This decision echoes Binder's *freedom of speech* frame and shows the repetitive nature of these arguments about popular culture's content and that censorship support (arguing that youth are corruptible, that popular culture's content is immoral and dangerous, taking legal action against popular culture) continues in a cyclical pattern.

<sup>29</sup> One interpretive direction this can take is to view popular culture as propaganda, which Cowan defines as "a systematic, ideologically driven, action-oriented manipulation and dissemination of information, which is (a) designed for a specific target audience, and (b) intended to influence the beliefs and behaviors of that audience in a manner consonant with the aims and objectives of the propagandist" (2004, 259). The successful propagandist repeats a message which resonates with pre-existing prejudices in the audience, framing the argument consistently and using simplified arguments and solutions for their own purposes (259; see also Cowan 1999, 127-270; 2003a; 2003b). Propaganda should, therefore, be seen as a useful tool in the popular culture theorist's toolkit. However, *The Simpsons'* creators are aware that their audience is diverse and will not agree with everything they find humorous. Seeing their humour exclusively as propaganda removes its argumentative and persuasive elements as it tries to confront opposing viewpoints. As Cowan's work

*The Simpsons'* commentators note that it depicts established American cultural trends and critiques some of the United States' most fundamental institutions. Media scholar Jonathan Gray analyzes television through *The Simpsons'* perspective. He argues that their advertisement parodies are effective because they are "constantly making ads appear fundamentally unnatural, foreign, and invasive. To laugh at many of these jokes is to accept and share the criticism of advertising's modes of address, for the jokes are not just on the internal absurdities but also, externally *and intertextually*, at ads that we have all seen before" (2006, 82; emphasis in original; see also Knox 2006). Political scientists Nicholas Guehlstorf, Lars Hallstrom and Jonathan Morris (2008) also contend that *The Simpsons* criticizes the status quo, suggesting that the program consistently depicts the American political scene as populated with corrupt and incompetent political elites, apathetic voters, and a tendency on the part of the populace to turn into an unthinking mob. Temple University graduate Margaret Hull (2000) also endorses this position, finding similarities between Michel Foucault and *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening in their opinions of school as an institution which destroys individuality and teaches conformity, and in their resistance to this characteristic of primary education; Henry (2004, 2007, 2008) also supports the program's oppositional stance, noting that *The Simpsons* challenges common assumptions about gender roles and behaviours. These studies suggest that analyzing *The Simpsons'* content as a critique of American society's dominant institutions can lead to valuable insights into the program's ideology. My analysis follows by investigating how the program uses satire to critique America's religious institutions.

### **2.3 Religion and Popular Culture: A Diversity of Approaches**

With definitions of religion and popular culture in place, my next step is outlining my methodological approach. There are different ways to map the relationships between religion and popular culture, but religious studies scholar Bruce Forbes' is the most useful (2005). Drawing on theologian Richard Niebuhr's framework from *Christ and Culture* (1951), Forbes proposes four relationships between religion and popular culture: religion in popular culture, popular culture in religion, popular culture as religion, and religion and popular culture in dialogue (10).<sup>30</sup> This project

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demonstrates, propaganda is often directed "in-house," while *The Simpsons* is directed to all viewers. Therefore, it is as much about reifying certain viewpoints as it is about actively engaging and challenging opposing ones.

<sup>30</sup> Niebuhr's original categories were: Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture. They were frameworks for explaining the different ways people have thought about Jesus' cultural role throughout history. Forbes also proposes a fifth category "Religion as Popular Culture" in a footnote (2005, 18-19 fn. 14), but the articles in *Religion and Popular Culture in America* do not address it. This relationship between religion and popular culture is worth

uses cultural analytical methods for analyzing religion in popular culture, specifically the way that *The Simpsons* portrays different American religions in order to criticize them, drawing heavily from work that is categorized under Forbes' religion in popular culture and religion and popular culture in dialogue categories. As I previously acknowledged, some religious groups use *The Simpsons* for religious reasons. However, cultural analysis of religion in *The Simpsons* is relevant because there are four hundred and sixty-three episodes of *The Simpsons*, with only eight having no religious references (another fifteen episodes have only questionable references). Furthermore, religious groups have been commenting on the program for years. Studying the depictions of religion in *The Simpsons* helps us understand why the program has been both influential and controversial.

Forbes describes religion in popular culture as “the appearance, explicitly or implicitly, of religious themes, language, imagery, and subject matter in elements of popular culture” (2005, 10). Studies taking this approach demonstrate an array of theoretical and methodological approaches that can be applied to contextualize and interpret popular culture's content (e.g., Beal 2002; Clanton Jr. 2003; Cowan 2005b, 2008b; Hendershot 2004; Howard and Streck 1999; Hulsether 2005; Iwamura 2005; J. Knight 2005; K. McCarthy 2001; McDannell 1995; Plate 2003; Rowmanowski 2007; Shuck 2004; Siegler 2001). Through an analysis of different religions' depictions in *The Simpsons* we can see how the show has been crafted to represent America's religious culture in such a way that these renderings convey particular ideologies about religious beliefs and actions in contemporary life. That is, we will examine how the program's spoken texts, characters' actions, and other visual elements reference different religious traditions and socially relevant events in American religious life through cultural intertextuality. These investigations reveal underlying cultural and ideological patterns for further analysis and criticism.

Other scholars analyze the dialectic between popular culture's contributions to culture at large and culture's influence on popular culture in different ways. Varying approaches to horror films illustrate this point. Religious studies scholar Timothy Beal's exploration of monsters in the biblical and Western cultural traditions reveals that they are used as warnings (from the Latin *monstrum*: “a message that breaks into this world from the realm of the divine” [2002, 7]). Monsters are symbols that direct our attention to the unseen order, representing the world's supernatural elements at the boundaries of our consciousness. In response to this unsettling presence in our world, Beal argues that “the monster is an envoy of the divine or the sacred as radically other than ‘our’ established order of

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exploring further, but it is not something I will be addressing in this work because it does not answer my significant questions which are based in religion in popular culture and religion and popular culture in dialogue.

things” (6). To protect our worldviews we can either demonize or deify the monster, rejecting it or incorporating it into our established order. Beal finds this unsatisfactory and argues that we are often ambivalent about monsters (6). Through critiques of Dracula, ecomonsters (e.g., Godzilla), and the work of H.P. Lovecraft, Beal’s examples illustrate that monsters reveal latent patterns in our unseen orders. They either protect it (e.g., angels) or try to destroy it (e.g., demons), but a monster’s presence invites us to think deeper about said order.

Cowan expands Beal’s argument to all cinematic horror. Using the concept of sociophobics (“our culture teaches us in a variety of ways what to fear, and through a variety of cultural products reflects and reinforces the fears we have been taught” [2008b, 59]), he demonstrates how horror films illuminate Peter Berger’s point that “All socially constructed worlds are inherently precarious” (1967, 29). Cowan argues that each society has its own religion and people’s horror stories relate directly to what endangers their unseen order. For example, in his discussion of our fear of death and dying badly Cowan compares the films *Ju-on* and its American remake, *The Grudge*, to demonstrate the differences in Japanese and American sociophobics. In Japanese society ghosts are part of the cultural milieu. Especially frightening are the angry and vengeful ghosts who have died bad deaths and are untended by their families. However, ghosts exist in the background of American consciousness. Some people believe in them, but they rarely come to the forefront of our attention. In its story about a house haunted by a vengeful ghost, *Ju-on* did not need extensive narration and instead focussed on the common Japanese themes of the cursed house and the entrapped spirit. Japanese audiences understood what was happening as part of the unseen order. On the other hand, *The Grudge* introduced narrative elements that would help explain the Japanese cultural elements to Americans, contextualizing the haunted house and fitting the story into an American sociophobic and narrative framework by focussing on the characters and allowing audiences to identify with them (2008b, 128-133). This model of examining how a film (and, by extension, *The Simpsons*) draws from underlying social assumptions about reality is used consistently throughout this dissertation because what we find humorous is socially contextualized and dependent upon our learned assumptions.<sup>31</sup>

Horror films demonstrate the importance of what Cowan calls “cultural intertextuality.” He uses this concept to discuss how disparate cultural elements intertwine in horror films’ production (11-12), but this concept can be extended to any popular culture production, especially *The Simpsons*. The concept of intertextuality is important for this project because it refers to “a set of conventions—

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<sup>31</sup> For further discussions of religion and horror films see, Beavis (2003), DeGiglio-Bellemare (2005), Humphries-Brooks (2004), Paffenroth (2006), B. Stone (2001); cf. Bellin (2005).

social norms, religious practices, artistic products, folk wisdom, different parts of the taken-for-granted information that Berger and Luckmann call ‘a body of transmitted recipe knowledge’” (11).<sup>32</sup> Significantly, audiences can recall this information quickly and easily (12). Cultural intertextuality builds upon already assumed norms, beliefs, and practices. The more esoteric standards of theologians are not nearly as important for people as the assumptions which frame their interactions with other people. To put things in more concrete terms, people who fear Muslims do not usually do it because they have read the Qu’ran, hadith, and works of Islamic theologians who have inspired contemporary Muslim terrorists. They are scared because they have seen repeated viewings of the 9/11 attacks and carefully edited footage of Osama bin-Laden meant to inspire fear.<sup>33</sup> These patterns of cultural reinforcement are then replicated in popular culture because the quickly available information is easily employed for the popular artist’s purposes.

Cultural intertextuality facilitates humour in *The Simpsons* and intertextuality is a common theme among *Simpsons* commentators. Gray uses the term “critical intertextuality” to analyze *The Simpsons*’ parodies (43-68; see also Henry 2003).<sup>34</sup> Contending that parody disrupts genre conventions, Gray writes that *The Simpsons* transmits a critical framework that inverts ideologies normally conveyed through particular media (44-48). For example, the sitcom has historically been “a mouthpiece for a contemporary fairytale of patriarchal, middle-class, consumerist suburban morality and for the myth of the American Dream” (53), a fairytale *The Simpsons* draws upon and subverts. Gray’s argument illustrates the fact that *The Simpsons* exists in a cultural context that people already know how to interpret. Juxtaposing meanings allows audiences to reinterpret habitual patterns of media consumption (although they may not get the joke) (47; see also K. Richardson 2008, Weinstock 2008). Television scholar Simone Knox argues that *The Simpsons* double-codes itself to be both commercial and critical, having things both ways. Furthermore, its jokes do not have singular meanings, allowing for broad interpretations among audience members (2006). Humour’s intertextuality allows people to use it as a means of communicating ideas and as a critical reflection on their world. By referring to a broad array of religious and cultural assumptions, therefore, *The Simpsons* helps us recall relevant bits and pieces of our unseen orders, and reinforces or challenges the conjectures upon which they are built. Among other things, it allows us to remember ideas,

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<sup>32</sup> The Berger and Luckmann quote is from (1966, 83).

<sup>33</sup> See chapter 7 for a further discussion of Islam’s treatment in *The Simpsons*.

<sup>34</sup> Gray also includes a helpful review of intertextuality theory (2006, 19-40).



presumptions, and emotions we associate with these cultural artefacts and to re-evaluate our ideological positions.

To access the ideas, assumptions, and emotions *The Simpsons* parodies, I employ a hermeneutic approach informed by the theoretical insights of the phenomenological branch of symbolic interactionism.<sup>35</sup> Building from the insights of the University of Chicago's social psychological tradition, most famously represented by George Herbert Mead (1934), sociologist Herbert Blumer framed symbolic interactionism's three basic premises as: (1) human beings act according to the meanings that things (e.g., physical objects, other people, institutions, ideas) have for them, (2) those meanings arise from social interaction, and (3) these meanings are used and changed through an individual's interactions with others (1969, 2). Contemporary symbolic interactionist David Snow extends Blumer's model to include four further principles: interactive determination (a continued focus on how our contexts give objects their meaning); symbolism (symbolic meanings are not given, but constantly negotiated and reworked); emergence (symbolic interactionists frequently investigate those historical moments where something in a culture changes); and human agency (symbolic interactionism allows us to see the dynamic tension between social structure and human agency) (2001; see also Mihata 2002).

Symbolic interactionist theory is often applied in ethnographic research (see, e.g., H. Becker 1963, Fine 1983a, Garfinkel 1967, Goffman 1959), and, closer to this project, it informs the work of religion and media scholars Stewart Hoover (2006) and Lynn Schofield Clark (2003; see also Alters 2002). Specifically, they use audience reception studies to illustrate how mass media is used to shape people's religious lives. This is important and insightful research, as they demonstrate that a program's audience is often diverse and does not passively consume media. However, audience reception studies have a different focus from an undertaking such as this. Audience research does not necessitate a rigorous analysis of the cultural and political ideas being transmitted through mass media. Indeed, how the audience uses media may have very little to do with any of the ideas it transmits. Therefore, appropriately, insights gained from audience reception research focus on the audience's reactions and how they use media, to the exclusion of cultural content transmitted through said media. In the study of religion and popular culture the audience is but one part of the picture—an important one to be sure, but just a part. Furthermore, in the case of an audience as broad and

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<sup>35</sup> While there are many methods and theoretical approaches to the study of religion and popular culture, I follow Morgan's (2007b) advice and build a solid foundation within one tradition rather than trying to do everything and accomplish nothing.

international as *The Simpsons*', any audience research study is necessarily incomplete and tells us little about the program. The audience and their social interactions with mass media, rather than a detailed engagement with the media's content, become the focal point of the study (see Alters 2002).

If someone wanted a complete picture of *The Simpsons*' audience they would need to conduct a widespread international survey. I have neither the resources nor training to conduct such a study. In a project such as this one, which focuses on the representations of religion in *The Simpsons*, any small-scale audience reception material I included would be limited by geography, sample size, and demographics. Gray's audience reception section in *Watching with The Simpsons* illustrates this problem (2006, 119-168, 174-175). His sample consists of thirty-five people, all of whom have at least a bachelor's degree, and only five of whom had not at least started post-graduate studies at the time they were interviewed. They were found through snowball sampling and by advertising near London's Goodenough College, a dormitory catering to foreign graduate students (120). Gray does not claim any sense of representativeness and instead uses these interviewees to illuminate his work on the problems of interpreting parody (119-120). However, using such a biased sample to frame our understanding of the audience of such a widely popular program as *The Simpsons* only illustrates the incomplete nature of trying to understand the significance of putting forth a depiction of religion in the United States through mass media by interviewing a handful of fans. The educational bias in his sample led to a variety of insightful engagements with the program's parody, but *The Simpsons* is watched by people of all educational levels. The significant question of *what do viewers learn from interpreting The Simpsons' parodies?* remains unanswered because "viewers" are not representative in this case. This is not to say that Gray implies that his audience reception study is authoritative and representative of all *Simpsons* fans, but it demonstrates the difficulty of performing audience research on such a popular program. I find Gray's audience reception elements to be more of a methodological exercise than a useful explanation of how *The Simpsons*' fans interpret its parodies. Concerned that the same problems would arise in this work, and having no way to improve upon Gray's methods with my own resources and training, I have decided not to use audience reception methods.

My decision not to enter the field does not mean that symbolic interactionist theory is inapplicable to material culture. The theoretical insights remain valuable, but we need to apply a different methodology. To do this I turn to symbolic interactionism's phenomenological branch. I follow Austrian sociologist Alfred Schutz who formulated social phenomenology in his *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1967) and *Collected Papers* (1962). Drawing on sociologist Max Weber's problem of human action as directed towards ideal types, in *Phenomenology of the*

*Social World* Schutz argues that Weber did not pay close enough attention to the problem of meaning's construction and conveyance. Human beings live in an environment rich in sensory data. However, we cannot focus our attention on everything we experience. Instead, we pay attention to certain events and give them significance. We then act upon these significant impressions in our everyday lives. Also, when we establish patterns over time we can create ideal types which allow us to understand others' actions and behaviour quickly, based on our expectations of how they enact their social roles and on our interactions with them in the past.<sup>36</sup> The less intimate our relationships, the more we rely upon our rationalized assessments of people's roles and their enactments because, while no two people are exactly the same, we can hopefully convey our meaningful experiences to those around us. Socially constructing meaning relies upon constantly rationalizing role behaviours so that we can understand and anticipate how others will perform when encountering them for the first time (1967; 1962, 3-47, 118-139).

Schutz's insights are helpful for two reasons: First, human communication is imperfect. One of sociology's great questions is how people come to live together in the first place. Schutz takes this even further, asking how we can even communicate when we are so different. This is a significant question which gets to the heart of popular culture and humour. How do we reach a point where we can convey ideas about the social world and understand each other? Why can we understand some people and not others? How do we know if we really understand the other person? How are my personal meanings, built from my own experience and projected through my assumptions about the world, interpreted by somebody else who does not have the same framework? That popular culture conveys messages that people find meaningful suggests that there is something profoundly human about transmitting ideas through these media, even if interaction constantly reshapes those meanings.

Second, approaching popular culture as the products of people's meaningful construction and communication of ideal types gives us a hermeneutic framework. Schutz's phenomenology facilitates identifying historical patterns, biases, ideas, and arguments, and asking about how these complex concepts have been simplified into a communicable ideal type. *The Simpsons* employs ideal types drawn from American culture. Interactionism and phenomenology provide us with the sociological hermeneutics to identify and analyze these ideal types. They also keep us connected to the fact that ideal types are socially shared and communicated. Lived religion, popular culture, taste, and cultural intertextuality are all concepts used to explain how humans formulate and communicate these

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<sup>36</sup> Weber described ideal types as rational abstractions which may not appear in real life but allow us to analytically compare, contrast, and understand human behaviour [2003, 56; see also 1947, 89-115])

meaningful ideas and, in turn, construct their worlds. The next chapter discusses humour's role in this process in light of Schutz's student, Peter Berger, and his sociologies of religion, knowledge, and humour.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> This is not to characterize Berger as solely a phenomenologist. As many commentators have noted, Berger is indebted to the Schutzian tradition for some of his terminology, concepts, and orientation; but he incorporates other sociological traditions, especially Weberian sociology. Berger admits he never really studied phenomenological philosophy and instead relies on Schutz, leaving him somewhat outside phenomenology proper (1986, 223-224; see also Ainlay 1986; Wuthnow et. al 1984, 23).

## Chapter 3—Are Catholics Funny? Religious Comedy in *The Simpsons*

Catholics have inhabited the Americas since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when Spanish and French explorers and colonists crossed the Atlantic. While historians of the United States often emphasize Protestantism's role in nation shaping, Catholics have a long history in America. They are unquestionably a significant religious group in that country.<sup>38</sup> Yet, Catholicism is rarely a source of *The Simpsons*' humour, and when it is, their jokes focus on the papacy, Irish clergy, and the church's position on birth control. Pinsky suggests that Catholicism's treatment in *The Simpsons* has "an undeniably hostile, sometimes gratuitous edge to it. At times, the tension between writers and producers and the denomination has assumed some aspects of an intimate, deep-seated family feud" (2007, 129). Because some writers and producers, including major contributors Mike Scully and George Meyer, are lapsed Catholics, there is clearly some bias there (The Believer 2004; D. Owen 2000; Pinsky 2007, 129). Considering Catholicism's internal ethnic diversity, elaborate hierarchy, political positions on controversial issues including abortion and euthanasia, and rich tradition of lived religion, the significant question is why has *The Simpsons* resorted to a few simple stereotypes when satirizing it?<sup>39</sup>

Answering this question requires a theoretical framework that enables us to analyze how *The Simpsons*' creators have portrayed Catholicism, what they have decided their audience would find humorous, and why they frame their jokes the way they do. In this chapter I demonstrate how aspects of Peter Berger's sociology, with its emphasis on the social roles of knowledge, religion, and humour, offer a solid theoretical base for interpreting *The Simpsons*. Although I will refer to the works of other scholars, I do so as they clarify Berger's positions. Selecting only a few elements of Berger's thought is important because his oeuvre is broad and deep, covering everything from global religious trends

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<sup>38</sup> According to The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's most recent "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey" (2008a), America is 78.4% Christian, 23.9% of which are Catholics. This makes Catholics the single largest Christian denomination in America (Protestantism is divided into three "umbrella groups": evangelicalism [26.3%], mainline [18.1%] and historically black churches [6.9%], but each of these categories contains multiple smaller denominations and independent churches) (5). The University of Chicago's General Social Surveys (GSS) over the last eighteen years have shown Catholics to be roughly the same percentage of the population (e.g., 1990 GSS: 23.8% of Americans are Catholic; 2000 GSS: 24.1%; 2008 GSS: 23.2% [Davis, Smith, and Martin 1990, 2000, 2008]).

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Dolan (1985), Gillis (1999), Marty (1995), and Morris (1997) for introductions to American Catholicism's history. For examples of lived Catholicism see Ferraro (1997), Orsi (1985, 1997, 2005), Primiano (2009), Skerrett (1996), and Tobin (1999).

(1999; Berger, Davie and Foaks 2008), to Third World modernization (Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1973), and manifestos for studying sociology (P. Berger 1963). He has written about religion in the United States (1961a, 1961b), religion in the modern world (1967, 1979, 1998, 2001b), and the way societies are socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966). When we include his theological works (e.g., P. Berger 1970, 2004), we encounter a mind broadly engaged with human life's various facets. This chapter emphasizes his work in the social construction of society and religion because it effectively explains how people construct religious worlds and are, in turn, shaped by their creations (1967; Berger and Luckmann 1966).<sup>40</sup>

This foundation is Berger's base for analyzing humour, which he interprets as one of the signals of transcendence that allow us to see something of the supernatural—the divine—in human experience (1970, 69-72; cf. 1961b, 209-218; 1997). Humour is one of the more understudied elements of his thought, and this project allows us to investigate religion and humour's relationship in his theories. To accomplish this, I discuss the significant elements of Berger's sociologies of knowledge, religion, and humour, augment them with insights from other scholars, and over the next five chapters demonstrate how his theories frame my analysis of religion in *The Simpsons*. This chapter discusses Catholics not because they are the most important religion in *The Simpsons*' debate about religion's role in public life, but because the sample size is small enough to facilitate a first application of the theoretical framework before going deeper into religion's depictions in *The Simpsons*.

### **3.1 The Sociologies of Knowledge, Religion, and Humour: Interwoven Elements in Berger's Thought**

When Berger published *The Social Construction of Reality* (hereafter *Construction*) with Thomas Luckmann in 1966 he was already an established sociologist, having written what is arguably his first classic in sociology, *Invitation to Sociology* (1963). The latter book demonstrates some of the key elements that would inform his later work, namely his interest in Alfred Schutz's theories about "the world as it is" (24) and the importance of the sociology of knowledge for explaining everyday life (110-118). It allowed Berger to promote sociology and sociological thinking as a powerful tool for liberal arts scholars and the "educated public," but *Construction* synthesizes the thought of

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<sup>40</sup> For further summaries and critiques of Berger's sociologies of knowledge, religion, and culture see Ahern (1999), Hunter and Ainlay (1986), Woodhead (2001), and Wuthnow et. al (1984, 21-76).

preceding great sociologists of knowledge, providing an interpretive framework that allows for complex analysis of human cultures and their products.

In *Construction* Berger and Luckmann argue that reality is based on institutions—“a reciprocal typification of habitualized action” (1966, 54)<sup>41</sup>—that a society’s members share. We exist in a dialectic tension with our institutions; we shape them as they shape us. Institutions can be anything from the legal system with its recognizable buildings, rules, and procedures, to the family roles that we adopt—all of which carry behavioural expectations we are expected to fulfil. Key to this argument is that people who are socialized into particular institutions adopt the roles embodied and legitimated therein, and contribute to their completion and ongoing legitimation.

Central to *Construction*’s argument is the idea that people encounter social institutions as if they were objective reality. While they are not objective, and only objectivated through human interaction, we treat them as though they are both real and absolute. Institutions are human creations built from our externalized ideas and behaviours, which gradually come to constitute patterns of action. Once these thoughts and actions become habituated, subsequent generations encounter them as reality. But all institutions have a developmental history. They are not separate from the history of people interacting with the rules and roles institutions prescribe, and changing them over time. Institutions are dynamic, and as we are socialized into the world we internalize already existing social roles and structures, then externalize our subjective interpretations of them through our actions for others to internalize, repeating the cycle (53-66).

According to Berger and Luckmann, these socialization processes create “knowledge” which “is at the heart of the fundamental dialectic of society. It ‘programs’ the channels in which externalization produces an objective world. It objectifies this world through language and the cognitive apparatus based on language, that is, it orders it into objects to be apprehended as reality. It is internalized again *as* objectively valid truth in the course of socialization” (66, emphasis in original). There are also many different kinds of knowledge, each serving a particular purpose in reality’s maintenance and comprehension. The important types of knowledge in our discussion are the social stock of knowledge which is comprised of knowledge of everyday life, commonsense

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<sup>41</sup> Berger and Luckmann describe the process of institutionalization as occurring “whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution. What must be stressed is the reciprocity of institutional typifications and the typicality of not only the actions but also the actors in institutions. The typifications of habitualized actions that constitute institutions are always shared ones. They are *available* to all the members of the particular social group in question, and the institution itself typifies individual actors as well as individual actions” (1966, 54 emphasis in original).

knowledge, recipe knowledge, and legitimations—arguments used to explain the institutional order (P. Berger 1967, 29).

Knowledge of everyday life consists of what is taken for granted in society—a world that enables me to communicate subjective experience to others (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 19-46; cf. Schutz 1967). Preexisting social institutions and objects imply the objectivated reality others have projected and which they can use to communicate their subjective experiences. Much of this constitutes “commonsense knowledge” because “I share [*it*] with others in the normal, self-evident routines of everyday life” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 23). Language is a favourite example of Berger and Luckmann’s because it forces us to shape our thoughts and feelings to its structures if we wish to communicate with others. In our lives we also have unshared subjective experiences—“finite provinces of meaning”—which are inaccessible in everyday life but can be translated into its framework.<sup>42</sup> For example, I can only share a dream with you if I translate it through language, making it part of everyday life rather than letting it remain a separate finite province of meaning (40).

Our social stock of knowledge, including recipe knowledge, further conditions our everyday knowledge. While the everyday world is available to everybody, we do not access everything in it. Pragmatic needs guide knowledge accumulation, leading to a social stock of knowledge which “includes knowledge of my situation and its limits” (41). Because everybody’s situation is different we build individualized stocks of knowledge that assist with our routine problems. Berger and Luckmann call these pragmatic solutions “recipe knowledge” (42). However, because socially constructed worlds are under the constant threat of having their arbitrariness exposed, people develop legitimations to defend institutionalized knowledge (P. Berger 1967, 29-51).<sup>43</sup> Although I will discuss

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<sup>42</sup> Berger and Luckmann take “finite provinces of meaning” from Schutz (1962, 340-347). It is a significant concept because it refers to “the meaning of our experiences, and not the ontological structure of the objects, which constitutes reality” (341).

<sup>43</sup> I use the word arbitrary here not to imply that institutions are insignificant, but to highlight the fact that they develop in a random, unplanned fashion rather than a fixed, fated pattern. Understanding that society is both constructed and very difficult to deconstruct and change, is essential to understanding Berger and Luckmann’s theories because it explains why socially constructed worlds are hard to alter (P. Berger 2001b, see also Hacking 1999). Furthermore, while socially constructed worlds are arbitrary, they are also built out of the social and natural materials that history and environment provide. This has been missed by some commentators. For example, Smart’s major error in his interpretation of Berger was assuming that Berger did not adequately account for the natural world and its impact on human society’s development, and therefore calls Berger’s original inability to account for the *numinous*’ existence into question (1973, 74-91; see Otto 1950 on the *numinous*). The natural world exists and influences us, but its *significance* is constructed through the dialectic process of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. As for the *numinous*, it may exist, but we only come to *know* it through our interactions with objects people have already created, even if they are interpretations of natural objects that have been given sacred significance.



legitimations further when I focus on religious conflict, it is important to note that all of our knowledge is legitimated in some way, even if it is at the most basic level of legitimation: a pretheoretical, incipient explanation such as “we have always done things this way” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 94; cf. P. Berger 1967, 30).

### 3.1.1 Berger’s Sociology of Religion: Legitimizing Sacred Canopies

To understand *The Simpsons*’ jokes about Catholicism, we need an understanding of religion in American culture. America’s religious life has always been diverse. From the wide array of Native American traditions that predated Columbus, to the many Protestantisms that arrived from Europe, to the influx of Catholics and Jews during the colonial period and beyond, to the variety of new religions that arrived from other countries after the Oriental Exclusion Act was repealed in 1965, there has never been a single, overarching religious tradition in the United States.<sup>44</sup> When he published *The Sacred Canopy* (hereafter *Canopy*) in 1967, Berger was invested in explaining a dramatic shift in the United States’ religious culture. *Canopy* is a book in three parts. The first two parts are the most significant, with the first part discussing religion’s role in constructing a meaningful world against the threat of meaninglessness and the second part explaining the process of secularization in modern societies. The third part is comprised of two appendices, one on sociological definitions of religion, and the other on the relationships between sociological and theological approaches to religion’s study. Human society is an unfinished product, always undergoing the process of externalization, objectivation, and internalization Berger and Luckmann explained in *Construction*. Because it is incomplete, it is also precarious. That is, society’s construction needs protection through legitimations. As explanations for why society exists the way it does, legitimations reassure us that the worlds in which we live are stable. Religious legitimations connect mundane institutions, including family structures and political leadership, to the unseen order in the popular imagination (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 92-116; P. Berger 1967, 29-51). For example, Christian Smith provides the following quote from an evangelical Minnesotan woman which illustrates the connections she makes between national identity and religious cosmology: “We are founded on the Bible, and as a Christian nation we are to honor God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Just rolling back the things that they’ve done to take God out of the country. Our country did very well back then, with God in

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<sup>44</sup> Following Albanese’s typology of methods for studying American religious history (2002), I employ the “contact model” where different religious groups develop in relation to others around them (see, e.g., Albanese 1992; 2002, 6-7; Tweed 1997b). Sometimes this contact is peaceful, sometimes it is conflictual, but it importantly highlights the fact that historically American religions have not developed in isolation.

everything. I just don't like what they've done to take God out of things. I think it just worsens society" (2000, 63). While Smith stresses that this woman is not representative of all evangelicals, her statement is important because it links social organization, prosperity, and religion, and legitimates a Christian morality system against contemporary pluralism. Locating America's mythical golden age in a time of "Christian America," she affirms an ideal government that favours her interpretation of religious doctrines and their corresponding moral codes. As society appears to worsen, she can appeal to religious explanations for answers.

This quote also points to a significant element in *Canopy's* second part: secularization theory and the weakening of religious plausibility structures. Plausibility structures are the social base upon which religious worlds are built. They consist of all legitimations that justify the socially created world's continuation (P. Berger 1967, 45). Catholicism is a socially constructed world inhabited by saints, miracles, and an elaborate church hierarchy. Legitimizing itself through tradition and doctrine, the Church has developed an extensive framework for transmitting explanations over the last 2000 years. However, the very fact that there are others nearby who do not inhabit the Catholic world challenges its legitimations and its taken-for-grantedness. Berger interpreted diversity as a major problem for religions (see also Berger and Luckmann 1966, 116-128). Religious plausibility structures are threatened because they can no longer provide an entire society with a series of legitimations for its institutional order. Ultimately, Berger argued that in such a situation our options become either a secular world or meaninglessness. Those who hold out against secularization's oncoming tide do so in subcultures which Berger thought were inherently precarious because of doubt's persistence in society at large and the fact that their legitimations were no longer taken for granted. Eventually, purely secular institutions would replace religion with their own legitimations (1967, 127-153).<sup>45</sup>

I say that Berger used to think this way because by the late 1980s America's robust religiousness called secularization theory into question. America is one of the most modern societies on the planet and it is also one of the most religious. These two facts appear paradoxical under the secularization paradigm because it was assumed that as societies modernized religion would become

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<sup>45</sup> Berger would revisit this problem in *A Rumor of Angels* (1970) and *The Heretical Imperative* (1979), where he advocated for the strong personal religion favoured in liberal Protestantism against neo-orthodoxy's dogma and modernism's reductionism as a way of preserving religion in the modern age. As I will discuss in relation to comedy, Berger's post-*Canopy* work stresses the continuing importance of the transcendent in human life, even if his classic work supported secularization theory.

privatized and then disappear (Hadden 1987).<sup>46</sup> However, as counterevidence was gathered, some scholars adopted what sociologist Stephen Warner called “the new paradigm” (1993). Whereas previous studies had focussed on the European idea of “one church” with state support, voluntary association without state interference characterizes the situation in the United States. In other words, it is a religious free market. While this free market ideology has not found total acceptance in the academy, it is shaping the debate about religion’s future.<sup>47</sup> After reviewing this evidence Berger famously changed his position on secularization, adopting the new paradigm (1998).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The concept of a paradigm is used here in Kuhn’s sense. That is, a paradigm “is an object for further articulation and specification under new or more stringent conditions” (1996, 23). Paradigms can be helpfully compared to institutional structures which make research productive and meaningful. However, data which challenges the theories upon which they are built threatens them. In this sense Kuhn’s paradigm theory can usefully be incorporated into the larger theory of the sociology of knowledge discussed here because paradigms demonstrate the ways people fruitfully restrict intellectual possibilities to further already established agendas.

<sup>47</sup> Whether or not secularization is inevitable is an ongoing debate within the sociology of religion. Rational choice theory’s (RCT) acceptance among some sociologists of religion over the last twenty-five years has led to arguments over whether or not secularization is ongoing. Positing the question in terms of supply and demand, leading RCT advocates Bainbridge, Finke, Iannaccone and Stark argue that religion is a supply issue. That is, everybody is potentially religious, but if an appropriate religious provider is unavailable they will be religiously unsatisfied. According to this body of theory, religions survive by meeting their adherents’ desires. A free religious economy allows for the broad creation of religions that can then meet a diverse population’s many needs (see, e.g., Finke and Stark 2005; Iannaccone 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark 1995; Stark 1997, 2000, 2001; Stark and Bainbridge 1996; Stark and Finke 2000; Stark and Iannaccone 1994, 1995; for criticisms of RCT see Bruce 1999; Bryant 2000; Chaves 1995; Demerath 1995a; Ellison 1995; Mellor 2000).

Opposing the supply-side argument against secularization are theorists who see religion losing social influence, and therefore declining, for various reasons (Tschannen 1991). Sociologist Bruce (2002) is a leading proponent of secularization theory, arguing that as religions are forced into a situation of relativism and diversity they lose the ability to command loyalty and people become apathetic towards them. Other scholars approach secularization through different lenses, emphasizing the fact that secularization happens in different ways in various contexts. For example, Casanova (1994) argues that religions can still make significant contributions to modern societies by becoming engaged in political activities favouring human rights and other social issues other groups of people are not championing (see also Halman and Draulans 2006, Lechner 1991, Yamane 1997). Chaves (1994) echoes similar concerns when arguing that secularization is a result of power differentiation—and religions are losing power to other social institutions. The important thing to note about works published shortly before or after Hadden’s (1987) article is that they stress religion’s declining social influence, not religion’s disappearance. This means that categorizing “secularization theory” as the belief that religion will disappear is an incorrect assessment. Instead, it helps explain declining religious power to the point where religion may become irrelevant in people’s lives. On a related note, Beyer (1997) offers an interpretation of Canada’s religious scene that integrates insights from both theories, demonstrating that this is not a zero-sum theoretical debate.

<sup>48</sup> Bruce has called this recantation “unnecessary” because he finds Berger’s original theory still applies to the first world (2001). Berger refutes this, saying that it is European style state religion that leads to secularity, citing Sweden as an example (2001a, 194-195). Berger now promotes the idea that Europe is the exception to the rule because of its high degree of secularity. America’s robust religiousness, conversely, is more reflective of humanity’s religious norm (Berger, Davie, and Foaks 2008).

Christian Smith adapts Berger's original ideas to explain religion's persistence in diverse societies. Arguing against the notion that accommodating modernity is a zero-sum game for religion, Smith suggests that the sacred canopy is not the proper metaphor for religions in a religiously diverse situation. Instead, he proposes the concept of "sacred umbrellas" which are "small, portable, accessible relational worlds—religious reference groups—'under' which their beliefs can make complete sense" (Smith et al. 1998, 106). Translated into Berger's language: Plausibility structures do not have to work for the entire society, just for a group's members. If we do not care about what people outside our reference group think about us, then the sacred umbrella provides a meaningful plausibility structure against an outside world that undermines its legitimacy (89-119). Smith's reformulation means that religions can survive by embedding themselves within a modern framework and thrive by distinguishing themselves from, and engaging, relevant outgroups (118-119; see also Cowan 2003a). Furthermore, because many religions legitimate themselves not only against society's secular elements, but also against competing religions, their legitimations are known not only to themselves, but also to others in society who engage them. This means that legitimations are available not only to a religion's adherents, but to their opponents who can use their arguments against them—something comedians do with considerable skill.<sup>49</sup>

Whether or not secularization is happening, the new paradigm's stress on religious diversity and contact between religions is important for this project. *The Simpsons* re-presents a wide array of religions that frequently engage each other. Sometimes they encounter each other benevolently, but often they engage each other in ways that emphasize differences and conflict.

### 3.1.2 Humour and Knowledge in *The Simpsons*

Berger's sociologies of knowledge and religion form a useful framework for analyzing humorous interpretations of different religions. When people tell jokes about different religions, the

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<sup>49</sup> Ahern (1999, 4-5) argues that *A Rumor of Angels* dismantled the sociology of knowledge's plausibility structure detecting mechanism by locating knowledge of the divine in individual induction based on everyday knowledge. Smith's reformulation allows us to reintegrate the importance of plausibility structures into the sociology of knowledge and religion because now we can theorize plausibility structures that involve small groups, or even solitary individuals working under a sacred umbrella, an important development because it allows us to return Berger's theorizing to the analytical framework offered in his sociology, without recourse to his theological assumptions. To push this further, while Berger argues that even the sociology of knowledge itself depends upon a plausibility structure, thus relativizing the relativizers (1970, 28-48), that does not change the fact that once a person moves an insight from a finite province of meaning into social discourse—thereby making it a theology and a legitimation of their unseen order—it can be analyzed through the sociology of knowledge because it has become a social object. The difference is not in the question of the ontology of inductive truths, but in the problems of socially communicating those truths.

various plausibility structures interact with each other's legitimations. In *Redeeming Laughter* (1997) Berger identified benign humor, tragicomedy, wit, and satire as different forms of comic expression. While *The Simpsons* employs all these techniques, satire is the most significant for our discussion because it is "the deliberate use of the comic for purposes of attack" (157; see also Feinberg 1963, 1967; Kercher 2006; P. Lewis 2006). Acknowledging satire's near omnipresence in humour, Berger contends that satirists employ all comic elements for their purposes (1997, 157). If we return to the above discussion about the sociologies of knowledge and religion, we have to acknowledge that satirists stand within their own plausibility structures. They have assumptions about the world that are reified through the institutional legitimations to which they subscribe. *The Simpsons'* creators project and legitimate their worldview through satiric jokes and parodies by attacking perspectives with which they disagree. *The Simpsons* takes religious groups' legitimations and uses them to frame jokes which reflect the program's perspective, regardless of whether or not these jokes support the religions' plausibility structures (see also P. Lewis 2006; cf. Mulkay 1988).<sup>50</sup>

Although Berger's sociologies of knowledge and religion are powerful theories, his theory of humour is ultimately less useful because it is based in his theology rather than in his sociology. For Berger, humour *does* religious work. Accepting his theory of humour means integrating a distinctly religious perspective into one's analysis. This proves difficult because it requires proving the existence of something beyond the natural world, a requirement which empirical methods cannot meet.<sup>51</sup> That said, reaction to *Canopy's* stark take on religion's plausibility started Berger toward lay theologizing in *A Rumor of Angels* (1970), in which he posits the concept of signals of transcendence: "phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our [*human*] 'natural' reality but that appear to point beyond that reality" (53). There are experiences we can have in our everyday worlds which suggest to us that there is more to life than our socially constructed realities. Signals of transcendence alert us to a cosmic reality beyond our everyday lives. Berger gives five signals: the propensity

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<sup>50</sup> Mulkay (1988) poses a similar argument in his distinction between serious and humorous modes of discourse. For Mulkay, our everyday lives are shaped by a serious discourse which presents the world as unitary and consistent, while the humorous mode presents us with the differences and paradoxes born from juxtaposing different perspectives. The main difference in our approaches is that I treat diversity as an acknowledged and problematic element of everyday life, while he only discusses it in relation to the humorous mode of discourse (see also M. Davis 1995; cf. Fox 1990).

<sup>51</sup> In *Canopy* Berger argues that sociological inquiry based on empirical evidence cannot make statements about the ontological status of the supernatural, a position he calls "*methodological* atheism" (1967, 100; emphasis in original). However, my position is not atheism in the strictest sense because I do not deny the existence of a god or gods. Instead, following Smart, it is *methodological agnosticism* because I suspend any (dis)beliefs I may have about the subject (1973, 54). For a critique of methodological agnosticism's history and contemporary relevance, see James Cox (2003).

towards order, the argument from play, the argument from hope, the argument from damnation, and the argument from humour (49-75). For Berger, comedy alerts us to the incongruities of this life and in those incongruities we realize that there is more to existence than our current state. Because comedy reveals that socially created forces (rather than ontological ones) oppress us, it allows us to relativize our situation and reach beyond it to something greater (69-72). While *A Rumor of Angels* makes humour a universal signal of transcendence, Berger's Christian perspective haunts his analysis. In *The Precarious Vision* Berger argues for a similar perspective of the comic (1961b, 209-218). There he contends that the comic reveals what is really human in light of society's trappings. When comedy relativizes the seriousness of social institutions, he asserts that it offers Christians a promise of redemption (214). He maintains this position throughout *Redeeming Laughter* (1997).<sup>52</sup>

In claiming that incongruities causing laughter reveal the sacred, Berger builds upon the incongruity theory of laughter, which is one of the three general theories of laughter upon which humour studies is established (1961b, 209-218; 1970, 69-72; 1997). Philosopher John Morreall (1983, 1987) maps them as superiority, incongruity, and relief. Briefly, superiority theory posits that we laugh at a perceived fault in an opponent, incongruity theory contends that we laugh when an event occurs that does not match our expectations, and relief theory argues that we laugh to release built up tension. As Morreall (1983) wisely observes, each of these theories is an inadequate explanation by itself for why we laugh. Each theory can apply to different jokes in different contexts, but taken together they form a tripartite framework for understanding the various reasons why human societies have humour. Sociologist Murray Davis captures the interrelationship of the three sources, summarizing the humour process as "an individual (1) who perceives through humor an 'incongruity' in the outer world, (2) expresses through laughter the 'release' or 'relief' of being subjectively unaffected by this objective contradiction, and (3) consequently feels his laughingly sustained subjective integration manifests his 'superiority' to the humorously disintegrated object" (1993, 7). This work takes incongruity as a starting point, and investigates cases where *The Simpsons* asserts the superiority of one religion over others through the jokes it makes about different religions. Relief theory is under-emphasized because, like the presence of the divine in comedy, we cannot prove that people will be relieved by laughing at a joke, and if they are relieved, we cannot prove of what they are relieved. However, we cannot discount relief as a significant physiological benefit of laughter, and

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<sup>52</sup> For a different analysis of Berger's theology, see Ahern (1999) who argues that Berger's combined theology and sociology provide a broad base for studying religion which helps avoid reductionism and enables religious scholars to understand the everyday world as a site of transcendent reflection.

that it has important functions in certain situations. The methodology employed in this dissertation, however, does not allow us access to audience sensations and, therefore, we cannot speculate about whether or not *Simpsons* viewers experience relief when laughing at the jokes.

Berger is not the only religion scholar claiming that humour born in incongruity reveals the sacred. Theologian Conrad Hyers' early edited collection of writings on the topic, *Holy Laughter* (1969), contains essays by a variety of scholars who argue that humour opens the way to the divine. In his own work (1981, 1987, 1989, 1996), Hyers consistently argues that the comic spirit within the world's religions inverts tragic seriousness, revealing our humanity and humbling people, allowing for a greater development of the human spirit. He proposes three types of laughter (which can be taken as three types of comedies or humour): the laughter of paradise, which is childlike joy arising from frivolity in the world; the laughter of paradise lost, which strikes back against injustice and provides hope; and the laughter of paradise regained, which comes from inclusiveness and a vision of the unseen order that reflects redemption (1981, 33-39). As will become clear, I favour interpreting humour through the framework of "paradise lost" as I cannot prove the reconciliation offered by the vision of paradise regained is really reconciling or if people only think it is. In Hyers' work, paradise regained is too often discussed in terms of *feelings* that extend to others (e.g., 1981, 29). The problem is that feeling you are being inclusive, gracious, and humble before others can lead to pride, exclusion, and nastiness. Hyers interprets humour through what Cowan and Bromley call the "good, moral, and decent fallacy" ("the popular misconception that religion is always a force for good in society, and that negative social effects somehow indicate false or inauthentic religious practices" [2008, 11]). Avoiding this fallacy requires that we do not assume humour leads to an ultimate evil or good, and focus instead on its use in concrete situations rather than its assumed ends. Hyers' theory is a matter of comic *faith*, which literature scholar Robert Polhemus describes as "a tacit belief that the world is both funny and potentially good; a pattern of expressing or finding religious impulse, motive, and meaning in the forms of comedy; and an implicit assumption that a basis for believing in the value of life can be found in the fact of comic expression itself" (1980, 3). This works if we are discussing humour *religiously*, but when we are discussing humour's social role we have to investigate the social consequences of the feelings Hyers emphasizes instead of assessing their moral standards.

Berger's and Hyers' theories both rely on untestable insights. That is, how do we know that humour reveals a "separate world" with any ontological existence apart from what we have learned as socialized human beings? Certainly, jokes illustrate the inconsistencies between ideology and praxis

in our lives. Our highest ideals, which are themselves socially constructed institutions, are always at risk of falsification or threatened by those who stand to improve upon our claims. Sociologist Peter Blau argues that oppressed groups can push our ideologies to their logical limits, revealing the extremes to which we do not normally extend ourselves in order to subvert dominant power structures (1986, 224-252). This argument indicates our ideologies' precariousness, as the internal logic of the ideological systems that serve groups heavily invested in their maintenance can overthrow their maintainers.<sup>53</sup> However, the utopias our ideological extremes present are still social constructions. In other words, while Berger and Hyers see a redemption for humans beyond the socially constructed world—a divine revelation within a finite province of meaning—I see humour based within our ideological systems' dialectical limits. That is, we may be seeing heaven, but the discussions of heaven permeating our culture shape that vision. Berger proposes that through seeing that human life is more than our socially constructed worlds, we escape constructions all together and encounter a qualitatively different existence. The problem is that we cannot test for something beyond the material world. Berger may be correct and humour might give us a glimpse of a transcendent reality, but we have no way of proving it. Instead, what we can know is that the world could be different than it is, but our social stock of knowledge shapes our ability to imagine that difference. In this sense, humour's revelation is not divinely derived, but a product of our ideologies. We can only know incongruity based on what we see as congruous—it has to be comprehensible within our plausibility structures. Therefore, if we are not looking for the divine in humour, what are we looking for?<sup>54</sup>

That said, Berger's sociology of knowledge is a strong foundation for a working theory of humour. Dutch sociologist Anton Zijderveld recognized this when he applied Berger and Luckmann's arguments to humour (1983; cf. Mulkey 1988). Building on their Weberian roots, Zijderveld contends that scholars and societies construct ideal types ("rational constructions of human beings, social processes and cultural institutions" [1983, 4]) which rarely, if ever, match the reality they purport to

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<sup>53</sup> Blau is not the first to take this tension into consideration. It is also a significant element of Weber's "ethical prophet," a figure who offers new ethico-religious directions through their preaching (1991, 55), a concept which demonstrates the way religion can significantly contribute to social change. The way people manipulate existing ideologies to their own purposes, reshaping them in the process, is a significant element of the sociology of knowledge (see also Cowan 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Mannheim 1936).

<sup>54</sup> Another way to phrase this difference is that Berger and Hyers are offering theories on humour's religious work, looking at it from the perspective of believers who want to contribute to different religious traditions or individuals' spirituality, while I am studying how outsiders use humour to criticize religious beliefs. These are two different kinds of theories, one working from inside the tradition and the other outside. For further studies of laughter and humour in religion see, e.g., Arbuckle (2008), Gilhus (1997), L. Gross (2002), Joeckel (2008), Laude (2005), Morreall (1999), and Saroglou (2002).



explain. They are useful heuristic tools, but should not be mistaken for the thing itself. Jokes build upon the discrepancies between ideal types and reality. For example, Christians claim that their tradition teaches them to love others as they love themselves. When local minister Timothy Lovejoy tells Ned Flanders that “there’s more to being a minister than not caring about people” at the end of “In Marge We Trust,” the joke explicitly plays upon the incongruity between a man who, ideally, tries to love others and the fact that he openly acknowledges he does not care about them. The juxtaposition between the ideal type of a minister who embodies Christian teaching and the character of Rev. Lovejoy demonstrates how our rationalizations lead us to expect one thing, but that these rationalizations are approximations of behaviour, not descriptions. That this depiction is familiar, in the sense that viewers will likely know a minister who has stopped caring about their flock, facilitates the way the incongruity between ideal type and lived reality resonates with the audience.

Humour exists when we play with institutionalized meanings in a situation defined by laughter (Zijderveld 1983, 9; see also Paolucci and Richardson 2006a, 2006b). Juxtaposing ideal types with familiar social examples which do not meet expectations allows us to see our taken-for-granted existence as something relative and constructed, rather than permanent and given (Zijderveld 1983, 4). However, understanding humour requires a deep understanding of the world in which the jokes are told. People have to share values and plausibility structures—the same stock of knowledge—in order to play with jokes’ meanings (6-27, 41-54; see also Gardner 2002).

Psychologist Victor Raskin’s semantic script theory of humour (SSTH) (1985) and his general verbal theory of humour (GVTH) (Attardo and Raskin 1991) helpfully explain the basic psychological principles behind activating knowledge in humour. Building upon theories developed in cognitive linguistics, Raskin argues that “the script is a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it. The script is a cognitive structure internalized by the native speaker and it represents the native speaker’s knowledge of a small part of the world. Every speaker has internalized rather a large repertoire of scripts of ‘common sense’ which represents his/her knowledge of certain routines, standard procedures, basic situations, etc.” (1985, 81). This directly relates to Berger and Luckmann’s institutionalization of everyday life through recipe knowledge. Scripts are institutionalized ideal types, upon which we draw when solving our daily problems. They are another concept scholars use to explain how we access everyday knowledge. Raskin argues that jokes cause laughter because they are compatible with two different, opposing scripts (99)—a fact that leads Morrell to classify both the SSTH and GVTH under the larger rubric of incongruity theory (2004, 397). Put differently, juxtaposing different “scripts” which contain everyday knowledge

creates meaning through humour. The problem with Raskin's work is that it is directed towards canned jokes with fixed texts and which circulate freely in society (e.g., knock-knock jokes). These jokes may be useful for understanding the cognitive elements that are at play in deciphering jokes and how they work, but they lack context. They may tell us what scripts we are juxtaposing, but not about how the scripts reflect social realities or why joke tellers feel it is appropriate to tell certain jokes in certain situations (cf., Douglas 1975, 90-114). Raskin's theories also do not work with non-verbal humour which is a significant element in *The Simpsons*' humorous construction of religion. Although his theory is very influential in humour studies, it complements the more complete social theories upon which I build my theoretical approach.<sup>55</sup>

Once we have a basic understanding of our world, we can see that joking serves a variety of social functions. It can reconfirm reality, assuring us that our assumptions about reality are stable (Zijderveld 1983, 11-12). Reinforcing reality forges solidarity within a group (47-52) and allows humour to be used to exclude others (53-57).<sup>56</sup> Humour's role in conflict situations (see, e.g., Ferguson and Ford 2008, Zillmann 1983), with the need to reinforce an in-group's reality against an out-group's, is significant because this dynamic is at work in *The Simpsons*.<sup>57</sup> While Zijderveld did not emphasize conflict, it is an imperative component of Berger's theories (cf. R. Collins 1975, 108; E. D. McCarthy 1996, 2). Legitimations exist for offensive and defensive purposes. They are intellectual tools meant to protect plausibility structures against opponents (see, e.g., Cowan 1999, 2003a, 2003b, 2004). Jokes are, therefore, legitimations. They employ meanings, playing with them within a plausibility structure's logical confines. Even if jokes relativize reality, making us aware of our world's precariousness, in a pluralistic situation they can become effective tools for determining who resides under our "sacred umbrellas" and who is left out in the rain (see Fine 1983b, 169).

