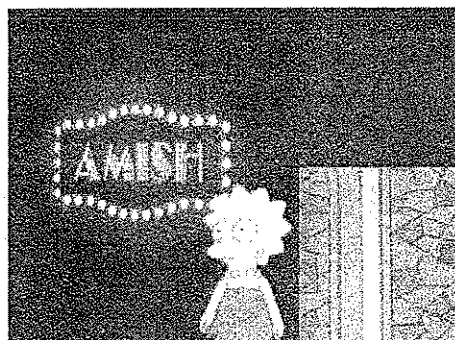
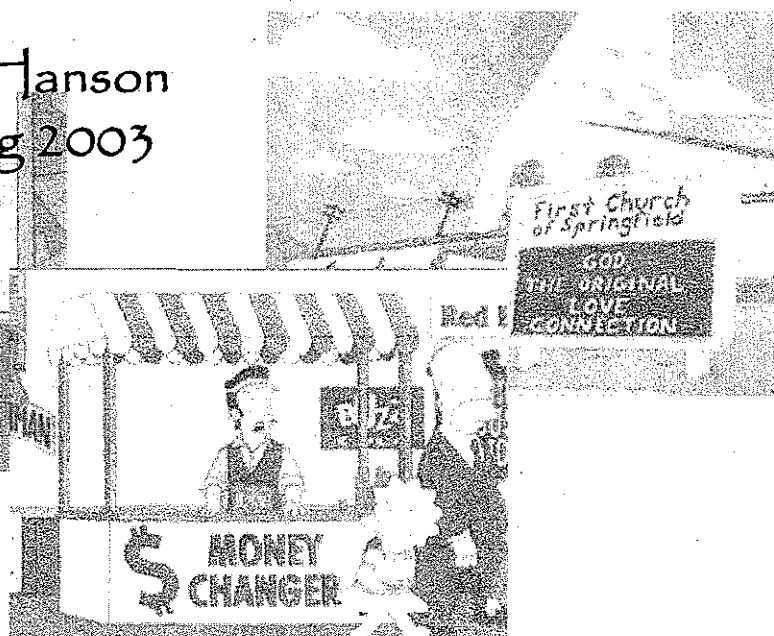
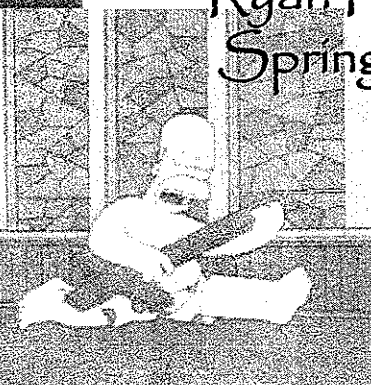


What's up with Ned? And Why Lisa Left: What *The Simpsons* has to say about Christianity in America



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READERS NOTE

Since this thesis analysis The Simpsons, and all readers may not be familiar with the program, attached to the back of this portfolio is a video CD ROM which includes the following episodes. Almost all of these episodes are all referenced within the thesis itself, and if helpful feel free to watch the episodes/scenes referenced either for further understanding or just for fun. Enjoy!

Episodes:

BART SELLS HIS SOUL
BROTHER CAN YOU SPARE TWO DIMES
FAITH OFF
HALLOWEEN VII (TREEHOUSE OF HORROR VII)
HOMER THE HERETIC
HOMER VS. LISA AND THE 8TH COMMANDMENT
I'M GOING TO PRAISELAND
IN MARGE WE TRUST
LISA THE SKEPTIC
LITTLE BIG MOM
MISSIONARY IMPOSSIBLE
PRAY ANYTHING (EDITED)
SHE OF LITTLE FAITH
SIMPSONS BIBLE STORIES
SUNDAY, CRUDDY SUNDAY
THE JOY OF SECT
THE TELLTALE HEAD
TREEHOUSE OF HORROR X
WHEN FLANDERS FAILED

*Every time I look at you, I don't understand
Why you let the things you did get so out of hand
You'd have managed better if you'd had it planned
Now why'd you choose such a backward time
and such a strange land?
If you'd come today, you could have reached the whole nation
Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.¹*

*Spoken by Judas, to Jesus
Jesus Christ Superstar*

What an interesting question. In our fast-paced, stress-filled lives, we are consistently being bombarded by an incredible amount of information and stimuli. The vast majority of this input is a direct result of a mass communications system that grows stronger by the mille-second, instantly connecting the whole world to itself and back again. Within minutes of any event, it can be transmitted via the web, satellite, or cable news to television screens and computers across the country and the globe, instantly informing us of what is happening. Nothing is beyond the reach of our need to know – no place on earth is out of bounds for the media industry.

Think about what would have happened if this system would have been in place a little over 2,000 years ago when a man from Jerusalem was crucified by the Romans. Or if instead of 2,000 years ago, if Jesus Christ marched into Washington DC, or London, or Jerusalem today speaking out in revolt against the current state of affairs, being turned over at the hands of friends, and crucified for the crime. Can you even begin to imagine what sort of press would be there? Think of the headlines in newspapers, and the tag lines running across the bottoms of television screens. And think of the millions

¹ Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Texts from <http://www.elte.hu/~pici/webber/jesusch.htm#20> (24 February 2003).

of dollars that would be spent by a single station to get the sole broadcast rights to his death on a cross.

We live in a world pervaded by media. Media, specifically television is perhaps the most powerful force in the world today. Not only does it keep us informed, up to date, and entertained, but it has direct access into our own homes, and right into our living rooms and bedrooms. With the massive proliferation of cable channels and satellite technology possibilities, the options for television viewing seem endless. In a world that appears as chaotic as ours, at least television offers us a place to retreat and a place where we control what is happening, all with a click of remote.

Religion in America has had a long and played out history, and is no exception to the powers of T.V. Indeed, considering that religion is a key component of American culture, at least in a very basic way, as it served our puritan ancestors who set up this country about two hundred and twenty-seven years ago, then religion will invariably play into the shows on television. But just what sort of representation of religion, specifically Christianity, makes it onto television? Who and what are portrayed and how? How indeed does the business of television affect the messages of religion and Christianity that enter our living rooms via the box in the corner?

This paper will examine the way Christianity is portrayed on television, though an analysis of the television program *The Simpsons*. *The Simpsons*, which recently celebrated its 300th episode, has become an American cultural icon over the course of the last fourteen years. As a critic of contemporary American culture, *The Simpsons* appears to have the freedom to examine everything, holding nothing sacred, and bring under the lens of scrutiny.

The Simpsons is one show on television that invests a significant amount of time to the topic of religion. The cast of *The Simpsons* attends church regularly. Religious topics and themes regularly enter into the conversation at home or elsewhere in the town of Springfield. It is a show that is not afraid to have multiple faiths represented, namely Christianity, Judaism, Hindu, and Buddhist characters. Similarly, the Reverend Lovejoy, the Simpson's church pastor, plays a regular role on the show as does the Evangelical neighbor Ned Flanders. *The Simpsons* has also committed several entire episodes to a specific religious themes or issues (commercialization of organized religion, the 8th Commandment, Revivalist ministry). As the Simpson family, who live in Springfield USA, are supposed to be representative of the everyday American family, examining religion on television through their lens proves not only interesting but enlightening as well. Seen through the lens of media/television theory, *The Simpsons'* representation of Christianity in America is at once conventional and subversive.