The sociology of humour offers us a variety of useful tools for connecting humour to the "seen order." Sociologist Giselinde Kuipers argues that humour is "a form of communication, a

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<sup>55</sup> See volume 17 (4) of *Humor* for an extended critique of Raskin's theories (Brock 2004, Davies 2004, Morreall 2004, Norrick 2004, Raskin 2004, Triesenberg 2004, Veale 2004). On Raskin's theories' applicability to religion and humour see Hempelmann (2003).

<sup>56</sup> For additional studies on humour as a means of solidifying group solidarity and reinforcing symbolic universes see Fine (1983b, 1984); Fine and de Soucey (2005); Francis (1994); Lowney and Best (1996); Sanford and Eder (1984); and Zillman and Cantor (1996). For critiques of sociological approaches to the study of humour see M. Davis (1995) and Fine (1983b). Fox (1990) gives a good example of how humour can disrupt a social group to the point that its taken for granted reality is brought into question (cf. Garfinkel 1967).

<sup>57</sup> See Randall Collins (1975), Coser (1956), and Dahrendorf (1959) for foundational statements on conflict's role in forging alliances and creating opponents in modern society. Coser and Dahrendorf also provide insight into conflict's role in maintaining social stability while allowing for social change.

question of taste, a marking of social boundaries” (2006, 10). Building on Bourdieu’s work (1977, 1985) she argues that humour conveys standards and works as a form of symbolic capital, always marking social and moral boundaries between groups (Kuipers 2006, 13-18). British sociologist Christie Davies (1990, 1998, 2002) theorizes that there are two general types of ethnic jokes in the world: stupid and canny. Stupidity is “a general and universal quality and has come to include and to refer particularly to an inability to understand and cope with those technical aspects of the modern world that are common to most countries rather than simply to a lack of understanding of local customs, practices, or forms of speech” (1990, 15). Ethnic groups which are marginal in society, but also closely related to the dominant group, are often considered stupid. Canadian “Newfie” jokes are a good example of this. Jokes about canniness, on the other hand, imply “cleverness and rationality, but it is a shrewd cleverness, and a calculating rationality applied in the pursuit of personal advantage. Indeed, jokes about ‘canny’ groups often depend . . . on their alleged disposition to use these qualities in ways and in contexts that others find ludicrously inappropriate and excessive” (15). Scots and Jews have historically been these jokes’ main targets.

Davies contends that these jokes help the dominant ethnic groups who tell them deal with the tensions of modernity by deflecting their anxieties onto peripheral groups (1998, 164). Jokes are minor social controls because they implicitly praise majorities while explicitly ridiculing minorities (165). However, Davies has argued elsewhere that jokes do not start wars and are not reasons to fight (2002, 201-227).<sup>58</sup> He metaphorically argues that jokes are “not social thermostats regulating and shaping human behaviour, but they are social thermometers that measure, record, and indicate what is going on” (1990, 9). This analogy is useful because jokes and popular comedies such as *The Simpsons* can give us a sense of the cultural climate. They can tell us who is dominant, stupid, and canny in society. For example, the fundamentalist Ned Flanders, who follows the Bible to the point that he keeps kosher “just to be on the safe side” (“Hurricane Neddy”), is portrayed as stupid because of his inability to think apart from Christian dogma (see chapter 5). The Hindu Apu is canny because he represents the model minority stereotype applied to high achieving Indian Americans, and the stereotype of a greedy convenience store clerk who applies an exorbitant mark-up to his goods (see

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<sup>58</sup> This does not mean that jokes are not threatening to political orders. The satirical trial of late night comedian Jon Stewart, held at the 2007 National Communication Association’s annual meeting in San Antonio, illustrates cynicism’s problems and potential in a democratic society (Bennett 2007, Hariman 2007, Hart and Hartelius 2007, Lule 2007). On contemporary satire and politics, see Baumgartner and Morris (2008) and Lamb (2004). Conversely, Oring and Raskin argue against any political significance of humour in their contributions to *Humor*’s forum on the caricatures of Muhammad (P. Lewis 2008, 21-30, 37-42).

Chapter 7). *The Simpsons* is a thermometer that measures a certain set of values. Those who understand *The Simpsons*' jokes need to understand the way the program manipulates everyday knowledge through cultural intertextuality to craft the program's humorous arguments, even if viewers do not agree with these arrangements.

However, Davies ignores a volatile and important element in his sociology. Omitted from his survey are jokes about hated groups. Folklorist Elliott Oring's study of cartoons in the White Aryan Nation's periodical *WAR* exemplifies the extremes humorists will go to (2003, 41-57). Arguing against Freud's (2003) contention that humour is a sign of repressed attitudes and that if the attitudes were aired humour would disappear, Oring demonstrates that the racist group openly uses humour to further its agenda. He presents a variety of cartoons from the magazine, including one depiction of a smiling African American with a stocking cap, large mouth with thick lips and a missing tooth, wide nose, and a sign that says "Will Make Excuses for Food" (2003, 48). This caricature combines some of the most gratuitous stereotypes of African Americans in contemporary society; including the ideas that they are lazy, refuse to work, and make excuses while expecting handouts. The joke itself works on the association between the man's sign and some homeless people's signs which read "Will Work for Food" (46-47). These jokes reflect a particular worldview, and Oring contends *WAR*'s founder Tom Metzger would include such depictions "to imagine—rightly or wrongly—other laughers like oneself" (56-57; see also P. Lewis 2006). In short, it is another example of using humour to build community.<sup>59</sup>

In a pluralistic society, religious objectivations and legitimations compete with each other. To emphasize the competitive element that augments Berger's earlier theories, sociologist Randall Collins' use of microsociology helps us understand how competition between different definitions of reality characterizes knowledge's use in society. Collins combines Durkheim's theory of the socially unifying power of ritual with sociologist Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory of interpersonal

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<sup>59</sup> Using humour for derisive and controlling purposes is not exclusive to Oring's thought. Bergson shares this theory, arguing that "laughter is always the laughter of a group" (1956, 64) and "Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow-beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream" (147). Cowan (2005b) finds that third parties can also use humour to reinforce their worldviews. His example of countercult evangelicals using *South Park*'s episode "All About Mormons" to marginalize Mormons and reinforce their Christian worldview demonstrates that these programs can reach a variety of audiences, and be used for a variety of reasons in the process of competitive world building. Arthur Berger summarizes humour's ambiguity as both world builder and destroyer when he writes "laughter is a two-edged sword. It can be used by those in power, or those who accept their view of things, to force acquiescence. But it also can be used by those out of power to resist domination" (1993, 134; see also pages 1-11).

interaction to explain how our everyday interactions bind us into specific power relations in society (1975, 90-152; see also Durkheim 1995, Goffman 1959). Collins favours the face-to-face interaction central to Goffman's studies and the interactionist paradigm as a foundation for macrosociological theorizing. Moving from microsociological to macrosociological perspectives, Collins sees the influence of larger institutional forces derived from behavioural patterns born in unequal relationships in people's small, everyday interactions. He reveals an important element in understanding symbols and their social exploitation; namely, the power to create, manipulate, use, and interpret symbols is unequally distributed among different social parties. Powerful social institutions and actors, including government, mass media, cultural and economic elites, and others who have the ability to create and control the distribution and interpretation of socially significant symbols have an advantage in interpreting reality for their own benefit and making their definitions of reality seem "normal" (1975, 103-111).

In the sociology of knowledge, conflict theory finds its best articulation in Karl Mannheim's classic *Ideology & Utopia* (1936). Mannheim's important contribution to this argument is his dualistic conception of political thinking's extremes (ideology and utopia) which he uses to summarize the differences in political knowledge worlds. Ideology implicitly contains "the insight that in certain situations the collective unconscious of certain groups obscures the real condition of society both to itself and to others and thereby stabilizes it" (40). Conversely, "utopian thinking reflects the opposite discovery of the political struggle, namely that certain oppressed groups are intellectually so strongly interested in the destruction and transformation of a given condition of society that they unwittingly see only those elements in the situation which tend to negate it . . . Their thought is never a diagnosis of the situation; it can be used only as a direction for action" (40; emphasis in original). These two positions represent the extreme ends of a competitive political spectrum where political conflict "is from the very beginning a rationalized form of struggle for social predominance" (38).

Mannheim's analysis works with *The Simpsons'* depiction of religion. Because knowledge workers pursue and use knowledge for the benefit of those with similar perspectives, in a pluralistic society knowledge is inherently contentious. It is not just a way of coming to know "the truth," but it is also a weapon with which to discredit opponents (Cowan 2003a). For example, *The Simpsons* frequently attacks Christianity because Christians fail to meet their tradition's presumed moral standards. Homer once summarized Christianity as "the one [*religion*] with all the well-meaning rules that never work out in real life" ("Homerpalooza"). This demonstrates how *The Simpsons*

incorporates opposing viewpoints into its humour as a means of criticizing them. While Christians may advance ethical principles based on doctrine and tradition, *The Simpsons* emphasizes the disjunction between ideal type and lived reality. It relies on a cultural familiarity with the basics of Christian belief and exposes the basics' faults for comedic advantage.

Religious groups can retaliate, provided they have sufficient means. The episode "Sunday, Cruddy Sunday" contains a parody of outrageous Super Bowl commercials. In *The Simpsons'* ad, a man pulls his car into a desert gas station where three scantily clad women come out and "service" his car to an instrumental reminiscent of ZZ Top's "Legs." At the end, one of the women leans over the car's hood and a cross dangles in front of her cleavage. A voiceover says "The Catholic Church: We've made a few changes." This raised the ire of The Catholic League, a group dedicated to attacking anti-Catholicism (Catholic League 2009; 1999b). Already upset at a joke earlier that season in which Bart asks Marge "Mom, can we go Catholic so we can get communion wafers and booze?," to which she responds "No, no one's going Catholic. Three children is enough thank you." ("Lisa Gets an A"), the League used its newsmagazine *Catalyst* and other media outlets to pressure FOX into censoring the episode. In response to Bart's request to convert for communion wafers and booze, FOX spokesperson Thomas Chavez responded that Marge's statement was simply a statement about why she did not wish to join the Catholic Church and "Bart sees the wafer merely as food and wine as a forbidden drink. . . . it is not atypical that a child would pose a question such as this unknowingly" (quoted in Catholic League 1999a). However, through a successful Catholic League email campaign, FOX eventually changed "Sunday, Cruddy Sunday" so that the syndicated voiceover now says "The church," after executive producer Mike Scully refused to change Catholic to another religion. Scully's point was that that would be insulting another religious group just so that FOX could appease Catholics; for the Catholic League, this was a way of getting a perceived Hollywood double standard to work in their favour (1999c; Pinsky 2007, 130-135).

This demonstrates how Catholicism's meanings are contested and that pressuring the FOX network can have them change their content to suit a particular interpretation of Catholic tradition. Scully's fury is also understandable, because *The Simpsons'* writers thought they were just making a joke about Super Bowl commercials. "The Catholic Church: We've made a few changes" was the line that got the best laughs during the production process and, therefore, became the punch-line. *The Simpsons'* creative staff thought the Catholic League overreacted ("Sunday Cruddy Sunday" DVD Commentary). For the Catholic League, on the other hand, the joke exemplifies a persistent bias against Catholicism in American mass media that they felt it necessary to attack. However, satirists

also do not miss an opportunity to attack their targets. In “Sunday, Cruddy Sunday’s” DVD commentary, after making fun of the Catholic League’s letter writing campaign as merely a series of form letters (implying that these Catholics were not fans and did not understand the show), Matt Selman jokes that now the Catholic Church is trying to get priests to watch the video of the sexy ladies—a cruel joke based on the Church’s recent pedophilia scandals.<sup>60</sup> However, the fact that one particular voice within Catholicism was able to alter *The Simpsons*’ content through a letter writing campaign speaks to satire’s contentious nature and the fact that the interpretation of jokes can lead us into sensitive and contested arenas.

To summarize the theoretical argument thus far, Berger’s sociology of knowledge implies conflicting definitions of reality’s existence. Collins adds the concept that institutional power is maintained in patterns of deference and continually exchanging signs and symbols in everyday interaction reifies and affirms the institutional orders and power differentials in society. In other words, we know how to behave through continuous performances of particular rituals which reaffirm shared significant symbols’ meanings. When we abstract these actions to generalized behavioural patterns we have institutions in Berger and Luckmann’s sense. Mannheim’s theoretical insights direct us both to access social institutions’ history and also to see that the ideas people share can be used for opposite-purposes. To put this in more concrete terms, a religious tradition such as Catholicism is interpreted by different people for different purposes. While the “data” of Catholicism is based on what practising Catholics do and what they claim to believe, each group interprets those claims and actions through their particular plausibility structure and assess Catholicism accordingly. When *The Simpsons* tells jokes about Catholicism, it employs culturally intertextual knowledge about the tradition and frames it according to a symbolic system that shapes an interpretation of the religion.

This theoretical framework also rejects Berger’s moralistic interpretation of humour in *Redeeming Laughter*. While humour—especially satire—inverts social norms and reveals different ways of living, that interpretation’s moral direction needs contextual evaluation. Berger’s analysis lacks this contextualization. Although he is aware of humour’s critical capabilities, in emphasizing a finite province of meaning’s universality Berger departs from an empirically testable theory of humour. Throughout his oeuvre, Berger theorizes humour as something that is universal not only in the sense that every society experiences humour, but that those experiences have similar content. By

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<sup>60</sup> *The Simpsons* would later joke about the priesthood’s sexuality in “Sex, Pies, and Idiot Scrapes,” in which a St. Patrick’s Day parade float entitled “Straight Catholic Priests” has six chairs with only two clerics sitting on it, continuing the theme of perpetrating a public perception of deviance from the Church’s stated sexual norms among its clergy.

framing his analysis in theological terms he takes us away from looking at what actual humorous instances signify. As anthropologist Mary Douglas writes, “all jokes are expressive of the social situations in which they occur” (1975, 98). Therefore, in a study of *The Simpsons* and its religious comedy, we have to identify the social situations that the program represents, the institutionalized bodies of knowledge it draws upon, and the critical position it takes on different social issues. Whether or not it directs us towards a universal truth is something unavailable to the sociologist.

### **3.2 Catholicism in *The Simpsons*: A Preliminary Theoretical Application**

We can apply Berger and Luckmann’s theories to interpret Catholicism in *The Simpsons* when we examine everyday life, see it structured by commonsense knowledge, and then further distill it into useful stocks of recipe knowledge. This allows cultural intertextuality to work. Viewers cannot be expected to have an intimate knowledge of Catholic doctrine, popular Catholicism—which is too broad for anybody to know comprehensively—or even Catholicism’s basics. Instead, the program uses popular sentiments and concepts regarding Catholics, and Catholic symbols that are widely available. If the quantity of jokes is any indication, the Pope, as the Church’s leader and most visible spokesperson, is a good example of a symbol which is treated as a relevant cultural reference point. Because *The Simpsons* communicates symbolically through words and images, it references institutions such as the papacy and utilizes common assumptions about the person who fulfils that role to generate its satirical perspective.

In “The Mansion Family,” billionaire capitalist Charles Montgomery Burns visits Rochester, Minnesota’s famed Mayo Clinic. While he and his assistant Waylon Smithers wait for his appointment, a man wearing white with a gold sash and a cross exits the doctor’s office, receiving the advice, “It’s nothing serious, just lay off the chili and you should be fine.” Fidel Castro, who is also waiting, starts chuckling and the man says, “Don’t you laugh, Fidel, I’ve been in the car with you,” while waving his hand in front of his nose. While this is a fairly tame joke, it intertextually identifies the man as the Pope. Referencing Pope John Paul II’s trip to Cuba in January 1998 and the fact that the Pope and Cuban President Fidel Castro spent much time together during the five-day excursion, this joke depends upon people making these connections and drawing on these common stocks of knowledge. It also relies on knowledge about John Paul II’s failing health, which was the topic of much speculation when this episode aired in January 2000 (he died in 2005). This joke devalues the papacy’s sacredness because it makes the Pope out to be human. In a sense, *The Simpsons* is saying “everybody farts.” The papacy’s sacredness is downplayed, casting the Pope as just another man.



Secondly, in “The City of New York vs. Homer Simpson,” bartender Moe Szyslak has his regulars select a designated driver “the same way they pick the Pope.” Each patron reaches into a jar of pickled eggs and whoever picks the black one has to stay sober. Choosing a new Pope can appear a bit mysterious. It is a secretive event in which the College of Cardinals is locked in the Sistine Chapel until a Pope is elected and a plume of white smoke rises from the chapel’s chimney. That said, the College deliberates their choice, rather than engaging in random selection as *The Simpsons* insinuates. However, the event’s secrecy and the fact that it is relegated to the Catholic hierarchy’s upper echelons can make the whole process appear arcane and, therefore, it is easier to ascribe to random selection than to other ways of determining group leadership like democratic voting.

Finally, in “All’s Fair in Oven War,” Marge claims that a pizza she’s sabotaging in a baking contest will be so bad “even the Pope couldn’t forgive this pizza, and he’s letting a lot of things slide these days.” This joke references the fact that John Paul II was politically controversial inside and outside the Church. Inside, he was seen as a political liberal who was doctrinally conservative. Supporting the global spread of democracy, peace, and social justice, he also refused to admit women into the priesthood and upheld the Church’s doctrine forbidding contraception (see Allen 2003a, 2003b). Conservative critics accused him of weakening Catholic positions on interfaith issues because of his willingness to engage in interfaith dialogue with Jews and Muslims. Also, while John Paul II stood by the controversial encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and its provisions against birth control which angered liberals, his conservative critics argued that he did not do enough to remove the liberal voices in American Catholicism that explicitly challenged those teachings and have worked hard to modernize the American Church (Cuneo 1997).

While Pinsky thinks Marge is referring in this episode to the priestly sex scandals (2007, 130; see also P. Jenkins 2003, 133-156), there are numerous issues people could reference when interpreting her statement. This joke’s significance lies in the fact that for it to be funny you have to think the Pope has become lax on certain issues, or that he had softened on issues Marge would support. This leads to the concept of *ignorant familiarity*.<sup>61</sup> That is, we often gather incomplete information about others that we place in our personal stocks of knowledge as a way of rationalizing our interactions with them. In *The Simpsons’* case, the jokes assume the Catholic Church is an inherently conservative institution. We are familiar with a variety of religions, but we are also hopelessly ignorant of them. Knowledge that is unimportant in our everyday lives becomes little more

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<sup>61</sup> I am thankful to Douglas Cowan for coining this term (private communication).

than trivia upon which we can construct ideal types when the need arises. This knowledge is necessarily incomplete and is often incorrect. Our ignorance also requires effort to overcome—effort which most people do not invest. In this case, ignorance of the papacy’s inner workings facilitates jokes about how the Pope is selected, while general familiarity with controversies surrounding the last Pope allowed for culturally intertextual jokes drawing on his health and doctrinal standards. However, the jokes are framed on the assumption that the audience shares the joke’s general sentiment, but do not need to know all the controversial details to participate in the worldview it promotes.

One episode dedicated to Catholicism demonstrates how *The Simpsons* utilizes ignorant familiarity to criticize some of Catholicism’s more controversial elements. “The Father, The Son, and The Holy Guest Star” draws upon Catholic stereotypes of Irish leadership, strict nuns, ethnic debauchery, arcane rules, and unequal treatment of women. It also portrays Catholicism through the lens of pre-Vatican II lived religion, which does not reflect the reality of contemporary Catholicism in the United States. As biblical scholar and former priest John Dominic Crossan puts it, “The level and accuracy of satire in the episode would have been very appropriate against classic movie targets like *Going My Way* and *The Bells of St. Mary’s* in the 1940s. But as contemporary Roman Catholic and/or Protestant satire, I found it too shallow” (quoted in Pinsky 2007, 145). Yet, drawing upon familiar stereotypes and not engaging more arcane controversies makes perfect sense when appealing to a wide audience. Portraying the church as antiquated and opposed to liberal values is a useful way of denigrating the institution (P. Jenkins 2003). This episode’s portrayal of Catholicism is one that relies on these intertextual keys that have become a part of the American religious narrative.

The episode’s plot is fairly straightforward. After Bart is expelled from Springfield Elementary school, he gets sent to Saint Jerome’s Catholic School. There the priest, Fr. Sean, gives Bart gory comic books about the saints, convincing him to convert. Homer then challenges the priest, but once he realizes that the sacrament of confession will absolve his sins he decides to convert as well. This upsets Marge and she refuses to join the Church. However, once she starts attending the Protestant First Church of Springfield (FCOS) by herself, Rev. Lovejoy and Ned convince her they need to rescue Bart from the Catholics, arguing that Catholic Heaven is different from Protestant Heaven. They take him from first communion class to a Protestant youth festival where Homer and Fr. Sean come barging in to re-rescue the boy. Before a fight can break out, Bart stops the commotion, saying, “It’s all Christianity, people! The little, stupid differences are nothing compared to the big, stupid similarities!”—which leads to a peaceful resolution.

I consider three Catholic elements in this episode. First, Fr. Sean is characterized as Irish, a fact emphasized by having Irish actor Liam Neeson voice him. Fr. Sean is also assisted by Sister Thomasina, a nun of indeterminate age who speaks with a thick Irish accent, hits Bart with a yardstick, and, as punishment, makes him hold out his arms “like our Lord on the cross” and balance dictionaries.<sup>62</sup> Drawing on a history of Irish Catholicism and pre-Vatican II stereotypes of clergy, *The Simpsons* assumes that viewers are familiar with this ethnic variant of American Catholicism. It is also this variation which was promoted in classic American Catholic films. This is not surprising considering the history of Irish Catholic leadership in America, even though there are many different ethnic groups in the American Catholic Church. Yet, to watch *The Simpsons* one would not know that other ethnic groups exist in church leadership (see, e.g., Ahlstrom 2004, 527-568, 998, 1107-1109; Dolan 1985; Gillis 1999; on Irish leadership in American Catholicism see, e.g., Dolan 1985; Finke and Stark 2005, 143-145; McCaffery 1992; Morris 1997). One could also be forgiven for assuming that Catholic nuns in habits were still dominating parochial school classrooms. However, Catholic religious membership has been in decline ever since Vatican II and parochial schools are closing because they can no longer rely upon the cheap labour religious orders formerly provided. This episode presents a remnant, a mythologized vision of pre-Vatican II Catholicism when ecclesiastical hierarchy was revered. Today’s American Catholics show much greater independence from church doctrine such as official bans against divorce and contraception. Indeed, Catholics are divorcing and remarrying (after acquiring annulments on their previous marriages), and in many cases using birth control.

When referencing pre-Vatican II Catholicism with its Irish leadership and respect for ecclesiastical authority, *The Simpsons* does not treat it idyllically. Instead, the nun’s brutality and the school’s punishments (beating with yardsticks, holding up dictionaries) portrays Catholicism according to lapsed Catholic, and influential writer-producer, George Meyer’s memories of Catholic school:

People talk about how horrible it is to be brought up  
Catholic, and it’s all true. The main thing was that there was no sense

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<sup>62</sup> This same voice and caricature is used in *The Simpsons’ DaVinci Code* (D. Brown 2003) parody “Gone Maggie Gone,” in which an entire convent of similar nuns fosters Maggie in order to fulfil a prophecy about finding a gem child and bringing peace to the world. Nuns in the program have been depicted as strict and Irish, the only exceptions being a Latina nun in “Blame it on Lisa,” in which the family goes to Brazil; and French nuns in “Bart’s Friend Falls in Love,” in which Bart’s best friend’s girlfriend is sent to St. Sebastien’s School for Wicked Girls after they are caught kissing. The French nuns are still strict, dispensing fifty rosaries a kiss.

of proportion. I would chew a piece of gum at school, and the nun would say, 'Jesus is very angry with you about that,' and on the wall behind her would be a dying, bleeding guy on a cross. That's a horrifying image to throw at a little kid. You really could almost think that your talking in line, say, was on a par with killing Jesus. You just weren't sure, and there was never a moderating voice. (quoted in D. Owen 2000)

Meyer's experiences have been instrumental in shaping *The Simpsons*' humour. By drawing on his lived experience, and projecting that towards an audience that contains a variety of Catholics and non-Catholics through ideal types, Meyer and other writers are able to shape the program's impression of Catholicism to one that criticizes it as an archaic institution that has little sense of proportion. Even the questions in math class are morbid as they focus on how many years people will have to spend in hell for swearing. As Homer says to Bart in this episode regarding parochial school "you don't just get bad grades, you go to Hell."<sup>63</sup>

Second, while the Irish are depicted as Church leaders, two significant montages in this episode focus on other ethno-Catholic stereotypes. The first depicts Bart and Homer's consideration of conversion, and shows them doing "Catholic" activities such as lighting candles before an image of a saint, and going to a seafood restaurant on Fridays. In the other we see Catholic heaven from Marge's vantage point in Protestant heaven. The Irish are fighting and dancing, the Latinos are singing, drinking, and dancing, and the Italians are drinking and kissing at a banquet table. These ethnic stereotypes are contrasted with the WASP heaven where yuppies play croquet and badminton. In Catholic heaven, Homer and Bart enjoy themselves by breaking open a piñata and then Irish dancing with the other Catholics. Drawing on negative stereotypes of ethnic groups that have been marginalized, in part because of their religion, *The Simpsons* associates those activities with Catholicism. While it is true that American Catholicism is composed of densely interwoven ethno-religious cultures, ignorant familiarity requires reduction to stereotypes for quick humour. It is easier to portray the Irish as drunken brawlers and Latinos as piñata-whackers than to depict them as varied populations that have rich religious and ethnic traditions beyond those that can be conveyed in a montage. The montages' problem and power lie in the fact that they can quickly reference a variety of

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<sup>63</sup> A similar joke about Catholic schools was used in season nineteen's "The DeBarted." After Bart pulls a prank, principal Seymour Skinner stands before an auditorium filled with students and says "When I catch the culprit, I'm gonna throw this away" (he holds up a copy of *Public School Punishment Guidelines*) "and use this instead." He then raises a copy of *Catholic School Punishment Guidelines*, which has a picture of a child in a shirt, tie, and shorts who is tied to a cross. This continues the theme of disproportionate strictness and cruelty in parochial schools.

behaviours which appear negative (drunken brawling) or exotic (lighting prayer candles). This emphasizes Catholicism's differences from the American religion normally depicted in *The Simpsons*, which is a combination of American individualism and Protestantism. Making Catholicism appear incongruous requires explanation, and *The Simpsons* draws upon negative stereotypes to resolve the incongruity, casting the Church in a less than desirable light for cultural behaviours essentialized as "Catholic."

Third, there is the issue of birth control and women's rights in the Catholic Church. When Homer comes home after meeting with Fr. Sean, Marge refuses to join the Church because there is no way she is having a dozen children. Homer laughs and says that nobody is asking for twelve kids, just "nine, ten tops," and hands her a pamphlet entitled "Plop 'Til You Drop" which depicts a priest rubbing his hands while looking at a man and a pregnant woman. This plays on common assumptions about Catholics and birth control. *Humanae Vitae* is one of the most significant and controversial documents in American Catholic history. Historian R. Scott Appleby notes that "it was the first time in the history of the modern church that a papal teaching had been openly defied in such a widespread fashion" (quoted in Burke 2008; see also Tentler 2004). Today, sixty-one percent of Catholics believe individuals have the final say on contraception and seventy-five percent think you can be a good Catholic and deny the teachings (Burke 2008; see also Gillis 1999, 106-108). In other words, while the Catholic Church's highest levels uphold the controversial encyclical, only a significant minority of laypeople adhere to it.

Attacking the Catholic Church on this teaching is a way of assaulting an institution and discriminating against Catholics who actually agree with *The Simpsons'* implied position. Historian and sociologist Philip Jenkins suggests that anti-Catholic rhetoric attacks the Church's stance on birth control as a way of promoting an agenda derived from contemporary feminist arguments. That is, a significant number of Americans (including Catholics) think the church's teachings on women, their bodies, and their reproductive rights are wrong (2003, 70-72). *The Simpsons* appears to support this agenda by having Bart tell Marge, "this is the Catholic Church, chicks don't have any authority here" when she comes to take him from first communion class. Projecting the assumption that this prejudice is essentialized in Catholic doctrines ignores the millions of Catholics who continue to find meaning in the Church's doctrines and structures and marks them as ridiculous for adhering to them even while they oppose *Humanae Vitae's* teachings.

Jenkins' research raises a critical question about *The Simpsons'* portrayal of Catholicism: Is it anti-Catholic? Contemporary anti-Catholic sentiment is difficult to pinpoint. After all, many people

believe they are not attacking other people but an institution. Yet, for committed Catholics this institution is symbolic of their faith (5-6). Jenkins contends that

the institution of the Church is fundamental to the Catholic religion, and it is disingenuous to pretend otherwise. . . . The Pope may be the institutional head of a gigantic political and corporate entity, but for hundreds of millions of people, he is also a living symbol of their faith. Moreover, if the Catholic Church as an institution is so wicked, so homicidal, what does that say about the people who believe deeply in it, for whom it provides the vital organizing principle of their lives, the basis of their social identity? Anti-Church sentiment leads naturally to contempt for practicing or believing Catholics, whose faith must reflect emotional weakness, internal repression, or unnatural subservience to authority. (6)

But does anti-Church sentiment lead to contempt for practicing Catholics? Furthermore, is the episode even anti-Church? At what point does criticism of an institution become hatred rather than satirical commentary? Is there even a difference? This episode is not a clear denunciation of Catholicism, showing some positive elements (Homer notes that the church has time tested values and is intrigued enough to join) along with the negative ones. If it is not fair in all its portrayals, it at least projects an understanding that Catholicism provides a compelling worldview for its adherents.

In *The Simpsons*' writers' eyes, they are equal opportunity lampoonists and this is frequently repeated in interviews and popular commentary as an explanation and legitimation for their attacks on a variety of social institutions. They are certainly aware that some people will take offense at their jokes, as their experience with Donahue and the Catholic League demonstrates, but that does not mean that they have a hateful agenda. Indeed, one of the problems with identifying discrimination in satire is the fact that if humour is employed with the intention of correcting peoples' behaviour we are dealing with conflicting interpretations of reality (see also Bergson 1956, 147). Orthodox Catholics see no problems with their adherence to Church doctrines, or if they do they still respect and revere the unseen order the Church transmits through its sacred symbols and rituals. Outsiders and former Catholics who cannot abide the Church's dogmas see themselves attacking a corrupt institution. It is where benevolence and discrimination mix that we find ourselves in the delicate world of intergroup critique. *The Simpsons* is not offering unique critiques of Catholicism. Criticisms of women's rights in the Church and papal authority are nothing new, but that does not mean that the critiques do not hurt people who feel their religion is being attacked from the outside. Bearing the equal opportunity lampoonist's mantle allows *The Simpsons* to claim a critical position while avoiding the stigma of bigotry.

At the same time, this episode echoes the assumption that Catholics are bound by their institutional teachings. Catholicism is a separate world from the normally Protestant Springfield, and “The Father, the Son, and the Holy Guest Star” does not deal with the difficulties of reconciling Catholic teachings and the modern world in characters’ lives. As such, the jokes in this episode and others which reference Catholicism draw upon the intended audience’s superficial knowledge about Catholicism such as the sacrament of confession (which Homer thinks makes God absolve his sins), clerical and religious authority, and the fact that ethnic stereotypes are frequently Catholic. Ultimately, the institution is attacked for its archaic qualities and doctrinal strictness, with Homer claiming Catholics have “more crazy rules than Blockbuster Video.” When we look at jokes from other episodes, we see that this pattern holds.

Furthermore, unlike recurring secondary characters, Fr. Sean and Sister Thomasina are guest characters who lack multidimensional personalities developed over time. One dominant pattern is that when a religion is marginalized in *The Simpsons* it lacks a recurring character to voice its concerns and ethical struggles, to speak on its behalf. Instead, these religions exist as ideal types that draw upon the religious tradition’s most controversial elements to generate humour based in ideological differences. *The Simpsons* assumes that people are not familiar with the Church’s internal doctrinal debates, nor with the fact that part of being a contemporary Catholic often involves ongoing discussions about which doctrines to follow and which to ignore. Indeed, as Catholic priest, sociologist, and novelist Andrew Greeley demonstrates, the Catholic perspective is strong and keeps potential dissenters within the Catholic world despite their differences with the hierarchy and certain doctrines. They remain Catholic because they like being Catholic and find the unseen order (what Greeley calls the “Catholic imagination”) spiritually fulfilling (1990). *The Simpsons* ignores this and resorts to ethnic stereotypes and prejudices about institutional influence for humorous purposes, meeting Jenkins’ criteria for anti-Catholic rhetoric and portrayals even if they appear mild and did not directly attack the Church on issues such as the “pedophile priest” scandals.<sup>64</sup>

### 3.3 Where Do We Go From Here?

This chapter built upon the concepts of lived religion and cultural intertextuality introduced in the previous chapter and incorporated them into a theoretical framework based in Peter Berger’s

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<sup>64</sup> Before going to retrieve Bart, Fr. Sean says he cannot lose Bart or else he will be “the worst priest ever.” Then he, Homer and Lisa look around nervously with an awkward silence. This can be interpreted as referring to any number of indiscretions by Catholic priests, but the sexual scandals is one that likely comes to people’s minds.

sociologies of knowledge and religion. It then integrated major theories of humour, based in the way it utilizes institutionalized knowledge circulating throughout society to activate differences between different “sacred umbrellas.” This theoretical framework was then qualitatively applied to Catholicism’s depiction in *The Simpsons* to illustrate how it employs ideal types within a satirical framework for political purposes using the concept of *ignorant familiarity*. *The Simpsons* works from a position of anti-Catholic prejudice, viewing the institutional Catholic Church as essentially corrupt and ridiculous. This ridicule reveals what *The Simpsons* portray as positive religious behaviour. *The Simpsons* clearly sees Catholicism as outside the appropriate boundaries of religious practice.

From this trial application we move to a discussion of what *The Simpsons* deems positive in American religion. “Spirituality,” channelled through the New Age, Native American religions, and Buddhism, is tempered by scientific rationalism to create the foundations of *The Simpsons*’ unseen order from which other religions are criticized.



## Chapter 4—Spirituality and Science: Acceptable Religion in *The Simpsons*

Every satirist attacks from an underlying, foundational ideology. This position gives them their moral authority and allows their audience a common ground from which both to identify with the satirist and to assess others, differentiating ideological insiders from outsiders. While this discussion of *The Simpsons*' satirical criticism of American religion starts with an assessment of Catholicism—found to be “unacceptable” in terms of the program's unseen order—what does *The Simpsons* present as “acceptable” religious practice in the United States? In this chapter, we will investigate the concept of “spirituality” in American religion, the appropriation of Buddhism and Native American religions, and scientific rationality's importance in shaping an implied centre from which to criticize other religions. Of concern here is what these groups have in common that make them the “centre” of *The Simpsons*' perspective on religion.

### 4.1 “Spirituality” in *The Simpsons*

In the literature regarding religion in *The Simpsons*, no episode is more discussed than “Homer the Heretic.” In this episode Homer skips church on a cold, snowy morning. While his family attends church and freezes miserably because the heater is broken, Homer stays at home where he dances in his underwear (parodying Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*), watches football, and eats a waffle wrapped around a stick of butter and served on a toothpick. After such a great morning he declares that he owes it all to missing church and vows never to go again. Marge is upset, but Homer is adamant. Later, when God visits him in a dream and accuses Homer of forsaking his church, Homer defends himself, saying, “I'm not a bad guy. I work hard and I love my kids. So why should I spend half my Sunday hearing about how I'm going to hell?” God agrees that Homer has a point and allows Homer to worship him in his own way before disappearing to appear in a tortilla in Mexico. After this encounter Homer is convinced he has made the right choice. He walks around his back yard dressed like St. Francis of Assisi; he creates fake holidays to get out of work; he is chased by the Flanders clan, who try to bring him back to the church by singing the Sunday school song, “The Lord Said to Noah;” he refuses to give money to local entertainer Krusty the Clown for the Brotherhood of Jewish Clowns; and he insults Apu by offering his *murti* of Ganesha a peanut. Falling asleep the next Sunday morning, he sets his house on fire, only to have Ned and the Springfield Volunteer Fire Department, featuring Krusty and Apu, rescue him. Homer's explanation for the fire is simple: “The

Lord is vengeful.” Rev. Lovejoy disagrees, saying that God “was working in the hearts of your friends and neighbours when they went to your aid, be they Christian, Jew, or miscellaneous [Hindu].” Lovejoy convinces Homer to return to the church and Homer is there the next week, front row centre—asleep and snoring loudly.

Pinsky argues that this episode is built around the question of how God wants to be worshipped (2007, 20), and intrafamily struggles about how to raise children when parents are unequally committed (23). In the small group study guide he co-authored with Parvin, this episode is used to argue for the importance of having a relationship with God and belonging to a faith community (2002, 57-62). Journalist Steven Keslowitz suggests the episode demonstrates that morality can be achieved apart from religion, but that religion is useful for binding communities together (2006, 207-211). Lynch treats it as a discourse on American civil religion, arguing that it promotes different religions working together for the common good (2005, 154-160).<sup>65</sup> Romanowski uses Homer’s decision to stay home to capture American religious individualism (2007, 174-175), while Heit employs this episode to illustrate how Americans are leaving Christianity for individualized spirituality, a position he deems perilous (2008, 14-15, 104-106). Turner, on the other hand, thinks this episode is an attempt to strike a balance between fundamentalist and faithless extremes and, in contrast to the Flanderses, in the Simpson household “faith is flexible, responsive, debatable, *alive*” (2004, 267; emphasis in original). Henry writes that the episode is an extended critique of fundamentalist, institutionalized religion (2008, 250-255). For Dalton and his associates this episode coalesces the program’s many religious themes: “Against the backdrop of declining religious authority, increasing personal choice, and ‘flattening’ of doctrines into more palatable themes, television presents revamped morality plays such as this in which personal piety, religious pluralism, and sincere goodness rate higher than denominational adherence and church attendance” (2001, 240).<sup>66</sup>

“Homer the Heretic” is an early and classic example of how *The Simpsons* challenges the commonly held assumption that religion is a moral necessity and that people cannot be fulfilled without it—a contentious issue in today’s United States. The phrase “I’m not religious, I’m spiritual”

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<sup>65</sup> Lynch does not use *civil religion* in Bellah’s classic sense (1967). Bellah argues for a unifying spirit within the American people based in deep seated American values like sacrifice, equality, and a divinely ordained mission in the world, which have a unifying public presence. Lynch’s civil religion is, instead, a model of interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence—a way of being civil and religious.

<sup>66</sup> Delaney (2008, 208-211) summarizes the episode without giving much analysis. He uses it as an example of his larger argument that churches are corrupt and inessential.

captures the tensions between those who adhere to traditional doctrines and others who draw upon various religious and esoteric traditions when crafting their spiritual identities (cf. C. Smith 2005).

Part of the problem in this debate is determining what constitutes “spirituality.” While many people consider themselves both spiritual and religious (see, e.g., Marler and Hadaway 2002, Roof 1999, Wuthnow 1998) the two terms are not necessarily synonymous or even complementary. Definitions of spirituality are heavily dependent upon the religious tradition or social group one is studying. For example, historian of American religion Catherine Albanese writes that “spirituality in the metaphysical movement, especially in its present-day New Age manifestation, means working with the energies of the moment, ‘going with the flow,’ and seeking, as earlier metaphysicians, to combine all of the cultural currents that act as catalysts in our time” (1999, 321; cf. S. Rose 1998, 13). From a survey that religion scholar Stuart Rose distributed to religious leaders in the United Kingdom, he identified three traits commonly associated with spirituality: it has to have a significant experiential element to it—an experience of something beyond oneself; there has to be continuous ethical practice; and it is altruistic (2001, 204). Sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow (1998) identifies two types of spirituality. The spirituality of dwelling “emphasizes habitation: God occupies a definite place in the universe and creates a sacred space in which humans too can dwell; to inhabit sacred space is to know its territory and to feel secure” (3-4). This is spirituality that develops within a religious tradition. The lived religion of Orsi’s Italian Catholics is a good example of the spirituality of dwelling. Conversely, the spirituality of seeking “emphasizes negotiation: individuals search for sacred moments that reinforce their conviction that the divine exists, but these moments are fleeting; rather than knowing the territory, people explore new spiritual vistas, and they may have to negotiate among complex and confusing meanings of spirituality” (4). It captures the common assumptions associated with the phrase “I am spiritual,” which, in contemporary America, categorically separates religion and spirituality. Whether one embraces or rejects this distinction, it is key to understanding “spirituality” in popular culture.<sup>67</sup> In common parlance “spirituality” now often means something

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<sup>67</sup> For further theories which distinguish between religion and spirituality, viewing spirituality as something individualistic and “religion” as a social phenomenon which is unnecessary for spirituality’s practice, see, Belzen (2005), Hanegraaff (1999), Hyman and Handal (2006), Shimazono (1999); for those that see them as interrelated, see, S. Rose (2001), Schneiders (2003), Zwissler (2007). Also, note Stark, Hamberg, and Miller’s (2005) point that people draw upon many sources when crafting their religiousness/ spirituality and stringent distinctions between the two categories which favour institutionalized interpretations can harm analyses of people’s behaviour. Zinnbauer et. al (1997) demonstrate that the way people use the two terms is not hard and fast, with some separating the two and others seeing them as integrated (see also Roof 1999). On the socialization processes involved in learning how to be “spiritual” see, Aupers and Houtman (2006), and Houtman and Aupers (2007).

desirable, while religion is considered negative. At the centre of this distinction is a dispute between the individual and religious organizations (Roof 1999, 46-76; Roof et al. 1999, 145). While this dispute does not capture the full range of spiritual practices, it is instrumental in shaping the way people think about spiritual practice. In *The Simpsons*' case it is important not to see the separation of religion and spirituality as a "zero sum proposition" (Marler and Hadaway 2002), in which these two facets of life are always separate and never co-exist. Instead, in the program spirituality and religion are often intertwined, allowing *The Simpsons*' creative staff to work their criticism in more nuanced ways.

However, we live in a world where people can be spiritual without being religious. Central to this development is the idea that spirituality is something people craft for themselves by drawing from the world's religious traditions. According to sociologist of religion Wade Clark Roof they are *bricoleurs*, they "cobble together a religious world from available images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines, thereby exercising considerable agency in defining and shaping what is considered to be religiously meaningful" (1999, 75; see also Besecke 2001; P. Jenkins 2004, 198). Personal spirituality can draw from any number of sources. For example, in *Habits of the Heart* sociologist Robert Bellah and his associates provide the classic example of Sheilism, named after interviewee Sheila Larson's private faith, which was crafted from various external sources and her personal experiences and constituted belief in God without attending church (2008, 221, 235). Yet, most conceptions of spirituality share three common characteristics. First, spirituality tends to be immanentist. That is, it finds its meaning and authority within the individual and not in institutional doctrines and dogmas. Second, these conceptions often feature a "connection" between a supernatural force or power and the individual, a perspective that is frequently termed "metaphysical." "Supernatural force" can mean a conception of God matching a religious tradition's teachings, or it can be a more ambiguous concept such as a "force of nature." The most important element of this conception is that there appears to be contact beyond oneself with a greater force that imparts some special teaching and insight. Third, the teachings are often seen to apply to the this-worldly concerns of everyday life (Aupers and Houtman 2006; Bellah et al. 2008, 219-245; Fuller 2001, 75-77; Heelas 1996, 2008; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Hyman and Handal 2006, 278; Hanegraaff 1996, 1999; Roof 1999, 81-86; S. Rose 1998, 13; 2001, 204; Stark et al. 2005; Sutcliffe 2003a, 2003b; Wuthnow 1998; Zinnbauer et al. 1997).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Although spirituality tends to be concerned with everyday life, whether or not its practitioners, especially those in highly eclectic forms of spiritual practice that are frequently categorized as "New Age," are effective at engaging people in social life is debated. Bruce (1998, 2002) argues that New Age spirituality is too

One place where spirituality has developed apart from traditional religious institutions is in the “New Age” movement, which is difficult to characterize. Sociologist Paul Heelas argues that “It has come to be used to designate those who maintain that inner spirituality—embedded within the self and the natural order as a whole—serves as *the* key to moving from all that is wrong with life to all that is right” (1996, 16; emphasis in original). Religious studies scholar Steven Sutcliffe (2003a) argues that the term is used too broadly as a catch-all concept for people’s opposition to “organized religion.” This prevents deeper analysis because there is no way of identifying concrete boundaries for what constitutes New Age. His own research (2003b) demonstrates that while there is a well developed “seeker culture” that outsiders categorize as “New Age,” his interviews with Reiki healers, firewalkers, and other practitioners of the broad range of “spiritual” activities in today’s spiritual marketplace reveal that “New Age” is not a term that they use. However, that does not mean it is not a useful ideal type in the popular imagination, it is just so broad that anything that does not fit into an institutionalized religious tradition gets categorized under New Age. Albanese demonstrates this categorical utility in her work on nature religion, locating many of the concerns of healing, eco-spirituality, and Native American shamanic insight that circulate in the wider modern spirituality movement as part of an ongoing tradition of American existential engagement with nature and its revelatory role in the country’s debates about the unseen order (1990). Without the general movement known as New Age in the popular imagination, the significant patterns of behaviour among spiritual practitioners would be much more difficult to describe. Later, she would locate New Age as the most recent phenomenon in America’s metaphysical religious stream (2007). Metaphysics, for Albanese, is “an American religious mentality (thought, belief, emotional commitment, symbolic and moral behavior) organized in terms of an identifiable set of themes” (13). She highlights four themes: “a preoccupation with the mind and its powers” (13), “a predisposition toward the ancient cosmological theory of correspondence between worlds” (13), thinking in terms of movement and energy (14), and

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personal to be useful in binding people together and that the movement is largely based around a consumer ethic which stresses the individual and their personal development, thereby weakening people’s ability to work together because they have weakened ties to each other. Heelas (1998) refutes Bruce, saying it needs to be proven not in terms of classical sociological theory, but rather in terms of how people actually use the materials they purchase (cf. Heelas 1996, 2008; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; see also Aupers and Houtman 2006, Houtman and Aupers 2007). Chandler (2007) contends that in practice people who are “spiritual but not religious” form social bonds that lead them to work together while not being tied together by a shared doctrine or religious institution. For the purposes of our argument, people’s spiritual orientations can at least lead them to feel that they should be more socially engaged (although not necessarily with a religious group). Whether they are engaged or not is entirely different.

“a yearning for salvation understood as solace, comfort, therapy, and healing” (15).<sup>69</sup> Noting that the “new spirituality” is broader than what has been called New Age, Albanese traces American metaphysical thought’s historical branches, demonstrating its breadth and pervasiveness in the country’s religious history. “New Age” may be analytically unhelpful for academics, but that does not prevent people from using it as an organizing concept (496-516; see also Lewis and Melton 1992, Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000). Also, as Albanese argues, while New Age’s material trappings—the channelers, crystals, pyramids, and reincarnations from the lost continents Atlantis and Lemuria—have become less conspicuous, the metaphysical act of combining different ideas and practices from a wide swath of traditions continues unabated (2007, 515). In this case, New Age becomes the most recent ideal type in an ongoing series of loosely connected, but highly significant, metaphysical impulses in American religious history.

Therefore, it is helpful to draw upon scholarship about New Age, but to classify our concerns under “new spirituality.” Again, we are faced with a broad, metaphysical drive in American culture that has strong family resemblances only at the most abstract levels. Although Albanese’s four themes are helpful guides, as she illustrates, we can find these drives in many different places including Theosophy, the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and contemporary spiritual practitioners who live in nature communes. What we need is a way of capturing how this metaphysical stream of thought in American culture has found its way into popular culture. Berger and Luckmann again provide a helpful concept in “sedimentation”:

Only a small part of the totality of human experiences is retained in consciousness. The experiences that are so retained become sedimented, that is, they congeal in recollection as recognizable and memorable entities. Unless such sedimentation took place the individual could not make sense of his biography. Intersubjective sedimentation also takes place when several individuals share a common biography, experiences of which become incorporated in a common stock of knowledge. Intersubjective sedimentation can be called truly social only when it has been objectivated in a sign system of one kind or another, that is,

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<sup>69</sup> This can helpfully be compared to Hanegraaff’s five major trends in New Age religion: Channeling (which is contact with spirits and forces in the cosmos which give us direction in daily life), healing and personal growth, New Age science, Neopaganism, and the New Age as a millennial vision (1996). While we can divide these themes either way, the concern with individual growth, healing, a sense of contact with a vast unseen order, and an understanding that these beliefs can lead to actions which will change the world broadly, characterizes New Age and previous metaphysical movements. That said, I agree with Albanese that Neopaganism is its own separate religious tradition, even if it shares many of the same themes that characterize the New Age (2007, 512).

when the possibility of reiterated objectification of the shared experiences arises. Only then is it likely that these experiences will be transmitted from one generation to the next, and from one collectivity to another. (1966, 67-68)

In other words, over time particular ways of thinking and behaving find their way into society through shared experiences which have been given specific meanings. Creatively punning on this concept, it is helpful to think of metaphysical thinking not as “sedimentation” because the particular ways people think and act are so diverse, but there is a general *sentimentation* going on in contemporary spiritual culture. While ideas about the mind’s power, cosmological correspondence, movement and energy, and yearning for salvation through healing are general patterns of behaviour (Albanese 2007, 13-15), Albanese’s concepts capture sentiments more than habitualized thoughts and behaviours which can easily be transmitted symbolically (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 68). I treat each historical manifestation of these sentiments as a sedimented institution which is part of the larger web of metaphysical sentiment. However, the idea of personal revelation which comes from the beyond and has specific outcomes in this world is such a strong sentiment in American culture that it influences everybody, whether they accept or refute it. In this light, “spirituality” is a concept that captures the *sentimentation* of Albanese’s metaphysical themes. It builds upon and moves beyond the New Age material which was its most recent historical manifestation.

In this light, “Homer the Heretic”’s significance lies in the fact that Homer finds spiritual awareness within himself and legitimates it through his desires. When God approves of Homer worshipping in his own way, Homer has all the reasons he needs to not do things he deems undesirable—like going to church. Jokes in this episode further promote the relativism which facilitates spiritualities of seeking. For example, after Homer makes his decision he asks Marge “what if we picked the wrong religion? Each week we’re just making God madder and madder.” Bart, who is also on the not-going-to-church bandwagon, claps his hands and says “Testify!” in a parody of evangelical revivals. On the DVD commentary Al Jean suggests that this is a good question to ask, but its importance lies in relativism’s corrosive effects on religious certainty. If you think you are correct beyond a shadow of a doubt, this is an irrelevant question. You already know that you are right. However, it is hard to maintain such certainty in the face of great and legitimate religious diversity. The First Amendment’s right to religious freedom ensures that there will always be challenges to religious plausibility, and through jokes such as this *The Simpsons* suggests that we should embrace relativism and find our own ways. It is this seeking, searching, and the ability and willingness to change traditions that legitimates spirituality in their jokes because it appears more

authentic than the rote repetition that characterizes church. As Roof demonstrates (1999), this is characteristic of baby boomer religion, which is little surprise when we consider that *The Simpsons*' writers and producers are boomers or boomers' children. *The Simpsons* draws upon common social ideas which undermine religious exclusivity, and in the process says that all religions are equally valid—even ones concocted by lazy egoists who want to stay at home, drink beer, and watch television as their highest goals in life.

Homer's actions capture the sentiments of a segment of Americans. Religious studies scholar Robert Fuller argues that roughly forty percent of Americans are unchurched (meaning they attend church services six times or less every year) (2001, 1). In spite of people leaving churches because of negative experiences, religion's pervasiveness in American culture makes it hard to avoid contact with ideas derived from institutionalized religious traditions. Homer's vision of God is clearly a turn towards an unchurched spirituality that is free from institutionalized constraints, but is still firmly grounded in the intellectual tradition from which Homer (and by association the writers who create his actions) comes. George Meyer, the lapsed Catholic who wrote the episode, drew upon his heritage when crafting the character of God as powerful and intimidating. Artistically, God's depiction falls squarely within the tradition of Christian representations of him as an old, powerful, white bearded man—the most famous depiction of which is Michaelangelo's portrayal on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling (see also Pinsky 2007, 21-22). Drawing on these intertextual elements, *The Simpsons* puts its own spin on God by putting words in his mouth. Instead of a deity who demands institutional and traditional allegiance, God is merciful, allowing Homer to change his path and undermining the demands that traditionalists claim God requires of us. In this we see how *The Simpsons* draws upon religion, but interprets it through the lens of spirituality, promoting a view that undermines the sacredness with which God is treated and emphasizing a relativistic worldview.

#### **4.1.1 Spiritual Appropriation in *The Simpsons***

##### **4.1.1.1 Native American Religions**

“Homer the Heretic” is not Homer's only experience with immanent spirituality. In “El Viaje Misterioso de Nuestro Jomer” (The Mysterious Voyage of Homer) he takes a vision quest after eating extremely spicy peppers at a chili cookoff. Explicitly modeled on “anthropologist” Carlos Castaneda's writings about his alleged experiences with Yaqui shaman don Juan Matus, Homer hallucinates and finds himself in a mysterious desert with giant butterflies and a constantly changing environment (e.g., a pool of water turns into a giant rattlesnake). After following a tortoise to a giant



pyramid, Homer climbs to the top and thinks he finds Marge, but she dissolves into a pile of sand. Homer then encounters his spirit guide, a coyote voiced by Johnny Cash who forms himself out of the sky. The coyote tells Homer he is on a quest for knowledge and gives him advice such as “The problem, Homer, is that the mind is always chattering away with a thousand thoughts at once” and “Clarity is the path to inner peace.” These suggestions could come from any number of New Age books, but when Homer asks, “What should I do? Should I meditate? Should I get rid of all my possessions?”, the coyote laughs, saying, “Are you kidding? If anything you should get more possessions. You don’t even have a computer.” This embraces both the anti-materialist and consumerist elements that can be found in different sectors of the contemporary spirituality movement. Some New Age practitioners eschew personal improvement for worldly possessions, but the means for personal growth are found in a competitive economic marketplace that includes a variety of gurus, seminar leaders, and producers of New Age material culture (e.g., crystals, books). Homer’s discussion with the coyote captures this apparent logical tension, and resolves it in a way that reaffirms spirituality’s consumption (Carrette and King 2005; cf. Heelas 2008). After gnawing on Homer’s leg, the coyote sends him on a journey to find his soul mate. Homer claims it is Marge, the coyote asks if it is, and the rest of the episode involves Homer coming to realize that he was right in the first place.

While Heit argues that this episode supports seeker spirituality, which he finds less substantial than the spirituality of dwelling (2008, 100-104), the important thing about it is the way it draws upon appropriated imagery from both Native American traditions and a debunked anthropologist to frame a contemporary seeker’s story without any consideration of the cultures from which the story is taken. Castaneda has been accused of fraudulently presenting fiction as ethnography, but in that act he also tapped into a deep-seated sense among anthropologists and spiritual seekers who argued that his reported experiences express a greater truth about the world.<sup>70</sup> Telling how, among other incredible events, his head turned into a crow (1968, 120-123), he saw giant moth shadows (1971, 231), and was chased by the wind (1972, 83-89), Castaneda’s work tapped into the countercultural *zeitgeist* and became standard reading in courses on Native spirituality. *The Simpsons* has taken this general theme of inner spiritual exploration, in some cases facilitated by the use of natural hallucinogenics (in Homer’s case a Guatemalan insanity pepper; in Castaneda’s a combination of peyote, Jimson weed, and psilocybin), and revealed another world to people. The

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<sup>70</sup> See de Mille (1980) for an extended debate about Castaneda’s legitimacy and veracity in his work (see also de Mille 1976, Hardman 2007, W. Rose 1992).

problem is that *The Simpsons*' creators take Castaneda's creation as a basic truth, treating it as an accurate account of the spiritual insight people assume Native American traditions possess.

Once people assume Native American traditions can facilitate great spiritual insight, they start treating them as consumer products. Native American scholars have argued that Native spirituality cannot be separated from the local community's reciprocal networks, customs, and politics (see, e.g., Aldred 2000; P. Deloria 1998; V. Deloria 1992a, 1992b, 1999a; Grim 2000; Hernández-Ávila 2000; Jocks 2000; S. Owen 2008; W. Rose 1992; see also P. Jenkins 2004). However, *The Simpsons*' creators—and Castaneda—do just this. Homer does not contribute to any Native American community, but he undertakes a spiritual quest within the framework of Native American spiritual traditions. Appropriating these traditions contributes to a legacy in which the insights, practices, and values of Native American communities are treated as something available to everybody. Even if we believe Castaneda is a fraud, the salient fact is that many people see his interpretation of Native spirituality as more real than that practiced by Native Americans. As Lisa Simpson says in the episode “Little Big Girl,” “Native Americans are a proud people with a noble heritage—a noble heritage that anyone can claim.” Although she ends up suffering as a fraud by the episode's end, when we examine Homer's mystical journey there is explicit support for the spiritual appropriation of Native American religious traditions without recourse to the people from whom they are taken. Decontextualized, commercialized, and individualized, these religions are now a part of the spiritual marketplace, another brick in the *bricoleur*'s wall.<sup>71</sup>

Philip Jenkins, on the other hand, argues that this does not delegitimize the religious lives of those who appropriate Native American religions—and he is correct—although their appropriations have serious consequences. Furthermore, Jenkins argues Native Americans have benefitted from the fascinations of New Agers who want to draw insight from these traditions, especially in terms of political support for Native legal causes (2004, 254-255). That said, New Age appropriation of Native

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<sup>71</sup> *The Simpsons* satirizes Native American religious practices conducted by Native Americans in “Milhouse Doesn't Live Here Anymore,” when Bart and Lisa discover an ancient Native burial mound with arrowheads and pictographs. Lisa later researches the “Mound Builders” and discovers that they “worshipped turtles, as well as badgers, snakes, and other animals.” Bart flippantly remarks, “Thank God we've come to our senses and worship a carpenter who lived 2000 years ago.” While this is also an attack on Christianity, it is a way of saying “Native American religions are stupid, but Christianity is *really* stupid.” Furthermore, in “Dude, Where's My Ranch?” Bart asks a Native who has been flooded off his land why they are selling cheap junk. The Native responds, “We used to live and farm in a bountiful valley. Then the river was dammed to make that lake by our ancient enemy, the beaver.” Marge asks why they do not chase the beavers away, to which the Native replies, “Because the beaver is also our god. In retrospect it was a poor choice.” Again, there is a theme of stupidity in selecting animals as divine representations.

spirituality creates identity issues that shape Natives' lives in ways they cannot control. Parkhill summarizes the dangers of the "Indian" stereotype (1997, 82-87). Even though it is positively associated with ecological spirituality and a sense of deep connectedness with the world, it creates a romanticized notion of how Native Americans should, and did, live (see also Gill 1987). Reproducing stereotypes creates expectations that can deprive Native Americans who do not meet those standards of their dignity and ability to participate fully in society. Parkhill quotes Smithsonian Institution ethnology curator Rayna Greene, a Cherokee: "I cannot tell you how many times I've gone into a classroom or lectured in front of a group of little children, who are deeply unhappy because I don't wear a costume every day, who think that what the Boy Scouts do is real stuff, real Indian life, and then they want us to live that life. And, when we don't live that life for them, they're brokenhearted" (quoted in Parkhill 1997, 85; see also V. Deloria 1999b). The positive image of Native Americans ultimately leaves real people burdened with unrealistic expectations and roles which marginalize them into romantic "noble savages" who live in the countryside being spiritual. Native dreams and aspirations which do not meet appropriators' standards are crushed under the unequal distribution of the ability to define reality. Those who claim knowledge of Native American religions through reading books, participating in sweat lodges or other ceremonies, and trying to gain insights like Castaneda's through the use of natural hallucinogenics or meditation practices, have a disproportionate power to shape Natives' reality. That is, those Natives who do not conform to their expectations fall outside their sacred umbrellas. They are either "inauthentic" or unimportant. The paradox Native communities face is that without the financial and social capital middle-class spiritual seekers bring in exchange for Native spirituality, Native communities suffer economically and politically (see also P. Deloria 1998, 154-180). However, when they do put a price on their traditions, they change them in such a way that they are no longer tied into the community which gave them meaning. In short, they can either suffer economically, or they can suffer spiritually. Homer's mystical journey is another example of this dangerous stereotype's acceptance in contemporary American popular culture.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> In *The Simpsons Movie* (Silverman 2007), Homer receives an epiphany after engaging in Inuit throat-singing which teaches him that others are more important than himself. He has a similar experience in "Boy Meets Curl," in which he calls the woman his therapist and has another psychedelic vision through throat singing. This continues the theme of finding spiritual revelation in Native American religions without a serious engagement with the traditions themselves.

#### 4.1.1.2 Buddhism

If Homer's mystical journey appropriates Native American religions, and "Homer the Heretic" reflects a superficial seeker spirituality, his daughter Lisa characterizes the introspective and ethical practices commonly associated with spirituality. Put differently, if Homer uses "spirituality" to get out of church or realize what he already knew, Lisa's spirituality is a significant aspect of her character, driving her personal development and influencing her involvement in many social causes. Lisa is a vegetarian, environmentalist, and feminist. Belonging to MENSA, she is also the family's voice of reason. As writer David Cohen says on "Lisa the Skeptic"'s DVD commentary, "When you have an episode which has a real moral or philosophical point, I think Lisa is your go-to character. And I think you really buy her as caring about it" (see also Gray 2006, 58; Henry 2007; Skoble 2001). Not only is Lisa positively associated with these liberal causes, but in late 2001 she made a significant religious change—she became a Buddhist after the FCOS burned down and plutocrat C. Montgomery Burns, with his business consultant Lindsey Neagle, turned it into "a faith-based emporium teeming with impulse buy items" ("She of Little Faith"). She felt that this change cost the church its soul, she looked for a "church that is free from corruption" and found the Springfield Buddhist Temple where she met Richard Gere and decided to become a Buddhist ("She of Little Faith"). While Turner characterizes this as moving from one commodified religion to another (2004, 274), I disagree. Having Lisa choose Buddhism, and remaining a Buddhist in subsequent seasons, reflects this religion's influence on seeker culture.

Lisa's conversion to Buddhism should seem vaguely familiar, as it is a story which has been told many times in the post-1960s world. Building on the themes of immanentism, connections to the metaphysical, and everyday concerns, spiritual seekers appropriate Buddhist ideas, and thrive in a cultural context where people feel alienated from North America's traditional religious institutions. Sociologist Steve Bruce (2002), theologian Harvey Cox (1977), and Wuthnow (1998), have all argued that Westerners have looked to the East to cure themselves of spiritual malaise. Cox (1977) called this "turning eastward," where spiritual seekers borrow from Eastern traditions to overcome the problems of modern Western life. Cox and Bruce both argue that completely adapting to the conventions of another culture is something incredibly difficult for Westerners, let alone those who want to have their spiritual fulfillment along with their American consumer culture. Bruce writes that people may look to the East for "authenticity, spirituality and holism" (2002, 134), but instead they take eastern traditions, strip them of their humility and discipline, and inflate those traditions with Western self-centeredness (132). Cox argues that the process of adopting Eastern religions for

Western purposes gets them caught in the consumer culture they were originally adopted to critique (1977, 130). These criticisms aside, it has become common to see the East as a locale of spiritual salvation from Western consumerism, and this positive portrayal shapes “She of Little Faith” (see Iwamura 2005). The episode does not depict Buddhism’s adoption satirically, even though Turner reads this into the episode.<sup>73</sup>

While North Americans have a fascination with Buddhism dating back to at least the mid-nineteenth century, Lisa is drawn to the Buddhism that developed in the 1950s Beat culture and the 1960s counterculture. Her political consciousness, feminism, and ecological concerns are shared by North American Buddhists practicing a range of traditions from Zen to Tibetan Buddhism. Lisa’s values resonate with “socially engaged Buddhism,” which practitioner-scholar Donald Rothberg argues covers “a broad range of approaches unified by the notion that Buddhist teachings and practices can be directly applied to participation in the social, political, economic, and ecological affairs of the nonmonastic world” (1998, 268). These values, although present in other Buddhist traditions (Queen 2002, 324-5), have been given special interest in the study of North American Buddhism (see e.g., Queen 2000, 2002; Seager 1999; Wetzel 2002). Buddhism scholar Kenneth Tanaka (1998, 293-5) argues that Americans want to see results from their religious beliefs and engaged Buddhism lets American Buddhists connect their religious beliefs to actions (Powers 2000). Because Lisa engaged left-leaning political, economic, and social concerns leading up to “She of Little Faith,” her conversion to Buddhism is consistent and compatible.

However, since America has a long tradition of socially engaged Christianity, why should Lisa’s critique of consumerism take her to Buddhism rather than a more politically active Christianity? In his first edition of *The Gospel According to The Simpsons*, Pinsky suggests that Lisa echoed Jesus because of her ethical concerns with social justice and challenging the status quo (2001, 39-46). He maintains this point in the updated 2007 edition, although he recounts “She of Little Faith” at length and includes positive reviews from a pair of Buddhist pundits (2007, 171-180). Treating Lisa as a character who acted according to the values Jesus preached was a valid hermeneutic to analyze Lisa before 2001, so why make her Buddhist instead of emphasizing her

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<sup>73</sup> There is a much longer history of appropriating Buddhist and East Asian traditions in America going back into the nineteenth century. However, Buddhism’s popularity was dramatically increased by Japanese Zen thinker D.T. Suzuki’s books and broader immigration laws after 1965 which allowed Buddhist teachers to enter the country. For general histories of Buddhism in North America see Fields (1986), Layman (1976), Prebish (1979, 1999) and Seager (1999). For more focussed studies see, e.g., Albanese (2007, 373-393), Lopez (1998), Tweed (1992), and Wilson (2009). See also Tweed and Prothero (1999).

Christian ethics? At the end of “She of Little Faith”’s second act, after experiencing the commercial changes to FCOS (e.g., corporate advertising in the lobby, the church’s new Jumbotron, a rotating billboard on the pulpit, and a man yelling “Money changed! Get your money changed! Right here in the temple!”), Lisa is near her breaking point. She finally loses her calm when the Noid, a character used to advertise Domino’s Pizza in the 1980s, delivers a sermon on “the sanctity of deliciousness.” She claims that FOCS’ directors have dressed the church like the Whore of Babylon, she leaves, and refuses to have her hand stamped so she can get back in, a reference to both hyper-commercial amusement parks where one has to pay for admission and to the Mark of the Beast that Revelation 13: 16-17 claims will be “marked on the right hand or forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he [sic] has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name” (NRSV). Suspicions of the Mark and consumerism and currency circulate throughout American culture, making this an ignorant familiarity that people can reference. But if we follow Lisa’s explicit disgust with consumerism, and treat it as what drove her away from Christianity, why turn to Buddhism? The turn East explains this decision through its emphasis on the East’s spiritual purity in the face of Western materialism. The episode does not even consider alternate forms of Christianity and Christian activism which would also be in line with Lisa’s character. It does, however, portray her in such a way that her decision is consistent with other North American converts to Buddhism, a pop culture example of what Bruce, Cox, Roof, and Wuthnow discussed. She is seeking, and finding, what she wants in another religious tradition without the “cultural baggage” accompanying its lived forms.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> When Buddhism is mentioned apart from Lisa, it is often without any sustained commentary on the religion. In “Black Widower,” the homicidal Sideshow Bob quotes the first two noble truths to explain why he tried to kill Krusty. Lisa’s Buddhism also inspires jokes and plot twists in other characters. In “‘Tis the Fifteenth Season,” Lisa tells Homer that she thinks Christmas has become too commercial, and, as a Buddhist, she thinks people would be “happier without presents.” Homer then imagines a car, a sweater, and the Buddha. The images coalesce into a scene where the Buddha wears the sweater, drives the car down a road, and says “Presents are material goods and attachment kills the soul.” This is certainly a Buddhist teaching, but the scene takes a “Homeric” twist as the Buddha suddenly hears police sirens and says he is not going back to prison. The fantasy ends and Homer decides to take away everybody’s presents, thanking Buddha in the process. His fantasy starts again, and we see the Buddha bent over the hood of the car, covered in prison tattoos, and threatening the police officers. This scene combines the spiritual wisdom of the Buddha with a parody of contemporary thug life, mixing a variety of meanings for humorous effects. However, it conveys the original Buddhist message, and the prison joke comes off as one of Homer’s strange comedic fantasies. In other words, the disconnection lies in Homer, not Buddhism. Similarly, in “I-(Annoyed Grunt)-Bot,” when Marge comforts Lisa after her third cat dies, she says, “it’s ok, you’re a Buddhist, so you know your cats are now reincarnated as a higher form of life.” Homer then chimes in, “Like a dog or a snowman.” The joke is not on Buddhism, it is on Homer the idiot. In “She Used to be My Girl,” Lisa hides in journalist Chloe Talbot’s car trunk when a nearby volcano erupts. Frantically she prays to “Buddha, Jesus, Spongebob! There’s no time to be picky!” The next scene has Buddha, Jesus, and Nickelodeon cartoon character Spongebob Squarepants standing on a cloud in

Despite engaged Buddhism's conflicts with economic and environmental exploitation, Buddhism in the West is big business. Speakers hold large seminars; hundreds of books on meditation (which has become the primary activity and means of religious identity for many North American Buddhists) or piggybacking on Zen's popularity are available for purchase;<sup>75</sup> and spiritual retreats, lasting from days to months, are open to those who can afford them. This is connected to the greater presence of lay leaders, especially women, in American Buddhism as compared to its Asian counterparts. German Buddhist activist Sylvia Wetzel argues that this is because of the general affluence of North American converts to Buddhism (2002, 281). According to her, "Life in Western societies allows many members of the (mainly white) middle class to work a relatively few hours for their livelihood and to dedicate the rest of their time to intensive Buddhist studies and practices" (2002, 281). American Buddhist converts' affluence is known within Buddhist circles as religious studies scholar Douglas Padgett (2000) demonstrates in his study of the meditation cushion market. A decade ago cushions sold from \$27 to \$50 to elite North American Buddhists to help facilitate their practice. Today those same cushions cost between \$50 and \$100, suggesting that prices have increased because people are willing to pay that much for a meditation pillow. While some American Buddhists question whether or not this commercial aspect has tainted North American Buddhism (Seager 1999, 245), there is little doubt it exists.

"She of Little Faith" acknowledges Buddhism's and consumer culture's relationship in North America only in so far as it uses movie star Richard Gere as its guest celebrity. While looking for a new religion, Lisa happens upon Springfield's Buddhist temple (designed to look like a Chinese temple). Inside she meets Homer's co-workers, Lenny and Carl, who we learn are both Buddhists.

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front of pearly gates. The Buddha looks down towards the Earth and says, "Perhaps we should help." Spongebob chimes in with "Screw her!", and starts laughing maniacally. This twisted joke does not demean Buddhism, noting the Buddha's goodness.

The one time Buddhism is referenced apart from Lisa in a way that advances the plot is in "Goo Goo Gai Pan," in which the family goes to China so that Marge's sister Selma can adopt a Chinese girl. In order to sneak into an orphanage, Homer is spray painted gold and positioned as a Buddha. He is then dragged inside by the orphanage's guards, who complain that the statue is too heavy and that they should cut him up and worship the chunks instead. Considering that this is directed to a Western audience, it confuses the concept of a Bodhisattva—a being who stands just on the verge of enlightenment in order to help others—and the enlightened Buddha, with gods and other divine beings. It works within a Western religious system where divine beings are worshipped, but incorrectly captures the Eastern mindset for comedic purposes working within ignorant familiarity. That is, people know that there are Buddhists, but may not realize that the Buddha is more of a role model than a divine being. This joke works in a Christian influenced unseen order rather than a Buddhist one.

<sup>75</sup> Tweed (2002, 21) cites the 2000 *Books in Print* list which included 218 titles that begin with Zen, 70 of which are how-to books which apply Zen concepts to other aspects of life.

Lisa says, “I’m looking for a new faith. One that isn’t so materialistic.” At this point Gere’s voice can be heard from off camera, “Well, you’ve come to the right place. Buddhism teaches that suffering is caused by desire.” Buddhist studies scholar Charles Prebish has noted celebrity Buddhism’s mass popularity in the 1990s, and Gere’s guest appearance on *The Simpsons* follows in this vein (1999, 255; see also Iwamura 2005). When Lisa, Lenny, and Carl see Gere (a Tibetan Buddhist who is tending a Zen garden), Lenny and Carl have the following exchange:

LENNY

Ooh! The world’s most famous Buddhist.

GERE

Well, what about the Dalai Lama?

LENNY

Who?

CARL

You know, the fourteenth incarnation of the Buddha Avalokiteshvara.

LENNY

Who’s Buddha?

GERE

It’s a good thing Buddhism teaches freedom from desire because I’ve got the desire to kick your ass. (“She of Little Faith”)

Lenny is clearly taken in by Gere’s celebrity, and his knowledge of Buddhist celebrities is limited to Hollywood’s practitioners, regardless of the Dalai Lama’s fame (cf. Iwamura 2005: 34-38). However, Gere’s celebrity promotion of Buddhism is not the butt of their jokes, only Lenny’s ignorance.

Once again ignorant familiarity is at work, this time playing on positive themes. This episode associates humility, peacefulness, and freedom from desire with Richard Gere and Buddhism. It is assumed people know the Dalai Lama and Gere, and positively connect them with the promotion of peace and enlightenment. The common perception of socially engaged Buddhism is that it grapples with material desires, or at the very least their manifestations in global injustice. Rothberg’s summary



of socially engaged Buddhism's ethics finds people taking a stand against capitalist exploitation and environmental degradation such as clear-cutting (1998, 274-5). When we combine these North American concerns with celebrity Buddhism's promotion of human rights in Tibet (a cause for which Gere and the Dalai Lama are both well known), Lisa's attraction to Buddhism is consistent with her character.

Buddhism, in short, is frequently characterized as the idealized leftist religion. This public face of North American Buddhism does not make Buddhism's consumerization irrelevant, but it does make Buddhists appear more active and engaged in their practice. This characterization also helps us distinguish between different North American Buddhists. Thomas Tweed's category of Buddhist sympathizer or "night-stand Buddhist," those people who "have some sympathy for a religion but do not embrace it exclusively or fully" (2002, 20), helpfully draws the boundaries between the Buddhism that Lisa adopts (an anti-materialistic, meditation intensive position where she self-identifies as someone who follows the Buddha's teachings and continues her socially engaged politics), and those who might be considered "insincere" or "fake Buddhists." Tweed himself does not do this, noting that sympathizers may not fulfill the normative categories for defining who is a Buddhist, but they still play a significant role in the creation of Western Buddhism. He warns against using normative categories because they exclude those who may not be a part of the religion but whose interest helps promote the religion in a given culture. Rather, he suggests that scholars categorize Buddhists according to Buddhist self-identification (2002, 22-27). While Tweed's points deserve consideration, socially engaged Buddhism requires that people place themselves within the tradition. Having a category such as "night-stand Buddhists" and the knowledge that there are Americans who are interested in Buddhism but who do not consider themselves Buddhist, allows popular conception to locate "real" or "authentic" Buddhism in those who actively claim the title, which is usually accompanied by socially engaged Buddhists' ethics (at least among converts). Hence, celebrity Buddhists such as the Dalai Lama,<sup>76</sup> and the politics of Richard Gere, can become Buddhism's public face rather than those Buddhists who have detached themselves from social concerns and who spend their time reading popular Zen books and meditating. But if commercialization and Buddhism accompany each other in North America, and if, by locating the voice of Buddhist knowledge in "She of Little Faith" in a celebrity follower of the Dalai Lama rather than the teacher himself, why should

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<sup>76</sup> Iwamura notes that the Dalai Lama's entry into American popular culture "transformed [him] into a celebrity; that realm then exploits the reception of his physical and spiritual presence by marketing it for mass contemplation and consumption" (2005, 35).

we see this episode as a critique of Christian consumerism rather than an attack on materialism and religion in general? The answer lies in how “She of Little Faith” uses comedy to satirize the irony of Christian materialism while not extending the same treatment to Buddhism.

#### 4.1.2 Spirituality and Consumerism

“She of Little Faith”’s second act concerns the revamping of the FOCS under Mr. Burns’ guidance. Taking the fire-gutted building and expanding it with an ornate lobby and placing a large neon sign of Jesus holding a lasso outside the church, he turns the once-floundering institution into a profitable business. People appear happy in the new accommodations. Local businessman Comic Book Guy loves the giant seats, and Marge’s sister Patty is pleased that Burns put ice in the urinals. In the words of Krusty’s assistant Sideshow Mel, “He [Mr. Burns] restored it [FCOS] from nave to narthex!” However, as already noted, Lisa argues that consumerism has cost the church its soul. The relationship between sacred institutions and religion as a consumable commodity is problematic for many people.

However, religion and consumerism are intimately linked in America’s history, and making money from Christianity is nothing new. Historian Laurence Moore’s *Selling God* (1994) is the classic discussion of this phenomenon. Moore works his way through the market for evangelical novels in the eighteenth century, to battles over appropriate film content (see also Black 1994), and the contemporary religious marketplace in which Christian bookstores sell CDs, books, and “Jesus junk”; televangelists populate the airwaves; and New Age stores sell an assortment of “spiritual” goods and guides to those who can afford entry into these literary and material mysteries (see also Hendershot 2004; Howard and Streck 1999, 149-220; McDannell 1995; Morgan 2007a; Schmidt 1995). Moore stresses the fact that religious people enter the market to promote their values and shape others’ perspectives (1994, 10). In other words, mass-produced goods are mediated religious ideals, instead of being things that inherently destroy the sacred elements in people’s lives. This competitive drive is constantly being revised, and the market is seen as a legitimate place to argue for one’s religious position. At the same time, Moore worries that religion’s normativeness in everyday American life makes it vulnerable to the market’s overriding forces and prevents religion from becoming a serious critical force which can elevate people beyond their everyday lives (272-277; cf. Kline 2007, V. Miller 2003).

This was Einstein’s concern (noted in chapter two), that “religion isn’t supposed to be comfortable, and it is through discomfort that we find new parts of ourselves” (2008, 210). There is a

latent assumption here that other scholars have criticized which could be called the God and Mammon fallacy, that is, there is a false assumption that religion, consumption, and financial profit cannot coexist (see Moore 1994, McDannell 1995, Morgan 2007a, Schmidt 1995). Through Lisa's claim that the new accommodations have "cost the church its soul" and dressed it up like the Whore of Babylon, *The Simpsons* suggests people are aware of the sentiments behind the God and Mammon fallacy, and these sentiments resonate with what viewers believe ("She of Little Faith").<sup>77</sup> Moore critiques the fallacy, writing, "the mystery of agency haunts us because we want to judge the quality of the product the past has served up and to wonder whether anything we might do from this point will matter. Many who do not like the business and commercial side of religion nourish the thought that it is never too late to do something" (1994, 269). Building on Marxist notions of alienation, religion scholars Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's *Selling Spirituality* (2005) attacks the consumption of "spiritual" goods and services.<sup>78</sup> They assert that spirituality is neoliberalist ideology's tool and that selling "spiritual" products numbs people to modern life's pains rather than

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<sup>77</sup> Another relevant joke is told in "Bart Sells His Soul." After Bart protests that the soul does not exist, Milhouse counters with, "but every religion says there's a soul, Bart. Why would they lie? What do they have to gain?" The scene shifts to Rev. Lovejoy's office where he is pouring money from the collection plates into a coin sorter. This episode is based around Bart selling his soul for five dollars, and then experiencing a variety of strange occurrences including automatic doors not working for him, a dream in which he cannot get to an island paradise because he has no soul to help row him there, and his loss of laughter. Eventually he reacquires his soul after a night of searching and prayer. See Koenigsberger (2004) for an extended discussion of Bart's soul in the marketplace.

<sup>78</sup> Consumerism and religion are intertwined in Marx's thought because while his definition of religion—"the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the *opium* of the people" (2008, 42; emphasis in original)—has become famous, in popular discourse it is often unaccompanied by the next paragraph: "The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is required for their *real* happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the *demand to give up a condition which needs illusions*. The criticism of religion is therefore *in embryo the criticism of the vale of woe*, the *halo* of which is religion" (42; emphasis in original). Marx's critique of religion introduces his theory of the proletariat's capitalist exploitation. But consumption is different from alienation from the results of one's labour. Marx's foundation for his theory of alienation lies in the products of our economic labour. He argues that in a capitalist system we produce goods because they own us. We consume goods in order to prove status, but while this may work for the capitalist who can accumulate enough capital to make it work for himself, the proletariat is paid enough to live a subsistence lifestyle. Proletarians work to survive while capitalists benefit from the fruits of their labour. Marx finds this alienating because he thinks we produce goods for their intrinsic beauty, not for their value to others. Being unable to create for our own aesthetic benefits, we are forced to create beautiful objects for others. We use those objects to project our identities within the social system, rather than projecting what is authentic within us (2007, 70-78; cf. mass culture critiques above). Here we can see that the fear that consumer products corrupt religion is horrifying because their very existence necessitates religion to alleviate the pain. If religion is demeaned by consumerism, then where are we to find alleviation of our suffering? However, the fact remains that under Marx's theory religion cannot cure the displacement from our work, it can only treat the symptoms and not rectify the underlying social injustices.

challenging them to change their circumstances.<sup>79</sup> Drawing upon religious traditions for its material, contemporary spirituality dehistoricizes religions, using their cultural capital to sell products that run counter-intuitive to what Carrette and King see as the world's religions' vital, prophetic role. For them, "the most troubling aspect of many modern spiritualities is precisely that they are not troubling enough. They promote accommodation to the social, economic and political mores of the day and provide little in terms of a challenge to the status quo or to a lifestyle of self-interest and ubiquitous consumption" (5). In other words, the search for a self-fulfilling spirituality divorces us from community, tradition, and history, and we are easily divided so that corporate capitalist enterprises continue to exploit us as individuals who cannot thus overthrow the system (see also V. Miller 2003).

Conversely, Heelas contends that although the diffuse spiritualities lumped under the term "New Age" are commodified, this does not exhaust their meaning. He writes, "my answer to the question 'When is an act of consumption?' is that acts . . . are *never* simply a matter of consumption" (2008, 14; emphasis in original). This is an important point because it leads to Heelas' main argument that the activities I have grouped under "spirituality" are also life-affirming and important to people. Heelas criticizes scholars such as Carrette and King for reducing all consumption to something negative, rather than seeing it as complex human activity that is part of a larger meaning making process (2008, 8).

Another issue with consumerism is its role in identity construction. French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1996, 1998) argues that we now live in a consumer society in which we buy the signs and symbols associated with objects, rather than purchasing something for its utility. Consumer goods are produced for status rather than need. This creates a society in which we constantly consume to maintain the impression of affluence. Baudrillard sees this leading to a narcissistic society where individualism only leads to our self-interest as consumers. For Baudrillard, because they are making money from others' consumption patterns, consumerism replicates power and class differences within society and helps maintain the elite's power. Meanwhile, because they have to work to pay for what they have already consumed, credit keeps the poor in their social location and maintains their alienation (1998, 37-86).

While he has a point about consumerism maintaining social distinctions within a capitalist society, Baudrillard assumes there is an "authentic" humanity beneath the projected signs and

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<sup>79</sup> Neoliberal ideology "puts profits before people, promotes privatisation of public utilities, services and resources, and is in the process of eroding many individual liberties that were established under its forerunner—political liberalism" (Carrette and King 2005, 7).

symbols. Sociologist Anthony Giddens highlights this problem in *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), arguing that in late modernity (contemporary society) people's identities are not fixed but constantly in flux. Alleviating the risks which accompany life in a global society (e.g., a war in India can have significant economic impacts in North America) requires us to sequester our experience, making sure that our everyday actions rarely connect to major existential issues (8, 156). We are searching for "authentic" relationships. These relationships exist when we are true to ourselves (78), but the problem is that our identity is not fixed. Instead, it shifts over time as we reinterpret our identity in light of changes in our lives. Getting married, having children, divorcing, losing parents, natural disasters, and triumphant celebrations as we move into new stages in life—these demonstrate the breadth of changes that can affect a person. So, while there is a sense of being true to ourselves, our "authenticity" is subject to constant revision as we try to understand ourselves in the face of constantly changing circumstances. Just like the consumer who constantly purchases to maintain their identities, we are also changing constantly—even if we talk about authenticity as if it were something static.

The assumption that "authentic" identity is crushed beneath a tide of consumer goods is a fallacy of limited alternatives. There is no absolute proof that consumer products shape people completely according to some underlying ideologies, but at the same time we cannot say that people are not affected by ideological currents embodied in consumer goods. Furthermore, there are problems with the assumption that religion is the key to solving this predicament. Returning to Berger and Luckmann's point about externalization, objectivation, and internalization (1966, 92-116), it is more useful to see religion and the products people create, use, and discard as part of a process of redefining their identities in changing circumstances without arguing for an essential humanity that is lost in the process. Giddens suggests that our authentic self (and how we understand who we are) is constantly changing, and we continue to shape it throughout our lives. Therapy is the product he highlights (1991, 70-108), but we can see how other consumer goods provide consumers with ideological direction. *The Simpsons* is no exception, providing viewers with a lexicon of humorous interpretations of reality they can use to explain their lives. However, in "She of Little Faith," *The Simpsons* embraces the God and Mammon fallacy in its treatment of Buddhism.

Christianity's denigration and Buddhism's endorsement suggest that *The Simpsons*' creators embrace the notion that money has corrupted Christianity and that Buddhists are free from material desires. Of course, as religious studies scholar Jane Iwamura (2005) demonstrates, this ties into the consumption of Buddhism. Her concept of the "oriental monk" describes characters who "represent

future salvation of the dominant culture—they embody a new hope of saving the West from capitalist greed, brute force, totalitarian rule, and spiritless technology” (32). However, once Westerners learn from the East, they are empowered to save impotent Asian cultures (32-33). This reinforces the inequality between East and West and leaves Westerners feeling superior now that Eastern wisdom has sanctified their way of life (33-38). The East provides the philosophical and spiritual insight to conquer the failures of the West, and Lisa’s Buddhism follows closely along this path. For example, her recognition of Tibet’s plight under communist China’s rule can be seen in episodes where she takes the opportunity to yell “Free Tibet!” after a school spelling bee (“I’m Spelling as Fast as I Can”), or, when the family goes to Springfield’s Chinatown, she remarks, “I love Chinatown, although I wish they would stop picking on Tibet town” while Chinese people push around bald men in red robes (“A Hunka Hunka Burns in Love”). She also introduces the Dalai Lama to Springfield in “Simple Simpson” as, “The Elvis of enlightenment, the lean, serene, chanting machine.” Iwamura calls the Dalai Lama a celebrity (2005, 25-26; cf. Lopez 1998), and he is certainly that, but he remains a valued spiritual teacher and political leader as well.

What are we to make of these uses of Buddhism? Certainly there is a pattern of social engagement and assuming spiritual enlightenment. It is also positively juxtaposed next to Christianity. Yet, Gere’s celebrity status remains unsettling for some (i.e., Turner). Gere is well known as a Buddhist and has consistently used his star status as a way to promote Tibetan independence and Buddhist causes (McLeod 1999). He founded the non-profit Tibet House, and famously spoke out against China at the 1993 academy awards. In short, while he is a celebrity, he is also a Buddhist practitioner whose religious politics may have hurt his career. This is not somebody adopting a religion for trendy purposes. To suggest that because he is a celebrity his Buddhism is somehow demeaned is an inaccurate assessment. For Turner, Buddhism must be demeaned because Gere is a celebrity and celebrities are consumer objects. However, if we look at this in light of Moore’s argument, we see an active Buddhist voice using the marketplace to further his religious agenda. Religious competition in the marketplace allows Gere a chance to share what is meaningful to him with millions of other people, and *The Simpsons* expanded his platform, supporting him in the process. In Buddhism’s case, the God and Mammon fallacy does not apply in *The Simpsons* because the religion’s values and political actions are supported in Lisa’s behaviour.

That said, *The Simpsons* is not above lampooning spirituality’s consumption. New Age spirituality’s association with consumerism has been criticized, although not every scholar agrees on how we should approach the fact that many New Age ideas are transmitted to people through book

stores, specialty magazines, seminar training, restaurants, and retreats—all of which cost money (see, e.g., Bowman 1999, Bruce 2002, Lee 2003, Mears and Ellison 2000, Possamai 2003, Redden 2005, York 2001). Pagan theologian Michael York demonstrates that certain cities (e.g., San Francisco, Bath) have become known as cities which have developed a considerable economy around the appropriation of religious techniques from around the world (e.g., yoga, meditation, shamanism), and have repackaged them for easy consumption to people who want to relax and enjoy vegetarian cuisine while partaking in “spiritual enlightenment” (1999). York criticizes New Age appropriations of indigenous religious traditions which serve an audience that, ostensibly, does not dedicate the time or effort to understand the traditions upon which these ideas were founded. Sociologist Adam Possamai continues this argument, writing, “this consumption could easily be seen as a pastiche in which contradiction and confusion are glorified. Indeed by constructing their subjective myth, there is an eclectic—if not kleptomaniac—process of selecting culture(s) and religions in a way that gives immediate pleasure; in a way that ‘speaks to the heart’” (2003, 40). His argument revolves around the first and third points I identified about common conceptions of spirituality: That it is immanentist and that it revolves around everyday life. The problem for Possamai is that the consumer turn in spirituality implies that one can achieve a desired spiritual effect without reference to deeper status that apparently comes from dedicated practice of a religious tradition (40).

Other scholars do not take such a critical stance towards consumerism and the New Age. Religious studies scholar Marion Bowman (1999), sociologists Daniel Mears and Christopher Ellison (2000), and cultural studies scholar Guy Redden (2005) emphasize the interconnected networks of people that comprise the New Age movement and the fact that they draw upon commercial networks in order to develop both themselves and these interpersonal bonds. In this case, it seems inappropriate to pass judgement on the commodification of religious goods because without studying how people use the materials we cannot evaluate their religious practices. Without some way of measuring the spiritual states of different people, it is impossible to tell whether or not Possamai’s and York’s claims are true. The commodified religions people consume may achieve something. Assessing a “successful” appropriation within the New Age framework, aside from judging it pragmatically in light of the practitioner’s concerns, is next to impossible. When we take factors such as these into consideration, what we can see in the New Age market for religious goods is a network of ideas and accessibility. This may or may not lead to a superficial spirituality. However, this does not matter to *The Simpsons*, as New Age’s outward trappings are fodder for jokes.

In “Make Room for Lisa,” after Lisa develops stress-related stomach aches, she and Homer visit a New Age store called “Karma-ceuticals.” The store itself is designed to mimic many New Age stores. In the store windows are various symbols that have been appropriated by New Age seekers, including the medieval style sun and moon, and a large yin-yang. The inside is decorated with similar symbols, icons, and assorted New Age goods. There is an ankh on the wall, a Stonecutters flag hanging from the ceiling, and a statue of Ganesh on the counter.<sup>80</sup> A small replica of an Egyptian sarcophagus can be seen at the bottom of the screen, and faint flute music can be heard in the background.

While Homer’s actions in “Homer the Heretic” support the kind of individualistic, self-spirituality that Heelas (1996) sees at New Age’s core, Homer does not condone many of New Age’s accoutrements. New Age ideas do not appeal to him, but the movement’s experimentation and willingness to appropriate ideas from other cultures entices Lisa. This is apparent after they enter the store in “Make Room For Lisa”, and Homer complains about buying a dreamcatcher, calls the owner “hippie lady,” and refuses to hear about the store specials, asking if they have something to make Lisa stop complaining. The answer to Lisa’s problems comes in the form of sensory deprivation tanks. Spirituality in Karma-ceuticals is too easy; it is simply prepackaged sentiment with no lasting value.

After Homer and Lisa are positioned in the sensory deprivation tanks, Karma-ceuticals’ owner is visited by repossession workers who empty her store of merchandise. Her defence is that the *I Ching* told her she had six months until bankruptcy. She then tries to bargain with the workers by discussing things over some sympathy tea. The problem is the teas are already loaded onto the truck. Later, when they are driving away with the goods, one repossession worker holds up a crystal and looks at the other one (whose stomach bulges out over the steering wheel of the truck) and says “Abracadabra. The crystal says your baby shall be a girl.” The other man tells him to shut up and throws the crystal out the window (“Make Room for Lisa”). This joke satirizes New Age merchandise, and the idea that crystals have spiritual powers, as foolishness and a waste of money.

When it comes to the treatment of the New Age goods in this episode they are just that: goods. That is, they are material objects that can be bought and sold in a store and repossessed when the proprietor cannot make payments. As Carrette and King argue, these objects are commodified artefacts that embody the capitalist marketplace’s values rather than the communally resistive

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<sup>80</sup> The Stonecutters are a parody of the Freemasons. Homer joins the group in the season six episode “Homer the Great.” “Make Room for Lisa” aired in season 10, which assumes a consistent audience that will make the connection.



elements of the religious traditions from which they borrow (2005, 5-6). Instead, by labelling things like crystals as “spiritual,” they argue that we have fallen into one of neoliberalism’s traps: “the term spirituality has now become the ‘brand-label’ for the search for meaning, values, transcendence, hope and connectedness in ‘advanced capitalist’ societies. The notion operates by compartmentalising questions of human values into an identifiable market space” (2005, 32). That *The Simpsons* saw it appropriate to have Homer say “Gimme a break!” to the dreamcatcher and centre a mean-spirited joke around the crystal suggests that the value that people find through using these materials is misplaced. These jokes suggest that it is misguided to try and find meaningful experience in material culture that is sold on ideas appropriated from other cultures. Furthermore, people have been making jokes about New Age spirituality for a long time. These jokes continue in this tradition and assume the audience shares *The Simpsons*’ creators’ sentiments. Rather than a way of accessing meaningful experience in a capitalist economy, this idea is a product of late capitalism and its commodification of everything (Possamai 2003, York 2001). These jokes are consistent with the popular view that New Age spirituality is not built on any solid ground and that it is associated with a cash grab.<sup>81</sup>

On the other hand, business scholar Nurit Zaidman (2007) argues that New Age stores are not just places of business, many are also “spiritual centres” with designated sacred spaces where spiritual experiences take place away from the main business areas (364). When Homer and Lisa enter Karma-ceuticals they are faced with a wide variety of items from dreamcatchers to toothbrushes. Yet, the back room with the sensory deprivation tanks is a stark contrast. There are two tanks (white pods with water in them), hooks on the walls, and a small table with a copy of *New Ager* magazine on it (featuring a man sitting in lotus position). The walls and floor are grey and there is a curtain pulled across the door. Here in the inner sanctuary the idea is to get people into the sensory deprivation tanks

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<sup>81</sup> In “Bart Gets a Z,” *The Simpsons* parodies *The Secret*’s (Byrne 2006) popular appeal. This book/DVD by Australian Rhonda Byrne was released on November 7, 2006, and by the time of writing had sold over 2.2 million DVD copies and made over \$65 million (*The Numbers* 2010). There are also over 5.3 million copies of the book in print (Yoffe 2007). *The Secret* continues in the tradition of New Thought theories about positive thinking, and has been criticized for promoting an unattainable ideal of just thinking about making changes without taking any direct action (see, e.g., Ehrenreich 2007, Yoffe 2007; on the history of New Thought see Albanese 2007). Promoted by Oprah and studied in book clubs, *The Secret* is a bona-fide success in the metaphysical market. In “Bart Gets a Z,” *The Secret* is recast as *The Answer*, and “is available wherever dubious self-help books are sold.” Bart buys *The Answer* for his teacher, Mrs. Krabapple, as a way of making amends after he gets her fired. However, once they start using the book, (writing down her dream on “the index card of fate” and then breaking her dream down “into smaller wishes, then break those down into wishable actions”), she says it “sounds like one of those loony self-help books.” This satirical point directs our attention to the fact that a market for metaphysical solutions, based in the power of individual thoughts, continues to exist and can be quite lucrative. It also reminds us that *The Simpsons* treats these blatant attempts to make money from people’s spirituality and metaphysical assumptions with little respect.

where, according to the store owner, “You’re about to take a journey into the mind. You may see and experience things that are strange and frightening. But remember, they can’t physically harm you—though they may destroy you mentally” (“Make Room for Lisa”).

Once inside the sensory deprivation tank, Lisa undergoes a series of hallucinations in which she experiences what it is like to be the family cat, a tree, and journalist Cokie Roberts. She then sees what it is like to be Homer and realizes that she is unfair to him when he makes sacrifices to spend time with her. Here, while the material culture of New Age consumerism has been satirized as ineffective and a waste of money, the reality of spiritual experience that can be gained through participating in commodified spiritual activities is affirmed. Lisa can—and does—have a meaningful, personal, and *real* spiritual experience. While being Cokie Roberts might be seen as a joke, the emotional centre of this episode comes through this clearly meaningful spiritual experience of imagining herself as her father. A New Age technique reconciles Lisa and Homer. The core of “spirituality” on which *The Simpsons*’ religious satire stands is reaffirmed.

The irony involved in this example makes it difficult to say *The Simpsons* directly criticizes the commodification and consumption of religion. On the one hand, we could say that it lampoons the New Age by having Homer refer to Karma-ceuticals’ owner as “hippie lady,” having her appear flakey, and mocking the material culture of the New Age. Conversely, the pursuit of a healing experience through sensory deprivation *works*. Heelas (2008; see also Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 82-110) argues that the pursuit of “experience” is what draws people into the New Age marketplace in the first place. While *The Simpsons* portrays much of that marketplace as ridiculous, it also validates New Age spiritual pursuits by having the episode’s emotional highpoint come from Lisa’s hallucination in the sensory deprivation tank.

## 4.2 Science’s Rational Challenge

Lisa is also the voice of reason, keeping religious excesses in check with her scientific rationality. When she is frightened because the city builds a cemetery outside her bedroom she reassures herself by saying, “I believe in science and rationality, not ghosts and monsters” (“The Girl Who Slept Too Little”). Scientific thinking, a belief in the rational order of things, and resorting to materialist arguments for why things happen are frequent occurrences in *The Simpsons*—especially when it looks like religion is gaining the upper hand. Delaney shapes his argument around *The Simpsons*’ use of science as a debunking force, and a survey of two episodes—“Lisa the Skeptic” and

“The Monkey Suit”—illustrates how *The Simpsons* uses science to draw the boundaries between what is acceptable belief in an unseen order and what is not.

In “Lisa the Skeptic,” Lisa finds a strange skeleton that resembles an angel while on an archeological dig. Homer takes the skeleton home and the townspeople, convinced it is an actual angel’s skeleton, pay Homer to see the angel and pray in front of it. Lisa is thoroughly unconvinced there is a dead angel in their garage and takes a bone sample to the local laboratory, asking renowned palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould to analyze it. His results are inconclusive, which convinces the townspeople to take the angel away from the Simpsons. However, when a mob comes to retrieve the valuable artefact they find it has been taken to a nearby hilltop where it has been marked with the message, “The End Will Come at Sundown.” As people prepare for the apocalypse, Lisa remains firm in her unbelief and at sundown we learn that the angel skeleton was a promotional gimmick for the new shopping mall. The Springfielders change course and, instead of worrying about the angel, rush off to the mall.

Similarly, “The Monkey Suit” criticizes the fight between religion and science in America’s biology classrooms, from the 1925 *Tennessee vs. John Scopes* trial (also known as the “Monkey Trial”) over the right to teach evolution in school to the 2005 *Kitzmiller vs. Dover Area School District* (hereafter “Dover trial”) decision to ban Intelligent Design in the small Pennsylvania town of Dover.<sup>82</sup> After attending an exhibit at the Springfield Museum of Natural History, where creationism is presented as a myth, religious conservative Ned Flanders convinces the church council to pressure the local school to teach alternatives to evolution. After blackmailing Principal Skinner, creationism will now to be taught in all science courses. Lisa’s class watches the film, “So You’re Calling God a Liar: An Unbiased Comparison of Creationism and Evolution,” in which the Bible is “written by our Lord” and Charles Darwin is called a cowardly drunk and shown passionately kissing Satan. Every answer on a test is “God did it.” Eventually, the town passes a law stating that only creationism can be taught in schools. When Lisa breaks the law and starts reading from *The Origin of Species* she is arrested and a parody of the Scopes trial takes place. Springfield scientist Professor Frink witnesses for the defence, testifying that evolution tells us God has less power than the Under Secretary of Agriculture. Witnesses for the prosecution include a “Ph.D. in Truthology from Christian Tech” and Ned Flanders himself. At one point during the trial, the William Jennings Bryan parody, Wallace

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<sup>82</sup> Moran (2002) introduces the Scopes trial, contextualizing it historically, and providing both transcripts and primary sources from the time. Humes (2007) and Slack (2007) offer accessible narratives of the events in Dover. Transcripts of the Dover trial are available from the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania (2009).

Brady, holds a baby fawn in an attempt to sway the jury, saying, “Now, Bambi, who started that forest fire that killed your mama? Evolution?!” Eventually Marge turns the tables by giving Homer a bottle of beer in the courtroom. He acts like an ape, proving that Homer is related to the missing link in human evolution. The episode ends on a conciliatory note with Lisa praising the separation of church and state while still respecting Ned’s religious beliefs.