Chapter 1

" THE ANSWER TO LIFE'S PROBLEMS AREN'T AT THE BOTTOM OF A BOTTLE,
THEY'RE ON TV!"²

TELEVISION, MESSAGES AND MEANING, AND *THE SIMPSONS*

Most of the work written thus far about *The Simpsons* has been from the viewpoint of either fans or critics. While some of the critics do watch, many have actually seen the show, but they are invested in issues regarding the state of society and the influence of television. With regard to religion, criticism comes from those who represent religion and religious faith and find themselves in a cultural landscape where that institution appears threatened by television entertainment and the general decline in religious/church interest.³

On the other hand, praise for the show comes from both fans who take it upon themselves to respond to such criticisms and authors who stumble across the show one day while watching television and discover merit in it, as is the case with Mark I. Pinsky's work, *The Gospel According to The Simpsons*. Whether praise or criticism is the point, all of this work is concerned chiefly with the message of the show. These authors want to argue for or against the depiction of certain institutions and ideologies

² "There's No Disgrace Like Home," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Al Jean and Mike Reiss, dir. by Gregg Vanzo and Kent Butterworth, Fox: 28 January, 1990.

³ The most famous critique came from President George Bush in a speech to the National Religious Broadcasters in 1992, in which he said "We need a nation closer to the Walton's than the Simpsons." The commentary was followed by his wife, Barbara Bush who stated, "*The Simpsons* is the dumbest thing I ever saw." Mark I. Pinsky, *The Gospel According to The Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of the World's Most Animated Family* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 5. See Also: Lisle Dalton, Eric Michael Mazur, and Monica Siems, "Homer the Heretic and Charlie Church: Parody Piety and Pluralism in *The Simpsons*," in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 233. The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights has been known to protest the show, specifically references to the Catholic faith or traditions, often without necessarily seeing the show. Mark I. Pinsky, "The Gospel According to Homer," *The Simpson Archive*, 15 August 1999, www.snpp.com/other/articles/gospelhomer.html (7 March 2003); Howard Rosenberg, "Fox Does Have Standards—and Double Standards," *The Simpson Archive*, 2 June 1999, www.snpp.com/other/articles/foxstandards.html (7 March 2003).

(including religion, politics, the nuclear family, etc.) as seen through the satirical humor of an animated TV family. Because the show is so popular, and has maintained popularity over such a long time and because it regularly reflects on the nature of humanity, providing a satirical look at American culture, the show is one worth investigating.⁴

This paper is concerned with the message of *The Simpsons*, in particular as it concerns Christianity in America. This paper differs from previous writings in that it begins with the show itself, and, more important, the medium through which the show is transmitted; the television. Using theories of popular culture and of television, we will examine how television programs such as *The Simpsons* creates and validates cultural meaning that is communicated to its audience. By thinking about the important role of audiences and animation, we will gain a framework through which to think about the meaning and messages of the show. We will ask questions as to what the structure of the show is which allows it to make statements, poke fun at, support and critique Christianity in America. What assumptions that are built into the show enable it to succeed as a television program for an audience, and how do those assumptions affect the show's depiction of Christianity? What role do the characters play in creating meaning or presenting religious themes? *The Simpsons* is not merely a program created by someone for someone else's viewing and entertainment pleasure. The show is itself involved in the creation of cultural meaning and, as this paper attempts to demonstrate, in the creation of an understanding of Christianity.

⁴ In its 12th year (2000-2001) the show still averaged 14.7 million viewers per episode, according to the Nielsen ratings. Pinsky, *The Gospel according to The Simpsons*, 2-3.

Television plays a significant role in everyday life. Americans spend more time watching television than engaging in all other leisure activities combined.⁵ One study of television in America noted:

Today, around the world, 3.5 billion hours of television will be devoted to watching television. But nowhere is television such an integral part of everyday life as in the United States. Ninety-two million homes in the U.S. have at least one TV set (98 per cent of the population). ... Those sets are on for more than seven hours every day. Between seven and eleven p.m., Americans of every demographic, social, and economic group are spending most of their time in a place where a television set is playing.⁶

Considering the sheer number of television sets and hours consumed by watching in this country, it is safe to say that television is America's prime source for both entertainment and information. While we may not all be watching all of the time, just having the television set on means it is providing at least background noise most of the time. Television has become such an integral part of our society that we seldom question its existence, importance, or the messages it transmits. Television just exists, a box providing us with our daily dose of entertaining enjoyment, informational learning, fast-paced visual stimulus, constant sound, a conversation, even escape. Moreover, television is a key topic of conversation, anywhere, anytime. Television offers us what we would like to think is "a window to the world."⁷ It has made far-off places - including outer space and the bottom of the ocean - a 'reality' in our living rooms. In many ways, television itself is our world: it is the way through which we come to know the world around us, information delivered twenty-four hours a day for our viewing convenience.

⁵ Nicholas Abercrombie, *Television and Society* (Cambridge, UK: Policy Press, 1996), 3. Abercrombie's text is a textbook introduction to the theories of television/media studies. Where appropriate, in this paper, the name of the individual associated with a particular theory will also be cited along with the Abercrombie text reference.

⁶ Abercrombie, 3 ff. Based on research by R. Allen (1992).

⁷ Abercrombie, 27.

Yet that box in the corner is not as simple as that. It is not a window to the world, because the world is not on the other side of the glass screen. On the other side of the screen are the shows we like to watch, and behind them are the producers, directors, actors, writers, and others who make these programs. Behind these individuals is a much larger industry of studios and advertisers who make and sell us our entertainment and our information. Behind the industry is our society of audience members who accept and uphold certain cultural truths, such as democracy or freedom, and cultural norms, such as whiteness, heterosexuality, the nuclear family, and Christianity (Protestantism).

These cultural norms form the subliminal basis for the television shows we 'see' reflected in the screen. But the television screen is hardly transparent: it is more like a one-way fun-house mirror, a mirror in which we can see ourselves - it is but a distorted image.⁸ While the world of television bears a striking resemblance to our own, it certainly isn't our own.

IMAGE, CHARACTERS, AND AUDIENCE

Television is primarily an image-based medium. This simply means that the messages broadcast on television, while they may or may not include a sound component, are mainly visual. Images tell stories, entertain, and inform at high-speed. Reliance on visual cues means that there are some things that cannot be broadcast on television without necessitating a dramatic change to format.

Because of its reliance on the visual, characters are central to television. Television especially likes characters who are individuals and individuals who can be characters. There isn't room on television for just anyone. Extremists individuals and

⁸ Jon Horowitz make a similar argument in his essay "Mmm ... Television," The Simpson Archive, 23 December, 1999, <<http://www.snpp.com/other/papers/jh.paper.html>> (April 20, 2003), Par. 18.

individuals with strong personalities, people who enjoy conflict, and persons who are not 'average', all make good characters. Characters are especially successful when they represent stereotypes, because stereotypes are easy to identify quickly, and audience members tend to be familiar with stock character types, so that a television program will not have to waste much time introducing an audience to its characters.