These episodes consistently portray science trumping religion, while allowing for religion’s continued, if marginalized, relevance. Heit and Delaney both miss this point, though from opposite ends of the spectrum. Heit suggests that Christianity poses questions that science cannot possibly answer, so assuming that it can is rationally flawed and misses the point. Naturalistic science cannot answer metaphysical questions such as whether or not God exists. This does not mean that Christianity and science must be opposed, but that they can work together to enlighten the Christian life (2008, 128-142). While Lisa’s civil stance at “The Monkey Suit”’s conclusion resembles a good example of this principle, we cannot forget that she also just won a trial against creationism. In “Lisa the Skeptic,” at the conclusion of the trial determining whether the skeleton really is an angel, the judge declares, “As for science versus religion, I’m issuing a restraining order. Religion should stay five hundred yards away from science at all times.” Furthermore, in “HOMЯ,” Homer mathematically proves there is no God, causing Flanders to burn Homer’s work. This certainly suggests that while Heit may be correct in arguing that science can only explain the natural world, only being able to rationally explain the material universe is a powerful and convincing argument against the existence of a supernatural reality—especially one as detailed as Christians posit. Neuroscientist Sam Harris’ *The End of Faith* (2004) started a brief trend of highly publicized anti-religious books which favoured an approach to understanding life based on scientific rationality dubbed “New Atheism” (see also, e.g., Dawkins 2006, Dennett 2006, Hitchens 2007). Harris and his colleagues all contend that religion and rationality cannot co-exist, and that to progress as a species we should do away with religion. Delaney (2008, 189-217) shares this sentiment, arguing that religious beliefs are “God of the gaps” arguments, providing explanations for natural phenomena until science can catch up. However, this argument may not be as convincing as he assumes. According to the 2008 GSS, 61.6% of Americans thought that the statement, “We trust too much in science and not enough in religious faith” is inapplicable (Davis, Smith, and Marsden 2008; cf. Boyer 2001, Shermer 2000). While interpreting this response is difficult because we do not know what respondents mean by “inapplicable” (e.g., that we should never trust science/religion? That they are in perfect balance?),

it at least suggests that Delaney and the New Atheists do not have a monopoly on science and religion's meanings in American life.

These two episodes also focus on the most problematic scientific theory in contemporary America—Darwinian evolution—and *The Simpsons* supports the theory's acceptance by the scientific community. While evolution is almost universally accepted among professional scientists, evangelical and fundamentalist Christians have a long history of opposing evolution for moral (e.g., it will lead to the downfall of society) and religious (e.g., it is not in the Bible) reasons. Executing what philosopher Barbara Forrest (an expert witness for the plaintiffs in the *Kitzmiller* case) and zoologist Paul Gross call a “seduction phenomenon” (2004, 5) (although “propaganda” [Cowan 2004, 259; see fn. 28] would be a more appropriate term), proponents of what is now called “Intelligent Design” (ID) are trying to redirect the nation's scientific discourse.<sup>83</sup> Utilizing American sympathies towards having every position heard in public debate, Intelligent Design proponents question evolution's validity as a theory and promote the idea that there is an intelligent designer behind the natural world.<sup>84</sup> However, as its critics routinely attest, Intelligent Design has yet to contribute to scientific theory—especially evolutionary biology—with new theories and concepts that can be empirically tested. Furthermore, its main argument from “irreducible complexity”—“a single system composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning” (Behe 1996, 39; see also Behe 2000, 2001, 2007; Shanks and Joplin 1999)—is being heavily challenged by refutations from naturalistic scientists (see,

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<sup>83</sup> “Intelligent Design” developed from “creation science” after the Supreme Court case *Edwards v. Aguillard* declared teaching the latter unconstitutional (see, e.g., Numbers 2007, Scott 2007). However, it differs in that while it posits an intelligent designer as the reason for life, it also accepts a broad range of scientific theories, for example, accepting that the Earth is billions of years old as opposed to the thousands of years that some creationists posit. For discussions against ID, see, e.g., Forrest and Gross (2004), Petto and Godfrey (2007), and Shermer (2006). Pennock (1999) helpfully locates ID within neo-creationism while also defending Darwinian evolutionary theory. For a theistic position that also endorses evolution see Francis Collins (2006). On another note, Gould (1999) proposes the idea of non-overlapping magisteria as a model for science and religion's relationship. That is, science provides us with the facts and theories to explain how the world works and religion encompasses moral questioning and ultimate meaning. Problems arise when the two become conflated as they do in creationism.

<sup>84</sup> ID's foundational figure and driving force, Berkeley law professor emeritus Phillip Johnson, has proposed a systematic agenda for infiltrating the scientific community's Darwinian orthodoxy. Dubbing this plan “the wedge,” its goal is systematically to undermine Darwinian materialism by creating a volume of books and articles that generate enough publicity to draw attention to them. This will “wedge” ID into scientific debate and eventually break Darwinian thinking, leaving ID as the dominant paradigm (Johnson 1999; see also Center for the Renewal of Science & Culture 1998, Dembski 2006, Johnson 2000). The problem is that in this light the arguments appear less than scientific, especially once scientists start challenging them (see, e.g., Behe [1996, 2000]; Shanks and Joplin [1999]). Rather, they start appearing as systematic attempts to influence public policy without adhering to accepted scientific standards.

e.g., F. Collins 2006, 181-195; Dawkins 2009; Forrest and Gross 2004; Petto and Godfrey 2007; Shermer 2006).

*The Simpsons* clearly promotes scientific rationality as a means of understanding the world, while also allowing for the supernatural's presence. However, when the two come into conflict science often wins. In addition to the examples already given, in "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad Marge" Marge is put before a psychiatric board to determine her sanity. While the panel of scientists deliberates her fate, she starts praying. When they ask her what she is doing, Marge explains that she was praying. One of the psychiatrists then says, "I see. And this 'God,' is he in this room right now?" When Marge replies that God is everywhere they declare her insane. The Christian belief in God's omnipresence is taken as conclusive proof of insanity. Conversely, at the end of "Pray Anything," after Lisa has given scientific explanations for acts of God such as a freak rainstorm and flooding, she is at a loss to explain why the rain stops. Her answer is, "I don't know. Buddha?" Our perspective then shifts to heaven where the Buddha is sitting with God and suggests that the people on earth have suffered enough, implying that God is able to manipulate the physical world. However, this can also be seen as a chance to use humour in a "God of the gaps" argument since Lisa was able to scientifically explain everything that led to the town being flooded.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

With this in mind, we should ask why the two *apparently* contradictory positions of science and spirituality work at the core of *The Simpsons*' unseen order. We can use the concept of *institutional consonance*—the fact that new ideas which are considered plausible, and build upon already held beliefs and ideas, are integrated into already existing plausibility structures. Scientific thinking has brought about significant changes in the modern world, but fails to explain everything. At the same time, while religious institutions have lost their credibility with certain segments of the population, the metaphysical tradition of American religion has promoted the concept of naturally and supernaturally influencing the natural world through human actions, and American individualism makes actively selecting a religion or picking from many traditions into a personal decision. These institutionalized patterns directly influence the way people craft their spiritual and religious lives. The underlying assumptions of science and spirituality—that the natural world and its sometimes inexplicable occurrences (miracles) can be explained through rational means, that people have the ability to change the world around them, and that our religious affiliations are a matter of personal choice based on "what works for you"—are endorsed in *The Simpsons*. This endorsement shows us

what resonates with the habitualized (if not explicitly stated) religious assumptions in the show. With this in mind, we turn to the related issue of *institutional dissonance*, looking at what negative jokes about religious groups tell us about *The Simpsons'* assumptions about religion's role in social life.

## Chapter 5—Protestant Contributions to *The Simpsons*' Unseen Order

*Simpsons* commentators have lofty expectations, high praise, and sharp criticisms for the program's most prominent Christian characters. According to Heit, "Christianity's blunted authority in American culture is very much the result of leaders like Reverend Lovejoy bending their faith's fundamental beliefs to fit into a secular context" (2008, 69), but "even when things are so dire that Reverend Lovejoy must risk his own safety, he will do so to help his flock" (82). He further argues that Lovejoy's prayers are keys to *The Simpsons*' satirical attack on Christianity (246-247), while Bowler thinks Lovejoy's "choice of Bible readings is often ill advised" (2001, 9). Pinsky writes that Lovejoy is "hypocritical and occasionally venal, but he is not evil or immoral, merely human" (2007, 71). The evangelical Ned Flanders is also a popular character in *Simpsons* literature. Henry calls Flanders' faith "highly exaggerated" (2008, 247), while Bowler dubs him "television's most effective mortal (i.e., not an angel) exponent of a Christian life well lived" (1996/1997, 15-16). Turner argues that Ned and his family "serve as a constant reminder of the ugliness of organized religion's most significant trend in recent years: the rise of fundamentalism" (2004, 265). Conversely, Pinsky calls Ned "the fairest and most sympathetic portrayal of an evangelical Christian in American popular culture" (2007, 46). These characterizations point to the seriousness with which these journalists and scholars take *The Simpsons*' portraits of Protestant life in America, but they have not missed the fact that God, accessed through prayer, is also present in *The Simpsons*, which adds a Christian supernatural element to the program's unseen order.

In this chapter we examine God as a character in *The Simpsons*, noting the ways his portrayal criticizes and satirizes the Christian tradition.<sup>85</sup> We then visit the caricatured mainline "Presbylutheran" First Church of Springfield (FCOS) and examine the resident minister, Rev. Timothy Lovejoy, to learn about the town's most prominent religious institution and its representative's life. Finally, we observe the Simpsons' neighbours, the Flanders, who are a study in positive and negative evangelical stereotypes in the program. Looking at Protestantism through these characters helps us understand how *The Simpsons*' creators interpret the United States' dominant Christian tradition(s). Delving first into God and prayer, then mainline Protestantism and finally

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<sup>85</sup> Throughout this dissertation I use the male pronoun for God because that is how *The Simpsons* depicts him. That said, God is not universally seen as male in American Christianity. God is seen as male, female, and as a genderless "it" by different individuals across the Christian traditions.



evangelicalism, we will move from the religious elements closer to *The Simpsons*' comedic sensibilities to the more marginal ones.

### 5.1 God: Too Old and Too Rich to be a Class Act?

“Homer the Heretic” not only depicts God for the first time in *The Simpsons*, but also discusses his character. After the dream where God speaks to Homer, he informs his family that God told him missing church is acceptable. Intrigued, Bart asks his father what God is like. Homer describes him as, “Perfect teeth. Nice smell. A class act all the way.” This is contrasted with God’s portrayal in Homer’s explanation for why his house almost burnt down: “God is vengeful.” Pinsky focuses on these two elements of God’s character (2007, 15-31), noting that “God is not mocked. When characters in *The Simpsons* face a crisis, they turn to God. He answers their prayers, often instantaneously, and he intervenes in their lives” (16). Pinsky is gracious with his interpretation, as a significant portion of *Simpsons* jokes about God could be considered mocking—a fact he acknowledges in passing. For example, when the family watches a Biblical epic parody about Noah in “Das Bus,” Bart proclaims, “God is so in your face.” Homer responds, “Yeah, he’s my favourite fictional character.” Furthermore, in “Homer Loves Flanders,” Homer prays for tickets to the big football game. Ned, having won tickets in a radio contest, arrives at the front door and offers to take Homer with him. Slamming the door in Ned’s face, Homer looks toward the ceiling and asks “Why do you mock me, O Lord!” Homer mistakes a waffle Bart threw on the ceiling for God, and after Marge peels it off, Homer catches it, saying, “I know I shouldn’t eat thee but...” He then takes a big bite and drools, “Sacrilicious.” Finally, in “Treehouse of Horror XIV,” God, depicted as a beam of light, chases Homer. After Homer crosses railroad tracks before God can catch him, God mutters, “I am too old and too rich for this,” before letting Homer escape, bringing God’s omniscience and omnipotence into question. God is as open to ridicule and mockery as any character in *The Simpsons*.

Heit has a different problem with God’s portrayal in *The Simpsons*. Most of his examples deal with Homer’s understanding of God, and “God thus comes to reflect cultural values rather than embody traditional notions of who God is. . . . The critical point here is that Homer fails to recognize the theologically inconsistent image he offers” (2008, 36). While Heit’s main concern is bringing people back to Protestant orthodoxy, his argument misses the point: Homer’s many misconceptions of God reflect different ways American Protestants have depicted God. To rebut Heit, God *always* reflects cultural values (Delaney 2008, 203-207). Traditional notions of God are cultural values that have become sedimented over time. Furthermore, why should *The Simpsons*' representations of God

adhere to traditional standards or be theologically consistent? None of the program's creators' and owners' vested interests—entertainment, cultural subversion, or profit—is concerned with upholding Christian orthodoxy. That said, *The Simpsons* mines contrasting images of God in the Biblical and American traditions for humorous material. The satirical newspaper *The Onion* once published an article claiming God had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder (2001). With the way God is depicted in American sermons, entertainment, and other cultural resources one could be forgiven for thinking that this fake news source printed the truth. *The Simpsons* certainly suggests that God transitions between grace and vengeance, and keeping him satisfied is in everybody's best interest.

That God fluctuates between benevolence and violence has a rich history in American culture. Possibly the most famous American sermon, Puritan Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," explains that "God is a great deal more angry with great numbers that are now on earth: yea, doubtless, with many that are now in this congregation, who it may be are at ease, than he is with many of those who are now in the flames of hell" and "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked" (1741). Edwards's wrathful depiction of God was not unique. His contemporary George Whitfield warned, "O obstinate sinner, whoever thou art, he [God] will by no means spare thee" (1738). The Second Great Awakening's leading voice, Charles Grandison Finney, urged the churches to take a proper moral stand, opposing slavery and promoting temperance because "God cannot sustain this free and blessed country, which we love and pray for, unless the church will take right ground" (1835, 274). These wrathful proclamations about God continue to the present day, frequently featuring in radical political sermons against liberal political actions. For example, on September 13, 2001 former Moral Majority leader and fundamentalist televangelist Jerry Falwell claimed on his colleague Pat Robertson's *700 Club* that God withdrew his protection from America on September 11, 2001 because of the actions of the American Civil Liberties Union, pagans, homosexuals, and abortionists (see also Henry 2008, 246).

While Falwell and Robertson do not represent all Americans, the fact remains that you cannot live in the United States without hearing ongoing debates about God, what he is angry about, and the punishment in store for sinners. Statistics show that almost 80% of Americans believe in God.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Jensen (2009) reports the 2007 Harris Poll giving 82% of respondents believing in God. The 2008 Pew Report (2008b) shows 92% of Americans believing in God or a Universal Spirit. In the 2000 GSS: 6.5% of respondents believed in a higher power, 3.2% believed in God sometimes, 15% believed in God with doubts, and 60% believed in God without doubting (Davis, Smith, and Martin 2000). By the 2008 GSS: 10.2% believed in an impersonal higher power, 4.5% do not know if God exists and believe there is no way to find out, 4.2%

However, among believers there are also significant divides in how God is understood, which correlate to political positions. While the majority of Christians conceive of God as a loving, caring, and compassionate entity, conservative Christians also associate God with power and judgment (Froese and Bader 2007; Jensen 1998, 2009; J. Hunter 1991; Kunkel et al. 1999; Noffke and McFadden 2001; Wuthnow 1989; cf. Stark 2008, 75-78). This matters because people's concepts of God affect how they solve problems, including issues such as abortion and capital punishment (Gorsuch and Smith 1983; J. Hunter 1991; Maynard, Gorsuch, and Bjorck 2001; Stark 2008; Wuthnow 1989).<sup>87</sup> In America's polarized political environment, differences in opinions about God emphasize religio-political differences. While American Protestants, who make up a little more than 50% of American adults, can agree that God is a loving entity, conservatives are leaders in characterizing God as punitive.<sup>88</sup>

*The Simpsons* is aware of this tradition, and frequently references God's anger for humorous purposes. In "I Married Marge," Marge tells Homer that she thinks the song "You Light Up My Life"

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believe in God sometimes, 16.9% believe in God with doubts, and 60.7% have no doubts God exists (Davis, Smith, and Martin 2008). The 2005 Baylor Religion Survey (BRS) found 65.8% of respondents have no doubts God exists, 10.8% believe in God with some doubts, 1.7% sometimes believe in God, and 14.3% believe in a higher power or cosmic force (Baylor University 2005). I arrived at the "almost 80%" number by combining the Harris Poll, and the 2008 GSS, and 2005 BRS numbers for those who have no doubt God exists with the numbers of those who believe in God with some doubts. This averages 78.4% of the respondents to those three surveys. I did not include "higher power" in this number because the term is too vague, excluding the Pew survey from my average as they equate higher power with God. Equating the two terms may show us that 92% of Americans believe in a significant agent as part of the unseen order, but it tells us very little about its nature. For example, equating a Fundamentalist Baptist's God with the Hindu concept of the universal soul is erroneous because they are radically different beyond the fact that they are both supernatural entities. As these surveys were not just surveys of Christians, it is important to distinguish the different characteristics of divine beings. That said, other studies show that some Christians see God as a universal spirit, making my estimate likely conservative. The salient point is that a significant percentage of Americans believe in God or some other agent in the world.

<sup>87</sup> Stark's *What Americans Really Believe* (2008) reports that evangelicals are similar to other Americans on moral issues (156-157), however, his data (collected from the 2007 BRS survey) suggests otherwise. For example, he reports that 94% of evangelicals think abortion is wrong. This percentage declines to 75% of Catholics, 60% of liberal Protestants, and 24% of people with no religion. This means that 63% of non-evangelical respondents think abortion is wrong. However, that is a 31% difference separating evangelicals from all other religious groups politically, and distinguishes them from non-believers by 70%. Secular humanist Gregory Paul questions Stark's work in interpreting the BRS data, taking issue with Stark's claim that the level of atheism has remained consistent for the last sixty years (2009a; see also Ingram 2009; Paul 2009b; Phan 2009). However, when we look at the statistics the BRS survey represents us with, we can call Stark's interpretations into question while still seeing that the data corresponds to other survey results. Put differently, the data is still useful while interpretations of it can be questioned.

<sup>88</sup> The Pew Survey reports that 51.3% of American adults are Protestants (2008a, 10). This number is a composite of evangelicals (26.3%), mainline Protestants (18.1%), and historically black churches (6.9%). The 2008 GSS also found 51.3% of respondents were Protestants (Davis, Smith, and Marsden 2008). The 2005 BRS respondents were 58.7% Protestant (Baylor University 2005)

is about God. Homer responds, “Oh, well, he’s always happy. No, wait, he’s always mad.” In “Mr. Plow,” Homer and his best friend Barney Gumble start competing snow removal businesses. At the episode’s conclusion they decide to work together, prompting Homer to proclaim, “When two best friends work together, not even God himself can stop them.” God’s voice then echoes from overhead “Oh no?” and a ray of light melts all the snow. In the episode “Pray Anything,” Homer becomes FCOS’s proprietor after suing the church. He throws a huge housewarming party at which numerous sins, including gambling, drunkenness, blasphemy, and idolatry, are committed. Storm clouds gather over the church and Marge, fearing for everybody’s safety, warns him, “Aren’t you afraid you might be incurring God’s wrath?” Homer nonchalantly replies, “Eh, God’s cool,” to which Marge says, “See, I don’t know he is. In the Bible he’s always smiting and turning people into salt.” Shortly thereafter, a bolt from the heavens electrocutes Homer and the town almost floods (in an act of God’s vengeance). Only pleas from the Buddha and Kentucky Fried Chicken’s founder, Colonel Sanders (feeding God popcorn chicken), calms the deity. Marge has a point—the Biblical God has a violent record. Marge references Gen 19:26, in which Lot’s wife is turned into salt when she looks back at Sodom and Gomorrah. *The Simpsons* has also referenced the story of Noah, in which God killed all but eight people in a giant flood (“Das Bus”; “Mom and Pop Art”; “Homer and Ned’s Hail Mary Pass”; Gen 6-9), and depicts hell as a fiery inferno, much like artistic renditions since Christianity’s inception and as described in Revelation 20:10 (e.g., “Bart Gets Hit by a Car”; “Treehouse of Horror IV”).<sup>89</sup>

In “Treehouse of Horror XVIII,” *The Simpsons* parodies the contemporary “hell house” phenomenon, in which evangelical Christians depict punishments for people’s sins on earth. The documentary *Hell House* (Ratliff 2001) chronicles Cedar Hill, Texas’ Trinity Church members’ careful planning and sincerity in creating a phenomenon that reflects their unseen order. In *Hell House*, rape victims kill themselves, homosexuals die of AIDS, and only a girl who took an abortion pill and bleeds over a hospital gurney, before calling out to Jesus, is saved. The rest are condemned to eternal punishment and torture. Designed to scare people into believing, *The Simpsons* summarizes their position on God’s relationship with hell and hell houses when Ned prays, “Please Lord, grant me the power to psychologically torture them into loving you” (“Treehouse of Horror XVIII”). He then turns into the devil, illustrates how the seven deadly sins are present in Springfield, and shows the children hell, which is based on Hieronymous Bosch’s depiction in “The Garden of Earthly Delights.”

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<sup>89</sup> “and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (NRSV).

In *The Simpsons*' version, Principal Skinner's head and shoulders are now a building in the middle of a lake of fire, into which people jump from a hole in the back of his head. Apu is chased up a tree and poked with pitchforks while protesting that he is Hindu, and Mr. Burns has been turned into a toad-like creature, although he insists he regrets nothing. Terrified, Bart, Lisa, Milhouse, and the local bully Nelson Muntz all swear they will never commit the deadly sins and Ned is satisfied that the children are scared straight.

Vengence and cruelty are cultural traits attributed to God. Drawing from scripture to determine God's animosity towards homosexuals (Lev 18:22, Rom 1:26-32), condemnation of adultery and sexual immorality (e.g., Ex 20:14; Pv 6:32; Mt 5:27-28; 1 Cor 6:9-10, 18-20; Gal 5:19-21), and granting eternal salvation for those who choose Jesus as a personal saviour, while damning those who do not (e.g., Jn 3:16, 10:9, 11:25, 14:6; Acts 4:2; Rom 6, 10:9-10; 1 Tim 2:4-5; Rev 3:20), are part of the unseen order conservative American Protestants emphasize when missionizing others. Only by accepting Jesus' death on the cross as redemption for their personal sins do conservative Christians think people go to heaven. Emphasizing God as a cosmic bully may seem cold and harsh to some, but scaring you into what these Christians see as ethical behaviour is congruent with their lived religious realities, something they see as an act of love. *The Simpsons* disagrees with this, but uses these portrayals of God to satirize those who do see him this way.

God in *The Simpsons* is not always a wrathful deity. Some depictions draw upon the American liberal Protestant tradition. While conservative Christian voices about God may be the loudest and the most sensational, American liberals have a long history of invoking God for their causes (Hutchison 1976). The influential Unitarian Universalist William Ellery Channing wrote that Christianity's essence lay in "The elevation of men above the imperfections, temptations, sins, sufferings, of the present state, to a diviner being,—this is the great purpose of God, revealed and accomplished by Jesus Christ" (1967, 197). Some nineteenth and twentieth century reformers shared Channing's sentiments about human elevation. They also saw Jesus' example as revealing a loving God, often seeing him as a divine person in the Christian Trinity.<sup>90</sup> Finney's advice to revivalists included making sure sinners accepted Christ's atonement, which would both satisfy God and lead

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<sup>90</sup> The other entity in the Christian Trinity is the Holy Spirit. This confusing mystery of how Christians can be monotheists, but their God be three people, is satirically questioned in "Treehouse of Horror XV," in which Ned acquires the power to see people's deaths. Begging Homer not to go to work, where he will cause Springfield's destruction, Ned says, "Homer, please, don't tempt the gods. I mean God. There's one God. Only one. Well, sometimes there's three." This joke references the general confusion that comes from trying to explain the Trinity and people's general awareness of the problem.

them to new ethical practices for the social good (1835, 334-352). The social gospel's major proponent, Walter Rauschenbusch (1967), argued that Christ's goal was to bring about a moral realignment that would lead to a better society based on equality, justice, and sharing property. Here God commands a great society in which contemporary social ills are cured through moral changes and altruistic decision making. Today, liberal evangelical pastor and social activist Jim Wallis writes that poverty is the foremost Biblical concern and that we should adjust our social policies towards its alleviation (regardless of political affiliation) (2005, 209-293). Positioning himself between conservative calls for personal ethics and liberal requests for increased funding, Wallis makes his stand on Matt 25:31-46 in which Jesus separates the saved from the condemned based on how they treated the impoverished and persecuted in society. For him "This judgement is not about right doctrine or good theology, not about personal piety or sexual ethics, not about church leadership or about success in ministry. It's about how we treated the most vulnerable people in our society, whom Jesus calls 'the least of these.' Jesus is, in effect, saying, I'll know how much you love me by how you treat them" (218-219). Like Rauschenbusch generations before him, Wallis found that biblical Christianity calls him to a greater love for the least privileged Americans. God, through Jesus, calls people towards repentance and greater social purpose. He blesses those who adhere to his commandments and directs society towards an ultimate good. If God punishes, he also rewards and finds joy in those who adhere to his commandments.<sup>91</sup>

The same holds true in *The Simpsons*. God frequently helps those who call upon him while living according to his commandments. Of all the characters, it is Ned and his family who benefit the most from God's favour. In "A Star is Burns," the Flanders family films a re-enactment of the story of Moses in the rushes. After the youngest son, Todd, is placed in a basket and carried away by the river's current, Ned prays, "Flanders to God! Flanders to God! Get off your cloud and save my Todd." A bolt of lightning knocks over a tree which stops the basket. In "Homer the Heretic," when the fire from the Simpsons' home moves to the Flanders', a raincloud appears over their house, puts out the fire, and then a rainbow appears. Similarly, in "Team Homer," Ned's bowling team "The Holy Rollers" competes against Homer's "Pin Pals." After Ned rolls a spare, Homer starts taunting him: "God boy couldn't get a strike." Ned looks upwards and says, "It's me, Ned." Then the pin falls over and the ball returner jolts Homer with electricity.

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<sup>91</sup> Jesus is not referenced as frequently or as deeply as God is in *The Simpsons*, and for reasons of space I have excluded a discussion of his role in the program. For an extended discussion of Jesus' role in American culture see Prothero (2003).

Heit takes exception to this last example, arguing that “to suggest that God will help Ned during a bowling game characterizes prayer in a way that belittles God. If God truly cares about knocking down Ned’s bowling pins, one would have a difficult time explaining why God does not seem to care about other, more serious problems in Springfield” (2008, 31). Henry responds that “I see the many examples of God immediately responding to Ned’s prayers as moments of absurdity on the show, and thus candidates for satire, not sincerity. The highly exaggerated way in which Flanders’ faith is portrayed is an indication that the writers are satirizing the presumption that, through prayer, one has the power to effect immediate change in one’s physical environment” (2008, 247-248). Henry’s assessment is more accurate because *The Simpsons* is satirizing the idea that one can pray and change the physical environment. This, however, does not exhaust possible interpretations, as it can also be read as God helping those he favours and punishing their enemies. While Henry interprets all prayer in *The Simpsons* as satirizing fundamentalist preachers who claim to affect the natural world through prayer (248-249), he misses much of the spiritual depth that prayer in the program offers and ignores the breadth of religious behaviour being satirized. After all, prayer is not a foreign concept to Americans. The 2008 GSS survey found that 58.9% of respondents pray at least once a day and 76.2% pray at least once a week. Among Protestants the numbers are even higher, with 69.4% praying at least once a day and 86.8% pray at least once a week (Davis, Smith, and Marsden 2008). If we correlate this with the Pew Survey’s findings which found that 60% of all Americans believe God is a personal force (72% of evangelicals and 62% of all mainliners), it makes sense to depict people petitioning him (2008b, 27).<sup>92</sup>

And characters in *The Simpsons* pray. Working from Rodney Stark and Roger Finke’s definition of prayer as “communication addressed to a god or gods” (2000, 109), characters in *The Simpsons* petition God through prayer in ways that range from the flippant to the deeply emotional. Bart’s mealtime grace in “Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish” is flippant, “Dear God, we paid for this stuff ourselves so thanks for nothing.” This prayer denounces ideas about God’s providence, saying that God does not provide for us, we provide for ourselves so why should we thank him? Bart trivializes God’s power, making him appear distant and disengaged. Homer’s prayers often blur the lines between trivial and sincere, and his simplicity makes it difficult to distinguish between frivolity and piety. In “And Maggie Makes Three,” Homer, oblivious to Marge’s

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<sup>92</sup> We have plenty of statistics demonstrating that Americans pray, but the content of those prayers goes largely unanalyzed. However, there is a growing body of sociological and psychological literature that is starting to rectify this problem, see, e.g., Bade and Cook (2008), Baesler (2002), Baker (2008), Harris et al. (2005), and Ladd and Spilka (2002, 2006).

pregnancy and enjoying life just the way it is, prays, “Dear Lord, the gods have been good to me and I am thankful. For the first time in my life everything is absolutely perfect just 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 ok, please give me absolutely no sign.” When nothing changes he says, “Ok, deal. In gratitude I present you this offering of cookies and milk. If you want me to eat them for you, give me no sign....Thy will be done.” He then eats the cookies and drinks the milk, but, in spite of his sincerity, Homer also sets himself up for an ironic twist. While Marge knows what is coming, it is Homer’s blissful ignorance that makes the joke work. She knows, we know, and God knows that God is letting Homer fall into a trap. Whether this is irreverent and trivial is up for debate. Pinsky classifies this as asking for something so extravagant that Homer gets called on it (2007, 40). God does not work for Homer’s gratification and Homer must live with the consequences of his actions. At the same time, this is a petitioning prayer that resonates with prayers people have heard throughout their lives. Homer is asking for something he wants and hopes God will intervene for him.

However, in “Lard of the Dance,” before pursuing a huge quantity of grease for his grease recycling business Homer prays: “Dear Lord, I know you’re busy—seeing as how you can watch women changing clothes and all that—but if you help us steal this grease tonight, I promise we’ll donate half the profits to charity.” Bart chimes in, “Dad, he’s not stupid.” Furthermore, in “Pray Anything,” Homer asks God to create a tasty new snack and then claps his hands, saying “I command you.” This prayer prompted Heit to argue that “in scenes such as these God is treated as a kind of metaphysical butler who will take care of every need” (2008, 32). These trivializing petitionary prayers are humorous both because they invert prayer’s expected nature and because millions of Christians pray this way. Heit acknowledges that Christianity sees God as a source of provision (32), but he tempers that by arguing that some petitions are trivial and God has better things to do. These jokes suggest that God may have better things to do, yet selfishness and individualism are endemic in American culture (see also Bellah 2008). This affects what people ask for when they pray. As the 2005 BRS demonstrates, people of lower economic status pray for financial and health reasons more often than those with higher status. Furthermore, they also pray more frequently than the wealthy (Baker 2008). In other words, personal interest and need dictate the content of petitionary prayers to some extent. *The Simpsons* reflects this and suggests that sometimes it will work, and other times it will not. Through this entire process God is posited as a real, active entity in the unseen order.

Furthermore, there are petitionary prayers that reveal a kinder God who actively intervenes for his followers’ benefit. Bart’s famous prayer in “Bart Gets an F” inspired Lee Strobel of Willow



Creek Community Church (one of America's leading megachurches) to suggest that Jesus would be pleased with the prayer's heartfelt confession and honesty (1994, 29-41). Knowing that he will fail a test and be held back, Bart prays fervently before going to bed: "Well, old timer, I guess this is the end of the road. I know I haven't always been a good kid, but if I have to go to school tomorrow I'll fail the test and be held back. I just need one more day to study Lord, I need your help. . . . A teacher's strike, a power failure, a blizzard—anything that'll cancel school tomorrow. I know it's asking a lot, but if anyone can do it, you can. Thanking you in advance, your pal, Bart Simpson." An overnight blizzard leads to a school cancellation and Bart takes the day to study, after Lisa warns him: "I heard you last night, Bart, you prayed for this. Now your prayers have been answered. I'm no theologian, I don't know who or what God is exactly, all I know is he's a force more powerful than mom and dad put together and you owe him big." The benevolent and powerful God comes forth and answers a sincere petition for help. Similarly, in "Bart Sells His Soul," Bart 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 with it! I just want it back. Please? [*starts crying*] I hope you can hear this." It is then revealed that Lisa bought back Bart's soul, but this sincere prayer comes after a long night of literal soul-searching for Bart. When he is in his darkest hour he honestly calls out to God. Whether or not viewers interpret this moment as God's intervention (cf. Heit 2008, 121; Henry 2008, 258-265), the fact remains that Bart's plaintive call to God was done in total sincerity and reflects the belief that there is a supernatural agent who will act in his favour. These two prayers demonstrate *The Simpsons'* willingness to develop its characters through religious and spiritual practice rooted in the Christian tradition, and not just lampoon Christianity's beliefs. As we will see in the extended discussions of Lovejoy and Flanders, *The Simpsons* finds a redemptive element in Christianity when characters reach beyond themselves.

However, *Simpsons* characters also bargain in their prayers, which reveals an understanding that God wants us to exchange behaviours for his providence (Pinsky 2007, 34). Stark and Finke suggest that religion is, at its core, about entering into exchange relationships with a god or gods (2000, 91). The more powerful the god, the more people pay to gain its favour, and the Christian God is a prime example of a god with a wide range of powers and high costs for his rewards (2000, 98-99). *The Simpsons*, however, suggest that people rarely pay the costs for the rewards they seek and sometimes the costs are seen as too expensive relative to the rewards. In "Homer Defined," during a nuclear scare, 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. Oh, the next time there's a canned food drive I'll give the poor something they'd actually like instead of old lima beans and pumpkin mix." This prayer is ironic because Marge thinks God's saving everybody in exchange for tasty food for the poor is a fair exchange. As no quantity or actual food source is specified, there is no way to tell just how far Marge was willing to go in her exchange, but judging by what she has given in the past she does not consider giving to food drives very important. Another time, during a hurricane, she prays, "Dear God, this is Marge Simpson. If you stop the hurricane and save our family we will be forever grateful and recommend you to all our friends. So if you could find it in your infinite wisdom to—" Suddenly the hurricane stops and Homer makes it clear how willing he was to fulfill Marge's offer, "He fell for it! Way to go Marge!" ("Hurricane Neddy"). Similarly, in "Homerpalooza" Homer drives Bart and Lisa to school while pontificating on classic rock music. Bart prays, "Dear Lord, if you keep Homer from embarrassing us today we promise to build several churches in your honour." Lisa grabs Bart's arm, saying, "Bart! No!" and implying that God might actually hold them to their promise, something the kids had no plans to honour. These prayers reveal God as a contractual, bargaining deity who makes exchanges for payment that he always has the power to collect. However, that does not stop characters from trying to cheat him.

God's appearances and people's prayers to him reveal a portrait of a divinity who rewards followers, but also extracts a high price for his services. *The Simpsons* does not deny God's active agency, but constantly questions his providence. However, while the United States' diverse Christian traditions shape this general idea of God, in *The Simpsons* he ultimately exists apart from institutionalized doctrines and rituals. In the characters of Rev. Lovejoy and Ned Flanders we see the extended criticism of institutionalized Christianity and its separation from *The Simpsons*' unseen order.

## **5.2 Reverend Lovejoy and the Protestant First Church of Springfield**

Reverend Timothy Lovejoy is a fantastic satiric ideal type. Dressed in clerical blacks with a white collar, standing behind a plain pulpit in a large urban church with faux stained-glass windows and ample parking, he delivers sermons on topics that are tangential to his congregation's interests. When the need arises he leads Springfield's charge for moral hygiene, but otherwise he would rather play with his model trains. It is impossible to tell what denomination he belongs to, although in later seasons we learn he is a member of "the Western branch of Reformed Presbylutheranism" ("The Father, the Son, and the Holy Guest Star"). Like the minister Dr. Matthew Collins in *The War of the*

*Worlds* (Haskin 1953), who is also dressed in clerical blacks and collar, “audiences are left free to map onto his character any tradition they choose” (Cowan 2007a, ¶20). While Heit avoids assigning Lovejoy any particular Christian denomination, Pinsky argues that he and his church represent mainline Protestantism (2007, 75). Pinsky is correct to a point because the church presents characteristics popularly associated with mainline Protestantism and helps explain how denominations such as the United Methodist Church, American Lutheran Church, and Presbyterian Church, USA contribute to *The Simpsons*’ unseen order.<sup>93</sup> However, mainline Protestantism’s more liberal elements are absent in Lovejoy’s preaching, making him a more conservative caricature than he would be were he representing mainline Protestantism’s liberal theological developments which emphasize critical historical thinking, a social ethic based on Jesus’ teachings, and a postmillennial view of the world that encourages the betterment of human beings through social improvement (see, e.g., Ahlstrom 2004, 731-824; Hutchison 1968, 1976; Lofton 2006; Ogden 1976; Thuesen 2002).

The first observation others make about FCOS is that its pews are full on Sunday (Heit 2008, 72; Pinsky 2007, 75; Turner 2004, 263-264), which Pinsky notes “is, in part, a plot device” (2007, 75). However, as both Pinsky and Heit acknowledge, just because people are in the pews does not mean they are particularly pious. Church is treated as a chore on *The Simpsons*, literally topping Homer’s chores list in *The Simpsons Movie* (Silverman 2007). Furthermore, in “In Marge We Trust,” Lisa says that the time right after church is the best time of the week because “it’s the longest possible time before more church!” In the Simpson family, it is Marge who insists that church is important for teaching morals and guiding people in their daily lives (“Bart’s Girlfriend”, “In Marge We Trust”). For the others, church is boring and irrelevant. Homer constantly falls asleep during the service (e.g.,

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<sup>93</sup> Grouping churches as “mainline” is increasingly problematic, as the term does very little to distinguish these Christians from other Protestants. The Pew Survey Report lists 52 different responses people gave for their Mainline Protestant classification (2008a, 105-106), which accounts for 18.1% of the adult population. This includes groups with different polities (e.g., American Baptist Churches, USA’s congregational polity compared to The United Methodist Church’s hierarchy of conferences and general agencies) and denominational histories (see Smidt et al. [2003] for mainline clergy differences). Roof and McKinney’s *American Mainline Religion* (1987) makes identifying mainline Protestants by denomination even more difficult, as they argue that mainline American culture is shifting away from the more liberal denominations towards a bifurcated debate, and changing demographics and declining attendance make it difficult for groups which traditionally shaped American morals to maintain their influence. At the same time, there are a group of moderate Protestant denominations (Methodists, Northern Baptists, Disciples, Lutherans and Reformed churches) that, along with Roman Catholics, hold the centre (see also T. Smith 1990). The sociological question that needs to be answered, and is still being debated, is which groups have the power to shape cultural and legal norms in an America where people are pulled between individualism and tradition (see also Bellah 2008, G. Layman 1997, J. Hunter 1991, Tamney 2005, Wuthnow 1988). However, the “mainline” label is still used in popular literature, and people know it as a differentiating marker from the more castigated fundamentalist and evangelical labels.

“Homer the Heretic”; “In Marge We Trust”; “Simpsons Bible Stories”), listens to football games on a portable radio (“The Telltale Head”), and makes noise with his motorcycle’s engine during the service, causing Lovejoy to give up and cut his sermon short (“Take My Wife, Sleaze”). Bart’s irreverent attitude extends to both the service, where he dispenses Iron Butterfly’s “In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida” as the hymn “In the Garden of Eden” by I. Ron Butterfly (“Bart Sells His Soul”), plays with troll dolls (“Bart’s Girlfriend”), and plays video games (Silverman 2007), and to Sunday school where he pesters the Sunday School teacher about whether or not severed limbs will be waiting for you in heaven (the answer is “yes”) (“The Telltale Head”), and he gets excited to learn about hell (“Homer vs. Lisa and the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment”) and why God causes train wrecks (“Homer’s Triple Bypass”). He also returns to Sunday School to catch Rev. Lovejoy’s daughter. When the prodigal son returns, the Sunday School teacher announces, “but Bart, we banned you from Sunday School. You were happy. We were happy. Everybody was happy—particularly the hamster.” When Bart claims he has changed his ways the teacher accepts him back, noting that the Bible teaches forgiveness. Her efforts at teaching are futile though, as the students give her confused looks when she says that the prodigal son has returned (“Bart’s Girlfriend”). Prothero’s (2007) claims about American biblical ignorance can certainly be found in FCOS’s Sunday School and in the church where people are present but do not care enough to invest their energy in learning about Christianity. Springfielders are in the pews not because it is congruent with their character (Marge and Ned Flanders exempted), but because this is a good setting for jokes.

This leads us to the problem of declining attendance, a major concern for contemporary mainline churches (see, e.g., Demerath 1995b; Finke and Stark 2005, 235-283; Hout, Greely, and Wilde 2001; Hutchison et al. 1991; McKinney 1998; Roof and McKinney 1987; cf. Percy and Markham 2006; Wuthnow and Evans 2002). While FCOS is apparently not suffering an attendance problem, it is stricken with apathy. For Finke and Stark (2005, see also Stark and Finke 2000) mainline denominations decline because they uphold cultural norms without causing members to invest time, money, and identity in the organization. There is little to distinguish the religion from the culture at large so people do not bother adhering (see also Hoge, Johnson and Luidens 1994). For Finke and Stark, religions that demand significant investment of this world’s resources in exchange for benefits in the next are more likely to succeed than those that do not (see also McGaw 1979; cf. Wellman 2002). *The Simpsons* suggests that while FCOS does not demand much of its members, it is the religion’s content and otherworldly character that cause people to leave.

This is a church that does not reflect upon Christian doctrine, nor does it have regular rituals which engage people's minds, hearts, and bodies. The Eucharist is rarely referenced, and when it is, it is either to make a joke about the wine's alcoholic content ("Co-Dependents Day") or about transubstantiation ("Mona Leaves-a").<sup>94</sup> Lovejoy's sermons are all the members have. Occasionally, Lovejoy has a passionate sermon, usually when he is mad about something Homer has done. In "The Telltale Head," he attacks sports gambling, calling it the eighth deadly sin, while Homer listens to the football game on headphones. In "Homer the Heretic," he warns people to honour the Sabbath in a sermon advertised as "When Homer Met Satan." However, Lovejoy's usual sermons are drab and irrelevant. That people fall asleep during his sermons or while he reads through the entire Bible on a hot Easter Sunday ("Simpsons Bible Stories") is part of Lovejoy's problem. His sermons miss any contributions Christian teachings could make to people's lives. In "The Springfield Files," an "alien" (actually Mr. Burns) is spotted in Springfield, prompting Lovejoy to preach, "I remember another gentle visitor from the heavens. He came in peace, and then died only to come back to life. And his name was... E. T. the extraterrestrial. I love that little guy." While the obvious inference would have been Jesus, this joke works by referencing another familiar character with negligible significance for Christianity. In "Bart's Girlfriend," Marge tells Bart he has to go to church to learn morals and how to treat others. The scene shifts to Lovejoy mid-sermon where he says, "And with flaming swords, the Aromites did pierce the eyes of their fellow men and did feast on what flowed forth. Among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh [*his voice trails off*]." This subverts Marge's original goal and suggests that Lovejoy's emphasis is counter-intuitive to the values Christians claim as their own. Finally, Lovejoy comes across as defeated by the tradition. In "Faith Off," Lovejoy starts his sermon with "In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul instructed them to send ten copies to the Thessalonians and the Ephesians. But the Ephesians broke the chain, and were punished by the..." at which point Bart interrupts him, snoring. Lovejoy holds up the Bible and says, "Hey, I'm doing the best with the material I have." Bart, who recently attended a revival meeting, argues, "But church can be fun!" When the parishioners laugh, he protests, "No, really, it can be a crazy party with clouds and lasers and miracles! . . . A real preacher knows how to bring the Bible alive through music, and dancing, and Tae-Bo!"<sup>95</sup> When Bart starts dancing in the aisles, a dejected Lovejoy rolls

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<sup>94</sup> In "Co-Dependents Day," Marge has been arrested for drunk driving, and when she drinks from the chalice Agnes Skinner yells, "Save some for the rest of us, alchy!" Then the local bus driver, Otto, says, "Don't bogart our Lord!" In "Mona Leaves-a," Ned argues against reincarnation, stating, "people don't come back as anything, except for our Lord who came back as bread."

<sup>95</sup> Tae-Bo is a mass marketed aerobics program that combines martial arts, boxing, and dance.

his eyes and mutters “Never give them an opening.” Bart is able to recognize the fact that religion can be made interesting if communicated properly—something at which Lovejoy clearly fails. Lovejoy’s sermons direct our attention to the fact that in *The Simpsons* the Christian tradition has failed to captivate the hearts and minds of its adherents, suggesting that contemporary preaching is largely boring or irrelevant in people’s lives.

Lovejoy can also be interpreted through the lens of internal strife within mainline denominations. As historian William Hutchison (1976) illustrates, the modernist impulse in American Protestantism led progressive Christians to try to adapt Christianity to the times. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this meant rejecting established creeds and doctrines that were not deemed useful in elevating humans to their fullest potential in modern society. The progressives’ focus was on improving conditions in this life as a way of showing God’s love, and using human knowledge to achieve the kingdom of God on Earth. However, Lovejoy not only fails to inspire his congregation, he is also fairly staunch when it comes to moral issues. While he appears leading moral crusades against lewd behaviour (“Bart After Dark”), science (“Lisa the Skeptic”; “The Monkey Suit”), and Krusty the Clown (“Krusty Gets Busted”), his most controversial (or, depending on one’s perspective, conventional) moral stand comes in season sixteen’s “There’s Something About Marrying.” After Springfield legalizes gay marriage to increase tourism revenue, hordes of homosexual couples come to Springfield to tie the knot. Lovejoy refuses them entrance to the church, saying, “While I have no opinion for or against your sinful lifestyles, I cannot marry two people of the same sex any more than I can put a hamburger on a hot dog bun.” When Marge challenges him on this, saying that love should be the deciding factor, Lovejoy sticks to the text: “The Bible forbids same sex marriage,” although it should be noted that he cannot name specific books (e.g., Lev 18:22, Rom 1:26). He starts ringing the church bell to quiet Marge’s protests, although we can hear her arguing that scriptural scholars disagree about the significance of something (her voice fades out) and that Jesus’ ministry emphasized love. Henry argues that this episode is the latest example of *The Simpsons* challenging heteronormativity in American media, but downplays its religious elements (Henry 2008, 220-224, 286-287), while Pinsky (2007, 192-198) uses the episode to illustrate that the series does not attempt to resolve the same-sex marriage issue for either side of the debate. Indeed, those both for and against same-sex unions claim the episode represents their views. While this is an issue that fills books, journals, and airwaves, the salient point about this episode is that Lovejoy

rejects the liberal attitude *The Simpsons* treats as normative.<sup>96</sup> In doing so he becomes another religious bigot, a villain in the larger discourse about Christianity in America. American churches are divided on this issue and it continues to further separate them (Cadge 2002; Cowan 2003b; Olson and Cadge 2002; Cadge, Day and Wildeman 2007). The modernist impulse embraces homosexuals' human potential and sees homosexuality as naturally occurring and, therefore, not sinful. Conservative Christianity generally does not (see Dawne Moon [2005], for discourse analysis of both perspectives). Lovejoy's position is the conservative one, denying marriage rights to homosexuals based on strict Biblical interpretation, suggesting that he is not as liberal as Pinsky submits.

Lovejoy has other personal problems which affect his ability to minister effectively. Like other clergy members, he constantly worries about finances. He borrows the local library's copy of the Bible every week because he cannot afford one himself ("Bart the Mother"). In "Bart Sells His Soul," when Milhouse asks Bart what the world's religions have to gain by lying about the soul's existence, the scene cuts to Reverend Lovejoy pouring money from the collection plates into a coin sorter. Furthermore, in "The Joy of Sect," Lovejoy denounces the new religious movement "The Movementarians," saying, "This so called 'new religion' is nothing but a pack of weird rituals and chants designed to take away the money of fools. Let us say the Lord's Prayer forty times, but first let's pass the collection plate." Lovejoy's concluding contradiction: His church is just as greedy as any new religion. This point is brought to the forefront in "Viva Ned Flanders," when Lovejoy explains tithing to his congregation: "And once again, tithing is ten percent off the top. That's gross

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<sup>96</sup> Olson and Cadge (2002) argue that debates about homosexuality raise questions that are pivotal to a church's identity, stating, "Homosexuality is about scripture: How is the Bible to be read, interpreted, and understood? It is about creation: How ought the people that God creates behave sexually? Homosexuality is about families and reproduction: Who can be married? Bear children? Adopt children? Raise children? What lessons should those children be taught about sexual behavior?" (155). Cadge (2002) reviews the different positions different mainline denominations took at the turn of the millennium, noting that there were 875 "gay welcoming or transforming congregations" in the United States (277). Thumma (2006, 100) now puts the number in excess of 1600 congregations. When we consider that none of the mainline denominational bodies had legitimated homosexual marriage or ordination in 2000, even though some local churches and bishops went against official church positions, this number is significant (since Thumma's writing the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church have issued statements which do not call homosexuality sinful [Cadge, Day and Wildeman 2007, 248]). It should also be noted that in Thumma's (2006) study of 750 Open and Affirming congregations across the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the churches had the same rate of decline as others in the denomination. Put differently, a congregation that decides to be Open and Affirming of homosexuals does not necessarily help or hinder its growth. It should also be noted that homosexual marriage is not the only same-sex issue churches are conflicted about. Homosexual ordination is also particularly contentious and involves similar battles over the nature of homosexuality (is it a choice or genetic), its status as sin, and whether or not celibate or committed homosexuals should be considered for ordination. For an extended discussion of the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s 1996 General Assembly debate on this issue see Beuttler (1999), Burgess (1999), Rogers (1999), Wellman (1999), and Weston (1999).

income, not net. Please people, don't force us to audit." Heit argues that Lovejoy's financial concerns reflect ministers' realities across the United States. That is, they are overworked and underpaid because people do not financially support their religious institutions (2008, 76-78).

Lovejoy's *ennui* stems from the fact that while he originally came to Springfield to help others, he has since become overworked by Ned Flanders' constant questions about applying Christianity to the smallest details of his life. This is clearly illustrated in "In Marge We Trust" when Marge volunteers at the church. Lovejoy is overjoyed that he now has some help looking after the building and, in preparing his sermon "The Joy of Shame" finds, "a form of shame that has gone unused for seven hundred years." However, when people start calling the Reverend for advice, he dismisses them. He tells Principal Skinner to read his Bible for guidance after a fight with his mother. When Skinner asks about a specific passage Lovejoy responds, "Oh, it's all good." When Marge asks him what had happened to his passion, Lovejoy explains that over the years Ned has asked him so many inane questions that eventually he stopped caring about people. Marge then takes over the Reverend's advising role, which leads him to feel that he has lost his flock. Walking into the church he looks at the stained glass windows of saints dying gruesome deaths and experiences a vision in which they talk to him, asking him what he has done to inspire faith. When Lovejoy says that he had the church vestibule recarpeted, one of the saints looks at him and complains, "I've appeared in over eight thousand visions, and that is the lamest reply I've ever heard." After Lovejoy protests the saint silences him, saying, "You're just lucky God isn't here." Meanwhile, Marge excels at Lovejoy's job as advisor until she gives Ned some bad advice, and he needs to be rescued from baboons at the local zoo by Lovejoy. Similarly, at the end of "Pray Anything," Lovejoy returns to Springfield after leaving because Homer won the deed to the church in a lawsuit and turned FCOS into the Simpsons' home. Homer's housewarming party has caused massive flooding, and the entire town huddles fearfully atop the church. Lovejoy appears just in time, prays for forgiveness, and the rain stops. These examples demonstrate one of Lovejoy's major characteristics—he rises to the occasion and looks out for his parishioners. Even if he represents Christianity's failed theology, greed, and general irrelevancy in many *Simpsons* jokes, when he is needed, Lovejoy selflessly looks after the people he serves.

Although often a caricature for organized Christianity's failures, Lovejoy is a complex character who wants to thrive professionally and encourage people. It is in those moments when he embodies love and courage in Christianity's name, and leaves his bigotry and judgementalism behind, that he is applauded. Heit accurately assesses Lovejoy's Christian leadership: "He accomplishes more than simply recarpeting the vestibule. He is inconsistent and cynical, to be sure, but he shows that he



is capable of making himself and the church he represents relevant to a town that will turn its back on its faith. Springfield's parishioners will fall away, neglect the demands their faith places upon them, do their best to avoid their fiduciary obligation to the church, but their pastor will trudge along, even at a low hourly wage" (2008, 82). These are the acceptable Christian elements for *The Simpsons*, leaving the boring sermons, irrelevant scriptural references, and conservative bigotry for their scorn. But Lovejoy is not the only Christian caricature in *The Simpsons*. Ned Flanders provides a nuanced interpretation of American evangelicalism and raises more questions about what is acceptable and damnable in *The Simpsons*' unseen order.

### 5.3 Ned Flanders' Dynamic Evangelicalism

Among *Simpsons* commentators there are two major summaries of Ned Flanders and his role as a caricature of evangelical Christianity. Pinsky (2007, 46-69) portrays him positively, as a representative evangelical who tries to be a genuinely good person, only briefly acknowledging some of Ned's more politically conservative activities (50-51). Heit (2008, 83-95) argues that Ned reflects Christianity's dark side (see also Turner 2004, 265; Henry 2008, 256-258, 270-275). When faced with diametric disagreements like these we often find that the situation is more nuanced than either analyst permits. First, consider Heit and evangelicalism's dark side as projected through Ned Flanders, especially his political work as a moral watchdog and his goal of returning the country to "the America of yesteryear that only exists in the brains of us Republicans" ("Home Away From Homer"). Here, we see a two-pronged attack on mainstream life in the United States. First, there is the attempt at moral reform through public action on issues such as homosexuality, abortion rights, prayer in public schools, and media content. Second, there is the promotion of an alternative symbolic universe rooted in conservative Christianity's Biblical interpretation and morality. The satirist's gaze focuses on these evangelical characteristics. Pinsky's discussions of Ned's Christian morality, on the other hand, suggest that he also represents the tradition's moral aspects that *Simpsons* portrays as valuable. This complicates Ned's character, moving him away from being an American evangelical caricature and making him into a plausible representative of evangelical values.

Ned's evangelicalism has deep roots in American culture. Today's evangelicals stand upon a rich and colourful history that stretches back to the First Great Awakening. Evangelicalism was America's dominant Christian tradition during the nineteenth century, but with the increased questions about biblical inerrancy, intellectual skeptics influenced by Darwinism, and German higher criticism, and the fundamentalist retraction from the mainline Protestant denominations after the

Scopes trial in 1925, conservative evangelicals withdrew from the American mainstream for their own isolated communities and abandoned the world to its sinful nature (Marsden 2005).<sup>97</sup> However, this did not last long as less conservative evangelicals started actively engaging the culture at large in the early 1940s, starting with the National Association of Evangelicals' (NAE) founding in St. Louis in 1942 to combat the liberal Federal Council of Churches. After a lull in political engagement during the 1960s, evangelicals were drawn back into the public square because of church and state issues regarding prayer in public schools and the 1973 landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion. Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 marked a new high point for conservative religion's political influence, a phenomenon repeated when George W. Bush took the presidency in 2000 and 2004 with strong conservative Christian support. Evangelicals were also known through highly visible public preachers and televangelists, including Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker, and others (Marsden 1991, 62-82; C. Smith 1998, 2-19; Hankins 2008; J. Stone 1997).<sup>98</sup>

Evangelicalism is a diverse religious subculture with members spanning the political spectrum from conservative to liberal. Studies emphasize evangelicalism's conservatism, and, depending on the analytic framework, "evangelical" may be exclusive to Protestants in conservative

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<sup>97</sup> Marsden (1991, 11-17) argues that a convergence of intellectual criticisms of traditional Christian beliefs, the influx of Catholic immigrants that led to greater pluralism, urbanization, and increasing secularization in the public sphere where Protestant respectability was favoured over a prophetic voice caused the evangelical decline. Bringing this line of argument into the present, James Hunter (1983, 11-19) builds on Peter Berger (1967), arguing that accommodating the intellectual trends of modernity led to mainline Protestantism's erosion. Concurrently, he contends that evangelicalism is dying a slow death before modernity's onslaught. Christian Smith (1998, 107-113) suggests that Hunter's and Berger's arguments about religious enclaves slowly dying away is incorrect. Instead, modernity allows evangelicals to construct strong subcultures that engage some elements of modernity and refute them, building a strong subcultural identity in the process (see also pgs. 41-42). This ties into the secularization debate discussed in chapter 3, ff. 45, see also Gallagher (2004), Hankins (2008).

<sup>98</sup> This shift is sometimes referred to as the neo-evangelical movement which is helpfully interpreted in light of what Wuthnow (1988, 1989) calls the restructuring of American religion. That is, after World War II the United States is experiencing a religious reorganization away from denominations towards religious special interest groups. While neo-evangelicals are still involved in denominational and non-denominational churches, it is impossible to understand their spread without knowledge of parachurch organizations. Evangelist Billy Graham is a central figure whose crusades brought many people into the movement, but without institutions such as *Christianity Today* magazine, the NAE, youth and young adult movements such as Campus Crusade for Christ, educational institutions and seminaries including Wheaton College and Fuller Theological Seminary, and a wide array of radio and television programs and personalities, the infrastructure permitting a sacred canopy/umbrella to exist could not have developed and effectively permeated people's lives. Although this is not an exhaustive selection of neo-evangelical parachurch organizations, it is also important to note that not every institution will appeal to every evangelical. Neo-evangelicalism's internal diversity allows different people to engage with the movement and interpret it in light of their own experiences and needs (C. Smith 2000). It is also significant that while scholars may classify these evangelical organizations together, within the various evangelical subcultures there is a distinct awareness of subtle differences between different evangelical groups (J. Stone 1997).

denominations, include or exclude Pentecostals and Fundamentalists, or be defined as a transnational subculture that permeates into religious groups classified as mainline.<sup>99</sup> Historian Randall Balmer (2006) includes Pentecostals, Fundamentalists, and other conservative Protestants in his description of the evangelical subculture, but evangelical historian Mark Noll excludes Fundamentalists (2001, 9-26).<sup>100</sup> To describe Ned Flanders, I follow Balmer because the breadth of his conceptualization allows us to combine evangelicalism's many elements into a single caricature—an ironic choice because Balmer aptly demonstrates the movement's internal diversity (see also Shibley 1996, 20-21).<sup>101</sup> Ned embodies those subcultural elements which combine right wing politics with a sincere desire to live Christian lives and help people.

Ned's dark side can be seen in over-protective parenting and his role in Springfield's moral watchdog groups. He is not only a moral exemplar, but what Howard Becker described as a "moral crusader" (1963, 149). Moral crusaders work to enact changes they believe will improve the lives of

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<sup>99</sup> See, e.g., Mac Iver (1990) and Jim Wallis (2005) who discuss liberal evangelicalism. Shires (2007) describes how Americans who converted to evangelicalism during the Jesus People movement in the 1960s shaped conservative evangelicalism, emphasizing the golden rule, conversionism, and working for political restructuring which would allow others to reach their full potential under what they saw as God's will. These are the ideas influencing left-leaning evangelicals and, therefore, it is worth considering the similarities between the two sides as well as the differences.

<sup>100</sup> There are numerous other categorizations. Christian Smith (1998) and Jon Stone (1997) categorize fundamentalists separately, positioning evangelicals between fundamentalists and liberal Protestants. They use "evangelical" to indicate those Christians who trace their religious lineage back to the evangelical-Fundamentalist split that occurred between 1942 and the 1960s. Smith, however, includes evangelicals, Fundamentalists, and Pentecostals under the banner of "conservative Christian" when conducting his research (2000, 15-18). Reimer (2005) describes evangelicalism as a transnational subculture that permeates into many denominations, making the movement difficult to categorize (see also Ammerman [1987]).

<sup>101</sup> Aside from the categorization according to broad religious movements which I use, there is also a definitional approach to evangelicalism. Marsden identifies five beliefs he considers essential for evangelicals: "(1) the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the bible, (2) the real historical character of God's saving work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelism and missions, (5) the importance of a spiritually transformed life" (1991, 4-5). Bramadat uses this definition and augments it with a sixth characteristic, a personal relationship with Jesus (2000, 10). Bebbington identifies evangelicals according to the core characteristics of conversionism (emphasizing a life changing experience in which people encounter God and are "born again"), biblicism (the Bible is the ultimate authority), activism (evangelizing), and crucicentrism (a focus on Christ's redeeming work through his death on the cross which is often seen as the way to salvation) (Bebbington 1989, 2-3). Canadian historian George Rawlyk used this model to identify evangelicals in a nationwide survey in which he concluded that one third of all Canadian evangelicals are Catholic (1996, 118; on the charismatic movement see Neitz [1987], and Hervieu-Léger [1997]). While Noll also uses this definition, he warns that these "traits have never by themselves yielded cohesive, institutionally compact, or clearly demarcated groups of Christians. But they do serve to identify a large family of churches and religious enterprises" (Noll 2001, 13; see also Hankins 2008). I follow a model that draws from traditions because it allows me to associate Ned's actions with contemporary evangelicals (broadly defined), rather than trying to fit both the caricature that is Ned, and real evangelicals whom the program's creators satirize, into an artificial category that emphasizes certain characteristics over others.

others. In “You Kent Always Say What You Want,” Ned writes an email to his online compatriots after hearing local newsman Kent Brockman swearing on television. When his sons Rod and Todd ask what he’s doing, Ned replies, “imploing people I never met, to pressure a government with better things to, do to punish a man who meant no harm, for something that nobody even saw!” Another time, Ned tells Homer that he spent his whole morning blacking out the words “gosh” and “darn” in *Hardy Boys* novels (“Smoke on the Daughter”). He also argues that “our courts aren’t fit to keep children in line. The only thing they’re good for is telling women what to do with their bodies” (“The Bart of War”). He scares Bart wearing finger shears (visually referencing Freddy Krueger, the central character in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* horror films), telling him to say his prayers because the schools can’t force him like they should (“Cape Feare”). Furthermore, he reassures his children that Harry Potter and his friends will go to hell for practising witchcraft (“Trilogy of Error”), but he does allow them to watch “Gravey and Jobriath,” in which the young man, Gravey, is making a pipe bomb to blow up Planned Parenthood (“HOMЯ”). In an extended sequence on the DVD version of this episode, Ned refuses to explain Planned Parenthood to the boys because he is busy taking down doctors’ names being listed on the screen. Parodying the Lutheran Church of America’s popular *Davey and Goliath* cartoon from the 1960s and 1970s, *The Simpsons* takes *Davey and Goliath*’s association with Christian teachings of love, forgiveness, and tolerance and inverts it, suggesting that evangelicals share abortion clinic bombers’ moral self-righteousness.

These examples reference and satirize politically engaged evangelicals (see Jelen 2005). As we saw in the last chapter, Ned has represented conservative Christian ideas in Springfield’s courthouse when fighting for intelligent design. However, the battle between creationism and science is not evangelicalism’s only crusade. The above examples point out symbolic identity markers that different evangelical groups have projected into American consciousness. References to courts controlling women’s bodies and attacks on Planned Parenthood recall the evangelical anti-abortion lobby of the late twentieth century, which saw sit-ins at abortion clinics and the harassment of women seeking abortions. In some cases, doctors were murdered and properties burned. Anti-abortionism has become a significant element in evangelicalism’s symbolic boundaries, and is a litmus test for political support (see, e.g., Evans 2002, Hadley 1994, Hoffman and Johnson 2005, Hughes 2006, Jelen and Wilcox 2003, Maxwell and Jelen 1995, Wilcox and Gomez 1990).

Abortion decisions are not the only legal issues evangelicals have challenged. When Ned complains that the schools cannot force Bart to pray he references 1962’s *Engel v. Vitale*, 1963’s *Abington School District v. Schempp*, and 1971’s *Lemon v. Kurtzman* Supreme Court decisions

banning school board-drafted prayers, and prohibiting religion's promotion in public schools. These are contentious decisions, and evangelicals continually seek ways to circumvent them (see, e.g., Chancey 2007, Ebel 2009, Elifson and Hadaway 1985, Green and Guth 1989). In this section's opening paragraph I referenced Ned's quote about the America of yesteryear that only exists in the minds of Republicans. As school prayer and anti-abortion are popularly associated with evangelical support for the Republican Party, it is little surprise that *The Simpsons* would use its evangelical character to satirize the Republican Party's base's religio-politics because these issues are seen as antithetical to the individualism and secularism *The Simpsons* supports.

The Flanders home and family are caricatures of American evangelicals. Their house is filled with pictures of God and Jesus, Ned has an extensive collection of Bibles, and the boys play games such as "Christian Clue," "Good Samaritan," and "Billy Graham's Bible Blaster" ("Bart Has Two Mommies"; "Lisa's First Word"; "Alone Again Natura-Diddly"). "Home Sweet Homediddly-Dum-Doodily" emphasizes the Flanders' stark contrast with the Simpsons. After the Simpson children have been placed in the Flanders' protective custody Lisa characterizes the difference as, "it seems like our house, but everything's got a creepy Pat Booneish quality to it." The Flanders do not watch television, they eat cucumbers with cottage cheese as a snack, and to relax they play "Bombardment of Bible Questions." While Ned and his wife Maude (who died in season eleven's "Alone Again Natura-Diddly") are caring parents, they are presented as the wrong custodians for Bart and Lisa. This is made readily apparent in the bombardment scene when, asking questions from the Vulgate of Saint Jerome, Ned questions the children about their biblical knowledge:

NED

Come on, this one's easy.

LISA

We give up.

NED

Well, guess! Book of Revelations, fire-breathing lion's head, tail made out of snakes. Who else could it be?

BART

Jesus?

## NED

[yelling] Je...Jes...don't you kids know anything? The serpent of Reboam? [*Bart and Lisa stare blankly.*] The well of Zohassadar? [*More blank stares.*] The bridal feast of Beth Chadruharazzeb?

When Maude says that these are the things the children should have learned in baptism class, Lisa acknowledges that they were never baptised. After Ned faints he decides to take the children to the Springfield River and baptize them for the good of their immortal souls. Once Homer and Marge discover this they come and rescue the children. The Flanders are loving and caring, but far too entrenched in fundamentalist conceptions of family values for *The Simpsons*. Emphasizing Rod and Todd's sheltered lives suggests that the Flanders have built a barrier to the outsider world, protecting themselves with evangelical trappings. Their sacred umbrella is exclusive and strong enough to prevent neighbouring forces from penetrating.

Ned is not always a moral crusader. He can also be a model of compassion, generosity, and neighbourliness. Indeed, one of the important things about Ned is the way that he embodies the ideal type of a kind, caring Christian—even if that type becomes corrupted by his moralizing and Christian exclusiveness. Throughout the series we see Ned practice neighbourly love, even though Homer is one of the most obnoxious characters anyone could ever imagine having as a neighbour.

From early in the second season, Ned seeks help from Rev. Lovejoy whenever he feels he has failed at this task. Reaching out only results in Homer's anger and mockery, but Ned tries to make amends by sending the Simpsons a heartfelt letter of apology ("Dead Putting Society"). In season five's "Homer Loves Flanders," Ned and Homer briefly befriend each other after Ned generously invites Homer to a football game, buys him snacks, and offers him the game ball. However, Homer's friendship quickly becomes overbearing. Ned wants to be a good neighbour, but ends up lying to Homer to get some time with his family. Eventually, he tries to race away from Homer, and after escaping he is stopped by the police. The church bus passes him, and everybody judges Ned while praising Homer's good works. Dejected, embarrassed, and angry, Ned is eventually redeemed after Homer declares that Ned is the most caring person he knows. Homer reminds us that if everybody were like Ned Flanders "there'd be no need for heaven, we'd already be there." Similar sentiments can be seen in "Home Away From Homer," in which Ned moves away after Homer humiliates him. Homer tracks him down, begging him to come back because the new neighbour is not nearly as gracious with Homer's failings as Ned. Finally, in "No Loan Again, Naturally," Ned becomes the Simpsons' landlord. He eventually evicts the Simpsons after they continue wrecking the house, but as

two new tenants are about to move in Ned has a change of heart. Explaining why he allows the Simpsons to return home, he says, “Well, the people who lived here before weren’t always the best neighbours, but I love ‘em. And you can’t be a saint unless you live among the lepers.” This suggests *The Simpsons* can find something valuable in Christian charity.

Ned is also willing to help financially when strangers are in need (“Brother, Can You Spare Two Dimes?”), and when Homer and Bart think they have contracted leprosy he pays to send them to a first class leper colony on Hawaii’s Molokai Island, which is famous for the work of Fr. Damien of Molokai who dedicated his life to improving the conditions of the leper colony there (“Little Big Mom”). He does charity work in a variety of episodes, including feeding the homeless or planting a tree at the seniors’ centre (“Homer Loves Flanders”; “The Bart of War”; “‘Tis the Fifteenth Season”). Pinsky correctly asserts that “Ned is . . . deeply immersed in the good works of the social gospel” (2007, 50), which Heit downplays in favour of his argument that Ned represents Christianity’s dark side. Indeed, Ned’s willingness to extend a helping hand makes him an easy foil for Homer’s abuse, but evangelicalism’s ethical vision of loving others and doing the right thing dwells beneath the humour Homer’s torments generate. Ned legitimates Christianity’s ethical side. While the institutional and culture warrior elements of Ned’s character are decried, his faith—his *spirituality*—is affirmed as ethical. Commentators like Pinsky and Bowler, who emphasize the good in religion that *The Simpsons* supports, focus on these elements of Ned’s character.

Ned’s two major crises of faith reveal his spiritual depth. In “Hurricane Neddy,” a hurricane destroys the family house while nothing happens to the Simpsons’. The Flanders take shelter at FCOS where the sign out front reads, “God Welcomes His Victims.” Echoing the Biblical story of Job, who lost his home, family, and property in a bet between God and Satan, Ned wonders if he is being punished. Lovejoy’s response to whether or not God is penalizing Ned is far from comforting: “Ooh....short answer yes with an if, long answer no with a but. Uh, if you need additional solace by the way I’ve got a copy of something or other by Art Linkletter in my office.” The reverend’s ambivalence forces Ned to find answers for himself. That night he climbs into the sanctuary and prays, “Why me, Lord? I’ve always been nice to people, I don’t drink or dance or swear. I’ve even kept kosher just 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 dang-diddly-do-dang-do-damn-diddly-darn do it! I... I...[sighs].” Unlike Job, who receives an audience with God and is rewarded for his faith in the face of hardship, Ned’s prayer is never answered. However, his actions call into question Turner’s claim that “in the Flanders home,

spirituality often appears to be fragile and other-worldly—couched in antiquated language, in need of constant protection from the rough-and-tumble of everyday life” (2004, 267). Instead, religion’s institutional concepts—the rules, dogmas, and rituals—have driven Ned towards a moral life. While he does not receive any consolation for his family’s suffering, religion frames the question of “why do I deserve this?” and gives Ned’s life meaning even if the answers he receives are unsatisfactory. This is a deep faith developed within religion, and while Turner is right that the caricatured fundamentalism Ned can represent is satirized, this does not mean that it cannot provide a meaningful spiritual experience in spite of its cultural baggage. Understanding Flanders’ value for *The Simpsons*’ unseen order means seeing past caricatures, realizing that *The Simpsons* actively selects what it deems positive traits from different religions, and showing how those elements can fruitfully enrich a character’s life.

Ned’s other major crisis comes in “Alone Again, Natura-Diddly,” when Maude dies. Grieving her loss, he prays, “Lord I’ve never questioned you, but I’ve been wondering if your decision to take Maude was well...wrong. [*Hastily*] Unless this is part of your divine plan. [*Groaning*] Just give me some kind of sign. Anything. [*Nothing happens*] And after all that church chocolate I bought, which by the way was gritty and had that white stuff on it! Well I’ve had it!” The next morning he threatens not to go to church, but he cannot follow through. When he arrives he walks into a performance by the Christian rock band Covenant and lead singer Rachel Jordan’s lyrics convince him that putting his faith in God will carry him through this dark time. Unlike the last time, Ned’s prayers are indirectly answered, and it is the church and Christianity that facilitates his healing. While *The Simpsons* has not spared Ned’s politics, parenting, or preachiness, how Ned copes with pain demonstrates a recognition and acceptance of the ways evangelicals can find meaningful answers to difficult problems through their religious traditions.

## 5.4 Conclusions

Christianity has an ambiguous place in *The Simpsons*’ unseen order. Far from Heit’s call to a reformation of American Christianity, a closer look at Christian elements in different characters illustrates that when Christianity matches *The Simpsons*’ liberal values emphasizing positive social and individual development it is applauded. However, when Christianity shows its conservative side and tries to enforce a particular unseen order on others, shaping society to conform to a conservative viewpoint, and taking people’s money, it is satirized harshly as hypocritical and irrelevant. Humour in these examples shows that *The Simpsons* acknowledges American Christianity’s diversity, but works



to promote certain elements of the tradition over others. Christians who share, love, and risk themselves for others are acknowledged as good characters. When those same characters judge and try to enforce their unseen order on Springfield they not only fail, but fail in a way that makes them appear foolish.

*The Simpsons* assess Christianity according to what sociologist Nancy Ammerman calls “Golden Rule Christianity” (1997), in which someone’s Christianity is dedicated towards helping others and bringing about a greater spiritual depth without the rigidity and combativeness that is born from doctrinal adherence and struggles. These Christians live ethically without the ideological baggage that characterizes the extreme liberal and evangelical poles on the Protestant religious continuum (although Ammerman’s survey also includes Catholics in this definition). Ammerman suggests that this is Christianity for the majority of American Christians. They live honestly, try to help others, and build meaningful relationships that make the world a better place. While Lovejoy lacks altruistic enthusiasm and Ned can be haughty and self-righteous, the humour directed at them does not attack the values and actions Golden Rule Christians find favourable. Humour in this case is, as Bergson suggests, a means to align behaviour to an assumed standard (1956, 147). Ridiculing Lovejoy for his greed and apathy and Flanders for his literalism and overzealousness tells us what *The Simpsons* treats as fundamentally flawed about lived Christianity in America. At the same time, seeing Lovejoy embody community values by returning to rescue the town from Homer’s excesses and saving Ned from baboons demonstrates that there are Christian values *The Simpsons* treats as exemplary. Similarly, Ned’s Job-like spiritual searching in the midst of suffering suggests that the religion offers something meaningful. While *The Simpsons* attacks scripture’s relevancy, Christian dogma, God’s character, and prayer’s efficiency, it does not discredit the people who achieve socially good things through these mechanisms, only the mechanisms themselves.

This puts Christianity in an ambiguous position relative to the comedic centre discussed in the previous chapter. While Christian spirituality is lauded, the institutional order and its legitimating devices (texts, rituals, and hierarchy) are not. As Henry notes, Humanism shares the same values Ammerman locates under Golden Rule Christianity (2008, 287) which suggests that Christianity may not be vital or have an important role in their conception of the unseen order. Henry goes so far as to say that in *The Simpsons* “religion, particularly Christianity, is a sham” (289; cf. Heit 2008, Pinsky 2007). This is going too far, as it is through Christianity that Ned is able to find answers to his struggles and Lovejoy finds a framework for returning to help others. Christianity still offers something valuable, but it has accumulated religious baggage *The Simpsons* ridicules. Likewise, God

exists as a bipolar character, but honestly searching for a right relationship with others through a framework that also worships this divine being and petitions him for help in achieving honest and good goals is treated as plausible and practical in *The Simpsons*. This reflects the reality of millions of Americans, even while it tries to correct some people's religious extremism. *The Simpsons'* satire of Christianity allows the evangelical to see where their behaviour may be excessive, but also directs them towards religious behaviours they would find congruous. It is not dismissal and destruction so much as it is constructive criticism.

Throughout this chapter we have seen how *The Simpsons'* struggles with the supernatural's reality and with ethical action inspired by institutions they deem erroneous. Those who deal in absolutes with the program's treatment of religion (e.g., Delaney 2008, Heit 2008, Henry 2008, Turner 2004, Pinsky 2007) miss this inner conflict. In the next chapter we will see how it carries over to two religions which are historically associated with immigrant populations in America: Judaism and Hinduism. The questions of what is ethically beneficial and supernaturally relevant carries on in *The Simpsons'* treatment of these two minority religions in American religious history.

## Chapter 6—Insiders or Outsiders? Judaism and Hinduism

Examining religion in *The Simpsons* involves moving from an ideological centre towards a periphery. Sometimes, as in the case of deinstitutionalized spirituality, Buddhism, and science, we find a direct correlation between what is acceptable in *The Simpsons*' unseen order and in established socio-religious institutions. In other cases, as with Protestantism, we find some elements are congruous with *The Simpsons*' worldview while others are not. But what should we make of marginal religious traditions that have encountered liberal American values differently and at different times? Two characters in *The Simpsons*, Krusty the Clown and Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, embody the tensions non-Christian immigrants have experienced in their passages to America over the last two hundred years. While Krusty is a caricature of the secularized Jew combined with the ravages a life in show business brings, Apu is a contentious stereotype of South Asian immigrants who have become increasingly visible since 1965's Immigration and Nationality Act allowed extensive immigration from non-European countries. In this chapter we consider these two underdiscussed characters (only Dalton et al. [2001]<sup>102</sup> and Pinsky [2007] examine them) in light of the emerging pattern of religious acceptance developed in the last two chapters. What elements of the Jewish and Hindu communities *The Simpsons* embraces, and what elements are attacked, determines how they present "proper" ethno-religious adaptations in America.

While Jews are an established religious group, their minority and non-Christian status still positions them tenuously in mainstream America's religious culture. There is a long history of immigration and integration into American culture, as Jewish immigrants from different European countries have found their way to the United States since the colonial period. Today, Jews are a largely accepted and established ethnoreligious group in America (although anti-Semitism persists among some Americans),<sup>103</sup> while Hindus are generally unknown. Despite there being over a billion

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<sup>102</sup> Dalton and his associates only devote one paragraph of summary description to each of these characters, which, while factually accurate, do not address the underlying significance of the portrayals. As such, I mostly argue with Pinsky, if any of the major *Simpsons* commentators, in this chapter.

<sup>103</sup> Finkelstein (2005; see also 2003) argues that there are two different types of anti-Semitism in contemporary America. Anti-Semitism, "the unjustifiable targeting of Jews solely for being Jews," persists in small pockets throughout the country, and is not nearly as prevalent as "*anti-Semitism*" (emphasis his) makes it out to be (2005, 84). "*Anti-Semitism*," "the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism by American (or other) Jewish elites," is a politically useful strategy used to protect Israel's interests and cover its human rights records (84). In deflecting legitimate criticism of Israel by labelling opponents anti-Semites who pose the same threats as the Nazis, Finkelstein contends that those using "*anti-Semitism*" for their political purposes support ongoing human

Hindus globally, in “Homer the Heretic” Reverend Lovejoy remarks that Homer was saved by God working in the hearts of his friends and neighbours “Be they Christian, Jew, or miscellaneous.” When Apu responds that there are over 700 million Hindus (the episode aired in 1992), Lovejoy says, “Awww...That’s super.” Lovejoy is condescending and dismissive, but his comment indicates that Hinduism has yet to establish itself as a “normal” religion in American culture. These two characters allow for a comparison between two groups with different histories in America, permitting us to see how *The Simpsons* uses historical patterns and particularities for their comedic purposes. In short, Krusty and Apu are metonyms for their respective religious groups.

## 6.1 Crossing and Dwelling: Migration and Changing Religious Identities

Thus far I have used a modified version of William James’ definition of religion (*institutionalized systems of beliefs and actions relating to an unseen order which compels harmonious adjustment thereto*) to argue that *The Simpsons* presents a normative ordering of different religions in American culture. In other words, it has its own unseen order of unseen orders. But when it comes to thinking about religions shaped by migration and flux, it is also helpful to consider Tweed’s definition from *Crossing and Dwelling*: “Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries” (2006, 54).<sup>104</sup> In viewing religion as something that moves people about, bridging different places—whether other countries or alternate planes of existence—and providing explanations for why humans inhabit the world they do, Tweed offers a new twist on the Bergerian problem of legitimation. While Berger does not figure prominently in Tweed’s theoretical foundation, they share an interest in religion’s role in providing life with cosmic congruity and meaningfulness. Tweed’s definition, which he acknowledges is a collection of tropes (167-171), implies that religion makes our constantly changing and moving world comprehensible by locating us in a cosmic narrative, even when the rest of our lives feel as though they are in flux. This relates to an unseen order, but acknowledges that the unseen order is intimately shaped by the adherent’s context. Even

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rights violations in the Middle East and abuse the memory of those who died in the Nazi holocaust. In the main text I refer to the first type of anti-Semitism, which is often associated with marginal racist organizations.

<sup>104</sup> Not everybody finds Tweed’s theory helpful, as his aquatic metaphors and the theory’s testability have been challenged. Other scholars favour more limiting spatial metaphors for describing the often contentious and powerfully mediated flow of people in the contemporary world. See the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*’s extended review panel discussion (Taves et al. 2009).

while an unseen order provides meaning in a confusing world, it is also adapted to the changing needs of those who believe in it.

A growing body of literature explains new immigrant religious adaptations to American culture. In *Religion and the New Immigrants*, sociologists Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz (2000) synthesize findings from thirteen case studies in Houston, arguing that environmental impacts including the local economy and institutional location affected how different religious and ethnic groups integrated into the city. Religious institutions often serve as places for immigrants to come for social services related to settling in America.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, they are places for socializing the second and subsequent generations into home cultures through different languages, ethnic holidays, and religious festivals not celebrated in American culture at large.<sup>106</sup> In other words, ethnoreligious institutions preserve cultural and religious traits for groups transitioning from one national context to another. In practitioners' minds the two are often inseparable. This process creates a variety of ethno-Christian churches and introduces Americans to practitioners of established religions that are new to this continent, including Middle Eastern and Asian Islams, different schools of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Hinduism.<sup>107</sup> This growing religious diversity has been celebrated in some corners and derided in others. In 1997, then South Carolina school board member Dr. Henry Jordan said, "screw the Buddhists and kill the Muslims" during a discussion about displaying the Ten Commandments in schools (quoted in Nimer 2002, 181). Others share his views, as violence against mosques and gurdwaras, synagogues and temples periodically arises in America. New religious

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<sup>105</sup> Although he does not deal with transnational immigration, McRoberts' (2003) study of churches in Boston's Four Corners neighbourhood is related because it illustrates the transient nature of religious institutions in contemporary America. As suburbanization changes major cities' inner dynamics, different types of churches emerge, adapting to the situation. This can mean anything from established churches changing their programming to serve a new clientele to storefront churches opening to provision a small group of people for short periods of time. Immigrant religious institutions face similar issues, from finding spaces to refurbish or build, to establishing temporary homes until the community can raise the financial resources to find a permanent residence.

<sup>106</sup> I follow Bramadat in defining ethnic groups as "any significant group of people, typically related through common filiation, or blood, whose members also usually feel a sense of attachment to a particular place, a history, and a culture (including a common language, food, and clothing). An ethnic group is therefore a kind of modern 'tribe' in the sense that its members believe themselves to be related, and to owe some degree of loyalty to the main institutions, leaders, history, or symbols of the larger group" (2005, 8).

<sup>107</sup> While this chapter's narrative applies theories and questions about ethnic adaptation and religious perseverance in American culture to Jews and Hindus, this does not exhaust the literature on new immigrant religious traditions. A significant portion is dedicated to Christian congregations (see, e.g., Guest 2003; Orsi 1985, 2005; Tweed 1997a; Yang 1999). Furthermore, there are diverse resources dedicated to non-Christian ethnoreligious traditions' adaptations and assimilations in America (see, e.g., Brown 2001, R. Williams 1988; and chapters in Haddad 1990, 2002; Haddad and Smith 1994; Orsi 1999; Prebish and Baumann 2002; Warner and Wittner 1998).

immigrants are in a precarious situation where their sacred umbrellas represent different perspectives from already established American religions. While some people embrace this difference, others are threatened by it (Eck 2001, Wuthnow 2005).

Over fifty years ago, sociologist Will Herberg wrote his now famous *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1960) about how these three religious groups had become the major identifying bodies for Americans. Herberg argued that by the third generation, an ethnic group had lost its “ethnic” language, dress, and customs, but kept its religion intact. Religious difference was the one acceptable distinction people were expected to preserve. There was a sense of shared American cultural values, especially individualism, idealism, and moralism with a strong work ethic. Upon this cultural ground religious differences were maintained. They enabled people to be different within the larger cultural fold. However, recent studies of religious immigrants call Herberg’s thesis into question. Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000) demonstrate that old patterns of establishing ethnoreligious enclaves are ongoing, and socializing children to maintain language and customs from the old country is a large part of their church programming. While this repeats patterns Herberg discussed in relation to Protestants, Catholics, and Jews (see also Dolan 1985, R. Williams 1988), differences in international travel and communications complicate the old patterns of immigration and assimilation in which people moved to the United States with little hope of seeing their homelands again. Furthermore, communicating with the homeland was difficult before modern telecommunications. Assimilation was a matter of survival because there were no other communities to which they could remain connected. Today, things are different. With telecommunications, the Internet, air travel, and satellite television, the immigrant from India, China, or Iran can talk to friends and family, consume news and entertainment media from their homeland, or visit. While there may be economic restrictions, the fact remains that today we talk about “transnationalism” as a reality rather than as the lucrative privilege of the few who could afford to travel (Warner 1998, 14-15).

Wuthnow argues that there are four reasons why religious diversity is socially significant: “First, there are some who believe that greater diversity poses a threat to democracy itself . . . Second, there is concern that greater religious diversity raises difficult practical questions about fairness and decency. Third, there are those who fear that increasing diversity is undermining long-held American values. And fourth, there is a set of arguments suggesting that the *religious* dimension of religious diversity is itself an important cultural challenge that needs to be taken seriously” (2005, 78; emphasis in original). America has always been a religiously diverse country. However, the variations among Protestant sects and even among Catholics, Protestants, and Jews are more easily overcome

than the differences, for example, between American Protestants and Hindus. While Christians and Jews have some “family resemblances” and a long history of interaction, Hinduism and Christianity are foreign to each other. Hinduism’s karmic system and ongoing cycle of rebirths is very different from the Christian view of one life to live on this earth with the soul judged after death. Hinduism’s many deities are contrasted with the monolithic God. Hindu rituals, with their visceral smells, bright colours, dancing, and sacrificial *poojas* at which gods and goddesses are fed, clothed, and treated as present in their *murtis* (statues of the deities) are distant from the sombre Calvinist Protestant traditions that have been so influential in shaping the United States. When we combine these religious differences with various ethical traditions, cultural histories, and the fact that Hindus are noticeable for their professional achievements, we can see why Americans who are unfamiliar with this tradition could feel threatened by it. After all, they are now seeing intelligent and successful people from another country move into their neighbourhoods, take leadership positions in the community, and practice a religious tradition that was formerly foreign to the United States (R. Williams 1988). Incidents of racism and more subtle forms of discrimination (e.g., finding ways to obstruct a temple’s construction) come from trying to deal with the radical changes these religions pose to the predominantly Christian assumptions that shape the unseen orders of majority of Americans.

This framework is useful for studying Krusty and Apu because their religiousness is directly tied to their ethnicity, and this helps identify where they are positioned within *The Simpsons*’ unseen order. Furthermore, these ethnic identities have an explicit religious component in *The Simpsons*. How are these religions and ethnicities embraced or criticized in terms of *The Simpsons*’ expectations for religious groups? How does *The Simpsons* position itself relative to religious groups that are shaped by fairly recent immigration? While historically all Americans (with the exception of Native Americans) are immigrants, descendants of non-Western European Protestants find their ethnoreligious identity is marginal to the country’s mainstream (see also L. Moore 1986). The question now becomes how far *The Simpsons* accepts these new variations in America’s religious culture.

## **6.2 The Other American Indian: Apu Nahasapeemapetilon and Hinduism in *The Simpsons***

Current immigrants from Southeast Asia can look to the Hindu, Apu, as their ethnoreligious representative. A Ph.D. in computer science, Apu is an Indian immigrant who manages Springfield’s Kwik-E-Mart (a convenience store). He lives with his wife, Manjula, and their eight children in a

small apartment. Apu has been associated with Hinduism from the second season in which he explains that he enrolled in a screenwriting class because “I long to tell the story of an idealistic young Hindu pushed too far by convenience store bandits. I call it ‘Hands off my Jerky, Turkey’” (“Brush with Greatness”). The first depiction of Hinduism comes in “Homer the Heretic” when Homer asks Apu why he is not in church. Apu replies, “Oh, but I am. I have a shrine to Ganesha, the god of worldly wisdom, located in the employee lounge.” The camera pans to the lounge where there is a *murti* of Ganesha, the popular elephant headed Hindu god who removes obstacles and brings luck. Homer, however, tries to offer Ganesha a peanut. The indignant, but polite, Apu responds, “Please do not offer my god a peanut.” Homer retorts not only with ignorance, but a rudeness born of a historical hubris which sees Hindu deities not as representatives of an unseen order, but visible idols unworthy of serious engagement. “No offense, Apu,” he says, “but when they were handing out religions you must have been out taking a whiz.”

There are two types of jokes about Apu and Hinduism in *The Simpsons*. First, there are jokes based on superficial knowledge of Hindu practices and concepts such as karma, reincarnation, and the Hindu pantheon. These jokes emphasize Hinduism’s differences from mainstream American religious culture. Second, there are jokes that distinguish Hindus from Christians, casting Hindus in a positive light because they are more tolerant. While religious studies scholars lament general religious ignorance, the fact remains that before I, and others like me, learned more about Hinduism in university, I could find these jokes funny by fitting them into my cognitive framework for understanding different religions, read them through Apu’s character, and make sense of them. Just because these jokes are superficial does not mean they are inconsequential. Their superficiality makes them significant for understanding the program’s depiction of Hinduism, speaking to how little one has to know about Hinduism to understand its place in *The Simpsons*’ unseen order.

Ignorant familiarity is key to understanding depictions of Hinduism in *The Simpsons*, as the jokes are largely based on an “introductory textbook” understanding of Hinduism (e.g., Flood 1996; Matthews 2004, 79-121; Molloy 2008, 73-121; Narayanan 2002; see also Grossman 2006). If we look at Hinduism jokes in *The Simpsons*, we see that a few specific tropes are consistently repeated. This should come as little surprise. Ignorant familiarity does not require detailed knowledge and jokes based on Hindu esoterica would be irrelevant to American audiences. However, reincarnation and the polytheist Hindu pantheon are frequent topics for jokes, establishing Apu’s difference from the rest of Springfield. In “The Sweetest Apu,” Apu contemplates suicide after cheating on Manjula. He has a small reincarnation chart before him and directs our attention along his spiritual path. “Now, let’s see



what awaits me in the next life. First I was a tiger, a snake, a clod, a goat with a hat, then me... Wow! A tapeworm. Then assistant to Lorne Michaels. It's going to be a rough couple of lifetimes."<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, in "Smart and Smarter," Apu takes his eight children to Mrs. Wickerbottom's pre-nursery school so they can get ahead of their academic competition. The children fight outside the school while their father encourages them, saying, "That's it, claw and bite for position. There's only enough tuition money for two. The rest of you, better luck next life." *The Simpsons* also juxtaposes reincarnation with Christianity's concept of salvation in "Treehouse of Horror XVI." In one of the stories, Mr. Burns turns his property into a hunting reserve where he kills humans. After Apu is shot, his last words are, "You got me, but I shall be reincarnated." Suddenly, his spirit comes back as a rabbit, saying, "Ha ha! You can't kill a Hindu." Suddenly, the rabbit is caught in a bear trap and calls out, "Help me, Jesus!" This may be a joke on the karmic consequences of Apu's hubris, but it emphasizes the fact that reincarnation and Christian salvation are often seen as incompatible. Calling out to Jesus for salvation is not a part of the Hindu tradition, but being reborn as different life forms (or as a spiritual being) is. *The Simpsons* mixes and matches from the two traditions for comic effect because people are aware that the two religions are different and are, at least, vaguely familiar with the different understandings of what happens after death.

The best introduction to a Hindu worldview in *The Simpsons* is "Homer and Apu." After selling Homer some diseased meat and losing his job at the Kwik-E-Mart, Apu goes to the Simpsons' house to make amends. Upon offering to work off his debt Apu tells Homer he is, "selling the concept of karmic realignment." Indignant, Homer tells Apu, "You can't sell that! Karma can only be portioned out by the cosmos!" and slams the door in his face. Standing on the doorstep Apu says, "He's got me there." Later in the episode, when Homer and Apu travel to India so that Apu can ask Kwik-E-Mart's president for his job back, they are accosted in the airport by Christians singing, "If you're saved and you know it, clap your hands."<sup>109</sup> They travel up a mountain to the world's first convenience store, where they meet the guru-like president and CEO of Kwik-E-Mart International. Designed to look like many gurus who have crossed the globe attracting Western followers, the

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<sup>108</sup> Visually, the clod is Alfred E. Neuman—*MAD Magazine*'s infamous mascot—while Lorne Michaels is famous as the creator of *Saturday Night Live*, a show for which some *Simpsons* writers worked before coming to FOX.

<sup>109</sup> This is a direct reference to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness' (ISKCON, also known as the "Hare Krishnas") members who distribute religious pamphlets to travelers in American airports. One of the Indian passengers rolls his eyes and mutters "Christians" as he passes them, indicating that *The Simpsons* relativizes the prejudice directed towards ISKCON members in America as a matter of cultural difference, rather than a flaw inherent in the religious tradition. For more on ISKCON, see Bromley and Shinn (1989), Bryant and Ekstrand (2004), and Rochford (1985, 2007).

president most resembles Maharishi Maheshi Yogi, Transcendental Meditation's founder, who came to prominence in the West after the Beatles became his followers for a brief period during the 1960s.<sup>110</sup> Seated in the lotus position on a pile of cushions and drinking a squishee, the president provides answers under a sign that reads "The Master Knows All Except Combination to Safe." The store is designed like an ashram, with stereotyped Indian designs such as domed tower silhouettes for doorways, mixed with convenience store shelves stocked with goods. The president is portrayed as mystical, speaking in a soft voice and offering to answer three questions. When Homer uses all the questions asking a variation of "Are you really the president?" Apu is furious, but the president dismisses them with Apu's catch phrase, "Thank you, come again."

"Homer and Apu" references karma and some of Hinduism's most visible elements because they are culturally relevant. In other words, Americans have seen images of gurus, and know that Hindus believe in cosmic consequences for their actions, even if they do not understand the complexities of these ideas within Hinduism. Gurus are plentiful throughout India, and Indian religion has a long history of the divine being revealed through people, places, and things. Indeed, as Eck argues in *Darśan* (1998), Hindus see the sacred through such diverse things as holy rivers (e.g., the Ganges), people (gurus and *sannyāsin*, those who have renounced householder status), and objects such as *murti*. *Darśan*, seeing the deity incarnated in a *murti* or flowing through a sacred mountain or forest associated with their sacred narratives, is the gift that Hindus receive from these visual encounters with the divine. Gurus are not only great teachers, they are also *holy* men and women. Reincarnation, on the other hand, and its determination by one's karma, is less popularly understood. Karma is often treated as a celestial score card working on the principle of "what goes around, comes around." The sitcom *My Name is Earl*, which aired on NBC from 2005-2009, used the tag line "karma is a funny thing" to frame stories about a small-time hustler who wins \$100,000 in the lottery, writes a list of everybody he has ever wronged, and sets about trying to make restitution so that his immediate circumstances will improve. The Hindu doctrine of karma encompasses a wide variety of different beliefs, from the "orthodox" version of karma put forth in the *Bhagavad Gita* as selflessly completing one's duty (*dharma*), to the understanding that bad things happen in this life because of actions in past lives, to the basic concept of karma *The Simpsons* and *My Name is Earl* use, but the

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<sup>110</sup> Groening is a known Beatles fan and all of the band's members except John Lennon (d. 1980) have appeared as guest stars. Paul McCartney's appearance includes a reference to this period in the band's history when he claims he met Apu "during the Maharishi days" ("Lisa the Vegetarian").

fact remains that through everyday use Indians are aware of the diversity, breadth, and different understandings of karma, but it is a novel concept in America (Reichenbach 1988, Sharma 1973).

Similarly, jokes about the Hindu pantheon also focus superficially on a few well known deities. Apu's attachment to Ganesha is well established, as he is seen offering him a bottle of Yoo-Hoo in "Much Apu About Nothing," an episode parodying California's proposition 187 on the 1994 state election ballot.<sup>111</sup> *The Simpsons* draws upon the phenomenon of "milk miracles" which took place in September 1995 when, for three days, *murti* of Ganesha and other deities around the world appeared to drink milk offered by devotees (Kurien 2007, 53). Apu's relationship with Ganesha is made explicit when he offers the bottle as a bribe to make anti-illegal immigrant protestors depart, saying, "make the protestors go away and I'll give you the entire bottle." This sacrifice is appropriate because Ganesha is the remover of obstacles, but in other cases when *The Simpsons* uses Ganesha for humorous purposes, the deity's character is not acknowledged or parodied.

The Simpson family has a history of dressing up as Ganesha when they are trying to influence Apu's life. In "The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemepitons," Homer dresses up as Ganesha in an attempt to stop Apu's wedding to Manjula. Walking down the aisle and talking in a ghostly wail, he flaps his arms and says, "I am the god Ganesha! This wedding angers me! All will die unless it is stopped." Eventually, he is chased up a tree and the wedding continues. In "The Sweetest Apu," Bart, Lisa, and Maggie dress up as Ganesha in an attempt to force Manjula and Apu to reconcile after Apu's affair. Bart, voicing Ganesha, shows that he has no understanding of this deity and, in a voice imitating a cinematic vampire, says, "I order you to get back together or I'll suck your blood!" While Apu respects Ganesha, *The Simpsons* pays him as much respect as any other god—which is to say very little. However, these depictions also play on general assumptions about gods. That is, they get angry, they can affect people's lives, and they are willing to act on their anger. This ignorant familiarity, combined with culturally relevant intertextual assumptions about gods and their powers, restricts the use of more specific references to devotion to Ganesha because the god is not widely known and worshipped in the United States. Ganesha is a familiar icon, but, as with other Hindu deities (see "Kiss, Kiss, Bangalore"), his character in *The Simpsons* is as a generic god.

Another problem with *The Simpsons'* depiction of Hinduism is that it lacks any portrayals of *lived Hinduism*. Hinduism in America is practiced mainly in the home, although worship in temples is

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<sup>111</sup> Proposition 187 is a significant example of anti-immigrant legislation directed at denying illegal aliens social services including health care and education. Although it passed on the original ballot, it was found unconstitutional in 1998 and overturned by the Supreme Court (American Civil Liberties Union 1999). The full text of Proposition 187 can be found on the anti-illegal immigrant website SaveOurLicence.com (2010).

increasing, as they are being erected in the country's major urban areas.<sup>112</sup> Apu does not attend a temple nor does he have a religious community. His Hinduism lacks the important ritual traditions that locate Hindus within the world. This is not to say that there are not moments when we see parodies of Hindu ritual. In "The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemepetilon," Apu's mother comes to Springfield from India and forces Apu to fulfil his obligation to marry Manjula, a girl to whom he was betrothed to when he was very young. For North Americans, the tradition of arranged marriages stands in stark contrast to the tradition of "love marriage," in which two people choose each other instead of having parents make the choice for them. Apu, though, is not North American. He rides to his wedding on an elephant, while Bart prepares a sacred fire by tearing pages from a hymnal and throwing them on the fire. Reverend Lovejoy officiates at the service, but he does not know what he is doing so he admits that he consulted a Hindu website for his information and justifies his officiating as "Christ is Christ," an ecumenical statement that completely misses the differences between the two religions (see *Hinduism Today* 1999). Homer tries to disrupt the ceremony dressed as Ganesha (described earlier), and Apu marries Manjula even though he has never met her before.

*The Simpsons'* take on the Hindu wedding is somewhat consistent with real Hindu ceremonies. While there are a wide variety of wedding traditions, if we follow the ritual performed in Pittsburgh's Sri Venkateswara Temple (one of the first Hindu temples in North America) we see some definite similarities (Sri Vankateswara Temple 1999). First, there is the worship of Ganesha. At Sri Venkateswara, the bride's parents invite the deity to come and remove any obstacles to the ceremony's smooth procession. In this case, Homer invites himself as Ganesha, circumventing and inverting Hindu tradition with humorous consequences. Homer as Ganesha is an obstacle, and misses the god's significance for this occasion. There is also the *pradhana homam*, or worship of Agni who is represented by the sacred fire. In this, *The Simpsons'* depiction is somewhat closer to reality, with Bart tending the fire. However, a hymnal is not desecrated to sanctify the fire at Sri Vankateswara and, according to the DVD commentary, this was a twist *The Simpsons'* creative team added as a way of making the fire sacred.<sup>113</sup> The most accurate depiction of a Hindu wedding ceremony comes when

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<sup>112</sup> There is a wealth of material on Hindu temples as gathering places through which the community proves they have arrived in North America and pass their traditions to their children. It should also be noted that Indian immigrants emphasize the religious elements of the temples, instead of their role in helping immigrants settle socially, as opposed to Asian churches which help many newcomers with settlement issues such as finding work, navigating immigration law, and learning English, see Gupta (2003); Jacob and Thaku (2000); Kurien (1998, 2007); Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2003); Min (2003); Waghorne (1999).

<sup>113</sup> Originally the hymnal was supposed to be a Bible, but it was changed at the last minute to be less offensive.

Apu and Manjula walk around the fire to seal their vows. Called *Sapta Padi*, this moment in the ritual marks a statement before a deity and is an exchange of vows between the married couple. It is also the one element of the wedding *The Simpsons*' team does not satirize. The solemnity of marriage, as the episode's emotional climax, is too important to make light of on this occasion.

These examples demonstrate that there are visual, surface elements of Hinduism that a wider audience can access through cultural intertextuality. However, this knowledge is disjointed and superficial, illustrating the fact that for the majority of Americans, knowledge of Hinduism is unnecessary. They do not practice it themselves, it does not have public stigma associated with it, and Hindus have quietly worked their way into different sectors of American culture without trying to change American culture to be more like India's. In other words, most Americans only need an "ignorant familiarity" of Hinduism to navigate their everyday worlds, and *The Simpsons* uses these basics to generate their humour. People know a little about karma and reincarnation, have seen pictures of Hindu weddings, gurus, and gods, and are not threatened by them. Hinduism exists as one religion among many, but because it is not a dangerous religion, *The Simpsons* does not frame it negatively.

This is not to say that these ignorant familiarities are unaccompanied by evaluations of Hinduism. Understanding where Hinduism fits in the grand scheme of *The Simpsons*' creative team's unseen order can be seen when Apu and Ned Flanders are juxtaposed. A recurring theme is that of "religion is acceptable if it is not forced on others," and this places Hinduism in a positive light. Two examples from the later seasons emphasize the differences between American evangelicalism and Hinduism. Season sixteen's "Midnight Rx" sees an exchange between Apu and Ned when Homer crosses into Canada to take advantage of the country's cheaper prescriptions after Mr. Burns cancels the nuclear plant's staff's health plan. Sitting in the back seat of Homer's van, Apu and Ned have the following exchange:

APU

Homer, tell Ned to stop trying to convert me.