Individuals and characters on television can represent some ideals or ideology, but in general, ideas and ideologies do not play well on television.⁹ Television does not broadcast social concerns very well, because it is difficult to represent social problems in television images. In place of large social concerns, television prefers to broadcast an individuals with incredible stories. The face of homelessness or AIDS on television is an individual's face, not a collective one. At the same time, ideologies such as religion or politics do not play well on TV either. God is not a very good character because God is not a character at all.¹⁰ It is tough to depict what is, on the one hand, an idea with no known physicality, and on the other hand, something so significant to such a large number of people that no producer of television, dares alienate them.

This leads to the third point, audience. Television needs more than anything to attract an audience: the larger, the better.¹¹ One way in which television attracts large audiences is through its use of a unique is its domestic style.¹² Television plays such a significant role in our everyday lives precisely because it comes to us chiefly in our own homes. While this access does offer us, the viewers the control over what is viewed and when to turn TV off, television, nevertheless, represents an unprecedented form of mass

⁹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 123.

¹⁰ Postman, 122.

¹¹ Postman, 121.

¹² Abercrombie, 17.

access for the purpose of communication. No other medium comes close to being able to reach as large an audience as instantaneously as television can. Because it exists within our homes, the majority of television is circulates around the activities of the home and the family, television's primary audience.¹³ Television programs almost always involve a family as the central character(s), and the exploits this family/these family members find themselves in.

Since audience members cannot be counted on to be present for every show, and because television programming is so fragmented, any given episode of any given program cannot be all that significant.¹⁴ Television programs count on audience support, and if audience members are to be dedicated to a show, they must be able to step in and out and not miss much. Shows are usually repeated in reruns, and crucial information is almost always repeated the next week. Shows instead will feature characters and their 'monumental' mini-issues of the week. This week's episode is likely to revolve around an exploit, or dilemma, that will be resolved by the end of the show. Yet, each episode cannot resolve the ongoing plot conflicts of the show's narrative or the individual character failing in any way since these characters will be back next week to go through another mini-dilemma.¹⁵

This consistency over episodes helps to maintain the illusion of reality. However, the reality of society and reality as presented on television are not one and the same. Instead, our cultural understanding of the world is a sort of co-creation, a dialectic between culture and TV. From the beginning, the reality of the world television presents is not reality at all but a simulation of it at best. Outside of television, we, the audience,

¹³ Abercrombie, 18.

¹⁴ Abercrombie, 23-24.

¹⁵ Abercrombie, 24.

exist. Television turns our 'reality' into a sort of hyper-reality, loosely based on the cultural conventions we subscribe too. Television represents these generic, underlying beliefs in order to reflect the societal audience watching. This distorted reflection television is then often embodied by the society as cultural convention, reflecting culture as seen on TV. Television takes this image and recreates it to be re-reflected back on television. In this ebb and flow in between television and the audience, cultural conventions are created, with both sides simultaneously creating and reflecting what we think is our reality.

Even though cultural meaning is created by both television and the audience, television holds one specific advantage over the audience's individual experience. Individual audience members have different individual experiences. These experiences may challenge or directly contradict certain truths held by society. However, all audience members are united in television; television is a shared experience for the audience despite their individual differences. To the degree television is a shared experience, the cultural meaning and truths of television are shared across the diverse audience as well. Television truths becomes cultural truths through their redundancy; their representation on television, in place of other alternative truths. This redundancy helps to reinforce and validate these values and beliefs as true in the minds of the audience watching.

While the depiction of reality on television was never real in the first place, TV desires strongly that its audience might believe it is. Television does this by convincing us that it is simply a glass screen through which we may see the world. The images and characters we come to identify with on television and the cultural patterns of belief they uphold, represent and reinforce in us, the audience, those same conventions as real. This

reality on television appears all the more real by the structuring of coherent, linear plots and characters, always operating in the present, and hiding the "production process" from the eyes of the audience members watching.¹⁶ To the extent that television shows make sense to us, the illusion of reality can exist. We can really believe the characters we see on television. We can identify with them and their problems, understand their situation, and have an emotional moment or connection. Since we are unaware of the production process of our favorite programs, they seem even more 'real.'

Key to television's ability to creation of meaning is television's use of ideology. Television creates particular meanings that it broadcasts through the visual images, symbols, and events that support some cultural truths and leave out others. Ideologies typically concern power, and the dynamics between the voices heard over those not heard. Television will almost always represent the voices of those who support the accepted cultural conventions, over the voices of the minority or alternative position. In doing so, television is "interpolating individuals into specific subject positions" who will, by their constitution as subjects, come to support the ideology produced.¹⁷ Furthermore, television is responsible for the creation of many cultural symbols though its reflecting image of its audience:

Today television is the dominant producer of cultural symbolism. Its imagery is prescriptive as well as descriptive, and not only pictures what is happening in society, but also shows how one adjusts to the social order...The endless repetition of the same images produces a television world where the conventional is the norm and conformity the rule.¹⁸

¹⁶ Abercrombie, 26-27.

¹⁷ John Storey, *Cultural Studies & the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 20.

¹⁸ D. Kellner, "TV, Ideology, and Emancipatory Popular Culture," (1987). Cited in Abercrombie, 31.

Television creates the conventional view of the world by limiting the possible realities it presents and thereby limiting the viewer's perspective on the world. In one important sense, this is necessary since television cannot possibly present a multitude of possibilities all at once. If it did, programming would be incoherent.

The issue is, however, that television always presents the same version of reality, the same "preferred reading ...that fits in with the most powerful, dominant ways of looking at the world..."¹⁹ In doing this, this version of reality becomes accepted by society as the norm, while all others are rejected. The "*naturalizing effect*" of television is "reinforced by its visual character, which convinces us that we are looking directly at the world with our own eyes," when we watch TV.²⁰ But we forget that not any image or event or personality is broadcast on television; our view is limited by the reality television offers us.²¹ Therefore, television viewers find themselves faced with the choice to "internalize the ideologies" they see, to "negotiate" with them, or to reject them.²² Rejection often proves much more difficult than acceptance or negotiation, primarily because of the naturalizing effect of television and the substantial role it plays in helping to create our collective identity and ideologies. Furthermore, many of the images are based upon assumptions regarding the content of programs (about families, religion, minority others etc.) that are never in turn questioned.²³ Since we witness these cultural conventions on television and come to see them as valid, we then hold these assumptions as part of our reality outside of television and never question them. The

¹⁹ Abercrombie, 32.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Storey, 23.

²³ Abercrombie, 32.

combination of these assumptions and of the preferred understanding of reality help to create the meaning and realism television programs are after:

Realism...is a reactionary mode of representation that promotes and naturalizes the dominant ideology. It works by making everything appear 'realistic' and 'realisticness' is the process by which ideology is made to appear a product of reality or nature, and not of a specific society or culture... The conventions of realism have developed in order to disguise the constructed ness of the 'reality' [television] offers...Grounding ideology in reality is a way of making it appear unchallengeable and unchangeable...²⁴

But what happens to this sense of "reality" when the images on television are not realistic, but instead animated. Animation has its own effects on the representations of characters, images, and cultural conventions. It also must somehow negotiate the issue of reality. In the next chapter we will consider these issues, particularly as they relate to *The Simpsons*.