NED

I'm just telling him how brave he is to worship a false God.

APU

I don't worship one God, OK? I worship a whole super team of deities who...OW! OK, he just pinched me!

NED

Well, where's your super team now?

HOMER

Listen you two, I'll tell you who the true God is if you're quiet the rest of the trip. [Apu and Ned protest.]

HOMER

All right, I'm coming back there. [Mini van swerves all over the road.]

APU

Save me, Shiva!

NED

Why don't you just call out for Hawk Man?

APU

Why don't you just shut up? ("Midnight Rx")

Ned and Apu's exchange is childish, as it draws upon children's backseat fights during long road trips as a humorous script. What concerns us is the difference between Ned's aggressive, ridiculing evangelism, and Apu's resolute refusal to be converted. Ned's belligerence is used as a foil here to emphasize the differences between American evangelicals and the perspective an immigrant such as Apu brings to the United States. This joke trivializes the Hindu pantheon, making them sound like DC Comics' famed Justice League of America, which featured such superheroes as Superman, Batman, and, yes, Hawkman. While there is a body of literature relating superheroes to religious figures (see, e.g., Garrett 2008, Oropeza 2005, Skelton 2006), the distinction remains between Ned as the aggressor and Apu as the defensive Hindu who does not wish to convert. This contrast is raised again in "Mona Leaves-a," when Homer goes to the Kwik-E-Mart for solace when his mother dies:

HOMER

Apu, what do you think happens after you die?

APU

Manjula will sell the store, dye her hair blonde, and marry my cousin Jangala.

MANJULA

Yes, I will.

HOMER

I mean, do you think my mother's out there somewhere? Does she know I feel bad about things I said?

APU

Oh, perhaps she's around us now. She may have already been reincarnated as that new born baby [*points to a newborn*], or that tiny mouse in the nacho cheese [*a mouse slides down a ladle's handle into the nacho cheese*].

NED

Oh for crying out loud! People aren't mice.

APU

Oh, what a surprise! Joe Jesus Junior's going to set us all straight.

NED

Look Homer, people don't come back as anything, except for our Lord who came back as bread. That's it.

HOMER

That's it. [*Homer sighs, takes his groceries, and leaves the store.*]

APU

What's the thing with your religion? It's a bummer.

NED

Even the sing-a-longs?

APU

No, the sing-a-longs are ok. ("Mona Leaves-a")

Ned's persistent perpetuation of Christian belief in death's permanence opens the door for Apu to correct him. There is no proof that Homer's mother was not reincarnated as a mouse sliding into a vat of nacho cheese, but Ned's lived Christianity is a bummer. With the exception of sing-alongs, there is nothing Apu (and in this case the despondent Homer) can find uplifting in the United States' dominant religious tradition. Hinduism, conversely, offers hope. Our loved ones could be there in the room with us, they know we are trying to make amends, and there is hope for redemption beyond this life. This humorous exchange revisits the arguments in chapter four about spirituality and its position over Christianity in *The Simpsons*' unseen order. Here, Hindu concepts such as karmic rebirth and the fact that Apu does not aggressively proselytize, but does offer a hopeful solution to the problem of death, is juxtaposed against the negative elements of Ned's Christianity to show us how *The Simpsons* positions and evaluates both religions.

While Apu is a stereotype representing today's ethno-religious immigrants to America, his religiousness lacks depth. In this case, superficiality is not insignificance, as it lets us know about Hinduism's general acceptance in the United States, but also the indifference with which it can be treated. There is not much more to say about Apu's Hinduism other than that it is based on textbook knowledge, is seen positively compared to Christianity, and is easily reducible to a few basic tropes. While this is certainly not representative of Hinduism in America, it focuses our attention on the larger issues ethnoreligious groups face in gaining acceptance. That is, they are known only to the extent that their histories and actions impact the lives of mainstream Americans, and then they are reduced to the bare essentials necessary for navigating those encounters.

### **6.3 Krusty the Clown's Jewish Neuroses: Secularism, Ethnic Intermarriage and Semitic Angst**

If Apu's Hinduism is portrayed as different, but acceptable for Americans, Krusty the Clown's Jewishness demonstrates that ethnoreligious groups can be welcomed into *The Simpsons*' portrayal of American culture, provided they adopt the individualism, tolerance, and spiritual seeking at the heart of *The Simpsons*' unseen order. Krusty is one of *The Simpsons*' more memorable secondary characters. He is a chain-smoking, hard drinking, gambling, pornography-addicted comic with green hair, white make-up, and a red nose. He consistently produces shoddy merchandise with his likeness, mistreats people, and tells terrible jokes. Krusty is Springfield's foremost children's entertainer and he is also Jewish. In short, he is a complex character who epitomizes a stereotype of professional Jewish entertainers. Krusty's Jewishness provides him with no small amount of angst.



He fluctuates between accepting the faith and trying to hide any traces of his Jewishness. “I don’t do the Jewish stuff on the air,” he yells at a chef on his television program, “Cooking With Krusty,” in “The Front,” while in “Today, I am a Clown,” he embraces his faith by showing an episode of the ultra-violent “Itchy & Scratchy” cartoon (which is shown as part of his “Krusty the Clown Show”) entitled “A Briss Before Dying.” In this episode the psychotic mouse (Itchy) takes a scalpel from the cat (Scratchy), who is dressed as a *mohel* (circumciser) trying to perform a circumcision. Itchy then mutilates Scratchy, puts him through a meat grinder, melts his flesh, and creates a glass out of it. Itchy promptly wraps the glass in a cloth, stomps on, and yells “Mouseltoff!” [*sic*], parodying the Jewish tradition of smashing a small glass at weddings to remember the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem. The scene shifts back to Krusty’s stage where he yells “And that’s what I believe in now!”

But Krusty was not always depicted as Jewish. His Hebraic ancestry was introduced in the season three episode, “Like Father, Like Clown.” Parodying *The Jazz Singer* (Crosland 1927), in which the son of a Jewish cantor defies his father to become a jazz singer, this episode tells the story of how Krusty, born Herschel Krustofsky, defied his father, Rabbi Hyman Krustofsky (voiced by the self-professed “ultimate Jew,” Jackie Mason), to become a clown. In the second act we learn that Krusty grew up in Springfield’s Jewish neighbourhood which is based on New York’s Jewish neighbourhoods. Here Jews dress in Orthodox fashion (e.g., long robes, beards, earlocks), play chess outdoors, and debate ethical questions. In a flashback sequence we learn that Krusty’s father was a rabbi in a long line of rabbis, but young Herschel wants to make people laugh. His father responds with a quote that cuts to the core of this dissertation: “A clown is not a respected member of the community. . . . Herschel, life is not fun. Life is serious.” Rabbi Krustofsky echoes generations of thinkers who have seen nothing substantial in comedy. This is not to say that Krusty sees himself as a comic figure transcending the material world and revealing something sublime—he just wants to make people laugh. The comedy bug is too much for Krusty, who got his first laughs impersonating his father in Yeshiva (a Jewish religious school), where he stood before the class and said, “Blah, blah, blah Moses!” Despite his father’s best efforts to stop him, Krusty pursues a career in comedy until one day, at a Talmudic conference in the Catskills, a rabbi sprays him with a seltzer bottle and Krusty’s makeup washes off. His father disowns him for the shame he brought on the family, and for twenty years the two do not speak to each other.

Seeing Krusty so disheartened, Bart and Lisa resolve to reunite father and son. Rabbi Krustofsky is still heartbroken after all this time, so the only solution is to appeal to his knowledge,

or, as Lisa says, “We’re going to hit him where it hurts, right in the Judaica.” Two special consultants, Rabbis Harold Schulweis and Lavi Meier, gave feedback on the episode so that the exchange between Bart and Rabbi Krustofsky is as close to an authentic rabbinical exchange as possible. (Lisa is working hard in the library, reading books like *The Big Book of the Chosen People*, *Views on Jews*, and *Jewishness Revisited*.) First, Bart corners the rabbi in his office and quotes the Babylonian Talmud: “A child should be pushed aside with the left hand and drawn closer with the right.” Bart is sure that he has given a strong religious argument for forgiveness, but the Rabbi counters with the fifth commandment: “Honour thy father and mother, end of story.” Lisa then gives Bart some material from Rabbi Simon ben Eleazar, and Bart tracks Rabbi Krustofsky to a sauna where he says, “At all times let a man be supple as a reed and not rigid as a cedar.” The rabbi is unimpressed, countering with “the Book of Joshua says ‘You shall meditate on the Torah all day and all night.’”<sup>114</sup> Bart cites another Talmudic passage during a circumcision: “Who will bring redemption? The jesters.” Krustofsky is not convinced and sends Bart away as his timing is inappropriate. It is only with a long-shot quote that Bart convinces the rabbi to change his ways. While they play chess in the park, Bart sighs and quotes a “great man”: “The Jews are a swinging bunch of people. I mean, I’ve heard of persecution, but what they went through is ridiculous. But the great thing is, after thousands of years of waiting and holding on and fighting, they finally made it.” Krustofsky is impressed, but cannot identify the “great man” among various religious sources. Bart then reveals the quote came from famous entertainer Sammy Davis Jr.’s autobiography, *Yes I Can*. The rabbi, broken, laments the lost years and reconciles with Krusty.

This exchange brings Jewish tradition into *The Simpsons* in an honest and authentic way. Although there are humorous elements in the exchange (e.g., in the sauna scene there are other Jews with the rabbi and one says “all night?” when the rabbi quotes Joshua), its significance comes from the fact that Jewish thought is built on continuous argument about the Torah’s meaning. Part of a rabbi’s job is to offer guidance based on interpreting the Torah, and American Jews are divided on different approaches to the Torah and its interpretation. Furthermore, historically, finding rabbis to resolve conflicts relating to the Torah’s interpretation was very difficult. However, now that Jewish

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<sup>114</sup> In Judaism the Torah refers to the whole of the law (including the oral Torah, also known as the Mishnah and Talmud), as well as the first five books (the Pentateuch) of the Tanak (what Christians call the Old Testament). However, some American nontraditionalist groups (e.g., Reform Jews) will call into question some laws in the Torah and may not even acknowledge the oral Torah as legally binding (Raphael 2003, 18). Any of these meanings works here. This means that even if non-Jews in the audience are only familiar with the Torah referring to the Pentateuch, the exchange still makes sense.

communities are well established in the United States, there are rabbis to argue with each other about the Torah's ethical implications (Diner 1999, Raphael 2003). *The Simpsons* chose this vehicle for its first intense look into Judaism. This is not an exploration through ritual practice, the synagogue, or Semitic stereotypes, which is different from their treatment of Christianity and Hinduism. While Christianity is centred around Flanders' ethics and the First Church of Springfield, Judaism is introduced through the tensions between popular entertainment's secular seduction and the religious calling to meditate on the Torah all day and all night. In the end, there is no easy answer.

At the same time, this episode has been positively received within the Jewish community. According to Pinsky, after consulting on the episode Rabbi Schulweis said he "became an instant hero among my young people. I was cool" (quoted in Pinsky 2007, 151). Reconciliation was also a powerful theme for some viewers, who reached out to alienated parents for the first time in decades (158). However, it is Rabbi Daniel Wolpe who emphasizes the episode's significance for understanding Judaism: "It was an interesting take on the greatest of contemporary Jewish dilemmas, which is the battle between tradition and modernity" (quoted in Pinsky 2007, 158). Indeed, the struggle to belong and adapt to the American environment while maintaining their ethnic differences has long been a concern for Jews.

American Judaism has historically developed along a continuum dealing with these issues. At the far right are ultra-Orthodox Jews, known as the Hasidim and Haredim, who try to adhere completely to all the Torah's laws and who refuse to accept any modern innovations they feel violate Torah. Next come the Orthodox, who also uphold the laws, but do not build their communities around a charismatic Rebbe like the Hasidim do. Orthodox Rabbis, in other words, are religious professionals who may be charismatic, but the community does not exist around their charismatic presence whereas the Hasidim are characterized by the mystical Rebbe's centrality in the community. Moving closer to the centre are Conservative Jews who seek to uphold the Torah while making modest concessions to modern ideas. Allowing men and women to sit together in the synagogue, signifying equality, is one such change that the Orthodox have not embraced. Reformed Jews have embraced the modernist impulse more thoroughly than other Jewish denominations, which has led to conflict with Orthodox Jews over what constitutes proper Judaic practice. Reform Judaism has led the way in ordaining women, mixing sexes in the synagogue, and abandoning some traditions which are deemed irrelevant in the modern world, such as kosher food preparation. Finally, Reconstructionist Judaism developed out of a desire to treat the Jewish people as a distinct ethnic group with significant religious contributions, but it removed the tradition of divine election and any supernatural elements from its

understanding of Judaism. Over the last two centuries these different movements have fought and supported each other (although the Hasidim have largely removed themselves from this discussion as they treat all other Jewish traditions as inauthentic), showing that the tensions between Jewish survival (which binds them) and how to practice and protect the tradition (which divides them) are brought out in Judaism's institutional organization in America (Diner 1999, Kaplan 2009, Raphael 2003, Sarna 2004).

Despite American Judaism's historical institutional developments, Krusty is recognizable as a stereotype that marks him as an ethnic, rather than a religious, Jew.<sup>115</sup> Jewish traditions mean little to Krusty except when he faces an identity crisis. While American Jews have struggled with questions regarding the extent to which they should adapt their traditions to American culture, Krusty struggles with a problem more reminiscent of Herberg's analysis (1960). That is, his ethnoreligious identity as a Jew matters when he wants to see himself as complete. In the United States, that often means having a religious identity. Rabbi Krustofsky's denunciation embodies Orthodox Judaism's defence against modernity's onslaught, as these Jews have tried to preserve their traditions by rejecting modern trends and maintaining the Torah. Yet, like all Jewish denominations, they struggle to maintain adherents who find Orthodox Judaism too costly. Furthermore, as Jewish sociologist Sylvia Fishman argues, Jewish and American values have coalesced to the point where "many American Jews—including some who are very knowledgeable and actively involved in Jewish life—no longer separate or are even conscious of the separation between the origins of these two texts" (2000, 10). Fishman identifies the specific American liberal values of "free choice, universalism, individualism and pluralism" (1; see also Cohen and Eisen 2000, 35) as the values Jews now find legitimated and incorporated into their Jewish identities.<sup>116</sup> Sociologist Steven Cohen and Judaism scholar Arnold

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<sup>115</sup> There are ongoing debates about Judaism's role in Jewish ethnic identity. One way into the discussion is through Herbert Gans' characterization of American Jews' "symbolic ethnicity," a "nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country: a love for and pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated into it" (1999, 178). Winter (1992, 1996) argues that Jews are an *ethnoreligious* group because their religious identity is key to understanding both their ethnic identity and maintaining the group's community structures that extend beyond religious organizations (see also Levine 1986). While this question can be discussed within the ethnoreligious category, we still have to account for the fact that Jews are Jews by blood as well as by belief (see Cohen and Eisen 2000, 27-42), and this causes problems for contemporary Jews who are negotiating their identities. Kaufman's overview of the ongoing debate argues that splitting ethnicity and religiosity is problematic for understanding Judaism as lived among people. However, Krusty's sporadic interest in his tradition marks him as, at the very least, a highly secularized Jew who only turns to his tradition when he needs to resolve identity crises. It is, in short, a last resort and not a central element to his frequent depictions in the program.

<sup>116</sup> Feingold's (1995) survey of American Jewish political history suggests that while Jews support these values' implementation, they are also becoming more libertarian in their support for free access to

Eisen (2000) further found that a majority of Jews (roughly 60%) are engaged in “moderately affiliated Judaism” (5), which encompasses a type of “spirituality of seeking” (Wuthnow 1998, 4) within the confines of traditional Judaism. The self is sovereign over tradition, and Jews actively select from the tradition along with their experiences to craft their identities (Cohen and Eisen 2000). Taking Fishman’s, Cohen’s and Eisen’s findings, the modernist problem for Jews is that these moderately affiliated Jews interpret their tradition through the issue of being Jewish by both blood and choice (Cohen and Eisen 2000, 27-42). In other words, Jews are Jews because they were born Jews, but they are also Jews because they choose to practice the religious tradition which has historically informed that ethnic identity. This helps explain Krusty’s struggles as somebody who fluctuates between accepting and resenting his ethnoreligious tradition.

As some American Jews left synagogues and found their way as an ethnic, rather than ethnoreligious, group,<sup>117</sup> those who remained religious fought hard to maintain their tradition and bring their lapsed brethren back into the fold (often unsuccessfully). Jewish studies scholar Jacob Neusner (1990) notes that the Jewish American identity is one that developed after the Second World War around the state of Israel. Specifically, being Jewish in America meant supporting Israel, which in turn preserved the Jewish people, a development that came to fruition after the Six Days War in 1967 (see Oren 2002 for a recount of the war). After the war, the sense that preserving Israel was essential to Jewish survival became a “civil religion” uniting American Jews (see also Glazer 2005, Sklare 1990, Woocher 1990).<sup>118</sup> However, this support for Israel as central to Jewish identity started

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abortion and the end of quota systems such as affirmative action which have blocked Jews who acquire education and training from taking jobs. He and Auerbach (1995) also note the importance of second generation Eastern European Judaism’s allegiance with Roosevelt and New Deal politics during the Great Depression as the catalyst for bringing American Judaism into both liberalism and American acceptability. Glazer (1995) argues that while Jews support American liberal causes such as using taxation to distribute wealth and fighting for civil rights, their support of Israel has become a difficult contradiction for them to overcome. That is, Jewish support for Israel and its policies of treating Arab citizens as second class, and Israel’s prominent and active military exploits, contradicts the values Jews want American democratic government to enforce at home. Auerbach (1995) contends that Glazer misreads American Jews, suggesting that the Israel issue, not their liberalism, will separate American Jews from Israel. On the dangers modernization poses for the American Jewish community, see Ritterband (1995).

<sup>117</sup> Cohen and Eisen estimate that at the end of the second millennium CE, about 20% of Jews could be categorized as nonreligious (2000, 5).

<sup>118</sup> Krusty rarely deals with the Israel issue in his Jewish identity, reflecting Cohen and Eisen’s finding that, “the young to middle-aged Jews we interviewed in the 1990s have clearly retreated from a passionate engagement with Israel” (2000, 189). The only time Israel comes up in regards to Krusty is in “The Greatest Story Ever D’Ohed,” in which the Simpson family accompanies Flanders’ Bible study group to Jerusalem. Krusty is there at the airport and says, “I believe that every Jew should make a pilgrimage to Israel before he dies. . . . Don’t want to end up in Hell.” When Lisa informs him that Jews do not believe in Hell, Krusty runs off to the “Gaza Strip Club,” reflecting the ongoing pattern of not embracing the religious elements of his

changing in the 1970s and 1980s as Jewish individualism became more significant for the baby boomer generation.

Jonathan Sarna, a historian of American Judaism, argues that one of the major challenges facing the Jewish community in the twenty-first century is to what extent the religion will accept the multiple identities Americans feel free to adopt. In other words, “the Jewish dilemma, at its core, involves a conflict of loyalties: faith pulls in one direction, America in the other” (2004, 371). While this contradicts Fishman’s assertion that now Judaism and America are almost as one, Sarna points out that there are still tensions between the religion’s ethical demands and the individual’s desires. Questions of whom one can marry and who is inside the community are significant elements of Krusty’s religious life. For more orthodox Jews, in the sense of Jews who adhere to any of the denominational traditions and not just the Orthodox, the development of Jewish ethnic identity divorced from its religious history presents what Sarna is discussing and what Rabbi Wolpe saw in “Like Father, Like Clown.” Krusty is a secular Jew who is incomplete without his religion. So, while *The Simpsons* does not embrace everything about Judaism, it acknowledges its importance in crafting a meaningful identity for Jews in contemporary America and suggests that Krusty is an incomplete person without it.

Contextualizing this trend is the personal spirituality theme discussed in chapter four. Sociologist Chaim Waxman argues that baby-boomer “seeker” spirituality has influenced contemporary Judaism, leading synagogues to serve individuals’ desires and spiritual developments. This endangers the tradition because the community is no longer emphasized. While traditional Judaism has developed around the unifying idea of the chosen people serving God, this new shift asks how contemporary Judaism can serve the individual’s personal quest without prioritizing the group (2005, 104-112). As such, Jews become religious for themselves and not for the continuation and connection with other Jews. Sociologist Nathan Glazer sees this as a new stage in Jewish civil religion. While past generations organized themselves politically to oversee the Jewish people’s “sacred survival” (especially through support for Israel), today he sees an increased focus on “sacred community” in which the Jewish tradition offers its adherents different ways to identify as Jews. For Glazer this is an *increase* in Jewish religiosity and a *decrease* in Jewish ethnic identification (2005). Cohen and Eisen (2000) identify the significant point about this shift: *privatization*. Today, Jews find

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Jewishness when his hedonistic pleasures can be pursued. While this episode also deals with some contemporary issues, such as pluralism in the Middle East and the problems it raises there, I do not have the space to discuss them here.

meaning in selecting which rituals to practice, how to practice them, and which elements of the tradition they do not want to engage. One of the refrains Cohen and Eisen (2000) found among their interviewees was that they bypassed elements of the tradition that bothered them. Privatization leads to selective interpretation and radical changes in the tradition when the institutional order can no longer command adherence to its principles. We can see this in the treatment of Jewish rituals.

Krusty's adaptations to modernity and his desire (occasionally) to take his faith seriously collide again in the season fifteen episode, "Today, I am a Clown." After getting a puppy from the Simpson children, he takes it for a walk in the old Jewish neighbourhood where street vendors call out to customers, promoting Brazilian wax jobs and DSL services. Eventually they find the "Jewish Walk of Fame," which features such notable Jews as Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Sandy Koufax, comedian Joan Rivers, children's entertainer and puppeteer Shari Lewis, and her puppet Lamb Chop. Krusty is astounded that he does not have a star on the Walk of Fame and goes to the offices of the "Jewish Walk of Fame: Where the Chosen Get Chosen." While the curator agrees that Krusty should have a star, it turns out that Krusty has not been bar mitzvahed. However, Krusty's father never let Krusty have a bar mitzvah because he was afraid the boy would make a mockery of the ceremony. When Krusty decides to take his faith seriously, his show gets cancelled because he will not work on the Sabbath (Saturdays in the Jewish tradition), and Homer's replacement show becomes a bigger hit. Desperate, Krusty takes his bar mitzvah to FOX and, co-hosted with actor Mr. T, he has an extravagant ceremony, complete with The Beach Boys singing about kosher meal preparation and a performance by the cast of Broadway's version of *The Lion King*. The ceremony ends not with Krusty reading from the Torah, but with Mr. T strapped to a giant *menorah* which is spun around by Krusty while sparks shoot from its ends. Krusty is a hit again, but, not surprisingly, his father is disappointed. In the end, Krusty decides to have a real bar mitzvah, in a synagogue with a small group of friends celebrating.

If "Like Father, Like Clown" represents the alienation that some Jews feel among the generations, religious life, and secular society, then "Today, I am a Clown" captures the angst involved in limited religious participation, while still trying to maintain an ethnoreligious identity. While there are certainly "secular" Jews, marginal affiliates are confronted with a tradition that emphasizes practice over belief. Indeed, in the strictly religious sense, Jews are free to question the Torah, just not to disobey it. Krusty's need for a bar mitzvah is significant because it is a transition into adulthood, it makes him both a man and a Jew. Without it, and the serious commitment it requires, Krusty knows that his identity's religious component is unfulfilled. *The Simpsons* accurately

captures the bar mitzvah's significance.<sup>119</sup> This is a substantial turn for *The Simpsons* because this story arc suggests there is something significant about the institutionalized traditions within Judaism. Unlike Christianity's institutional elements which were cause for ridicule, the bar mitzvah is treated with utmost seriousness, to the point that Krusty feels compelled to have a replacement ceremony because it needs to be held in an "authentic" environment. Wilful participation in Jewish ritual fulfils Krusty, suggesting that personal religious pursuits within institutionalized frameworks, without trying to convert others to one's religion, are considered acceptable religious practices in *The Simpsons'* unseen order.

Krusty's religiousness falls somewhere between Cohen's "moderately affiliated" and "peripheral" Judaism (1995). That is, he is not wholly uncommitted to the tradition, but he is not committed enough to participate in regular holidays other than Hanukkah. Krusty's need for religious identity is not enough to generate a permanent change in character the way Lisa's conversion to Buddhism changed her identity. Instead, this is the modernist problem of individual identity construction. Krusty understands himself as Jewish and needs the legitimacy that rites of passage provide. However, his individual interests also involve eating pork (and endorsing pork products) (e.g., "Krusty Gets Busted"), in "Today, I am a Clown" he refers to the 613 *mitzvot* (Jewish laws) as "all these rules, I feel like I'm in a strip club!" Clearly, the formal demands of Orthodoxy are not on Krusty's mind. On the other hand, this puts Krusty's religiosity squarely in the pattern that has been established in the previous two chapters. Religion is a good thing when it provides individual meaning and self-worth, and bad when it prohibits or forecloses individual pursuits. Krusty's commitment makes him a man and a Jew in his eyes, giving him the social recognition he craves, but this does not stop him from indulging in drugs, alcohol, and pork products; mistreating his coworkers; and luxuriating in crass materialism. The ethical stance that has defined liberal Judaism means nothing to Krusty. As such, he represents a position that reflects contemporary Jews' nervousness about the continuation of their religious tradition.

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<sup>119</sup> A similar service, known as the bat mitzvah, is held for women in Reformed, Reconstructionist, and some Conservative synagogues. For a brief explanation of the ritual see Olitzky (2000, 7-10). Silberman and Silberman (1993) discuss the ritual's importance as a rite of passage, but also locate it in the contemporary Jew's life cycle. That is, this is a rite for young adolescents which makes them religiously adults, but does not make them socially adults. It should also be noted that the bar mitzvah contributes to contemporary Jewish anxieties about the community's continuation because it is often the point where young Jews stop attending synagogue. In other words, their parents take them to synagogue long enough to be bar mitzvah and then stop because of prohibitive costs involved in synagogue membership (Kaplan 2005, 11).



The final Jewish concern Krusty touches upon emphasizes anxieties about the community's continuity in contemporary America. That is, in the four-hundred and fiftieth episode, "Once Upon a Time in Springfield," Krusty gets engaged to his new co-star, Princess Penelope. At the wedding ceremony we learn that she is not Jewish when Rabbi Krustofsky announces, "friends, loved ones, we are gathered here today to marry a Jew and a... Congregationalist? Is that even a thing? And now, let's continue with this mockery." Although the wedding does not take place because Bart and Milhouse convince Krusty that he is a terrible husband and Penelope is too good for him, the clown eventually follows his girlfriend to Paris, where they reunite.

On the surface this is another in a long line of *Simpsons* "crazy-wedding" episodes, but it raised concerns in the Jewish community. Journalist Nathan Burnstein summarized the episode in *The Jewish Daily Forward* (2010), and the Jewish Outreach Institute applauded it for (briefly) drawing attention to intermarriage (2010). Rabbi Simcha Weinstein (2010) took a more cautious approach, arguing that he would like to see more exclusively Jewish married couples on television, contending that they can be as humorous as mixed couples. On the other hand, *Jewish Exponent* writer Barry Schwartzman used "Once Upon a Time in Springfield" to illustrate the fact that intermarriage is increasing within the Jewish community, at least in Philadelphia where the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia had just released a study showing that 45% of marriages involving Jews under 40 in the Philadelphia area were exogamous. Schwartzman and his sources treat this as a problem because children born to intermarried couples are rarely raised solely as Jews, leading to the question of whether or not America's Jewish community is slowly dying due to a lack of replenishment (2010).

Ethnic and religious intermarriage has long been a significant issue in the Jewish community. Rabbi and Judaism scholar Dana Evan Kaplan writes that this has historically been a major dividing point within the community, complicating the question of who is actually Jewish (2009, 161-205). Some Orthodox rabbis refuse to recognize intermarriage, and will not officiate at ceremonies. However, as the rate of intermarriage spiked in the Jewish community after the 1950s, a new problem arose in the Jewish community. Children of Jewish fathers and Gentile mothers were not being raised Jewish and were not recognized as Jews, while children of Jewish mothers and Gentile fathers were at least nominally Jewish. In 1983, Reform Judaism allowed for patrilineal descent, and previously unrecognized children were now accepted as Jews, the hope being that their parents would now bring them to the synagogues and introduce them to their religious traditions. Unfortunately, this further split the Jewish body as Orthodox rabbis refused to acknowledge patrilineal descent. Today, the rate

of intermarriage is increasing and Kaplan thinks its stigma is decreasing as only the Orthodox continue to object. Yet, there is still a fear of the Jewish people's disappearance due to exogamy and lack of interest because children are not being raised within the tradition.

Sociologist Paul Ritterband (1995, 382-384) sees the problem demographically. Statistically, the children of intermarriages tend towards "cultural Christianity" (383), rather than Judaism. For Ritterband this is more than a symbolic question, it is a matter of basic survival. Without new Jews to replace the ones who die, the community will continue contracting until it disappears. According to the Pew Forum (2008a), only 1.7% of Americans are Jewish, and the demographic trend indicates decline.<sup>120</sup>

To the non-Jew, Krusty's marriage to Princess Penelope is little more than a plot device to expose Krusty as a terrible husband. To many Jewish observers, their fears and concerns are symbolically communicated through the depiction of a Jew marrying a Congregationalist. While there have certainly been other jokes in *The Simpsons*' history which seem more offensive—for example, in "Mr. Plow," the Simpsons attend a car show where a German spokesman for "Fourth Reich Motors: Since 1946" explains that their, "tireless safety engineers crash test over 1000 cars a year." After viewing their demonstration video, Lisa notes that the crash test dummies are real people, causing the spokesman to close the exhibit. This passing reference to the Holocaust draws on the horrors of Nazi "scientific experiments" on Jewish prisoners, but it never caused a stir in the Jewish community. This speaks to fact that in America there are other ways to threaten Jewish existence than the brutality and horrors the Holocaust wrought. The slow disappearance of the Jewish community through exogamy is one such threat.

Through Krusty we see how *The Simpsons* treats established ethno-religious communities in America. Judaism's rituals are not intimately woven into Krusty's character, but they are important for his spiritual development when he chooses to pursue it. At the same time, the endogamous practices that some Jews see as essential for preserving their community, which contradict the idea of freedom of choice in a marriage partner, brings *The Simpsons*' willingness to attack institutionalized ideas that violate liberal American values back to the forefront of our discussion. Judaism's embracing of these values is applauded (Fishman 2000) as an accepted ethno-religious tradition in America.

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<sup>120</sup> See Brook (2005) for a lengthy discussion of American Jewish groups' reactions to intermarriage in television programs.

## 6.4 Crossing and Dwelling in a Diverse America

Tweed's inspiration for *Crossing and Dwelling, Our Lady of the Exile* (1997), is a study of Miami's Cuban Catholic community and their reverence for Our Lady of Charity. As an outsider looking in, he took it as his professional duty to reflect on his position relative to these Catholics while trying to understand how their religion helped them in their movement. Cuban Catholics living in the United States were between two worlds, longing for Cuba, but steadfastly supporting American economic policy. Their religious practices supported this as they wanted to unite the two worlds on Cuban soil, even as the second generation was starting to assimilate.

For *The Simpsons'* creative team there is no such commitment to representing reality. All that matters is that they generate jokes they think the audience will find humorous. However, Tweed's ideas from *Crossing and Dwelling* are useful in that they alert us to the fact that human beings are constantly in transition, even while they are in one place. The challenges of being Jewish or Hindu in America, and linking these two religions to their ethnic heritages, has generated numerous stereotypes. While there are numerous studies about immigrant religious groups, some of which include how communities deal with prejudice from the other Americans, part of dwelling in America is knowing that there are "others" nearby. Controlling public representation and presentation are part of the struggle for ethnic religious groups. But no one group can ever completely control what others think about them. Stereotypes develop over time, and they are activated by humorists when they think they can make their audience laugh.

Krusty and Apu use their religions to mark transitions in their lives, giving them a sense of identity and difference in America. This reflects Herberg's (1960) thesis that having a religion is an acceptable mark of difference in America. *The Simpsons* embraces this idea, and positively contrasts Judaism and Hinduism with Christianity. Judaism and Hinduism give their adherents meaning and direction, helping them to transition through life in a culture that labels them as religiously different. The varying levels of depth in the jokes, with the shallowness of the Hindu jokes contrasted with the Judaism jokes drawing upon Jewish ritual traditions, suggests that there is greater intertextual familiarity with Judaism among the people creating and watching *The Simpsons*. However, both religions are treated as being acceptable religious practices in America.

In the continuum of Springfield's unseen order, Judaism and Hinduism fit somewhere between the core religions of Buddhism, Native American religions, and "spirituality," and the ridiculed, stupid, Christians. They are positive to the extent that they provide frameworks for people transitioning to America, facilitating our reading of Krusty and Apu as Americans in the sense that

they are different, but similar, in their drawing selectively from their inherited religious traditions to make sense of the world.

## Chapter 7— New Religions, Secret Societies, Muslims, and the Media: *The Simpsons*' Unseen Order's Outer Fringe

The last four chapters discuss a continuum of acceptable practice informing *The Simpsons*' critique of America's religions and their public roles. Deinstitutionalized spirituality, with its appropriation of Buddhism and Native American religions is combined with scientific rationality to provide a base for this criticism. Christianity, among both Catholics and Protestants, was criticized for its institutional and traditional religiosity. However, *The Simpsons* praises Christian ethics when they lead to positive social behaviour. To reiterate Homer's joke from "Homerpalooza," Christianity is the religion "with all the well meaning rules that never work out in real life." But when people follow through on the rules promoting positive social actions (e.g., caring for others), *The Simpsons* treats Christianity as socially beneficial. Within this schema, Jews and Hindus are marginalized because of their ethnoreligious traditions. Although both traditions have sects that welcome converts (e.g., Reform Jews, ISKCON), they are noticeable for their ethnic insulation.

*The Simpsons* draws upon a variety of historical events and filters them through an ignorant familiarity to craft jokes based upon presumed political and religious norms in their audience. This chapter criticizes the way that *The Simpsons* replicates mass mediated stereotypes about New Religious Movements (NRMs), the Freemasons, and Islam. They reproduce, rather than criticize, news media's biases, which is problematic because then *Simpsons* commentators reproduce the stereotypes as if they were true. In other cases, *The Simpsons* is critical of news media's accuracy. Jonathan Gray writes that the program's parodies criticize news media's trustworthiness (2006, 94-116). They depict local newsman Kent Brockman as careerist and incapable of discerning real news, such as the Soviet Union's collapse in 1989, from soft news, such as dogs being issued major credit cards ("Sideshow Bob's Last Gleaming").<sup>121</sup> They attack reporters who capitulate to owners' interests, and present news broadcasts as overhyped stories designed to entertain rather than inform. Gray considers this humorous criticism of news media a public service. *The Simpsons* teaches viewers a critical approach to mass media and hopefully they will become suspicious of future news broadcasts. Guehlstorf, Hallstrom, and Morris (2008, 215-216) note a similar pattern, and highlight

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<sup>121</sup> Some *Simpsons* episode titles are witty references to popular culture phenomena. "Sideshow Bob's Last Gleaming" is a parody of *Twilight's Last Gleaming* (Aldrich 1977), in which a United States Air Force general takes control of a nuclear missile silo and threatens to start World War III unless his demands are met. In "Sideshow Bob's Last Gleaming", Bart's nemesis, Sideshow Bob, steals a nuclear weapon and threatens to destroy Springfield unless all television programming is taken off the air.

*The Simpsons*' parody of the conservatism in FOX News' news ticker in the episode "Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington," with such headlines as "Study: 92 percent of Democrats are gay." Parodying the news ticker was so controversial that FOX forbade *The Simpsons* from ever doing it again, fearing the audience would interpret the news ticker as real. For these scholars, mocking the media elite is part of *The Simpsons*' criticism of power. Furthermore, media analysis professor Mick Broderick acknowledges that the program satirizes mass media's capitulation to the nuclear power industry (2004, 259-261) and English literature scholar Duncan Beard contends that the show's oppositionality lies in its ironic and destabilizing use of mass media stereotypes (2004, 273). Other studies have come to similar conclusions.<sup>122</sup> In light of this support for *The Simpsons*' critical perspective on mass media, its uncritical portrayal of contemporary America's most marginalized and maligned religions through common stereotypes is significant because it shows just how deeply entrenched these stereotypes are in the cultural stock of knowledge.

NRMs, secret societies, and Islam are some of the easiest religious targets for hostility in contemporary America and an uncritical position toward their marginality reflects how *The Simpsons*' creative team views these groups in the United States. First, I outline a specific "cult" stereotype and its historical use in mass media since the 1970s. Then, I demonstrate how this concept informs the episodes "The Joy of Sect" and "Homer the Great" and is challenged in "Rednecks and Broomsticks," discussing throw-away jokes from other select episodes to demonstrate its pervasiveness. Finally, I will discuss Islam's depiction which was consistent for the first nineteen seasons before reversing itself in 2009's "Mypods and Boomsticks."

## 7.1 The Cult Stereotype

For decades mass media has negatively portrayed NRMs. In a special issue of *Review of Religious Research* dedicated to mass media and unconventional religion, sociologist Stuart Wright writes, "It would seem that, in most cases, the only story sufficiently 'newsworthy' about these religious groups must involve some diabolical plot to subvert the innocent, engineered of course by a crazed maniacal 'cult' leader who secretly schemes to amass limitless power" (1997, 110-111). Ten

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<sup>122</sup> Among non-academics, Turner argues Brockman is glib and hysterical, while Springfield news (and by extension all news media) is preoccupied with trivial and sensationalistic stories (2004, 399-403), and Keslowitz (2006, 105) contends that "there is no news media program that can support and promote democracy the way *The Simpsons* does on a weekly basis." Within the scholarly community, Scanlan and Feinberg (2000, 132) recommend teaching critical media awareness to sociology students through *The Simpsons*, and Blakeborough (2008) argues the program's irony criticizes negative media stereotypes of the elderly.

years earlier, sociologists Barend van Driel and James Richardson identified the most common negative motifs used in “cult” reporting between 1972 and 1984 (1988a, 177; see also 1988b): charismatic leadership; extreme authoritarianism and discipline; confining members or depriving them of personal freedoms; behavioural control using psychological manipulation or brainwashing; a preoccupation with the leaders’ wealth and luxury; the group’s portrayal of the outside world as evil and something to be feared; and apocalyptic beliefs.<sup>123</sup> These are the essential elements of a stereotype which is used as recipe knowledge for explaining NRMs to media consumers who have little, if any, direct contact with these religious groups. As the 1978 *National Review* article “Cult Taxonomy” demonstrates, “cult” further symbolizes the difference between accepted and unaccepted religious beliefs. The article’s unnamed author lists the following traits as characteristics of cults: the inability to leave due to manipulative forces; the threat of violence; sexual deviance; financial exploitation; and doctrines which are “intellectually derisory.” The article’s unnamed author uses the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (the Unification Church, or “The Moonies”) as an example of the last two points (1578).<sup>124</sup> This pervasive stereotype homogenizes many different groups, but how did it develop?

Religion and media scholar Sean McCloud argues that while the concept of an exotic religious fringe existed prior to the 1970s, the contemporary “cult” concept took shape during that

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<sup>123</sup> For examples of news stories and popular exposés using this stereotype in relation to Scientology see Behar (1991), R. Miller (1987) and Reitman (2006); criticizing the Unification Church see Woodward (1976, 1978); its role in discussions of the Branch Davidian conflict at Waco see Kantrowitz (1993) and Puente (1993); framing discourse about the Children of God/Family International and sexual abuse see Chainey (2008), Nash (1993a, 1993b), and M. Williams (1998); and Mannes (1997) and Macklin (1997) regarding the Heaven’s Gate suicides. These are only some of the most prominent groups to receive media coverage and this survey is not exhaustive. However, it gives readers a sense of the consistency with which these groups are categorized together in popular consciousness, even when individual religions are being discussed. It also demonstrates how negative portrayals shape news coverage of NRMs. For academic accounts of these groups see Bednarowski (1995), James Lewis (2009), Melton (2000), and Roy Wallis (1977) on Scientology; Barker (1984, 1995), and Bromley and Shupe (1979) on the Unification Church; regarding The Family International see Bainbridge (2002), Chancellor (2000), Lewis and Melton (1994), Melton (2004), and Van Zandt (1991); see Tabor and Gallagher (1995), and Stuart Wright (1995) concerning the Branch Davidian conflicts; and regarding Heaven’s Gate see Balch and Taylor (1977, 2002), Balch (1995), and Winston Davis (2000). See also Cowan and Hadden (2004) on NRMs and mass media.

<sup>124</sup> Bromley (1994, 123) notes similar characteristics commonly associated with cults, emphasizing the stereotyping of charismatic leaders as manipulative, greedy, and capable of making their followers docile. He also adds the fear of each movement being densely populated when most groups are quite small. Robbins and Anthony (1994, 126) argue that while there is no clear or consensus definition, the term cult connotes “an authoritarian, mind-controlling movement in which convert-victims are mentally enslaved and can be made to perpetuate violence and crime as ordained by a charismatic prophet or guru.” According to McCloud (2006, 215), “cult” “conjures images of brainwashing, coercion, deception, exploitation, perversion, and religious fraud.” See also Beckford (1994), and van Driel and van Belzen (1990).

decade (2004; see also P. Jenkins 2000, van Driel and Richardson 1988b). The Unification Church led in negative coverage. Sun Myung Moon's lavish lifestyle, rumours of Moon's involvement in bizarre sexual practices in Korea, and accusations of brainwashing and involuntary confinement made for captivating journalism (McCloud 2004, 128; see also Barker 1984, Bromley and Shupe 1979). However, "by the late 1970s the connections between cults, brainwashing, and fraudulence had become naturalized. In other words, these associations became unquestioned truths—not just in magazine articles, but for many Americans" (McCloud 2004, 128). That is, the stereotype became recipe knowledge for interpreting NRMs and implicated more groups than just Unificationists. On November 18, 1978 the fear of violence was added to the stereotype as the members of Peoples Temple drank Flavor-Aid laced with cyanide and committed mass suicide at Jonestown, Guyana. Children too young to drink the concoction were injected with the poison. Jonestown has had a profound effect on American cultural memory, and it is cited in anti-cult literature as a reason to be wary of all NRMs (e.g., Rudin and Rudin 1980; Singer and Laich 1995; cf. J. Hall 1995).<sup>125</sup> McCloud notes that it featured prominently in discussions of the Branch Davidian's fifty-one day standoff with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) between February 28 and April 19, 1993 in Waco, Texas, which culminated violently as FBI combat engineering vehicles wrecked the Davidian compound and a fire gutted the building, killing seventy-four members. Echoing initial attempts to make sense of Jonestown, mass media legitimated events as a cult suicide by weak-minded followers of a charismatic psychopath getting what they deserved (2004, 179-184). In James Richardson's words, the Branch Davidians were turned into "unworthy victims" (1995) who deserved their fate.<sup>126</sup> By

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<sup>125</sup> Barker (1986) notes Jonestown's impact on anti-cult literature, a major source for reporters' opinions about NRMs. John Hall (1995) shows that narratives of "cult suicide" stemming from Jonestown's cultural impact influenced government decisions during the Branch Davidian standoff. Rebecca Moore (2003) demonstrates that the idea of "drinking the Kool-Aid" became a part of popular discourse after the People's Temple suicides, and works as a way of excluding the memory of Jonestown while implying a total commitment to the ideologies of an individual or group. Chidester's (1988) and John Hall's (2004 [1987]) studies explicate how discourse around Jonestown contributed to the way people distanced themselves from the events, denying Peoples Temple members their humanity and delegitimizing their actions. Meanwhile the Peoples Temple members' revolutionary voices were silenced in the dominant discourses of mass media and government explanations. For more on Jonestown's visual impact see Cowan (2008a). For initial news coverage of the event, see Matthews (1978) and "Nightmare in Jonestown" (1978).

<sup>126</sup> Examining media's role in the Branch Davidian conflict provides many fruitful insights. James Lewis (1995) argues that by applying the "cult" label to the group it was only a matter of time before a violent confrontation with law enforcement came to fruition. Documentary footage in *Waco: The Rules of Engagement* (Gazecki, 1997) demonstrates that there is good reason to call the FBI's interpretation of events into question, as government inquiries of FBI actions and video footage of the events of April 19, 1993 show their version of the events is unsupported by evidence. See also Beckford (1994), Cowan and Hadden (2004), and Jones and Baker (1994).



1993 it was clear that journalistic reporting on “cults” resonated favourably with the American public. These ideological narratives dialectically received legitimation and endorsed the political actions of the anti-cult movement (ACM) who then provided journalists with expert advice.

During the “cult wars” of the 1970s and 1980s, the ACM worked doggedly to advance their theory of conversion to NRMs and the dangers these groups presented. Assuming that NRMs caused people to “snap” and become charismatic leaders’ servants, journalists Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman (1978) gave an early account of what would be repeated many times under the “brainwashing” rubric. James and Marcia Rudin of the American Jewish Committee wrote that using highly successful techniques to manipulate thoughts and behaviours of new members were characteristic of new religions (1980, 16-17; see also Appel 1983; Shapiro 1977). Psychologist Margaret Singer argued that cultists kept recruits unaware of their surroundings, controlling the situation so neophytes felt helpless, replacing the convert’s old worldview with a new one focussed on the group’s charismatic leader, and constructed a closed system where criticizing the leader was unacceptable (Singer 1995, 63). Singer (11), and Conway and Siegelman (1978, 46) argued that these groups’ main purposes were recruitment and fund-raising. Linking violence to the charismatic bond, Singer and the Rudins insinuated that devotion to a charismatic leader led to the events at Jonestown; and Singer, along with anticultists such as Rick Ross, the Cult Awareness Network, and the American Family Foundation (later International Cultic Studies Association) were all prominent suppliers of information, acting as expert resources during major cult controversies of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>127</sup>

Comparing this focus on mind control, charismatic leadership, and fund-raising with the characteristics of mass media’s framework for reporting on NRMs discloses a direct correlation between anticult ideologies and media accounts of NRMs’ beliefs and practices. This ideological spectrum legitimates certain religions as “authentic,” “real,” and/or “valid.” How a religion is classified along certain cultural standards that editors, reporters, and audiences take for granted determines how it will be reported to the general populace (Barker 1986, Bromley 1994, Possamai and Lee 2004, Richardson and van Driel 1997, Robbins and Anthony 1994, and Shupe 1997).<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Shupe and Bromley’s *A Documentary History of the Anti-Cult Movement* (1985) demonstrates the historical development of these concerns through primary source documents. For overviews of the ACM, see Shupe and Bromley (1980) and Shupe and Darnell (2006).

<sup>128</sup> Asian religions are also categorized along an implicit standard, in which “real religious” groups consist of people of Asian ancestry worshipping Asian gods or listening to traditional institutional leaders (e.g., Buddhist monks), while gurus with numerous Western converts (e.g., ISKCON) are labelled dangerous cults.

NRMs face an uphill battle for legitimacy as stigma and controversy frames the public's initial exposure to them.

NRMs face another serious problem in terms of their "newsworthiness." Since they are small and marginal, newsmakers tend to treat them as significant only in cases sociologists Anson Shupe and Jeffrey Hadden call "crisis events" (1995, 182). These events are meaningful because they demand responses from a society's authoritative institutions whose legitimacy is challenged. Hence, as sociologist Adam Poassami and criminologist Murray Lee (2004) assert, this tends to involve criminalizing narratives of NRM activity (see also van Driel and Richardson 1988b). Cowan and Hadden (2004, 69-77) present a four stage value-added model of NRM newsworthiness which consists of event negativity, the event's resonance with a target audience, the rarity of the event for that audience, and how clearly and simply the event can be portrayed. By reducing complexity and relying on abnormal behaviour to frame their stories, news reporters have built a stereotype of cults which feeds into the ACM's agenda and reifies specific social arrangements (e.g., the nuclear family, monogamous heterosexuality, American middle-class lifestyle) and the authority structures that are legitimated by these arrangements (e.g., government, law enforcement). Richardson and van Dreil argue that this is dangerous because while these stories sell newspapers, they also discredit the idea of newsmakers as "fair and balanced" and harm civil liberties (1997, 128). Similarly, Berry College scholars Harvey Hill, John Hickman, and Joel McLendon suggest that by characterizing NRMs as dangerous, media may pressure borderline movements into violence when they might otherwise abstain (2001, 34-35; cf. Wessinger 2000). By reducing all NRMs to the status of "cult," mass media has played a role in marginalizing these groups.

If the cult stereotype is founded on faulty assumptions, the logical question is why media outlets perpetuate it. Journalist-turned-professor Mark Silk (1997) and *Christian Century* news editor John Dart (1997) defend journalists from accusations that they are spreading controversy in order to sell newspapers and preserve the American *status quo*. Silk argues religious news is based on the moral standards of the culture at large, not on the biases of the ACM; while Dart contends that journalists need to work with the common stocks of knowledge they assume people possess so they can get their story across quickly. He also writes that the best reporting happens when a journalist disproves a common assumption (1997, 148). Newspaper reporters have neither time nor space to study a group carefully for a prolonged period of time and then write a complex article. Their job is to convey events and their significance relative to the audience's assumed values (see also Beckford

1994, McCloud 2004). These arguments are helpful because they remind us that the news is not scholarship, but that it has a critical influence on society.

This explains why journalists do what they do. However, it does not absolve them from responsibility for the fruits of their labour. Neither Silk nor Dart refutes the problem of a deeply flawed and prejudicial “cult” stereotype in American culture. When journalists frame their stories about NRMs opposing everyday norms and only consider the story newsworthy if it is an event which violates social standards, they implicitly reaffirm the standards most people have for religious conduct. While journalists may consider it their job to report the uncommon, NRMs become news through deviance. As Cowan and Hadden remind us, the *negativity* of an event is its first newsworthy value (2004, 69-71). Despite Silk’s belief that his writings on local Scientologists are similar to his coverage of other religious Americans (1997, 139), this does not change the fact that the stories which attract people’s attention and shape popular opinion about NRMs are firmly rooted in controversy. With this stereotype established over the last forty years and still readily available, it is part of the cultural stock of knowledge *The Simpsons* draws upon when making its jokes. The questions are: How is it used? Why is it used? And why does it matter?

### 7.1.1 The Movementarians

In “The Joy of Sect,” the Simpsons join “The Movementarians,” a NRM that has just arrived in Springfield. The group entices Springfielders to donate their worldly possessions to follow the movement’s “perfect leader” who is building a space ship that will take them to the planet Blisstonia (“known for its high levels of bliss”).<sup>129</sup> An amalgam of a variety of NRMs, the Movementarians are the cult stereotype writ large. When Homer and Bart walk through Springfield airport a man in a saffron robe offers Homer a pamphlet and asks, “Have you heard of Krishna Consciousness?” Homer points at him and says, “This, Bart, is a crazy man.” They then pass a man in a blue suit, holding up a white book with a golden cross, who says, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Homer’s reply echoes the critiques of Christianity discussed in chapter five: “Yeah right, that’ll work.” Only the Movementarians’ promise of a new and better life on Blisstonia makes sense to Homer and he decides to attend their free weekend retreat.