²⁴ J. Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987). Cited in Abercrombie, 30.

Chapter 2

"KIDS ARE YOU HUGGING THE TV?"²⁵ THE EFFECTS OF ANIMATION

The Simpsons is an animated cartoon. As one of the only prime-time animated series on television, the attribute of animation affects the features of television already discussed, including image, characters, and the creation of meaning, and distinguishes *The Simpsons* from other prime-time network situation comedies.

The Simpsons, the brainchild of Matt Groening, began as a series of 30-second animated shorts shown regularly on *The Tracy Ullman Show*.²⁶ The first full-length episode debuted in 1989 as a Christmas special and has become a regular success story for Fox Television, helping to make Fox a top-four network station.²⁷

The program revolves around the exploits of the Simpson family, a working class American family who reside in a (stereo)typical American, two-story house painted bright pink, with curtains, a backyard, a two-car garage, a cat, and a dog. The house is located on Evergreen Terrace in the town of Springfield USA. The family consists of five members:

Father—Homer is bald and overweight, with a weakness for beer, pork chops, television, and donuts. He is employed as a safety inspector at the local nuclear power plant, hangs out at Moe's Tavern (local bar). He is usually dressed in blue pants and a white polo shirt.

Mother—Marge is a long-suffering, stay-at-home mom with a towering beehive of blue hair. She has held a number of one-episode jobs throughout the seasons. Marge is plagued with guilt over just about everything, specifically moral obligations, keeping her family together, and making something out of her life. She wears a green dress, string of pearls, and red shoes, no matter what she is doing.

²⁵ "Homer Bad Man," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Greg Daniels, dir. by Jeff Lynch, Fox: 27 November 1994.

²⁶ Jeff Shalda, "Religion in The Simpsons," *The Simpson Archive*, 24 November 2000, www.snpp.com/other/papers/jshpaper.html (7 March 2003).

²⁷ Ibid.; Rosenberg, "Fox Does Have Standards..."

Son—Bart (an anagram for “brat”) is a ten-year-old with attitude. He is known for being a kid who says whatever is on his mind and is always getting into trouble. He is a consistent source of stress for his mother, teachers, principal, minister, and Sunday school teacher

Daughter—Lisa is a gifted student, the brightest member of the Simpson family, and always environmentally and socially concerned. A vegetarian and a Buddhist, Lisa is often the initiator of intellectual and philosophical discussions of moral dilemmas. She is smart, and she knows it.

Daughter—Maggie, is still a baby, does not speak (she did say one word in one show in 14 years) and always has her pacifier handy.

Occasionally, Homer forgets that she exists, thinking he only has two children.²⁸

Most of the action on the program occurs within the Simpson family or between the family and the other residents of Springfield, and occasionally, the residents of the rival neighbor town, Shelbyville. Several places in Springfield - the local elementary school, which both Bart and Lisa attend, the Kwik-e-Mart, the nuclear power plant, Moe’s Tavern, the local hospital, and the First Church of Springfield – are frequent action locations. Most of the action, however, takes place where the family spends most of its time: within the Simpson home and in their yard.

As an animated program, *The Simpsons* operates in a world distinct from the world in which the audience operates. Most prime-time situation-comedies are about working-middle-class American families, and are set in a world which does not look all that different from the audience’s own. *The Simpsons*, on the other hand, deals with the same subject matter, but is set in the world of animation, a cartoon sketch of a place that resembles the viewer’s home. The characters are two-dimensional drawings, rather than three-dimensional human actors acting in a three-dimensional world. This makes the world of *The Simpsons* twice removed from our own; once as a television program, and

²⁸ Descriptions loosely based on descriptions in Pinsky, *The Gospel According to The Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of the World’s Most Animated Family*, 5.; Horowitz, “Mmm...Television.”

again in the animation. The separation affords the program some freedoms with context, texts, and action. At the same time, the distinction creates the challenge for show creators, writers, and animators of trying to bridge the two worlds together.

Since *The Simpsons* is animated, the writers of the show may take certain liberties with characters and situations that 'live-action' programs cannot take. Animated characters can do things that are too risky or physically impossible for human actors. The show's creators are free to put Simpson characters into just about any thinkable situation, or place on earth, in heaven, or in hell. They may also interact with any person, dead or alive. Live-action television programs may not have these freedoms because situations may impossible film, guest characters may be unavailable (or dead), or scenarios can be too expensive to create and depict.

The Simpsons also can take liberties with text, context, and character stereotypes. For example, on *The Simpsons* it is easy to create characters such as Krusty the Clown. Through him, the show may mock the stereotype of wealthy Jewish entertainers. It is also easier to satirize the Catholic Church or the Pope in an animated show than in 'live' action. At least, it is potentially less offensive in the eyes of the audience when this sort of satirical critique occurs in an animated program such as *The Simpsons* than in another prime-time program. Perhaps this is because, while all situation comedies are expected to be funny, the audience may give an animated program more latitude in its characters and situations. Animated characters can say the un-sayable because they are not 'real people' saying it. One of the attractions of Bart Simpson is that he often freely states what most people, if they were in his situation, might be thinking but would not dare say. That 'thoughtless' liberty of speech may be allowable when coming from a cartoon ten-

year-old in a way it would not from a human boy, on or off television. This freedom is one key reason the format of animation lends itself so well to social satire, and why *The Simpsons* has been so successful as a show that critiques society and cultural belief, practice, and institutions.²⁹

Animation also affects the role of 'the character' on the show. All television programs have characters, but animated characters are slightly different. As individual characters, they are more significant than individual characters in live-action television programs. The reason is that there are few animated characters on television, compared to their live counterparts, particularly on the national networks in prime time. Consider live-action situation comedies with the same premise as *The Simpsons* – the exploits of a working-middle-class family - of which there are ten to twelve on television. In these ten to twelve programs, audiences witness ten to twelve different representations of the working-middle-class family narrative. The combination of these multiple images will intergrade into a stereotype for the working-middle-class family. Or, audience members may only see one or two families over others. Their validated stereotype will be different from another viewer who watches two other families.

While, the presentation of these exploits is confined by the limited scope of reality television offers, and all of the shows uphold the same cultural general conventions, within this limited range of possibility, there is still a variety of ten to twelve presentations. There are still ten or twelve different live-action families presented for

²⁹ Just because the program operates as a social satire does not mean it is free from the creation of cultural meaning, or subject to the promotion of the same cultural truths television promotes which were discussed in Chapter 1. Social satire is a delicate process. To do it, *The Simpsons* at once must support the same beliefs, practices, and institutions it is satirizing. We will discuss this dynamic between the promotion and creation of cultural truths and the satirizing of those same truths in detail in Chapter 4.

audience members to interpret. *The Simpsons*, however, is the only animated presentation of the contemporary working-middle-class family and town on television.³⁰ Therefore, each character on *The Simpsons* is the only representation audience members will have access to.