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<sup>129</sup> Although I do not discuss the Movementarians in light of the larger experience of UFO religions, James Lewis (1995), Partridge (2003), and John Saliba (2006) introduce this phenomenon. See also Balch and Taylor (1977, 2003), Balch (1995) and Winston Davis (2000) on Heaven’s Gate and Palmer (2004) on the Raelians.

The retreat displays many of the cult stereotype's assumptions. At the welcome centre, people are shown a video about the Movementarians. Although free to leave at any time, they are pressured to stay: a spotlight shines on anyone who tries to exit and a voice asks why he or she wants to go. Homer is subjected to the "circle of judgement," in which members of the Movementarians and his Springfield neighbours insult him, and the cultists remind us that "everybody loves a droning, repetitive chant." A parody of the *Batman* theme song wins Homer over and he joins the group, registering the entire Simpson family and giving the Movementarians their life savings, the deed to their house, and a commitment of one trillion years of service. Once the house is donated the family moves to the Movementarian compound where they harvest lima beans, live in a dormitory, and are educated in the group's doctrines. Bart tries to cause havoc, but his "Lil' Bastard General Mischief Kit" is no match for the cultists' "Lil' Bastard Brainwashing Kit." Lisa starts loving the leader to get good grades, and Homer begs Marge to remarry him in a mass marriage parodying the Unification Church's blessing ceremonies in which thousands of people are paired by Reverend Moon and then married simultaneously.<sup>130</sup> Only Marge is not taken in by the group and manages to escape the compound.

Back in Springfield she enlists Reverend Lovejoy and the elementary school's Scottish groundskeeper, Willie, to free her family. Willie offers to kidnap and deprogram Homer, and the three of them take a Rolls Royce to the compound, pretending to be the leader. They beckon Homer and the kids into the car and take them to Ned's house where they tie them up in the basement. The children leave the movement with the promise of hover-bikes and it looks as though Homer will be won over with the promise of beer. That is, until the Movementarians use their deadliest weapon—the lawyers. When the lawyers find the Simpsons in Ned's basement they return Homer to the compound because he is Movementarian property.

Upon returning, Homer throws open the doors to the "forbidden barn," revealing a spaceship. Everybody is convinced the leader was telling the truth as the saucer lifts off, but then its exterior falls away revealing a man pedaling a helicopter bicycle with sacks of money attached to it. He crashes into Cletus' farm and loses the money as the dejected Springfielders return to their lives.

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<sup>130</sup> Mass marriage has been the subject of other throw-away jokes. A sign in "Sideshow Bob Roberts" reads, "Tonight: Mayoral Debates Tomorrow: Mass Wedding of Cult Members," and in "How I Spent My Strummer Vacation," after Homer gets his friends front row seats to an all-star benefit concert, an excited Moe the bartender exclaims, "I ain't had front row seats since my Moonie wedding." These jokes continue to work within the larger context of "cults" being deviant in their family arrangements.

Comparing these jokes to historical events reveals a pattern that draws upon examples framed by the cult stereotype to generate derisive humour. In “The Joy of Sect,” *The Simpsons* uses brief, meaningful statements and visual references to associate the Movementarians quickly with various NRMs, attaching these examples to negative sentiments already established in society. This way *The Simpsons* references numerous NRMs without any direct explanation of which groups are being parodied and allowing the overriding sentiment of “dangerous religions” to work as the interpretive framework.

First, the Movementarians are a group which follows a charismatic leader who is also the head of their perfect family. The term “perfect family” should not be taken lightly. As religion scholars Dereck Daschke and Michael Ashcraft note, NRMs which present themselves as new families often draw the ire of society because they challenge traditional notions of family and the religious and state organizations that support it (2005, 12). The Unification Church and The Family International are the most obvious targets of this agenda. When we take their controversial histories into account we can see how the idea of a “perfect family” is part of the cult stereotype which is derided in order to preserve the status quo. Unificationists consider Reverend Moon and his wife, Hak Ja Han, their perfect parents, shepherding them into completion of God’s plan for humanity. In their collection of NRM primary sources, Daschke and Ashcraft include an extended interview with Unificationists Hugh and Nora Spurgeon. The Spurgeons explain the Moon family’s role in the Unification Church as “Rev. and Mrs. Moon are the central family through whom we as followers can find new meaning for marriage and family life” (in Daschke and Ashcraft 2005, 153). Moon has also claimed that he is the Messiah and that he and his wife are “the True Parents of all humanity” (S. Moon 1992). Unificationists believe that God sent Moon to fulfil the mission Jesus failed to complete, that is, to found a perfect family through which humanity can find fulfilment. This is done through an ideal family structure known as the Four Position Foundation in which husband and wife nurture each other in submission to God and in a position of authority over children who are born without the sinful state of separation wrought by Adam and Eve’s fall (Barker 1984, 70-93; Cowan and Bromley 2008, 99-106; Daschke and Ashcraft 2005, 139-144).<sup>131</sup> In Unification theology, in order to achieve salvation, people have to marry into this perfect family and then raise their own perfect families in accordance with Moon’s teachings. Similarly, The Family’s members refer to

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<sup>131</sup> This is a necessarily abridged and, therefore, woefully inadequate representation of Unification beliefs. Cited references are summaries, and the foundational texts of Unificationism are available at [www.unification.org/bibliography.html](http://www.unification.org/bibliography.html).

founder Moses David Berg (d. 1994) as “Dad” or “Grandpa.”<sup>132</sup> This works within the Family’s structure, in which everyone is considered a part of the same family. This is emphasized in their traditions of living communally (although today only the most committed members do so [see Shepherd and Shepherd 2005]) and practicing free love. During his lifetime, Berg communicated with the different Family groups around the world through his “Mo Letters.” In the letter entitled “Happy Rebirthday,” he wrote “MARRIAGE IN THE FAMILY is to Jesus and they are all ‘Jesus Babies’! [children born in the movement, regardless of the parents’ marital status]—And we are all married to each other in His love” (Berg 1978; emphasis in original). This upset converts’ biological parents, and the separation of people from their families became one of the central concerns about cults (see Shupe and Bromley 1985). These alternative relationships helped inspire the ACM’s campaign to legalize deprogramming, as they saw these new family arrangements as proof that members were brainwashed and that the groups were threats.

Furthermore, while we do not see the leader until the episode’s conclusion, the fact that he has a team of brainwashers working for him is paradigmatic of the charismatic leader element of the cult stereotype. That the leader’s face resembles Scientology’s founder L. Ron Hubbard is not insignificant. Hubbard is a recognizable religious figure and Scientology has been accused of coercive mind control and financial exploitation. It also has a history mired in litigation with opponents ranging from defectors to journalists to the United States government. Hubbard has been accused of founding the religion for financial reasons, and Scientology’s detractors often depict it as financial chicanery masquerading as a religion (e.g., Behar 1991; Beit-Hallahmi 2003; Kent 1999a, 1999b; R. Miller 1987). The “trillion years of service” to which the Simpsons commit references the billion-year contracts members of Scientology’s elite Sea Org sign. This decision makes sense within Scientology’s unseen order, in which reincarnation plays an important role, but seems ridiculous to outsiders because this sounds less like a means to spiritual development and more like people putting their faith in science fiction, which Hubbard wrote prolifically (see Flinn 2009; Hubbard 1977; J. Lewis 2009; Kent 1996, 1999a; Melton 2009). In *The Simpsons Archive*’s (<http://www.snpp.com>) episode capsule for “The Joy of Sect,” fan Mark Dallara noticed this reference and drew analogies between the Sea Org’s and Movementarians’ blue uniforms. He also linked the Movementarians’ orientation film to Scientology’s recruitment practices; the lawyers to Scientology’s litigiousness; and

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<sup>132</sup> Despite Berg’s death he continues to communicate with The Family through channelled communication, which is why they treat him as still being alive (Shepherd and Shepherd 2005, Shepherd and Shepherd 2006).

the judgement session, references to UFOs, and tax-exempt status to Scientology's beliefs and practices. This demonstrates how the religion can be reduced to these few references in the popular imagination. Comparing the leader to Hubbard, he echoes critics who treat Scientology as disingenuous: "that the Movementarian [*sic*] claims that he [the leader] invented morse [*sic*] code and other crap is similar to Scientology's absurd biographical sketch of the con man who started it all" (Wierny 2000). Dallara's fellow *Simpsons* aficionado Benjamin Robinson made connections to other groups, including the Unification Church and Heaven's Gate. However, when it comes to Scientology, he argues that because Nancy Cartwright, the voice of Bart Simpson, is a Scientologist the writers probably felt limited in how explicit they could make the references (Wierny 2000).<sup>133</sup>

Hubbard is not the only NRM leader accused of misappropriating funds. Moon was imprisoned in 1981 on tax evasion charges and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, founder of the short-lived 1980s Oregon community Rajneeshpuram, was viewed suspiciously because he owned numerous Rolls Royces (Carter 1990; Urban 1996, 2005). *The Simpsons* reference this directly when the leader leaves "the forbidden barn" in a Rolls Royce and Lisa expresses disgust over the economic disparity between the leader and his followers who toil in the fields. *The Simpsons* encourages people to question NRM leaders' wealth in order to criticize their credibility. While individual religious leaders in other traditions are criticized for their wealth, this is not seen as a fundamental flaw in the religion as a whole. For example, just because televangelist Joel Osteen is wealthy does not mean mass media treats Christianity as a deeply flawed religion. However, this double standard legitimates criticisms of NRMs.

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<sup>133</sup> Rumours exist suggesting that Cartwright's connections to Scientology have caused some jokes to be rewritten. According to reporter Chris Ayers, the script for "Little Big Girl" originally called for the Mormons to be called "the second freakiest religion in America" (2009). The joke that aired has Bart saying, "Utah? Home of America's most powerful weirdos?" The implication Ayers draws from this is that Scientologists are the freakiest American religion. According to Cartwright's publicist, because Scientology was not directly mentioned there is no story here. However, because of Scientology's negative public image, and the general consensus that is reified through the cult stereotype, the story writes itself in the popular imagination (Ayers 2009).

Cartwright briefly mentions her philanthropic relationship with Scientology's para-organizations Narcanon, The Way to Happiness, and The World Literacy Crusade in her autobiography *My Life as a 10-Year-Old Boy* (2000). However, she does not give any reflection on her religious beliefs or opinions about Hubbard other than calling him a "humanitarian" (270). In 2009, Cartwright caused a stir among *Simpsons* producers by using Bart's copyrighted voice in a phone advertisement for Scientology's Flag World Tour event. Executive producer Al Jean then clarified that the program does not support any religious organization (Ayers 2009). Furthermore, Pinsky reports that *The Simpsons*' producers vetoed an episode criticizing Scientology because of the church's history of litigiousness (2007, 202).

During the audio commentary, show runner Steve Moore, writer Steve O'Donnell, and Matt Groening acknowledge that Erhard Seminar Training (est) and the Unification Church inspired the peer pressure scenes. Both groups were criticised for their high intensity recruitment techniques and their treatment of their meetings' attendees. Est was accused of verbally abusing people and subjecting them to draconian conditions, while charging exorbitant sums of money for a chance at enlightenment. Alternatively, the Unificationists were demonized for their practice of "love-bombing" in which they said overwhelmingly positive things about a potential recruit so the person would stay with the group. The implication is that love-bombers lied to grow their movement. In "The Joy of Sect," these cultural memories are recalled comically, and that the idea that cults verbally abuse people and restrain recruits in high pressure situations is seen as maliciously motivated.<sup>134</sup>

Furthermore, Willie's offer to deprogram Homer and the kids recalls how deprogrammers were often championed as heroes who rescued children from cults. Starting in the early 1970s, deprogramming developed as a radical way to remove young adults who had converted to NRMs and cut ties with their parents. For a fee, deprogrammers would locate converts, abduct and detain them, and use a series of the same tactics brainwashers were accused of using, including sleep deprivation, yelling, and occasionally physically abusing them in an attempt to undo the changes brought about by religious conversion (Shupe and Bromley 1980, 1994; Shupe and Darnell 2006). This is not the only time *The Simpsons* has featured deprogramming. In the episode "Burns' Heir" Marge and Homer hire a deprogrammer from "Conformico Brain Deprogrammers: A Subsidiary of Mrs. Fields Cookies" to rescue Bart from Mr. Burns, who is grooming the boy as his heir. Outside the deprogrammer's office is a "before-and-after" set of pictures. The first is of a man with a hair knot, wearing a toga, and carrying what looks like a tambourine—a visual reference to the Hare Krishna practice of men shaving their entire heads except for a small patch of hair at the back. The second (ostensibly) is of the same man in a business suit with a briefcase. Both have a vapid look in their eyes, implying that the person is still mindless. Once the deprogrammer is hired, the scene shifts to a local motel where he spirits a body into a room and says sternly, "You do not love Mr. Burns. You love Homer and Marge. You are their son. What you are doing is wrong, wrong, WRONG!" After two weeks we learn that he has successfully convinced one of the locals, Hans Moleman, that he is Marge and Homer's son.

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<sup>134</sup> See "Est" (1982) and Gelman (1991) for examples pertaining to Erhard Seminar Training, see above citations on Unificationism for criticisms of their recruitment practices.



This double-edged criticism of deprogrammers both legitimates their work and makes them appear stupid. Deprogramming works on Moleman and he becomes convinced he is Simpson progeny. At the same time, the deprogrammer is portrayed as an idiot who could not identify the proper victim. The family is still heartbroken, another person's life is ruined, and the Simpsons have wasted their money again. The joke lies in ignorant familiarity with deprogrammers and also in the incompetency of this particular would-be hero. It draws upon cultural arguments for deprogramming's necessity, which is based on the assumption that this is a last resort for saving people from dangerous cults. This helps reify the cult stereotype because it perpetuates the need to rescue people from NRMs' grips. When deprogramming is not discredited, its legitimacy is affirmed because it repeats the foundational assumptions of the recipe knowledge that is the cult stereotype. Yet, the fact that the deprogrammer works for "Conformico Brain Deprogrammers" implies that *The Simpsons* is willing to criticize the ACM's agenda as conformist, especially the idea of a "normal" religious and professional life course contrasted in the before-and-after picture.

Throughout the episode, the Movementarians are portrayed as able and insidious brainwashers. They have the "Lil' Bastard Brainwashing Kit" and work hard to overcome Homer's will so they can mould him for their own purposes. Conversion to the group can be either the result of malicious mind control or not-so-subtle socialization, but the implication is that it is insidious and deceptive. Although brainwashing was originally conceptualized to explain why American POWs allegedly turned on their country and promoted communist China's values during the Korean War (see, e.g., E. Hunter 1951; Lifton 1961), during the 1970s and 1980s it evolved into an explanation for why people joined NRMs. As youth left established middle-class lives and joined these movements, many relatives became concerned about these groups' influence. Parents were scared when their children spent increasing amounts of time with their new religious friends and less time with family, when they left promising careers to preach strange gospels, and when they started dressing differently and living communally. Brainwashing as a concept has been heavily criticised in the academic literature (see, e.g., Barker 1984; Bromley and Richardson 1983; Cowan forthcoming; Dawson 2006, 95-125), but its cultural resonance makes it a useful foil because people are ignorantly familiar with brainwashing's underlying assumptions. Even if brainwashing has been severely criticized, it still resonates as an acceptable explanation for the public because it is consistently repeated and left unchallenged in popular culture—including *The Simpsons*.

However, realizing the program works from faulty assumptions does mean we are any closer to identifying the larger problems with *The Simpsons*' uncritical replication of the cult stereotype. The

scholarly and popular literature on *The Simpsons* makes this episode's problems clearer. Pinsky argues that this episode is "yet another attack on the mainline worship experience, except that the seductive nature of many cults is that they offer much more of an emotional connection than traditional Judeo-Christian denominations—even if it is counterfeit and manipulative" (2007, 81), and Delaney assesses the Movementarians uncritically through the lens of ACM stereotypes such as brainwashing and greed. The only reason he can give for Homer's joining the group is that "he is weak-minded, unhappy with traditional religions, and possesses a personality that is highly susceptible to suggestion" (2008, 214). While all this is true, Delaney also argues that "some people (especially the vulnerable or weak-minded) are drawn to cults because of the charisma of the leader who attempts to inspire them to new levels of personal achievement" (214). The problem with Delaney's logic is that it implies that people who are not vulnerable or are strong-minded are unlikely to be inspired by a charismatic NRM leader. Sociologist Lorne Dawson's literature review of who joins NRMs demonstrates that Delaney's assumptions do not match the empirical evidence. That is, relative to American averages, people who join NRMs are disproportionately young, better educated, disproportionately middle to upper class, come from both genders, and come from varying religious backgrounds (Dawson 2006, 76-90). Homer is not young, does not possess above average education, and is not middle to upper class. His middle-age, stupidity, and poverty are frequent sources for jokes. In other words, he is not an ideal type of somebody who would join a NRM, but is characteristic of the pejorative assumptions people hold about NRM converts. That is, he must join because he is stupid enough to believe the charismatic leader. In repeating this stereotype Delaney is ignoring substantial empirical evidence. Delaney's argument is further jeopardized by his categorizing cultists as devious and manipulative. According to Delaney, cultists are lurking, waiting to grow their membership and wealth, and are "not nice people" (215). These quotes reveal how deeply entrenched the cult stereotype is, as critics treat it as a truth rather than a proposition. Ignorant familiarity's power is on display here.

Delaney and Pinsky assume they know about the religions that have been compressed into the Movementarians and that the moral evaluations that accompany those impressions are factual. That the episode parodies actual NRMs reinforces the connection between real groups and the stereotype's criticisms. Pinsky and Delaney can write the way they have because it is unlikely they will be challenged. Delaney's work demonstrates his unfamiliarity with NRM recruitment techniques, as there is no proof people who join these movements are weak-minded, and brainwashing is a poor explanation for conversion. Scholarship focussing on conversion as a process of socialization into an

NRM better explains these affiliations, stressing the convert's agency and allowing for comparison with conversions in other religious traditions (see, e.g., Barker 1984; Cowan forthcoming; Dawson 1990, 2006; Lofland 1977; Lofland and Stark 1965; J. Richardson 1985).

*The Simpsons* generates humour by combining the most recognizable elements of NRMs with an already established fear within society. Although they try and make connections between the Movementarians and established religions (Bart says, "Cult church, church cult. So we get bored someplace else every Sunday. Does this really change our day-to-day lives?" ["The Joy of Sect"]), this portrayal of NRMs lacks the balance of positive depictions throughout the show's history that other religions have. The larger problem lies in the fact that commentators such as Pinsky and Delaney are working within an accepted commentarial framework that praises the program's penetrating insight. In this particular case, academic and popular support for *The Simpsons*' so-called critical perspective legitimates the cult stereotype because of this episode's uncritical treatment of NRMs. When Pinsky and Delaney can write under the premise that these religious groups exist to seduce members and defraud them of their belongings, they are working under the assumptions of the ACM and Christian countercult (see Cowan 2003a). Many groups are satirized here: Scientology, Rajneeshism, The Unification Church, ISKCON, and Peoples Temple, and they have all been accused of various forms of social deviance related to the cult stereotype. Because *The Simpsons* is praised as appropriately criticizing society's follies, this faulty convention's replication is legitimated because it is unchallenged. Therein lies the danger of this depiction, as the power structures the cult stereotype supports are uncritically reinforced through satire. *The Simpsons* also finds other marginal religions threatening. Its treatment of secret societies (and secrecy can be extend to some NRMs such as Scientology [Urban 2006, 2008]) builds upon other reasons people have for mistrusting marginal religions.

### **7.1.2 Secrecy and "Sick, Twisted, Eerie, Godless, Evil Stuff"**

Masonic control of business and government is one of America's oldest fears. From the Anti-Masonic party's founding in 1827 to contemporary suspicions of Freemasons secretly influencing the American government, this idea has a long and colourful history in American culture. It is also shrouded in religious language, from both the Masons themselves and their detractors who accuse them of Satanic practice.<sup>135</sup> Freemasons claim they pursue knowledge, help build an orderly society,

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<sup>135</sup> The Anti-Masonic party arose from fears that Masonic lodges were gaining undue influence in the new republic. Although it no longer exists, its biases against Masons persist—especially its claims that Masons

and engage in charitable works (Fanthorpe and Fanthorpe 2006). However, their ritual secrecy, and popular suspicions surrounding their influence in shaping the American republic, has left them in the unenviable position of defending themselves against accusations of corrupting both government and religion. Meanwhile, they try to preserve the secrecy of their ritual practices from full disclosure. In this vein, we find the basis for “Homer the Great.”<sup>136</sup>

In this episode, Homer joins a mysterious secret society, the Stonecutters, and fulfils their prophecy of a legendary chosen one who will lead them to greatness. Based on executive producer David Mirkin’s experience hearing a preacher give an anti-Mason sermon, this episode highlights the problem of representing a group which is, at best, mistrusted in the popular imagination. Although Mirkin claims on the episode’s DVD commentary that he researched secret societies and their initiation rites, the problem is that these groups’ secrecy corrupts our knowledge of them. Because we cannot know with certainty whether somebody who is secretive is telling the truth, we lack the trust needed to build knowledge. Secret societies also lend themselves to conspiracy theories. British cultural studies scholar Clare Birchall argues that conspiracy theories arise as (para)institutional voices that shape a narrative about powerful forces in our world (2006, 34). Political scientist Michael Barkun argues that conspiracy theories inspire “claims to the truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the marginalization of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error” (2003, 27).

Masonic rituals are practiced by a group that has a long history of stigmatization and suspicion, and are ideal subjects for conspiracy theorists who focus on the elements of forgotten, rejected, and suppressed knowledge (27). That is, Masons claim esoteric, spiritual knowledge that goes back to Solomon’s temple. While their religious claims are largely rejected by political, religious, and academic institutions, they are also assumed to control access to powerful positions in prominent social institutions such as government and law enforcement, another officially rejected

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were using their fraternal connections for political and commercial gain to the detriment of the rest of society (Bullock 1989). For more on the Anti-Masonic party and anti-Mason sentiment in the nineteenth century, see Bullock (1990), Formisano (2008), Foster (2003), Gribbin (1974), Kutolowski (1982, 1984), and Vaughn (1983).

<sup>136</sup> Another example of *The Simpsons* using ignorant familiarity and prejudice about the Freemasons comes in “Gone Maggie Gone.” This episode makes passing reference to Masonic influence on the American government. Mr. Burns reveals that he joined the Masons before it was trendy (it is his eyeball and pyramid on the American dollar bill), and Skinner and Comic Book Guy explain that the Masons had known for some time about the “Gem of Saint Teresa” Lisa is searching for in this episode. This references the ignorant familiarity that the Masons conspire to increase their power. This episode also casts Freemasons as unscrupulous, depicting George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and King George III of England starting the American Revolution to cover up their search for the jewel.

proposition (S. Knight 1984). This official rejection of Masonic power supports popular suspicions that Freemasons are withholding vital information about the state. The Stonecutters' secrecy and a history of Masonic conspiracies similarly allow *The Simpsons* to craft jokes from this pool of popular knowledge. These jokes reinforce popular prejudices and locate Masonic religiosity outside the acceptable sphere of religious behaviour.

Homer discovers the Stonecutters when he notices that his co-workers Lenny and Carl are never around on Wednesday nights, and that they both have much better parking spots (and office chairs) at the nuclear plant. When they refuse to tell him what is happening, Lenny insists it is a secret. Homer treats this as a conspiracy and decides to follow them to their hideout. Their "secret meeting place" is a large stone building with a design that looks like an unblinking eye (minus the pupil) and the Stonecutter's logo (a two-headed sledgehammer) above the door. The Masonic Lodge has found its way into Springfield.

Homer is discovered spying when he falls through a skylight, and is promptly thrown out of the building. The next day he confronts Lenny and Carl at work: "I saw weird stuff in that place last night. Weird, strange, sick, twisted, eerie, godless, evil stuff. And I want in." Lenny informs him that he can only join the Stonecutters if he is a member's son or saves a member's life. Homer is desperate to join, even though he knows nothing about the Stonecutters' activities. Religious studies scholar Hugh Urban (1997, 1998, 2008) argues that secret societies struggle to protect their esoteric knowledge and they use their secrets to increase their power. Esoteric knowledge is both a scarce social resource and a source of social power for those who hold it (1998, 220-221). However, a secret is not a useful tool for acquiring power if people are unaware that you have it. It only becomes a form of capital when people acknowledge its value. Urban argues that secrets can be advertised (without being revealed), hierarchalized (progressively revealed), obscured (presented as nonsense or treated as "inside jokes"), or concealed by deliberately playing with language and metaphor (1998, 235-239). These patterns of concealing knowledge can be seen in Lenny and Carl's behaviour before Homer joins the Stonecutters, making him aware of the group but not revealing their secrets.

Secret knowledge is made available to Homer after he discovers that Grandpa Simpson is a Stonecutter. Parodying Masonic rituals, at his initiation Homer is made to take "the leap of faith." The group's leader, Number One, explains to a blindfolded Homer, "If you survive this five storey plunge, your character will be proven." Homer is then pushed off of a small platform onto the floor. In an ironic twist, while the Stonecutters laugh the floor breaks and Homer falls five stories. In the second ritual Homer endures, he walks past other Stonecutters who swat him on the rear with large

paddles (the final pass is known as “the paddling of the swollen ass...with paddles”). Surviving these initiatory trials, Homer vows never to reveal the Stonecutters’ secrets and Number One welcomes him: “You have joined the sacred order of the Stonecutters, who since ancient times have split the rocks of ignorance that obscure the light of knowledge and truth. Now let’s all get drunk and play ping-pong!” Masonic initiation rituals involve blindfolding the applicant and leading them through the lodge so that all members can see they are prepared for membership. While there is no five storey plunge, the entire ritual contains frequent questions about the candidate’s character and worthiness. Finally, in Masonic ritual the candidate is blindfolded to symbolize his movement from darkness into the light, from ignorance to knowledge. *The Simpsons* builds upon this symbolism and then inverts it for humorous effect at the Freemason’s expense. However, *The Simpsons* still implies that Homer has learned *something* in his humiliation, just as the Masonic candidate learns something through his initiation (M. Duncan 1866, 6-57).

Studies of secret societies note that esoteric knowledge is revealed in ritual or after ritual initiation (Bellman 1984, Bogdan 2007, Luhrmann 1989, Urban 2001). For example, anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann argues that through casting spells magicians gain esoteric knowledge which plain language cannot convey (1989, 145; cf. Salomonsen 2002, 129-152). Put differently, rituals give their practitioners insight into reality they hold to be true, but which nobody else can know. Urban identifies this element of secrecy in American Freemasonry, arguing that Masonry’s secrets were available only to those properly initiated through ritual. The craft was to mislead and confuse all others (2001, ¶35).<sup>137</sup> Yet, if Homer has undertaken the rituals and gained esoteric insight, we must ask why the occasion’s solemnity is inverted by Number One’s directive to get drunk and play ping-pong. The noble goals Freemasons espouse are undermined throughout the rest of the episode: the Stonecutters sing a song to their power (featuring lyrics such as “Who robs kingfish of their sight? Who rigs every Oscar night? We do!”); they bask in the glow of their sacred parchment; and they get drunk at every opportunity. Homer is eventually recognized as the chosen one destined to lead them to glory, but when he takes Lisa’s advice and has the Stonecutters help the less fortunate, they rebel and found the “ancient mystical society” of “No Homers.” While some might argue that this is *The*

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<sup>137</sup> Masonic manuals often explain a ritual’s general meaning and its symbols, but reiterate the fact that the real knowledge contained in the rituals is only possible through further reflection and participation in the brotherhood (e.g., M. Duncan 1866, How 1881, Macoy 1997). Dumenil (1984) shows how Masons drew upon Biblical and deist concerns in shaping their rituals, working them into the religious currents of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century America when shaping their interpretations. For a contemporary introduction to Masonry and the artwork used to express these religious sentiments, see MacNulty (1991).

*Simpsons*, and inverting expectations is a basic element of humour, the fact remains that some religions (e.g., Buddhism) are treated with seriousness and Freemasonry is parodied as corrupt. The Stonecutters are portrayed as greedy, manipulative, and self-indulgent, continuing the tradition of anti-Masonic rhetoric and conspiracy theories. It also contributes to the suspicion of marginal religious groups discussed above.

But why satirize Freemasonry's assumed political power and secret knowledge? In his foundational essay on secret societies, sociologist Georg Simmel argued that secret societies tend towards an aristocratic view of themselves, considering their status as knowledge keepers a sign of their social superiority (1950, 364-366). This can lead members of secret societies to try to influence society for their own ends, privileging their interests rather than working for everybody's benefit (375-376). It is important to note that secrecy is popularly seen as opposing society's well being, and secretive groups are often considered social threats (see also Erickson 1981, Lowry 1972, Shils 1956). Some Masonic conspiracies, and *The Simpsons*' jokes, are rooted in the assumption that Freemasons are conspiracists bent on destroying society and ushering in a new world order. For example, Catholic anti-Mason Paul Fisher's *Behind the Lodge Door* (1989) claims that Freemasons unduly influenced the United States Supreme Court to remove prayer and religion from public schools. British journalist Stephen Knight (1984) contends that Freemasonry is incompatible with Christianity and that it controls the highest levels of British government. Arguing that Freemasonry is not only a religion, but that it has its own god, Jahbulon (a combination of Jahweh, Baal, and Osiris [236]), Knight's implication is that no Christian who knew Freemasonry's highest religious secrets would join the society and, therefore, there is a conspiracy to keep this information from the unsuspecting public. Furthermore, the website *Freemasonry Watch* (2008) maps dense webs of argued influence and the threats to global security and free democracies posed by Freemasons' apparent roles in global politics since the nineteenth century. These examples only scratch the surface of Masonic conspiracies in the popular imagination.

Among *Simpsons* commentators, only Heit discusses this episode, and he approaches it under the rubric of "seeker religion" that I discussed in chapter four. For Heit, the fact that the Stonecutters cannot abide Homer as their chosen one demonstrates their faith's fickle nature. The truly devout would stick with their messiah (2008, 106-108). Masonic connections are not acknowledged and his argument reveals a clear bias towards Wuthnow's spirituality of dwelling (1998, 3-4). However, as discussed earlier, spiritual selection in *The Simpsons* reflects general patterns in American religious life. Just because Heit disapproves of the Stonecutters' choice to abandon the movement after Homer

becomes the leader does not mean that their religious lives are inferior. Yet, the jokes undercutting the solemnity of their rituals and beliefs imply a religious deficiency. The Stonecutters have tremendous power to do things such as control the British pound, maintain a secret tunnel filled with priceless artwork, and provide their members with free cola from the vending machines at the nuclear plant. However, they favour hedonism over responsibility, which undermines the gravity Masons associate with their rituals and ethics. The powerful have been satirized and subverted, their secrets unveiled, and their society depicted as one of convenience rather than insight.

In “Homer the Great,” negative stereotypes associated with Freemasonry have been uncritically repeated and lampooned for a global audience’s enjoyment. Freemasons are parodied as frauds engaging in “sick, twisted, eerie, godless, evil stuff,” falling under the “cult” rubric due to their secretive nature and popular concerns about the danger they ostensibly pose to American life. The fear of a small group of people amassing wealth and power at innocent Americans’ expense continues here. *The Simpsons* discredits Masons’ honest efforts to improve their communities by insinuating they have ulterior motives—such as getting drunk and revelling in their power. Even refutations from Freemasons cannot change these stereotypes because of the power of suspicion. Once a group engages in secrecy everything it says is suspect. Separating fact from fiction is difficult because true statements can be dismissed as a way of protecting secrets. But humour can undermine secrecy’s power and privilege. Presenting its own interpretation of what happens behind the lodge doors, *The Simpsons* challenges the Freemasons’ presumed power and renders it impotent. Here satirical humour is a means of attacking the marginal and restoring a supposedly open democratic society’s presumed norms. But what about cases in which attempts at a more nuanced perspective are used to find humour in America’s marginalized religions?

### 7.1.3 The Wiccan Exception

While *The Simpsons*’ team uses the cult stereotype to attack numerous marginal religions, there is an exception to this rule—Wicca and other varieties of neopagan witchcraft. Wiccans have had mixed reception in America, sometimes recognized as strong proponents of feminist spirituality and other times treated as Satanists.<sup>138</sup> *The Simpsons* has not linked references to occult evils with

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<sup>138</sup> The references in this section are to both Wicca and neopaganism, a problem arising from the fact that the neopagan movement—which includes Wicca among many other traditions—has porous boundaries and is difficult to categorize. Witches know their own histories, but as a movement Wicca is often categorized under the larger rubric of neopaganism. For histories of Wicca and neopaganism, Adler’s *Drawing Down the Moon* (2006) is recognized as an accessible history to witchcraft and neopaganism in the United States. Clifton’s *Her*



contemporary witchcraft and magic, although it is willing to lampoon these popular perceptions. “Radioactive Man”’s chalkboard gag during the opening credits is, “‘Bewitched’ does not promote Satanism.” However, jokes linking spell casting with evil make this assertion somewhat tenuous. In “Barting Over,” Lisa finds an old book in the garage and starts reading it. While reading words that sound like gibberish, a giant cloud of red smoke billows behind her and forms a demon. The creature disappears immediately when she drops the book halfway through the spell to play *Mad Libs*. In “Treehouse of Horror III,” Bart goes to the school library’s “Occult Section” to find a book for a class project. After unleashing a plague of zombies on the city he appreciates magic differently, saying, “I thought dabbling in the black arts would be good for a chuckle. How wrong I was. I never should have read that book.”

Yet, when discussing Wicca *The Simpsons* explicitly links the religion with its positive connotations for women. In “Catch ‘Em if You Can,” Bart and Lisa get into a fight after Bart accuses his sister of cursing him with a witch’s spell:

LISA

It’s called Wicca and it’s empowering!

BART

Wicca’s a Hollywood fad!

LISA

That’s Kabbalah, jerk!

“Treehouse of Horror XIX” revisits connections between Wicca and Lisa’s feminism. While preparing for a Halloween dance, Milhouse compliments her on her witch costume. Lisa responds, “I’m not a witch, I’m a Wiccan. Why is it that when a woman is confident they call her a witch?” *The*

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*Hidden Children* (2006), is a study of American Wicca’s development along its various strands. Clifton acknowledges the influence of Gardnerian Wicca on American paganism and Hutton’s *The Triumph of the Moon* (1999) is recognized as the best history of British Wicca’s development. Barner-Barry (2005) explains how accusations of Satanism directed at witches are upheld in court through Christian ignorance and, in some cases, belligerence. Since the United States is a predominantly Christian country, public officials can employ Christian prejudices in making decisions and, frequently, not suffer penalties for their discrimination. Pike’s *Magical Bodies, Earthly Selves* (2001) discusses contemporary pagan festivals (which includes some Wiccans and other groups) and contains an important chapter on the way these festivals are mistaken for Satanic gatherings (87-122). Salomonsen’s *Enchanted Feminism* demonstrates how Redeeming Witchcraft has shaped female participants’ consciousness, especially through ritual (2002).

*Simpsons* draws on both popular fears of the occult and Wicca's popularity in the post-*Charmed* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* market for its laughs.<sup>139</sup>

These early throw-away jokes demonstrate a perspective that is explicitly discussed in "Rednecks and Broomsticks."<sup>140</sup> In this episode Lisa is invited to join a coven comprised of three young girls whom she hears chanting, "Dark is she but brilliant. Black are her wings, black on black. She is Lilith who leadeth forth the hordes of the abyss." When she finds the group, two of the girls are chanting around a cauldron, wearing brown robes that cover their faces. The scene evokes numerous representations of witches as evil women who work in secret and curse people with their magic spells. Lisa quickly discovers that this is not true of these girls and that she has interrupted their esbat, a ritual celebrating the new moon and symbolizing the Goddess' lifespan (H. Berger 1999, 18).<sup>141</sup> Once she realizes she is not in danger, Lisa is skeptical about the Wiccans because she does not believe in magic. They warn her that things said in the ritual circle have a way of coming true, and when she benefits from her teacher mysteriously falling ill she decides there may be more to the religion than she first suspected.<sup>142</sup> After researching the basics on "Wiccapedia" and learning that Wiccans worship nature, too, Lisa decides to convert.<sup>143</sup> Bart tries to talk her out of this decision, arguing, "You're too young to be a witch. Savour the steps leading up to it. College anorexic, string of bad

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<sup>139</sup> On how *Charmed*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and other portrayals of witchcraft have influenced the acceptance of contemporary paganism, see Berger and Ezzy (2009), Clark (2003), Cowan (2005a; 2008b) and Waldron (2005b). For a historical account of paganism's increasing acceptance in, and appropriation of, popular culture, see Clifton (2006, 95-109).

<sup>140</sup> This episode title appropriately references the Disney film *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (Stevenson 1971), which tells the story of an apprentice witch and the three children in her care using magic to aid the British war effort during World War II. "Rednecks and Broomsticks" draws upon the positive associations with magic in the original film to frame Lisa's storyline (Homer has an alternate storyline in which he becomes a moonshine judge).

<sup>141</sup> For examples of esbat ceremonies, see Starhawk (1999, 193-196). It is important to note that while Starhawk has considerable influence within modern neopagan circles because her books are widely read, her rituals are only examples or variations that other pagans can modify. This is because of what Cowan calls modern paganism's "open source" nature (2005a, 30). Modern paganism is characterized by its support for personal gnosis and the variations in practice and belief that engenders. While there are communal limits to what is acceptable (e.g., there is a strong anti-Christian sentiment among many pagans, although the existence of Christo-pagans challenges this generalization), personal insight and pragmatism direct the development of neopagans' metaphysical beliefs and ritual practices (Cowan 2005a, 27-50).

<sup>142</sup> The circle is the ritual site where neopagans perform their religious rituals and some of their magical spells. Circles have no fixed location and must be called into being instead. This is done through a ritual process that involves evoking the spirits of the four directions and using other symbolic instruments such as a ritual dagger which symbolizes the male principle, a chalice symbolizing the feminine principle, and different objects placed on an altar. These latter instruments' significance is not fixed, as neopagans stress creativity in their religious practice. For examples of how circles are cast, see Starhawk (1999, 80-101).

<sup>143</sup> On witchcraft as a nature religion see Starhawk (1999), who argues "Witchcraft can be seen as a religion of ecology. Its goal is harmony with nature, so that life may not just survive, but thrive" (35).

marriages, career disappointments, failed pottery shop, and then, when you're old and alone, you can hit the witch thing hard."

Lisa is not deterred and joins the coven. One night she approaches a candle-lit circle in the forest where the three girls wait for her. Drawing near, one of the girls asks Lisa, "Initiate, how does one enter the circle?" to which Lisa responds, "With perfect faith and perfect love."<sup>144</sup> As she enters the circle the girls chant "Join us" three times before pouring grape juice into a chalice (the ritual symbol of the female principle [Cowan and Bromley 2008, 204]). Just as Lisa is about to drink the grape juice, the police arrest the girls for practicing witchcraft. Before the trial the girls ask the goddess Lilith to show their persecutors their blindness. Suddenly, citizens start going blind. The girls are tried in court for causing the townspeople's ailment. Lisa defends the girls on the witness stand. After the prosecutor accuses the girls of recruiting Lisa "into their evil coven" she retorts, "They're not evil. They believe in friendship and respecting the earth, and they made me feel like I belong." Ultimately, the judge finds the witches innocent. Angered, the people form a mob and take the girls outside where Springfield's Mayor, "Diamond" Joe Quimby, says they can prosecute the girls under seventeenth-century law. Just before they are to be executed, Lisa reveals the real reason behind the townspeople's suffering: Local hillbillies poured moonshine into the town's water supply, causing temporary blindness. The crowd disperses, and the Wiccans thank Lisa for saving them. Lisa is also grateful because while she has been rational her whole life participating in the coven made her feel cool. Lisa's time as a witch ends when Marge removes her from the group, saying, "Well I think you're very interesting girls, but from now on the only 'which' in Lisa's life is which boy will marry her."

Drawing from actual Wiccan practices, such as casting the circle and using a ritual chalice, and emphasizing the fact that these witches are good people who make Lisa feel accepted, *The Simpsons* juxtaposes positive portrayals with negative stereotypes. Bart's reduction of witches to depressed women who need to find acceptance in their failed lives, and the townspeople's insinuation that these girls are witches and, therefore, guilty of heinous acts, echoes the different approaches to Wicca taken in the public sphere (see Pike 2001, 87-122; Cowan and Bromley 2008, 192-213). Frequently, witches have to protect themselves from accusations that they are Satanists. However, in other circles Wicca is seen as a positive feminist religious expression that enables men and women to connect with feminine elements of the divine within themselves and nature that Judaism and

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<sup>144</sup> The words in real Wiccan ceremonies are, "With perfect love and perfect trust."

Christianity have denied them (see, e.g., Adler 2006, Griffin 1995, Salomonsen 2002, Starkhawk 1999, Weaver 1989). *The Simpsons*, while it plays with the fear that witches are Satanists who curse people, puts the burden of foolishness on the townspeople who persecute the witches, and not the witches themselves, ultimately portraying Wicca as a positive contributor to America's religious culture.

These examples return us to the theme of positive religions facilitating individual development, discussed in chapter four. Despite Wicca's status as a NRM, it has promoted positive images of women fighting against patriarchy. Starhawk, a co-founder of the Reclaiming Collective, writes that the revival of Goddess religions (of which Wicca is a significant element) is revitalizing women and men who have been dominated by the destructive forces of male centred religious traditions—namely Christianity and Judaism (1999, 25-39; see also Adler 2006, 178-239; Salomonsen 2002).<sup>145</sup> As I discussed earlier, when Christians persecute other religions, *The Simpsons* fights back for the victims. There is also support for the feminism that they associate with Wicca. While Bart's stereotype of the modern witch encapsulates pejorative sentiments, it does not capture the broad range of people who practice Wicca and other witchcraft traditions. Sociologist Helen Berger's study of neopagan groups in New England (1999) explores groups with a wide variety of ages, from university students to middle aged people (see also Berger and Ezzy 2009; Cowan 2005a; Jorgensen and Russell 1999, 330; Salomonsen 2002). *The Simpsons* associates Wicca's support of women's spiritual pursuits with positive portrayals of religious freedom in America, contributing to *The Simpsons*' larger support for feminism and liberal politics in general (see also Griffin 1995; Henry 2007, 2008; Weaver 1989).

## 7.2 From Hated to Defended: Islam

Islam is one of the most maligned religions in America. However, treatment of Islam in *The Simpsons* is instructive for its change over time. Until late 2008, the program occasionally used throw-away jokes based on prominent Muslim stereotypes in American culture. Scholars studying Islam's portrayal in news media and popular culture have consistently noted the relationship between the United States' foreign interests and the denigration of Muslims, who are often portrayed as Arabs despite the fact that (a) the majority of the world's Muslims live in Indonesia, and (b) not all Arabs

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<sup>145</sup> Weaver (1989) illustrates Goddess religions' importance for feminist theologizing, arguing that these religions raise significant questions about women's ritualizing and experience in interpreting religious traditions. However, she is concerned about the uncritical use of historical sources—especially unwritten sources—in the larger neopagan movement (of which Wicca is a significant tradition).

are Muslims (see, e.g., Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008, Karim 2003, McAlister 2005, Said 1981, Semmerling 2006, Shaheen 2003). Unfortunately, Arabs and Muslims are often reduced to a stereotype that media scholar Jack Shaheen summarizes as “Arabs are brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women” (2003, 2) or, even more succinctly, “billionaires, bombers, and belly dancers” (7). That is, Muslims are frequently depicted as oil barons who threaten the American economy and way of life through petroleum embargos; they are portrayed as violent suicide-bombers and terrorists, willing to die for purely religious reasons; and they are pictured as belly-dancers, a highly-sexualized vision of Arabic women assumedly dominated by oversexed Muslim men. Latent in this concept is the belief that Americans are good, modern, progressive, and truthful compared to Muslims’ evil, regressiveness and untrustworthiness (Gottschalk and Greenburg 2008, 76).

This tension between good America and evil Islam is so emotionally powerful that even the normally left-wing Lisa can say that she wants to attend an air show because “I want to meet the first female stealth bomber pilot. During the Gulf War she destroyed seventy mosques and her name is Lisa too” (“Sideshow Bob’s Last Gleaming”). Usually an outspoken advocate of the downtrodden, Lisa withholds her moral righteousness from those who lost their places of worship during Desert Storm. While fan Benjamin Robinson noticed this change in her character (Cherry and Goldberg 1997), he did not discuss its significance further. The fact that the creative team behind the episode thought that this change in Lisa’s character would work, speaks to the fact that when Muslims are targets the normal boundaries of what is acceptable for a character are waived; there is little discussion and few people notice. In this episode Bart’s nemesis, Sideshow Bob, steals a nuclear bomb and threatens to destroy Springfield unless they cancel television. After Bob makes his demands, “representatives of television” (including Krusty and television’s Dr. Who) are brought into an underground bunker to be told that Springfield’s leaders will meet Bob’s request. Of the people who contributed to *The Simpsons Archive*’s episode capsule, more noticed Dr. Who’s depiction than that Lisa had a change of character (Cherry and Goldberg 1997). Lisa’s change of character and the representatives of television are two different throw-away jokes, but the latter one had greater resonance for this small—and non-representative—sample. However, the fact remains that Lisa’s comment was not treated as a serious breach of character among *The Simpsons*’ most ardent fans.

This stereotype’s historical roots are commonly connected with four events, although as literary theorist Edward Said (1979) and American Studies scholar Melanie McAlister (2005) demonstrate, it builds upon even older assumptions about Islam and the Middle East. The first event

is the OAPEC<sup>146</sup> embargo from October 1973 to March 18, 1974. During the Yom Kippur/Ramadan War<sup>147</sup> the Arabic oil exporting countries and Iran withheld oil from Western nations and Japan to force foreign policy changes. Specifically, they wanted the displaced Palestinians' plight recognized and Western support for Israel decreased. While these foreign policy goals were not achieved, the embargo ushered in an era in which oil became an economic weapon in the hands of nations hostile to the United States. This was the catalyst for the image of the Arab oil baron, a greedy man who exploits honest Americans. Using oil as a weapon was the first major international incident with these countries that affected Americans at home, challenging their sense of American global leadership and superiority (see also, e.g., Gottschalk and Greenburg 2008, Knorr 1975, Licklider 1988, Rustow 1982).

Second is the Iranian hostage crisis which lasted 444 days from November 4, 1979 to January 21, 1981. Iranian militants held sixty-five Americans hostage in the U.S. embassy in Tehran at the same time the Iranian Revolution took place. The Revolution saw religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the circle of elite clerics (the Council of Guardians) replace the Shah, the country's ruler and America's ally (Esposito 1990a). As representations of the struggle of Islamic governance against American influence in the region, the hostages were important symbolic capital for both sides. Americans wore yellow ribbons in support of the hostages, while the situation itself began in response to the Carter administration's willingness to allow the ailing Shah into the United States for medical treatment. The hostages became a symbol of the new Iranian republic's independence from American interests. Including a failed rescue attempt on April 24, 1980, the Iranian hostage crisis was both a media spectacle at home and a way of giving an anti-American face to emergent Islamic terrorism. While incidents such as the attack on Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists at the 1972 Munich Olympic games were also heavily mediated, the hostage crisis brought the fear and anger of a terrorist attack home and helped solidify the divide between America and the Islamic world (McAlister 2005; see also Esposito 1990b; Esposito and Voll 1996; Gottschalk and Greenburg 2008; Said 1981).

Third is the Persian Gulf War lasting from January 17, 1991 when the air carpet bombardment started, until April 6, 1991 when the UN brokered a cease-fire. While there was certainly media saturation in the two previous situations, with the new twenty-four hour news

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<sup>146</sup> OAPEC refers to the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries, as opposed to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) which also included countries such as Venezuela and Nigeria, which did not join the embargo (Licklider 1988).

<sup>147</sup> Although this war is often called the Yom Kippur War in Western news media and histories, it is known as the Ramadan War in the Islamic world.

network CNN, Americans were exposed to a post-Cold War clash between the American-led West and the threat of a pan-Islamic enemy symbolized in Saddam Hussein. Canadian media scholar Karim Karim summarizes the problem mass media posed as a constructed narrative between the good American president who represented the enlightened, rational, and benevolent West and the evil Hussein who was violent, fanatical, and barbaric (2003, 155). American media stories contrasted a unified and diverse America with a monolithic and degrading Islam (McAlister 2005). Furthermore, Americans were now engaging in a war not only against evil and tyranny, but were also working to liberate Muslim women who were considered voiceless victims (T. Saliba 1994). Whereas the earlier examples villainized Muslims, now those villains were morally legitimated targets of military actions (see also, e.g., Gottschalk and Greenburg 2008; Jeffords and Rabinovitz 1994).

The terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq constitute the fourth event. The interpretation of this last case relies heavily on news media's advocacy of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" model. In 9/11's immediate aftermath, journalists employed the stereotype of Muslims as terrorists which had become normalized in the twenty years since the Iranian hostage crisis. Huntington argues "the West" and "Islam" are monolithic civilizations that are bound to be at war with each other. That is, Islam and America are so disparate the two cannot exist harmoniously and, therefore, the threat to America must be fought (1996). It legitimates a violent solution rather than encouraging a search for a peaceful one. While scholarship on American Islam demonstrates that Muslims in the United States craft their identities by drawing upon American cultural values, the traditions of countries that Muslims and their ancestors have immigrated from, and Islamic doctrine (Haddad 1990; Haddad and Smith 1994; Jane Smith 1999), mass media has opted for a narrative emphasizing a dichotomy between oppressed Muslims living under Islam's tyrannical rule and Americans as their good, freedom-loving liberators (see, e.g., Abrahamian 2003, Gottschalk and Greenburg 2008, Lincoln 2006, Martin and Phelan 2002, McAlister 2005, Tweed 2008, Wicks 2006).

Working within this framework, *The Simpsons* has told jokes about major Middle Eastern political leaders who were demonized in America, the Ayatollah Khomeini prominent among them. Season seven's "Two Bad Neighbors" directly attacks the Iranian Revolution's leader. As Homer and Marge are cleaning out their attic Marge raises an "Ayatollah Assaholla" t-shirt with Khomeini's face depicted on it:

MARGE

Can we get rid of this Ayatollah T-shirt? Khomeini died years ago.

HOMER

But Marge! It works on any Ayatollah. Ayatollah Nakhbadeh, Ayatollah Zahedi. Even as we speak Ayatollah Razmada and his cadre of fanatics are consolidating their power!

Juxtaposing American ideals of freedom of religion and free democratic government with the assumed regressive nature of the Iranian system, this joke activates and draws on prejudices against Iran's clerical leadership. Later in the episode the mutual animosity between America and Iran is foregrounded as Homer tries to sell the shirt at a neighbourhood yard sale. Standing on a table he yells, "Say, that Ayatollah thinks he's better than America! Is he right?" When the crowd boos (a lone voice says "Yes"), Homer rallies them saying, "Well, for just five dollars you can sock it to him in style!" Socking it to the Ayatollah by wearing a defamatory t-shirt acknowledges the trend in American politics of proselytizing through t-shirts, while reinforcing the idea that Khomeini is dangerous. It lampoons the way Americans do politics while reifying one of the pivotal stereotypes of the Ayatollah and showing support for American foreign policy against Iran. It uses heavily sentimental symbols to rally people to a political cause. McAlister explains buying similar merchandise during the Iranian hostage crisis as, "to purchase was to contain" (2005, 215). *The Simpsons* references a product created during the Iranian Revolution (which can still be purchased online), using the visual representation to connect to people's experiences of containing Khomeini's and other Muslim leaders' perceived power and threat. It exemplifies how *The Simpsons* both participates in and satirizes American popular culture while, in this case, supporting dominant political ideologies.