This is especially true for secondary characters, who are often less developed, or are stock (generic) character extras. On *The Simpsons*, the secondary characters, who are the citizens of Springfield, USA, are the sole representatives of their societal role. The Comic Book Guy, who owns the comic book store in Springfield, comes to represent all comic book storeowners. This two-dimensional character offers the audience the stereotype that all comic book store owners are comics-loving, Star Wars enthusiasts, who are overweight nerds that never moved past junior high pubescent sexuality, and who stay up late watching science fiction and playing computer games. Apu Nahasapeemapetilan, who owns the local Kwik-E-Mart, represents all convenience store operators. They are all of East Asian decent, work ungodly hours, sell questionable products, and are often taken advantage of or robbed, and yet still always say in their Middle Eastern accent, "Thank you. Come again." Police Chief Wiggum represents all cops: donut-loving, incompetent 'PIGS' (funny, how he has a nose that resembles a snout).

These characters, like all television characters, hardly exist in the world outside television. Characters on situation comedies are simply supposed to be humorous depictions of the people who live outside of television. They are stereotypes that tend to

³⁰ *The Simpsons* built on the tradition laid down by the animated series *The Flintstones* and (probably) *The Jetsons*. What makes *The Simpsons* unique is that it placed the family in the present instead of in the past or in the future as the other two programs had. Since *The Simpsons* became so popular with its audiences, Fox has created three similar animated series (*King of the Hill*, *The Family Guy*, and *Futurama*).

match audience members' own schemas for how certain people are 'supposed' to be. The representation of these characters on television not only testifies to the schemas held by audience members living in the world television attempts to recreate, but also validates these stereotypes for audience members who are watching and come to recognize and accept them as accurate.

Combine this function of television, which creates these characters, with Simpson characters who are the sole representations on television, and these animated characters become more significant. They are not only characters, but also *caricatures* of people. Caricatures are different because they stand alone, as single representations of a social role or ideology. They are flat (two-dimensional) and funny. Animated characters easily become caricatures because they are larger-than-life representations, or even beyond life, since they are not real, live people. Animation allows the writers and producers of *The Simpsons* to push attributes and characteristics to extremes in order to illustrate a point, ideology, or make a social commentary. As creator, Matt Groening states, "[Simpson characters are] creatures of consumption and envy, laziness and opportunity, stubbornness and redemption. [They are] Just like the rest of us, only exaggerated."³¹ The characters may begin to physically look like the ideologies they represent (ie Police Chief Wiggum, Mayor Quimby, or Power Plant owner and capitalist mogul Montgomery Burns).

Animated secondary characters on *The Simpsons* do not change over episodes, specifically when they serve as the voice of a set of ideological beliefs. While the major secondary characters often represent a 'diversity' of ideologies available in the 'average' American town, this 'diversity' is still constrained by the greater cultural conventions the

³¹ Horowitz, "Mmm...Television," Para. 40.

show promotes. These 'diverse' characters could instead be called 'token' characters. Their diversity is not something engaged, but merely something that is part of each character's biography. For example, Apu is a Hindu, Lisa, a Buddhist, and Krusty the Clown is Jewish because it fits their character stereotype and gives Springfield that hint of diversity that exists in the 'average' American city, or at least on a televised representation of the typical American city.

This distinction between characters and caricatures helps us see how television programs like *The Simpsons* represent ideas (such as politics, business, or Christianity). Take Mayor Quimby, for example. He is the lone politician on *The Simpsons*. He is a large man (symbolic of wealth and privilege) with slicked-back hair, and always with (or in bed with) some beautiful woman. Quimby is in with the mob, and corrupt as his mayoral seal states: "Corruptus in Extremis."³² He is a shameless self-promoter with the tag line "Vote Quimby" always on his lips, even when caught in uncompromising positions and adulterous affairs.³³ Quimby, always surrounded by bodyguards, is a smooth-talking man with a Kennedy-esque voice who always knows just what to say.

This caricature of Quimby, his body, his behavior, his voice, his words, come to embody for us the audience and for the show 'the politician.' To the degree that audience members hold this image, or some semblance of it, in their minds when they think of politicians, the visual representation of the caricature Mayor Quimby on *The Simpsons* informs, modifies, and validates their own 'politician' stereotype. Thus, if the audience

³² "Marge in Chains," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Bill Oakley and Josh Weinstein, dir. by Jim Reardon, Fox: 6 May 1993.

³³ "The Cartridge Family," *The Simpsons*, writ. by John Swartzwelder, dir. by Pete Michels, Fox: 2 November 1997.

identifies with this representation, even if only to laugh at it, it becomes an identifiable symbolic representation for the idea of politics in the minds of the audience.

Cultural conventions embodied in the caricatures of Simpson characters occur time and time again. Let us consider another chief secondary character from the show, Mr. Montgomery Burns. Mr. Burns is the owner of the local nuclear factory. To say he is old is an understatement. He is a wrinkled old man, with a tiny body frame, large head, pointy nose, and a grimacing toothy smile. Mr. Burns cannot do a thing for himself. His assistant Whelen Smithers accompanies Mr. Burns through all his activities, even bathing him and tucking him into bed. Montgomery Burns drives a version of the Model-T around town, lives in a huge estate, and is immensely wealthy.

As a character, Montgomery Burns is more than just a business owner. Mr. Burns represents the epitome of capitalism. He is a greedy, wealthy individual. He will kill, cheat, scam, and lie his way to whatever he wants. Mr. Burns, as head of the town's power plant, also represents consumption. Personally, he always wants and is after more. The connection between consumption and capitalism is embodied by Mr. Burns. He also represents the connection between capitalism and evil. Perhaps it is an editorial comment on behalf of the writers, but on multiple occasions, Mr. Burns is linked to the devil himself.

Mr. Burns is the head of the corporation that is both consuming and destroying the natural resources of the community. His power plant has caused the three-eyed fish in the ponds and river and pet dogs with two heads. Compassion for the workers of his plant is never a concern, as he seldom remembers Homer's name. Nor does he care about the work force's health and safety. Mr. Burns does not seem to love anyone but himself

and his expanding fortune. Mr. Burns is so caught up in the power and wealth of consumption that, in his grandest scheme, he blocks out the sun so that he may have total power, and be the sole provider of all for the people of Springfield.³⁴

The Simpsons presents two public Christian characters. Ned Flanders is Homers next-door neighbor. The loveable evangelical next door is always full of smiles and good cheer. Theologically, Ned works so hard at his Christian devotion, and is so engrossed in the laws of being religiously righteous, that he probably misses the point altogether. Ned is so devote to the love-your-neighbor-philosophy, that he lets Homer borrow anything he needs, even a pen so that Homer can sign the deed of the church over to himself.³⁵ When a flood hits the town, Ned is ready with his own ready made ark: "I've got two of every kind, but only males. I don't want any hanky-panky going on."³⁶ Family fun time at the Flanders' home is Bible trivia. Jeff Shalda, in his essay, "Religion in *The Simpsons*," notes some of Ned's other peculiarities:

[The Flanders] have a satellite dish with over 200 stations locked out (only religious shows are allowed); Ned doesn't have insurance because he considers it a form of gambling; a punishment in the Flanders' house is going to bed without a Bible story; [and just to be on the safe side] Ned's bible collection includes the Aramaic Septuagint, Holy Bible!, Good News Bible, Today's Family Gnostic Bible, The Living Bible, The Vulgate of St. Jerome, Who Begat Whom, and The Bible According to Hoyle among others.³⁷

The Simpsons' other public religious figure is the Reverend Timothy Lovejoy, who's own Bible is borrowed from the town Library. He is a minister with no faith; consistently lost and often when faced with crisis willing to turn towards whatever

³⁴ "Who Shot Mr. Burns? (Part One)," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Bill Oakley & Josh Weinstein, dir. by Jeffrey Lynch, Fox: 21 May 1995.