Terrorists are another fruitful source of jokes for *The Simpsons*. Terrorist jokes existed before September 11, 2001's attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon made fears of Islamic terrorism into a part of everyday life. Homer caught Mr. Burns selling uranium to Middle Eastern terrorists in "The Computer Wore Menace Shoes," while Maude Flanders and her mother are captured by militants while visiting Tyre and Sidon in "My Sister My Sitter." In post-9/11 episodes, American fears of terrorist attacks are fodder for satire. In season nineteen's "He Loves to Fly and He D'ohs," Homer flies on a private jet to Chicago. Returning home, Marge asks him if he flew commercial, to which Homer responds, "No way, commercial is for losers and terrorists." While



terrorists of other nationalities have hijacked planes, it is hard to imagine a post-9/11 audience thinking that the terrorists who fly commercial are anything but the same ones who crashed planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Further, in “E. Pluribus Wiggum,” *The Simpsons* satirizes political attack ads. In this episode the Republican Party shows an ad attacking Democrat “Vincent Alleppo” being in league with terrorist “Nostafa Mustafi” because they both appeared in the same issue of *The New York Times* (although in completely unrelated articles). Their pictures are placed side by side and a milkshake appears between the two images with little hearts rising between them before floating offscreen. The ad’s voiceover states: “And ye shall judge them by the company they keep.” While satirizing attack ads and the loose logic that major political parties use to demonize their opponents, *The Simpsons* is also aware that protecting the nation from terrorists is now a major part of any politician’s security platform and is, therefore, a major force in American politics.

9/11 cemented the connection between Osama bin Laden and terrorism, allowing *The Simpsons* to tell jokes about him that continued his demonization while subtly critiquing American foreign policy initiatives. The first of these depictions came in season thirteen’s (2001-2002) “I Am Furious (Yellow),” in which one of the Internet cartoons that the fictitious BetterThanTV.com produces is called “Bin Laden in a Blender.” The name says it all and does not challenge bin Laden’s portrayal in popular culture. He is a villain who meets a horrifying end. However, the next season’s “Special Edna” featured a throw-away joke that both attacks bin Laden and comments on American foreign policy. As Bart is watching wrestling on TV we see three different wrestlers—Osama bin Rotten, Uncle Slam, and Secretary of Hate Colin Kapowell (a reference to then Secretary of State Colin Powell). Osama bin Rotten is depicted with a long grey beard and a turban and is lying on the mat. The other two wrestlers beat him mercilessly with Kapowell dropping anvils (which the announcer calls “sanctions”) on bin Rotten’s head and Uncle Slam impales him with the American flag. Drawing upon famous World Wrestling Federation matches between heroic American wrestlers, namely Sargent Slaughter, and ethnic villains, especially Slaughter’s nemesis the Iron Sheik, this is a commentary on American foreign policy as the Afghanistan and Iraq wars heated up and sanctions were used to make these nations respond favourably to American interests. In the wrestling ring, this caricature assumes ridiculous proportions as Powell’s symbolic representation attacks his opponent in such gratuitous terms. While this is also a parody of wrestling, the symbolic battle between good and evil, taken to such extremes, demonstrates the violent direction American foreign policy towards the Middle East took during George W. Bush’s presidency. It also echoes the ways American popular culture narrates the battles between good and evil in its athletic dramas, as the Iron Sheik and

Seargent Slaughter's matches were also nationalist narratives of good versus evil (see Barthes 1972, 15-25). *The Simpsons* condenses this history of tackling sensitive international issues through macho American pride into a short joke that has no further bearing on the episode's story. Season fifteen saw Homer mention that his former pen pal was named Osama ("The Way We Weren't"), a joke that only works if that Osama is bin Laden, because Homer seems unaware of the danger his former pen pal poses for the United States. Finally, in season sixteen's "Fat Man and Little Boy" one of the t-shirts on sale at a t-shirt expo is "Osama bin Scratchy," which depicts the cartoon cat with a turban, grey beard, and a speech balloon saying "Death to America." The Muslim terrorist stereotype has made its way into Springfield's favourite cartoon.

Islam has rarely been portrayed positively in *The Simpsons*. The most obvious exception is from "Insane Clown Poppy" in which Krusty performs at a USO show during the Gulf War. After Krusty introduces the Cincinnati Bengals' cheerleaders, one of the soldiers yells out that the show is an insult to their Muslim hosts (a point which *Simpsons* fan Benjamin Robinson highlighted as a concern of U.S. soldiers during the war [Robinson 2003]). In nineteen seasons, this is the only time Muslim concerns were voiced. To that point *The Simpsons*' position on Islam was built upon well worn stereotypes, but season twenty's (2008-2009) "Mypods and Boomsticks" satirizes those conventions. After causing a scene at the Springfield Mall, Bart meets a Jordanian boy named Bashir who quickly becomes his friend. On the way to school the next day Bart tells Bashir what he can safely eat in the cafeteria. Only the pork chops are harmless, but Bashir's religion forbids eating pork. Bart does not learn of Bashir's religion right away, but he warns him not to tell anyone or else he will get beaten up. Overhearing this, the local bullies advance on Bashir who self-identifies as a Muslim. The bald bully, Kearney, looms over Bashir saying "You're the reason I can't carry toothpaste on an airplane." Bart defends Bashir and then makes a statement on diversity, identifying Jimbo (the bully in a stocking cap) as Christian, Dolf (the bully with long hair) as Jewish, and Kearney as a member of the "cult Moe started" (it turns out Moe was just acting crazy to get out of jury duty, reinforcing the stereotype of the duplicitous cult leader discussed earlier). Islam is now counted as one religion among many. *The Simpsons* has turned the tables on its former discriminatory attitude, which has become the target of ridicule.

Later, Homer meets Bashir and is impressed by the boy's politeness. However, that night Lenny and Carl tease Homer at the bar because of Bashir. Homer initially defends Bashir, but Moe warns him, saying, "This Bashir kid is Muslim, and therefore up to something." While Moe promotes a deeply embedded stereotype in American culture, Homer contends he cannot believe it unless he

sees “a fictional TV program espousing your [*Moe*’s] point of view.” Moe turns on a TV show resembling FOX’s hit *24* and Homer is convinced that Muslims are a threat.<sup>148</sup> Carl suggests that the way to get back at Bashir’s family is to discriminate in employment and housing, but Lenny and Moe advocate inviting the family over for dinner and then interrogating them the way *24*’s hero, Jack Bauer, would. Homer chooses the latter, implying that biased, stupid people advocate these methods.

At dinner Homer cannot hide his suspicions. When he learns that Bashir’s parents met at Jordan University of Science and Technology he notes that “science is used to make bombs.” He then brings out a cake decorated with the American flag and asks if they want to cut it. When they refuse, he bellows, “What’s the matter? Don’t like the taste of freedom?” Bart defends them saying, “Dad, these people are my friends. Don’t fear them just because they have a different religion, a different culture, and their last name is bin Laden.” Bashir’s father then models the stark differences between the Muslim family and the Simpsons, saying, “Young man, you do not respect us by disrespecting your father.” The bin Ladens leave shortly thereafter and Marge rebukes Homer for his behaviour. Homer replies, “I’m sorry, it’s just so fun and easy to judge people based on religion.” It may be fun and easy, but *The Simpsons* contrasts the way Muslims are normally judged with a Muslim family that acts in a more acceptable way than the Simpsons do. The positive presentation of Muslims is in stark contrast with other depictions of Muslims on American television, and although the bin Ladens’ last name makes for a convenient joke, it works because it inverts the expectations people have for someone named bin Laden. The process of overturning the Muslim stereotype is underway.

Marge then sends Homer over to the bin Ladens’ to apologize. However, when he arrives he sees Bashir’s father handling dynamite in the garage and goes home proclaiming that he was right about them. Homer’s dream that night parodies Disney’s *Aladdin*. The genie claims he will “destroy your decadent Western society,” and proceeds to turn the First Church of Springfield into a mosque, makes the bullies dress like Arab gangsters, and changes every CD in the local music store into a Cat Stevens album (Stevens converted to Islam in 1977 and is now known as Yusuf Islam). Homer awakens reassured that Muslims are a threat.

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<sup>148</sup> Debuting in November of 2001, *24* features Counter Terrorist Unit agent Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) fighting domestic and international threats over the course of one day (twenty-four hours, each of which is an episode). Extremely popular, the program has featured Muslims (among others) as international threats to the United States. Bauer is an example of the American hero who does what it takes to protect the country, as he is willing to murder, torture, and break protocol to get the information he needs. The satirical portrait in this episode is based on Bauer’s interrogation scenes (read: torture) across *24*’s eight seasons.

The next morning he goes to the bin Ladens' to confirm his suspicions. Homer overhears Bashir's father proclaiming his love for blowing up buildings, but does not hear the part where he states that it is done safely and legally. Homer's eavesdropping reveals that Mr. bin Laden is "killing myself, but it is all for the profit" (a clever homonym) and that he will be in a better place. What Homer does not hear is that the better place is a corner office. After snooping around the house, Homer learns that Mr. bin Laden is going to blow up the Springfield Mall. The condemned building is the old Springfield Mall but Homer ruins the demolition, taking the dynamite and throwing it into the Springfield River where it destroys a bridge to the Duff brewery. After this escapade, the Simpsons have the bin Ladens over for an apology dinner under Homer's "Please Forgive My Intolerance" banner. At least this Muslim family is welcome in Springfield.

### 7.3 Conclusions

I began researching this material during season eighteen (2006-2007). By that time there was an established pattern of employing discriminatory stereotypes to marginalize NRMs and Islam in *The Simpsons*' religious culture. These religions were peripheral and unwelcome contributors to Springfield's pluralism, especially since there is an absence of characters identified with their traditions. They lack the Lisa, Apu, and Krusty who represent the complexity of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. Without a Flanders or Reverend Lovejoy showing how a single tradition's positives and negatives complicate an individual character, NRMs and Islam are reduced to throw-away jokes or single-episode stereotypes. This is still the case, although "Mypods and Boomsticks" and "Rednecks and Broomsticks" show how *The Simpsons* can deflate the stereotypes upon which it previously relied.

A strong sense of mistrust in institutionalized religion persists in the way the Movementarians and the Stonecutters are treated. Both of these religions lack a character who speaks as a respectable advocate of alternative worldviews. The contrast is notable when we see how Islam's portrayal was inverted once Bashir and his parents were introduced. By humanizing Islam through a positive depiction of Muslims, a history of assumptions underlying throw-away jokes was called into question. *The Simpsons* has amended its Muslim stereotypes, more diversely portraying Muslims and their position within American culture. Now Muslims are considered a legitimate part of Springfield's and, therefore, the United States' religious landscape. This is a significant change from their earlier position, revealed to Pinsky in an interview with producer Al Jean for the 2001 edition of *The Gospel According to The Simpsons*, and quoted again the 2007 edition. Jean explained that *The Simpsons* had

placed Islam off limits because they were fearful of the violent repercussions that can come from offending Muslims. The stereotype of dangerous Muslims struck close to the creative staff's hearts. Pinsky quotes Jean as saying, "It's a faith where you don't want to offend, because we're not Muslim, and we're not sure what might be offensive" (Jean, quoted in Pinsky 2007, 214).<sup>149</sup> *The Simpsons* walked a fine line, never directly challenging Islamic doctrines and practices as they have criticized Christianity. Many of the jokes about Islam can be interpreted as jokes about individual Muslims, and not Islamic beliefs per se. They have changed their position on Islam and brought it into the program's larger discussion about appropriate religious behaviour in America. Muslims are now welcomed as citizens, but we will have to wait and see if their doctrines are considered safe enough for open comedic discussion.

Unlike Islam, NRMs continue to be stigmatized. *The Simpsons* and their commentators do not seriously engage the challenges and possibilities NRMs represent for American religious life. While Islam is recognized as a major world religion, NRMs and secret societies are easily marginalized because of their small size and apparent and presumed differences from mainstream American values. In their alternative family and living arrangements, different beliefs, and openness to the fringes of American metaphysical thought, many NRMs offer multiple perspectives from which to criticize mainstream American culture. They are excellent tools for comedic contrast, but *The Simpsons* has not taken the time to engage their different unseen orders. Instead, they replicate and reiterate the problem that major news media has presented for NRMs. That is, they are only noticeable as threats to the American status quo.

Negative stereotypes about Muslims and NRMs are generalizations that tell us about the stereotypers themselves. Stereotypes are part of Berger and Luckmann's system of institutional legitimations (1966, 94-96). They are "rudimentary theoretical propositions;" that is, they are pragmatic, they direct people's actions, but they are not fully developed theoretical arguments. Rather, they are moral maxims, hiding their institutional allegiances behind animosity towards opponents. Stereotypes also fit into our social stocks of knowledge as recipe knowledge, allowing us

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<sup>149</sup> However, this did not stop FOX from remaking the program for a Muslim audience to capitalize on *The Simpsons*' popularity. During the Islamic holy month of Ramadan in 2005 (October 2 to November 1, 2005), MBC-TV, an Arabic cable network, aired the show with significant edits. The Simpsons were "al Shamshoon," some of the characters' names were changed, and alcohol and Moe's bar were edited out of some of the classic episodes from seasons three and four in accordance with Qu'ranic law. Pork consumption was also deleted, which left Al Jean feeling as if the very spirit of Homer had been destroyed. Critics agreed. Pinsky (2007, 214-215) records some of the responses, and the general sentiment is that the show was not funny and lost much of its humorous grounding in American culture. It was an abject failure in the Arabic world, which points to the culturally contextualized nature of *The Simpsons*' comedy (see also Poplak 2007).

to conduct routine performances pragmatically without thinking of the underlying assumptions driving those actions (42; see also Gottschalk and Greenburg 2008, 76; McAlister 2005; Said 1981). While these stereotypes do not accurately depict Muslims and members of NRMs, the contemporary United States' institutional arrangement makes this point moot. One can live as an American holding these assumptions because of their prevalence. Serious social sanctions for believing these prejudices are lacking. While Muslims work hard to change popular perceptions of them, the voices who speak for NRMs tend to be academics with a more limited audience than the mass media who have a vested interest in treating "cults" as dangerous and newsworthy. Even media refutations of the dangerous Muslim stereotype rest on the assumption that the audience thinks Muslims are threats and, therefore, these news stories act as anecdotal evidence that complicates, but does not deflate, the stereotype of the dangerous Muslim.

Through replicating these assumptions in its jokes, *The Simpsons* has taken an uncritical position with its treatment of NRMs and a more critical perspective of Islam's role in American life. These jokes reaffirm the assumption that only select religious practices are legitimate, and justify the disdain that significant numbers of Americans hold towards these groups. Internet discussions at tv.com ([www.tv.com](http://www.tv.com)) and nohomers.net ([www.nohomers.net](http://www.nohomers.net)) found "Mypods and Boomstick"'s storyline predictable. However, its predictability lies in a shift in attitudes towards acceptance of Muslims among Americans who challenge the assumed association between Islam and terrorism. "Mypods and Boomsticks" is a significant change for *The Simpsons*, and contributes to a larger comedic discussion about how Americans should see Muslims not as "the other," but as part of "ourselves." However, the program has not accepted NRMs.

*The Simpsons'* jokes build upon the fears and assumed norms of American society. While we have progressed from accepted to feared religions over the last five chapters, these examples demonstrate the importance of questioning institutionalized religious beliefs. It also suggests a mistrust of anybody who does not share *The Simpsons'* perspective. As Bergson noted, laughter has a social dimension that is meant to correct immoral behaviour (1956 [1911], 146-155; see also Cowan 2005b). However, the sociology of knowledge teaches us that moral knowledge is contextualized and institutionalized. It is a contentious property of powerful social institutions whose positions are replicated through secondary socialization. In ridiculing NRMs and Muslims, *The Simpsons* has largely reproduced these implicit positions. Even if the majority of Americans are ignorant of these religious traditions, they have had their moral standards reaffirmed through jokes. In this case, satire

is a conservative medium. Only when Muslims can be portrayed as a model minority are they deemed acceptable. NRMs remain excluded.

## Chapter 8—Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation I have been concerned with what cultural intertextuality in *The Simpsons* lets us hypothesize about what people know about religion, and how this knowledge informs *The Simpsons*' humour. The concept of ignorant familiarity has been especially helpful in illustrating the problems surrounding religions' depictions in *The Simpsons*. Specifically, *The Simpsons*' humour implies that people know something about different religions, but this knowledge is superficial. This superficiality is used to creative advantage and jokes are crafted based on assumptions and stereotypes rather than detailed bodies of knowledge. Religions are not easy to learn, and most people do not bother learning about any other than their own. They have a practical stock of knowledge that enables them to interact with adherents of religions other than their own. The Schutzian problem of ideal types (1962, 1967), in which human interaction is based on rationalized assumptions about how other people will act, puts this issue into perspective. Our rationalizations about religion are often based on incomplete knowledge. The range of ideas, sects, and individuals within any given tradition within a religion is staggering, let alone the diversity across all religions. Our ideal types are, therefore, incomplete and possibly dysfunctional for facilitating interaction. Despite these dangers, *The Simpsons*' humour exemplifies the practicality of ignorant familiarities. Even if they are based on incorrent knowledge and assumptions, the fact remains that each ignorant familiarity discussed in this dissertation is socially constructed. These ideal types are already functional in American culture. Repeating them in jokes reinforces what people already know.

Jokes in *The Simpsons* demonstrate that knowledge is both a matter of fact and belief. In other words, to know something we not only need to know facts that can be empirically confirmed about religious groups (e.g., what a group believes, what they do), but also *how to interpret those facts sensibly within our own cognitive framework*. Mere facts are not practically useful. To be practical, they have to be used for a specific purpose. *The Simpsons*' implied politics—in which individual pursuits and freedoms are emphasized at the expense of conservative positions—are what we have to know, and at least be able to sympathize with, to find it humorous. Jokes about the superiority of scientific rationality at the expense of intelligent design and creation science in “The Monkey Suit” combat conservative cultural forces. Many people believe that if America abandons literally interpreting the Bible's creation narrative and engages in open dialogue with non-Christian religions, then God will withdraw his providence and protection and punish America with terrorist attacks such as those that happened on September 11, 2001. However, *The Simpsons* portrays these



people as misguided, foolish, and dangerous. Jokes about God reinforce the idea that these political positions are faulty, as God in *The Simpsons* is vindictive and not omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient, unlike the God of conservative Christians. The God of *The Simpsons* is not one whose kingdom can be brought about by politically active evangelicals. This illustrates the larger point that Henry (2008) emphasized: *The Simpsons*' politics fall along the "liberal" lines in America's culture war (see J. Hunter 1991), and the program's humour promotes a liberal worldview to conservatives' detriment.

Indeed, *The Simpsons*' jokes illustrate that knowing about religion involves knowing how to *deal with* religion. It is not enough to know facts about religions; we also need to know how to interact with people who hold those beliefs sacred, perform the rituals sincerely, and try to mould themselves to ideals that they consider transcendent. We need to know how to make their unseen order comprehensible in light of our own unseen order. In terms of humour theory, we need to know where those unseen orders are congruent and incongruent with our own. As the basis for humour, incongruity tells us more about what is congruent within the humorist's unseen order than it does about their opponents'.

My analysis reveals a pattern of concentric circles of acceptance. Mimicing Christie Davies' model of ethnic humour (1990, 1998, 2002), which sees marginal ethnic groups categorized as either stupid or canny, *The Simpsons*' satire works from an implied centre built around deinstitutionalized spirituality and scientific rationality. From there, an "excluded" ring of religions are treated positively. Jews and Hindus are excluded because of their ethnoreligiosity. That is, *The Simpsons* treats them as exclusive by blood. However, these religious traditions are treated with reverence, especially Judaism's rites of passage and Jews' struggles to navigate modern life. Hinduism is depicted as an accepted, if strange, religion in the United States, and is contrasted with Christianity's aggressive missionizing as a more tolerant, peaceful way of living. While these religions are not central in the same way as spirituality and scientific rationality, they are ambiguously both inside and outside *The Simpsons*' unseen order. They occupy a circle between "stupid" and the centre.

From there, an excluded, "stupid, but sometimes acceptable" circle includes both Protestant and Catholic Christians. Christian beliefs and practices are categorized as different and "stupid" relative to the centre. That is, Christian faith in Jesus' divinity, Catholic belief in transubstantiation, and evangelical missionary zeal are all targets for ridicule. These deeply held beliefs mark Christians as external to *The Simpsons*' implied norm of experimental religiosity that does not seek to make converts or intrude on other people's religious practice. At the same time, *The Simpsons* presents

ethical behaviours (such as Ned's generosity) approvingly and acknowledges that in a crisis of faith, Christianity has elements worth preserving. This selective approval allows *The Simpsons* to criticize Christian practice, discarding what they consider inappropriate in a pluralistic United States while keeping Christianity's positive practices.

Finally, there are the excluded religions—cults and Islam. While the dynamics relating to changes in the depictions of Wicca and Islam over the program's twenty-one seasons challenges this simple categorization, *The Simpsons* has historically treated cults and Islam as dangerous religious traditions worthy of ridicule. This is hardly surprising considering these religions' contentious histories in America. However, *Simpsons* commentators have treated the show as critically insightful, especially in terms of these portrayals, and the negative stereotypes undergirding these portrayals are continually replicated but not challenged.

## **8.1 The Importance of a Sociological Theory of Religious Humour**

Religion scholars have not seriously studied humour. While they are familiar with religious humour, they rarely theorize humour's importance in transmitting culturally contextualized knowledge and opinions about religion. This dissertation is a first attempt to rectify this problem. *The Simpsons* is a useful example and an important cultural product, but the more important point is how people use humour to criticize religions. *The Simpsons* is not a product made by a religious group as a way of communicating a specific religious truth to its own group members or other groups. It is designed to "entertain and subvert" (Groening, quoted in Griffiths 2000). Specifically, it subverts conservative biases in American culture. This subversion is seen in jokes that attack outsiders' beliefs that are incongruent with *The Simpsons*' position.

Drawing from Berger (1967, 1970, 1997; see also Berger and Luckmann 1966), Oring (2003), and Davies (1990, 1998, 2002), every joke implies two things: an underlying plausibility structure that helps us understand a joke's incongruity relative to the congruous understandings of an unseen order, and an implied audience that shares that plausibility structure. Professional humourists do not tell jokes if they do not think their audience will find them funny. While Alters (2002) and Hoover (2006) remind us that not everybody finds *The Simpsons* humorous, the fact is that a significant number of people do. Its status as the longest running sitcom in American television history is proof of its popularity, and its syndication and profitability speak to its continued influence in the global cultural marketplace. In short, this is a perspective on American life and, by extension, religion's role therein, that resonates with people around the globe. Knowing that this is an influential

body of ideas about religion is clearly important, and knowing that basic religious knowledge is transmitted humorously in easily memorable quotes and visual representations, speaks to how religious knowledge is transmitted and manipulated.

This echoes Prothero's (2007) assertion that Americans do not know much about religion. While Americans are woefully ignorant about factual knowledge (e.g., naming the Ten Commandments, knowing Hindu scriptures, being able to discuss basics of Islamic theology), *The Simpsons'* jokes demonstrate that there is a body of *practical* religious knowledge accessible through cultural intertextuality. In other words, while people may not be able to answer multiple choice questions about Hindu sacred texts, humorists can craft jokes based on stereotypes of Hinduism's role in American culture and expect a significant portion of their audience to laugh. However, Prothero is correct in asserting that when people lack the understanding of religion necessary to criticize media depictions, "ignorance imperils our public life, putting citizens in the thrall of talking heads and effectively transferring power from the third estate (the people) to the fourth (the press)" (2007, 10). Ignorance is problematic, leading to dangerous and regrettable situations such as the Branch Davidian conflict, excluding religious groups such as Hindus and Muslims from building places of worship, and treating the Catholic Eucharist as "wafers and booze." However, this does not change the fact that Americans possess such a body of religious knowledge and frameworks for activating it. They have both accurate and inaccurate factual information and deeply entrenched interpretive frameworks, making ignorant familiarity a dangerous framework for interpreting religion. Furthermore, religious facts are not humorous apart from a hermeneutic. Facts and assumptions intertwine when they are activated, reinforcing ignorant familiarities through repetition. Whether or not we agree with *The Simpsons'* interpretation, their framing of these stereotypes enables us to interpret the jokes and presents us with a second level legitimation. That is, these jokes are "various explanatory schemes relating sets of objective meanings. These schemes are highly pragmatic, directly related to concrete actions" (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 94). While Prothero has a well-constructed argument for why people should know more about the world's religions, those who have an established framework in place and do not care to challenge it need pragmatic explanations for how to deal with religious people in order to navigate life in the United States. *The Simpsons* projects a pragmatic approach to millions of viewers worldwide through the program's humour, providing a framework for activating ignorant familiarities.

## 8.2 The Problems Inherent in *The Simpsons'* Perspective of American Religion

Pinsky concludes *The Gospel According to The Simpsons* by arguing that “in essence, while not at all dangerous or threatening to the status quo, it [*The Simpsons*] is a sweet, funny show about a family as ‘real’ as the faith lives of many Americans. It is a show that does in fact give hope and joy and, yes, inspiration to millions. But mostly, as my wife reminds me, it’s funny. And as Homer says, ‘it’s funny ’cause it’s true’” (226).<sup>150</sup> Whether the show actually gives hope, joy, and inspiration to millions, is open to debate, but Pinsky’s assertion that the program is “funny ’cause it’s true” begs the questions: Who says it is true? Why do they say it is true? Who is advantaged by claiming this is the truth? Who is disadvantaged? *The Simpsons* is not funny because what it says is true, it is funny because *some culturally contextualized people think what it says about different religions is true*. There is a world of difference between the two positions and this latter stance questions Pinsky’s argument that the show “in essence does not challenge the status quo.”

In his conclusion to *The Springfield Reformation*, Heit argues that *The Simpsons* makes clear that “the marriage of Evangelism and neoconservative politics presents a real danger to anyone who runs against the grain that their converging interests produce” (2008, 146). That is, “*The Simpsons* thus accomplishes an important social task by making visible how religion has lost direction in the midst of competing cultural influences. Despite the caricatured nature that defines how the show portrays religion, the message emerges clearly” (147). Finally, “Christianity needs to recover its social identity in American culture quickly, or it could become the banner under which the neoconservative movement in America passes a tipping point. On the small and large screen, *The Simpsons* makes the risk clear. Its goal is, in part, to elicit a response from its viewers to address Christianity’s problems before they lose the chance to do so” (150). All of this is premised on the argument that neoevangelicalism’s merger with conservative politics is a bad thing. However, this is not a foregone conclusion. For those people who believe strongly that the best thing for America lies in protecting monogamous, heterosexual families; abolishing access to abortion; supporting Israel and having an aggressive position against Muslims in the Middle East; and who think the United States is divinely anointed to lead the world by being a Christian example of free market enterprise, *Heit’s* position is the problem. Conservative Christians honestly believe that they are doing what is necessary to save the state and souls from worldly failure and eternal damnation. When we look at this unseen order from the inside it is congruent; from Heit’s position it is misguided and frightening.

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<sup>150</sup> Homer’s quote is from “Homer vs. Lisa and the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment.”

Heit is correct that *The Simpsons* criticizes conservative Christianity, but that does not make it a call for others to address Christianity's problems from within the tradition. The spirituality of seeking that Heit decries in his book is central to *The Simpsons'* solution. However, personal seeking in a culture of tolerance is more in line with what *The Simpsons* advocates than is reforming Christianity. This is a different truth from what Heit thinks the program promotes, and it differs from what his neoconservative opponents believe. In other words, *The Simpsons* transmits a message that says personal spiritual pursuit within rationalist bounds is the answer to America's religious problems. However, in the big picture of religion and American politics, this is one option among many that people could take for improving the United States' religious situation.

In determining how *The Simpsons* positions itself, I favour one of Chris Turner's final arguments from *Planet Simpson* to Pinsky's simplistic analysis of *The Simpsons'* humour: "Satire comes from deep anger, and it is at its best when it is ruthless in its assessment of the subject's ills, but its final message is that the sickness, once satirically diagnosed, can possibly be cured" (2004, 430). This is the corrective power of humour discussed by Bergson, the ability to highlight the incongruous in society and ridicule it in order to bring those actions, institutions, and people into line. *The Simpsons* transmits an unseen order, one that resonates deeply with Turner and millions of others like him. In religious terms, *The Simpsons* argues that if we continue along a dogmatic road that clings to literalism and the need to force our beliefs on others, then society will fail. The Ned Flanders' of the world will start monitoring our every move, curtailing our freedoms, and our ability to make decisions. If we do not diminish prejudice against Muslims, then we end up like Homer and allow suspicion, fear, and irrationality to guide our actions, rather than critically assessing stereotypes and challenging them. We run the risk of allowing cherished individual rights to be overthrown by fear and hatred, harming ourselves and others in the process. At the same time, if we could encourage each other to pursue our spiritual interests, drawing from insightful traditions such as scientific rationality, Buddhism, Native American spirituality, and Wicca, then we may avert social disaster and find new ways to improve the world.

As Pinsky, Heit, Henry (2008), Delaney (2008), and Turner illustrate, people care about what *The Simpsons* has to say about religious life in America. It is a critical voice that resonates with people. It reflects, and reflects on, familiar issues, framing them in ways that people find humorous. Sometimes, this can inspire further reflection. However, it also alerts us to the fact that cultural critics can forget that every perspective is positioned; every social truth espoused is relative to particular plausibility structures. *The Simpsons* is built on deeply held liberal beliefs in individual improvement

and social responsibility. It advocates allowing individuals to develop to their fullest potential by pursuing their desires, rather than enforcing a traditional moral code upon them. For those with whom this sentiment resonates, *The Simpsons* is telling the truth. For those who disagree, *The Simpsons* is lying. Others may find themselves conflicted as they take a middle position on the way *The Simpsons* resolves issues. Perspective matters. It shapes the political impact and interpretation of humour and it influences how people will understand jokes. Because people care about *The Simpsons*, understanding its religious bias, how it reflects that bias by selectively interpreting American religious traditions, and whom that bias advantages and disadvantages is central to the sociologist of religion's job in understanding why this popular culture artifact remains relevant twenty-one years after it originally premiered.

The problem inherent in *The Simpsons* is that its embrace of liberal religion is undercut by its acknowledgement that our neighbours' faults limit our good deeds' influence. The fact that it is only Lisa who is the Buddhist and spiritual seeker—and also the feminist, vegetarian, and social activist—and not all of the characters, leaves *The Simpsons*' moral voice crying in the wilderness. In this sense, Pinsky is right: *The Simpsons* does not threaten the status quo. As a cultural product, *The Simpsons* cannot make people change their behaviour. However, it can challenge us by presenting ideas that can cause us to rethink our positions, allowing us to see our folly by shifting perspective and revealing things in a new light.

Ultimately, this is the satirist's social role. Satirists are critical voices, calling for change and attacking opponents from a different moral position. However, they are not in a position to force change, and they may see their efforts wasted. *The Simpsons* has been a platform for entertaining and educating for years because the satirists who join the creative team use it to engage an audience that is willing to consider what they have to say, and, as Turner suggests, the audience is willing to entertain the possibility that there may be a cure for the social ills the satirist identifies.

These problems of truth, perspective, and action are inherent in an analysis of *The Simpsons* and satirical humour as a social phenomenon. Rooted in the problem to which conflict sociology alerts us—the fact that groups within society are constantly in competition to shape society's future—*The Simpsons* cannot escape the fact that it is an argument, rather than a transcendent revelation. By removing the religiousness with which Berger would treat *The Simpsons*' humour, and emphasizing the program as a socially positioned voice for liberal religious freedoms against a social system *The Simpsons* portrays as increasingly totalitarian, we can see that the difficulty with *The Simpsons*'

religious humour is that it is just another voice among many in a cultural marketplace from which people can pick and choose.

### **8.3 Where Do We Go From Here?**

There are other projects related to religion and humour that sociologists of religion could undertake. Specifically, fieldworkers could include studies of joking cultures (the humorous banter that develops within groups) as a way of enriching their studies of religious institutions and organizations. There is also humour's sacralizing power, which could lead scholars into a variety of significant explorations about humour's role within religious organizations. While I have argued that humour does not reveal the sacred, only the humorist's perspective of it, that does not mean that groups do not use humour to convey their sense of sacredness and bestow objects in their environment with sacredness.

There is also a need to bring popular culture studies into the mainstream of religious studies. Films, television programs, material culture, music, fashion, and various other kinds of popular culture beg to be used as analytical lenses. As nodes in the dense webs of people's religious lives, the artifacts that people take the time to create, use, and destroy encapsulate significant moments that allow for further reflection. Regardless of the subject matter in which scholars are interested, popular culture is a tool for accessing religious people's lives and thoughts.

Presently, departments of religious studies frequently offer religion and popular culture and religion and film courses as first year, introductory, "cash cow" courses designed to generate high enrolments. Later, students can be challenged with "important" topics such as the work of a major theologian, or religion's intersection with politics, gender identities, and violence. However, even in the study of influential theologians or religion's social impact, popular culture exists as a data source. How the theologian is received and understood outside the academy and clergy is important, and his or her ideas may be completely unrecognizable when people have interpreted them. Popular culture marks the different moments in an idea's career when people thought enough of it to transform it into something marketable. Popular culture tells us how people transmit their interpretations of religions and teaches us how religious ideas are effectively communicated. After all, more people watch *The Simpsons* than read Peter Berger.

Why popular culture reaches people effectively is something we have to consider seriously when asking the larger questions surrounding religion's role in modern life. If this dissertation reinforced anything I believed in before I started it, it is that popular culture is a data set that needs to

be more rigorously theorized, and methods for studying it need to be increasingly defined for religious studies scholars. I would encourage any scholar to exploit the wealth of data popular culture provides in helping them answer their significant questions.



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- . 1990. "Krusty Gets Busted." #7G12. Originally Aired April 29. Written by Jay Kogen and Wallace Wolodarsky. Directed by Brad Bird.
- . 1990. "Bart Gets an F." #7F03. Original Airdate October 11. Written by David M. Stern. Directed by David Silverman.
- . 1990. "Two Cars in Every Garage, Three Eyes on Every Fish." #7F01. Original Airdate November 1. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Wesley Archer.
- . 1990. "Dead Putting Society." #7F08. Originally Aired November 15. Written by Jeff Martin. Directed by Rich Moore.
- . 1991. "Bart Gets Hit by a Car." #7F10. Originally Aired January 10. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 1991. "Homer vs. Lisa and the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment." #7F13. Originally Aired February 7. Written by Steve Peppon. Directed by Rich Moore.
- . 1991. "Brush with Greatness." #7F18. Originally Aired April 11. Written by Brian K. Roberts. Directed by Jim Reardon.
- . 1991. "Homer Defined." #8F04. Originally Aired October 17. Written by Howard Gewirtz. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 1991. "Like Father, Like Clown." #8F05. Originally Aired October 24. Written by Jay Kogen and Wallace Wolodarsky. Directed by Jeffrey Lynch with Brad Bird.
- . 1991. "I Married Marge." #8F10. Originally Aired December 26. Written by Jeff Martin. Directed by Jeffrey Lynch.
- . 1992. "Black Widower." #8F20. Original Airdate April 9. Written by Thomas Chastain and Sam Simon. Directed by David Silverman.
- . 1992. "Bart's Friend Falls in Love." #8F22. Original Airdate May 7. Written by Jay Kogen and Wallace Wolodarsky. Directed by Jim Reardon.
- . 1992. "Brother, Can You Spare Two Dimes?" #8F23. Original Airdate August 21. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Rich Moore.
- . 1992. "Homer the Heretic." #9F01. Original Airdate October 8. Written by George Meyer. Directed by Jim Reardon.
- . 1992. "Treehouse of Horror III." #9F04. Original Airdate October 29. Written by Al Jean, Mike Reiss, Jay Kogan, Wallace Wolodarsky, Sam Simon, and John Vitti. Directed by Carlos Baeza.
- . 1992. "Mr. Plow." #9F07. Originally Aired November 19. Written by Jon Vitti. Directed by Jim Reardon.

- . 1992. "Lisa's First Word." #9F08. Originally Aired December 3. Written by Jeff Martin. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 1992. "Homer's Triple Bypass." #9F09. Originally Aired December 17. Written by Gary Apple and Michael Carrington. Directed by David Silverman.
- . 1993. "The Front." #9F16. Originally Aired April 15. Written by Adam I. Lapidus. Directed by Rich Moore.
- . 1993. "Cape Feare." #9F22. Originally Aired October 7. Written by Jon Vitti. Directed by Rich Moore.
- . 1993. "Treehouse of Horror IV." #1F04. Originally Aired October 28. Written by Conan O'Brien, Bill Oakley, Josh Weinstein, Greg Daniels, Dan McGrath, and Bill Canterbury. Directed by David Silverman.
- . 1994. "Homer and Apu." #1F10. Originally Aired February 10. Written by Greg Daniels. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 1994. "Homer Loves Flanders." #1F14. Originally Aired March 17. Written by David Richardson. Directed by Wes Archer.
- . 1994. "Burns' Heir." #1F16. Original Airdate April 14. Written by Jack Richdale. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 1994. "Sideshow Bob Roberts." #2F02. Original Airdate October 9. Written by Bill Oakley & Josh Weinstein. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 1994. "Bart's Girlfriend." #2F04. Originally Aired November 6. Written by Jonathan Collier. Directed by Susie Dieter.
- . 1995. "Homer the Great." #2F09. Original Airdate January 8. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Jim Reardon.
- . 1995. "And Maggie Makes Three." #2F10. Originally Aired January 22. Written by Jennifer Crittenden. Directed by Swinton O. Scott III.
- . 1995. "A Star is Burns." #2F31. Originally Aired March 5. Written by Ken Keeler. Directed by Susie Dieter.
- . 1995. "Radioactive Man." #2F17. Original Airdate September 24. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Susie Dieter.
- . 1995. "Home Sweet Homediddly-Dum-Doodily." Originally Aired October 1. Written by Jon Vitti. Directed by Susie Dieter.
- . 1995. "Bart Sells His Soul." #3F02. Original Airdate October 8. Written by Greg Daniels. Directed by Wesley Archer.

- . 1995. "Lisa the Vegetarian." #3F03. Originally Aired October 15. Written by David S. Cohen. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 1995. "Sideshow Bob's Last Gleaming." #3F08. Original Airdate November 26. Written by Spike Ferensten. Directed by Dominic Polcino.
- . 1996. "Team Homer." #3F10. Originally Aired January 7. Written by Mike Scully. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 1996. "Two Bad Neighbors." #3F09. Original Airdate January 14. Written by Ken Keeler. Directed by Wes Archer.
- . 1996. "Much Apu About Nothing." #3F20. Original Airdate May 5. Written by David S. Cohen. Directed by Susie Dietter.
- . 1996. "Homerpalooza." #3F21. Original Airdate May 19. Written by Brent Forrester. Directed by Wesley Archer.
- . 1996. "Bart After Dark." #4F06. Originally Aired November 24. Written by Richard Appel. Directed by Dominic Polcino.
- . 1996. "Hurricane Neddy." #4F07. Originally Aired December 29. Written by Steve Young. Directed by Bob Anderson.
- . 1997. "El Viaje Misterioso de Nuestro Jomer." #3F24. Original Airdate January 5. Written by Ken Keeler. Directed by Jim Reardon.
- . 1997. "The Springfield Files." #3G01. Originally Aired January 12. Written by Reid Harrison. Directed by Steven Dean Moore.
- . 1997. "My Sister My Sitter." #4F13. Original Airdate March 2. Written by Dan Greaney. Directed by Jim Reardon.
- . 1997. "In Marge We Trust." #4F18. Original Airdate April 27. Written by Donick Cary. Directed by Steve Moore.
- . 1997. "The City of New York vs. Homer Simpson." #4F22. Original Airdate September 24. Written by Ian Maxtone-Graham. Directed by Jim Reardon.
- . 1997. "The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemapetilons." #5F04. Originally Aired November 16. Written by Richard Appel. Directed by Dean Moore.
- . 1997. "Lisa the Skeptic." #5F05. Original Airdate November 23. Written by David S. Cohen. Directed by Neil Affleck.
- . 1997. "Miracle on Evergreen Terrace." #5F07. Originally Aired December 21. Written by Ron Hauge. Directed by Bob Anderson.



- . 1998. "The Joy of Sect." #5F23. Original Airdate February 8. Written by Steve O'Donnell. Directed by Steven Dean Moore.
- . 1998. "Das Bus." #5F11. Originally Aired February 15. Written by David S. Cohen. Directed by Pete Michels.
- . 1998. "Lard of the Dance." #5F20. Originally Aired August 23. Written by Jane O'Brien. Directed by Dominic Polcino.
- . 1998. "Bart the Mother." #5F22. Originally Aired September 27. Written by David S. Cohen. Directed by Stephen Dean Moore.
- . 1998. "Lisa Gets an A." #AABF03. Original Airdate November 22. Written by Ian Maxtone-Graham. Directed by Bob Anderson.
- . 1999. "Viva Ned Flanders." #AABF06. Originally Aired January 10. Written by David M. Stern. Directed by Neil Afflek.
- . 1999. "Sunday, Cruddy Sunday." #AABF08. Original Airdate January 21. Written by Tom Martin, George Meyer, Brian Scully, and Mike Scully. Directed by Steven Dean Moore.
- . 1999. "Make Room for Lisa." #AABF12. Originally Aired February 28. Written by Brian Scully. Directed by Matthew Nastuk.
- . 1999. "Simpsons Bible Stories." #AABF14. Original Airdate April 4. Written by Tim Long, Larry Doyle, and Matt Selman. Directed by Nancy Kruse.
- . 1999. "Mom and Pop Art." #AABF15. Originally Aired April 11. Written by Al Jean. Directed by Steven Dean Moore.
- . 1999. "Take My Wife, Sleaze." #BABF05. Originally Aired November 28. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Neil Affleck.
- . 2000. "Little Big Mom." #BABF04. Originally Aired January 9. Written by Carolyn Omine. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 2000. "Faith Off." #BABF06. Originally Aired January 16. Written by Frank Mula. Directed by Nancy Kruse.
- . 2000. "The Mansion Family." #BABF08. Original Airdate January 23. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Michael Polcino.
- . 2000. "Alone Again, Natura-Diddly." #BABF10. Originally Aired February 13. Written by Ian Maxtone-Graham. Directed by Jim Reardon.
- . 2000. "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad Marge." #BABF18. Originally Aired May 14. Written by Larry Doyle. Directed by Steven Dean Moore.

- . 2000. "Insane Clown Poppy." #BABF17. Originally Aired November 12. Written by John Frink and Don Payne. Directed by Bob Anderson.
- . 2000. "The Computer Wore Menace Shoes." #CABF02. Original Airdate December 3. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 2001. "HOMЯ." #BABF22. Originally Aired January 7. Written by Al Jean. Directed by Mike Anderson.
- . 2001. "Trilogy of Error." #CABF14. Originally Aired April 29. Written by Matt Selman. Directed by Mike B. Anderson.
- . 2001. "A Hunka Hunka Burns in Love." #CABF18. Original Airdate December 2. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Lance Kramer.
- . 2001. "She of Little Faith." #DABF02. Original Airdate December 16. Written by Bill Freiberger. Directed by Sam Simon.
- . 2002. "Blame it on Lisa." #DABF10. Original Airdate March 31. Written by Bob Bendetson. Directed by Steven Dean Moore.
- . 2002. "I Am Furious (Yellow)." #DABF13. Original Airdate April 28. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Chuck Sheetz.
- . 2002. "The Sweetest Apu." #DABF14. Originally Aired May 5. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Matthew Nastuk.
- . 2002. "How I Spent My Strummer Vacation." #DABF22. Original Airdate November 10. Written by Mike Scully. Directed by Mike B. Anderson.
- . 2003. "Special Edna." #EABF02. Original Airdate January 5. Written by Dennis Snee. Directed by Bob Anderson.
- . 2003. "Pray Anything." #EABF06. Original Airdate February 9. Written by Neal Boushell and Sam O'Neal. Directed by Michael Polcino.
- . 2003. "Bartering Over." #EABF05. Original Airdate February 16. Written by Andrew Kreisberg. Directed by Matthew Nastuk.
- . 2003. "I'm Spelling As Fast As I Can." #EABF07. Original Airdate February 16. Written by Kevin Curran. Directed by Nancy Kruse.
- . 2003. "Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington." #EABF09. Original Airdate March 9. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Lance Kramer.
- . 2003. "Three Gays of the Condo." #EABF12. Original Airdate April 13. Written by Matt Warburton. Directed by Mark Kirkland.

- . 2003. "Dude, Where's My Ranch?" #EABF13. Original Airdate April 27. Written by Ian Maxtone-Graham. Directed by Chris Clements.
- . 2003. "The Bart of War." #EABF16. Originally Aired May 18. Written by Marc Wilmore. Directed by Michael Polcino.
- . 2003. "Treehouse of Horror XIV." #EABF21. Originally Aired November 2. Written by John Swartzwelder. Directed by Steven Dean Moore.
- . 2003. "Today, I am a Clown." #FABF01. Originally Aired December 7. Written by Joel H. Cohen. Directed by Nancy Kruse.
- . 2003. "'Tis the Fifteenth Season." #FABF02. Original Airdate December 14. Written by Michael Price. Directed by Steven Dean Moore.
- . 2004. "I-(Annoyed Grunt)-Bot." #FABF04. Original Airdate January 11. Written by Allen Glazier and Dan Greaney. Directed by Lauren MacMullan.
- . 2004. "Milhouse Doesn't Live Here Anymore." #FABF07. Original Airdate February 15. Written by David Chambers and Julie Chambers. Directed by Matthew Nastuk.
- . 2004. "Smart and Smarter." #FABF09. Originally Aired February 22. Written by Carolyn Omine. Directed by Steven Dean Moore.
- . 2004. "Co-Dependents Day." #FABF10. Original Airdate March 21. Written by Matt Warburton. Directed by Bob Anderson.
- . 2004. "Catch 'Em if You Can." #FABF14. Original Airdate April 25. Written by Ian Maxtone-Graham. Directed by Matthew Nastuk.
- . 2004. "Simple Simpson." #FABF15. Original Airdate May 2. Written by Daniel Chun and Jon Vitti. Directed by Jim Reardon.
- . 2004. "The Way We Weren't." #FABF13. Original Airdate May 9. Written by J. Stewart Burns. Directed by Mike B. Anderson.
- . 2004. "Treehouse of Horror XV." #FABF23. Original Airdate November 7. Written by Bill Odenkirk. Directed by David Silverman.
- . 2004. "All's Fair in Oven War." #FABF20. Original Airdate November 14. Written by Matt Selman. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 2004. "She Used to be My Girl." #FABF22. Original Airdate December 5. Written by Tim Long. Directed by Matthew Nastuk.
- . 2004. "Fat Man and Little Boy." #FABF21. Original Airdate December 12. Written by Joel H. Cohen. Directed by Mike B. Anderson.

- . 2005. "Midnight RX." #FABF16. Original Airdate January 16. Written by Marc Wilmore. Directed by Nancy Kruse.
- . 2005. "Treehouse of Horror XVI." #GABF17. Originally Aired November 6. Written by Marc Wilmore. Directed by David Silverman.
- . 2005. "Homer and Ned's Hail Mary Pass." #GABF02. Original Airdate February 6. Written by Tim Long. Directed by Steven Dean Moore.
- . 2005. "Goo Goo Gai Pan." #GABF06. Original Airdate March 13. Written by Lawrence Talbot. Directed by Lance Kramer.
- . 2005. "There's Something About Marrying." #GABF04. Original Airdate February 20. Written by J. Stewart Burns. Directed by Nancy Kruse.
- . 2005. "Home Away from Homer." #GABF15. Originally Aired May 15. Written by Joel H. Cohen. Directed by Bob Anderson.
- . 2005. "The Father, the Son, and the Holy Guest Star." #GABF09. Original Airdate May 15. Written by Matt Warburton. Directed by Michael Polcino.
- . 2005. "The Girl Who Slept Too Little." #GABF16. Original Airdate September 18. Written by John Frink. Directed by Raymond S. Persi.
- . 2006. "Bart Has Two Mommies." #HABF07. Originally Aired March 16. Written by Dana Gould. Directed by Michael Marcantel.
- . 2006. "Kiss, Kiss, Bangalore." #HABF10. Originally Aired April 9. Written by Dan Castellaneta and Deb Lacusta. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 2006. "The Monkey Suit." #HABF14. Original Airdate May 14. Written by J. Stewart Burns. Directed by Raymond S. Persi.
- . 2007. "Little Big Girl." #JABF04. Original Airdate February 11, 2007. Written by Don Payne. Directed by Raymond S. Persi.
- . 2007. "You Kent Always Say What You Want." #JABF15. Originally Aired May 20. Written by Tim Long. Directed by Matthew Nastuk.
- . 2007. "He Loves to Fly and He D'ohs." #JABF20. Original Airdate September 23. Written by Joel H. Cohen. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 2007. "Treehouse of Horror XVIII." #JABF16. Original Airdate November 4. Written by Marc Wilmore. Directed by Chuck Sheetz.
- . 2008. "E. Pluribus Wiggum." #KABF03. Original Airdate January 6. Written by Michael Price. Directed by Michael Polcino.

- . 2008. "The DeBarted." #KABF06. Original Airdate March 2. Written by Joel H. Cohen. Directed by Matthew Nastuk.
- . 2008. "Smoke on the Daughter." #KABF08. Originally Aired March 30. Written by Billy Kimball. Directed by Lance Kramer.
- . 2008. "Mona Leaves-a." #KABF12. Originally Aired May 8. Written by Joel H. Cohen. Directed by Mike B. Anderson and Ralph Sosa.
- . 2008. "Sex, Pies, and Idiot Scrapes." #KABF17. Original Airdate September 28. Written by Kevin Curran. Directed by Lance Kramer.
- . 2008. "Treehouse of Horror XIX." #KABF16. Original Airdate November 2. Written by Matt Warburton. Directed by Bob Anderson.
- . 2008. "Mypods and Boomsticks." #KABF20. Original Airdate November 30. Written by Marc Willmore. Directed by Steven Dean Moore.
- . 2009. "No Loan Again, Naturally." #LABF03. Originally Aired March 8. Written by Jeff Westbrook. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 2009. "Gone Maggie Gone." #LABF04. Original Airdate March 15. Written by Ian Maxtone-Graham and Billy Kimball. Directed by Chris Clements.
- . 2009. "Bart Gets a Z." #LABF15. Original Airdate October 4. Written by Matt Selman. Directed by Mark Kirkland.
- . 2009. "Rednecks and Broomsticks." #LABF19. Original Airdate November 29. Written by Kevin Curran. Directed by Bob Anderson and Rob Oliver.
- . 2010. "Once Upon a Time in Springfield." #LABF20. Originally Aired January 10, 2010. Written by Stephanie Gillis. Directed by Matthew Nastuk.
- . 2010. "Boy Meets Curl." #MABF05. Original Airdate February 14. Written by Rob LaZebnik. Directed by Chuck Sheetz.
- . 2010. "The Greatest Story Ever D'Ohed." #MABF10. Originally Aired March 28. Written by Kevin Curran. Directed by Michael Polcino.
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