³⁵ "Pray Anything," *The Simpsons*, Fox: 9 February 2003.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Shalda, "Religion in *The Simpsons*."

promises salvation, be that God, human, devil, or alien. Occasionally he is granted the opportunity to save the day offering his congregation words of hope, but in general, he preaches sermons of shame. Indeed, he would rather be playing with his toy trains than helping out his congregation. Furthermore, Ned often bothers him. On one hand, he is annoyed with Ned's constant striving to be the "best darn Christian" possible. On the other hand, Ned's striving only articulate Lovejoy's own failings, which is not always helpful. Thus, one can only chuckle whenever these two characters interact:

[Ned's home has just been destroyed by a freak hurricane which hit Springfield. Indeed his is the only home even touched by the storm in the whole town.]

Ned: Rev. Lovejoy, with all that's happened to us today, I kinda feel like Job.

Lovejoy: Well, aren't you being a tad melodramatic, uh, Ned? Also, I believe Job was right-handed. *[Ned is left-handed]*

Ned: But Reverend, I need to know, is God punishing me?

Lovejoy: Shooh, 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.³⁸

BRIDGING THE GAP: TWO WORLDS, SHARED BELIEF

While animation offers the ability to create visual representations of ideologies and cultural truths in ways not always possible for live-action programs, animated shows also have the difficult task of creating a connection between the audience and the program. For some animated programs this is not a concern. Saturday morning cartoon animation, Disney cartoons, and *Loony Toons* shorts such as Willey Coyote and the Road Runner tend to be animated shows for the sole purpose of entertainment. While the program may intend to teach a lesson or have some moral meaning attached, in general these bits of animation are simple and funny. *The Simpsons* offers an example of this

³⁸ "Hurricane Neddy," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Steve Young, dir. by Bob Anderson, Fox: 29 December 1996.

type of animated cartoon in *Itchy and Scratchy*. *Itchy and Scratchy* is a cat and mouse
Religion and Politics in America

Prof. Gilbert and Jerry that appears on Bart and Lisa's favorite television program, *The*
4-30-03

Krusty the Clown Show. These violent animated bits have no point other than to make

The White House: Gospel on the Potomac

Bart and Lisa. This *Newsweek* article, written by Kenneth L. Woodward, looks at how religious

faith has affected *Simpson* and presents anything and everything he can get his hands on how

the last two presidents have established a sense of believability with the public. That, yet

Simpson, on the other hand, does not seem to want to offend the *Simpson* and the animated

and into the audience's while Bush's justifying himself to a very personal nature. The article

program to talk about *The Simpsons* in finally yes and how President Bush has been in the show

and the cartoons of this program *Simpson* is in mixed if it does indeed seek other

distinguishing itself from the article talk about how different Bush's creation is to the

and the cartoon identifies with. United to make it and the fact of itself is liberal society and".

reflected religion and culture to the, the origin of this article is particularly interesting that can point itself is to

reflected in the character and the fact of God's line of life of a connection exists, than these

audience. This article is for the same to explain what we have seen of the characters

and the cartoon. Each episode of *Homer*, *Marge*, *Bart* and *Lisa* learn that the end of and its

effects. But how does a cartoon identify itself with the cartoon character? Church and state

can never be separated, that each specific of the cartoon helps to help the cartoon influence

the human world and the *Simpson* world. First, *Simpson* family members themselves are

not just *Homer* and *Lisa* but they are the very main characters through which the audience

only *Simpson* family in the USA, members of the *Simpson* family that did like how the article is made

most directly to identify with them through the fact of *Marge*, *Bart* and *Lisa* eyes that we see or

without the exploits of the episode. Their eyes become our own. To help us in the

Identification process, the writers of *The Simpsons* spend the greatest amount of time Religion and Politics in America
Developing these family members. Their moral and philosophical dilemmas make up the 4-30-03

majority of the action in each episode. Their beliefs, worldviews, and lives are depicted Administration Appeals for 'Under God'
to 'look' very much like our own even though they are just cartoon characters.

This New York Times Article looks at the upcoming Supreme Court

Second, it is clear that not only the lives of Simpson family members resemble establishment case dealing with the words 'under God' in the pledge of allegiance. The our own lives, but also the world in which the Simpson family resides is not all that much Bush administration is pushing for the phrase to be declared constitutional under the different from our own. As with the characters, the show's writers and animators attempt same precedents that acknowledge the religious heritage, foundation and character of to make Springfield is just an animated, funnier version of any town in America. Parents America. The Supreme Court has ruled the pledge of allegiance constitutional twice in Springfield go to work while the children head off to school each day. *The Simpsons* before. The ninth circuit Court of Appeals ruled in a sharply divided decision that the have family friends, eat dinner together, watch television, mow the lawn, go to the words violated the establishment clause.

bathroom and attend church each Sunday. Homer maintains a job, stops by the bar after

This article and topic relate to our discussion on the role of the Supreme Court in work, and 'tries' to be a good father and husband, while Marge is busy at home cleaning church and state matters. I have a feeling that the Supreme Court will rule against the the house, cooking and helping the kids with school projects. Together they have 1954 statute that added the words "under God". Clearly the statute would fail the first attended marital counseling, argued, and gone out on 'dates.' Bart and Lisa play with the prong of the Lemon test: does the law have a secular purpose? The statute was passed as neighbor's kids and do their homework. He tries to be a rebel, fails at school, and wants a way of advancing the notion that America is a God fearing nation, unlike the to be 'in' with the 'bad' boys while she studies hard, plays the saxophone and tries to communists of the Soviet Union.

save the world from all that is unfair and unjust.

I thought this article was pretty straight forward in its presentation of what is

While these activities all seem simple and expected, they are the kind of actions going on with this court case. I would have liked to have seen a distinction made that most television programs often exclude from their subject matter. On most regarding the past precedents however because I am pretty sure that the two previous programs, audience members just assume these things to be true; on *The Simpsons* they times the pledge has come up to the Court it has involved Free Speech, not the actually do them. Perhaps it is the portrayal of these domestic realities of our lives as Establishment Clause.

audience members, which helps *The Simpsons* suspend the disbelief that an animated

series is different from human life.

Third, *The Simpsons* engages its audience into its experience through the show's content as well. The chief subject matter of the show is the subject matter of everyday human life. The issues that come into play for members of the Simpson family are the same issues many audience members potentially find themselves facing. Homer and Marge struggle with temptation to cheat and the stress of trying to make the family and the budget work. Bart and Lisa struggle with morality, peers, and childhood. *The Simpsons* presents these tidbits of American life as a common element shared across the television screen and a 'reality.'

Simultaneously, *The Simpsons* are always discussing popular culture and current issues that are part of the audience's world. The fact that contemporary issues are the topic of conversation among Simpson characters and Springfield residents allows for the possibility that the world of *The Simpsons* and the world of the audience have something in common. If audience members see these characters as involved in the debate or conversation over contemporary issues or popular culture, then perhaps these characters have something to say and the show can create and distribute messages of meaning that are not simply entertainment. The involvement of popular culture icons as animated versions of special guests is significant because these individuals are not only icons for the audience, but they are popular culture icons for Simpson characters as well. These shared dialogues and cultural markers help build the bridge between audience and show.

Fifth, the neighboring town of Shelbyville also functions to help bridge the gap in a similar way. Shelbyville is the rival town, just over a hill from Springfield. Simpson characters find the place odd and almost unbelievable. Shelbyvillians are as unrealistic to Springfield characters as Simpson characters are unrealistic to the audience watching the

show. At the same time, Shelbyville, in some way, seems to represent for the Simpsons the world which is on the other side of their television screen. Just as the audience journeys into Springfield when watching *The Simpsons*, crossing over the hill into Shelbyville is, for Simpsons characters, to enter into another world. In Shelbyville, what is realistic by human standards exists, while in Springfield exists the animated, even though the two may not be any different. As Chief Wiggum commented in one episode:

At a Krusty Burger, Chief Wiggum also babbles as he enjoys a meat-flavored sandwich.

Lou: You know, I went to the McDonald's in Shelbyville on Friday night –

Wiggum: [interrupting] The McWhat?

Lou: Uh, the McDonald's. I, I never heard of it either, but they have over 2,000 locations in this state alone.

Eddie: Must've sprung up overnight

Lou: You know, the funniest thing though; it's the little differences.

Wiggum: Example.

Lou: Well, at McDonald's you can buy a Krusty Burger with cheese, right? But they don't call it a Krusty Burger with cheese.

Wiggum: Get out! Well, what do they call it?

Lou: A Quarter Pounder with cheese.

Wiggum: Quarter Pounder with cheese? Well, I can picture the cheese, but, uh, do they have Krusty partially gelatinated non-dairy gum-based beverages?

Lou: Mm-hm. They call 'em, "shakes."

Eddie: Huh, shakes. You don't know what you're gettin'. -- Don't think you want to know.³⁹

The final and perhaps most ironic feature about the television show *The Simpsons* is its reliance on television. *The Simpsons* is a program about watching television and basing your life upon it.⁴⁰ The television set is really the sixth member of the Simpson family. In almost every episode, there is a scene that takes place with Homer watching

³⁹ "Twenty-Two Short Films about Springfield," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Richard Appel, David S. Cohen, Jonathan Collier, Jennifer Crittenden, Greg Daniels, Brent Forrester, Rachel Pulido, Steve Tompkins, Josh Weinstein, and Matt Groening, dir. By Jim Reardon, Fox: 14 April 1996. Text from: *The Simpson Archive*, <http://www.snpp.com/episodes/3F17.html> (24 March 2003).

⁴⁰ Horowitz, "Mmm...Television," Para. 36.

TV from the couch, or Bart and Lisa plopped down in front of the television watching their favorite show hosted by Krusty the Clown. Television plays as substantial a role in the life of the Simpsons as it does in the lives of its audience members. Television serves as a primary source for conversation and humor within the show. This incorporation of television means that the Simpsons are watching all the same things we are and commenting upon them. It also makes *The Simpsons* a highly self-referential program.

The significance of television culminate in the opening credits of every episode, in which all the members of the Simpson family rush home to plop on the couch and watch their own opening credits.⁴¹ The show is making fun of everyone in the audience who are themselves watching. The illusion that the audience is some sort of voyeur into the lives of the Simpsons is parodied in this scene, as the Simpsons sit down to watch themselves. That is the irony and the point. That is why examining *The Simpsons* from the perspective of television is so necessary.

The show recognizes just how significant television is as a force for the creation, reflection and sharing of cultural stories and meaning. Television has become our primary source for information and entertainment. It is also the place we witness repeatedly and have validated the cultural conventions our society subscribes to. If we rely on television just as much as the Simpson family does, then television may be the chief site for our cultural understanding and we might find ourselves in a similar situation every time our accepted cultural conventions are challenged:

(Homer has been wrongly accused of Sexual Harassment and has found himself the subject of mass media coverage, the topic of every show on every channel and "57 of our

⁴¹ Dalton, "Homer the Heretic and Charlie Church," 236.

live, round-the-clock coverage.” When finally fed up and depressed about how terrible his life has become thanks to television, he turns to his kids:)

Homer: Aw, I need a hug.

[everyone pauses, then hugs him]

How come you guys hesitated?

Lisa: Sorry, Dad, we *do* believe in you, we really do.

Bart: It's just hard not to listen to TV: it's spent so much more time raising us than you have.

Homer: Oh, maybe TV *is* right. *TV's always right!* *[walks upstairs]*

[Bart and Lisa hug the TV]

[from upstairs] Are you hugging the TV?!

Bart+Lisa: No. *[They kiss it]*⁴²

⁴² “Homer Bad Man,” Text from: The Simpson Archive, <http://www.snpp.com/episodes/2F06.html> 24 March 2003. All text citations come from The Simpson Archive. www.snpp.com.

Chapter 3

"GOD BLESS THOSE PAGANS"⁴³ CHRISTIANITY ON *THE SIMPSONS*

The Simpsons has been called one of the most religious shows on television.⁴⁴

While other prime-time network programs may test the waters of religion and faith with the occasional moral dilemma, a minor role for a religious character, the occasional Jesus joke, *The Simpsons* dives right in. Professor John Heeren articulated the significant role of religion on *The Simpsons* in a study presented to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. His findings concluded that "69% of the episodes contained at least one religious reference, and, in 11% the plot centered on a religious issue."⁴⁵

In this chapter we will look at several religious themes associated with Christianity, using the criteria we examined in the previous chapters we will examine how *The Simpsons* treats Christianity through the examples of Christian themes which appear on the show.

THE CHURCH AND WORSHIP

The First Church of Springfield (FCS) is an ordinary Protestant church which serves as a key location within Springfield and place for action on the show. The Church itself for Christianity represents the gathering of believers, together in one place for the act of worship. While the Church is not limited to a particular building, many people often characterize the church as the building in which people gather for worship. For our

⁴³ "So it's come to this: A Simpson Clip Show," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Jon Vitti, dir. by Carlos Baeza, Fox: 1 April, 1993.

⁴⁴ Pinsky, *The Gospel According to the Simpsons*, 8, 11.

⁴⁵ Terry Mattingly, "The Gospel According to The Simpsons," *The Cincinnati Post*, 2000, posted on Beliefnet, www.beliefnet.com/story/55/story_5590.html (7 March, 2003).

purposes, we will limit our description of church in Springfield USA to that of the place and not necessarily the community members who worship there.

The FCS is the largest church in town; almost every character attends worship there. From the outside, the building appears to contain a large sanctuary with vaulted roof and cross on top, and space for a gathering hall or Sunday school classrooms attached to one side. At the entrance to the Church is a marquee board that posts a variety of messages, announcing upcoming activities, or Sunday's sermon. Examples of marquee messages include:

God, the original love connection
2:00 Peterson Wedding, 8:00 Hayride to Heaven
Every Sunday is super Sunday
Loosest Bingo cards in town
Private Wedding, Please worship elsewhere
Evil women in history: from Jezebel to Janet Reno
No shoes, no shorts, no salvation
God welcomes his victims
No synagogue parking
Next Sunday: the miracle of shame
Today's Topic: He Knows What You Did Last Summer
Christ Dyed Eggs For Your Sins
Today's Topic: There's Something About the Virgin Mary
If You Were a Pastor, You'd Be Home Now!⁴⁶

The only inside portions of the church audience members see are the main sanctuary and the Sunday school classroom. The sanctuary contains rows of pews facing an elevated chancel space, containing an altar, pulpit, and flowers. The walls behind the altar and on either side of the pews contain a variety of stain glass windows, some with various biblical scenes. The Sunday school classroom is a basic room, containing a blackboard, rug, toys, and "child-sized" chairs. It resembles strongly an elementary classroom, most specifically a kindergarten or first-grade classroom.

⁴⁶ "Religion on The Simpsons," *The Simpson Archive*, maintained by Bruce Gomes, created by Dave Sweatt, <http://www.snpp.com/guides/religion.html> (26 April 2003).

FCS is not identified as any specific denomination, though it is possibly Lutheran.⁴⁷ The worship services are traditional, with organ-led hymns and sermons by Reverend Thomas Lovejoy that usually are intent on shaming the congregation's failings:

Rev. Lovejoy: Now, today's Christian doesn't think he needs God. He thinks he's got it made. He's got his hi-fi. His boob tube. And his instant pizza-pie.

Homer: Ooh, pizza. [*licks his lips*]⁴⁸

Rev. Lovejoy: Judgment Day is upon us. I warned you the Lord wouldn't stand for your mini-dresses and Beatle boots. But it's not too late to repent your sins and be embraced by the Almighty...⁴⁹

Miss Allbright teaches Sunday school. It is clear that she means well and tries her best, but she is often frustrated by the children's plentiful questions. Some typical scenes from Sunday school illustrate the point:

Miss Allbright: Today's topic will be Hell.

Kids: Ooh.

Bart: All right. I sat through Mercy and I sat through Forgiveness. <Finally> we get to the good stuff.

Miss Allbright: Hell is a terrible place. Maggots are your sheet, worms your blanket, there's a lake of fire burning with sulfur. You'll be tormented day and night for ever and ever. As a matter of fact, if you actually saw hell, you'd be so frightened, you would die.

Bart: [*raises his hand*] Oh, Miss Allbright.

M.A.: Yes, Bart.

Bart: Wouldn't you eventually get used to it, like in a hot tub?

M.A.: No.

⁴⁷ Ned Flanders' doorbell plays "A Mighty Fortress is our God." "Brother, Can You Spare Two Dimes?" *The Simpsons*, writ. by John Swartzwelder, dir. By Rich Moore, Fox: 21 August, 1992. In a Halloween episode Lisa creates a mini-world in a petry dish. Partway through its evolution, Lisa notices someone posting a list on the doors of the town's cathedral and exclaims, "I've created Lutherans!" "Treehouse of Horror VII," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Ken Keeler, Dan Greaney and David S. Cohen, dir. by, Mike B. Anderson, Fox: 27 October 1996. These references may suggest the First Church of Springfield is of Lutheran Heritage.

⁴⁸ Homer vs. Lisa and the Eighth Commandment," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Steve Pepoon, dir. by Rich Moore, Fox. 7 February 1991.

⁴⁹ "Treehouse of Horror X," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Donick Spooky and Tim Long, dir. by Pete Michels, Fox: 31 October 1999.

Bart: *[raises his hand]*

M.A.: Yes, Bart.

Bart: Are there pirates in hell?

M.A.: Yes. Thousands of them.

Bart: *[rubs hands]* Hoo hoo, baby!⁵⁰

In Sunday School, Miss Allbright tries to explain to the kids that animals don't go to heaven. Heaven is for people.

Milhouse: Will there be cavemen in heaven?

M. A.: Certainly not!

Bart: Uh, ma'am? What if you're a really good person, but you get into a really, really bad fight and your leg gets gangrene and it has to be amputated. Will it be waiting for you in heaven?

M. A.: For the last time, Bart, yes!

[A few moments later, Miss Allbright is completely exasperated.]

M. A.: *[very tired]* The ventriloquist goes to heaven, but the dummy doesn't.

Bart: *[raises his hand]* Ooh-ooh-ooh! Me!

M. A.: Bart?

Bart: What about a robot with a human brain?

M. A.: *[at the breaking point]* I don't know! All these questions! Is a little blind faith too much to ask!?!⁵¹

The scenes that take place within FCS would normally be rather mundane and boring on their own. Each service is virtually the same and what happens in church is only to be expected. The humor comes from the instances of the unexpected. For example, one Sunday Bart decides it would be funny to insert a new opening hymn. As the people of Springfield enter church, the following scene takes place:

[On Sunday morning the faithful file into the most holy First Church of Springfield.]

Bart: Hymns, here! I got hymns, here. Get 'em while they're holy. Fresh from God's brain to your mouth. Heh heh heh.

⁵⁰ "Homer vs. Lisa and the Eighth Commandment."

⁵¹ "The Telltale Head," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Al Jean, Mike Reiss, Sam Simon, and Matt Groening, dir. by Rich Moore, Fox: 25 February 1990.

Lovejoy: And now, please rise for our opening hymn, uh... "In the Garden of Eden," by I. Ron Butterfly.

[Mrs. Feesh starts playing]

Everyone: In the garden of Eden, honey,
Don't you know that I lo-ove yo-ou?
In the garden of Eden, baby,
Don't you know that I'll always be tru-ue?
[Bart chuckles]

Homer: [quietly] Hey Marge, remember when we used to make out to this hymn?
[they both chuckle]

A longish organ solo takes place, Mrs. Feesh gradually getting sweatier and more disheveled.

Everyone: "Oh won't you come with me/and take my hand?"

Lovejoy: [takes a closer look at the words and observes] "Wait a minute. This looks like rock and/or roll."

Someone throws a beach ball at him and it bounces off his head. Seventeen minutes later, Mrs. Feesh plays an arpeggio while various members of the audience (er, congregation) hold lit candles above them. She plays the final five notes and collapses onto the organ.⁵²

Despite the boring worship services that more often than not put Homer to sleep, Bart sees potential for church to change.⁵³ One Sunday, he decides to interrupt Reverend Lovejoy during the sermon:

Lovejoy: 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 ...

Bart: I've got two words for this sermon: [makes snoring noises]

Lovejoy: Am I boring you, Bart?

Bart: Well, to be honest, yes.

Lovejoy: Hey, I'm doing the best with the material I have.

Bart: But church can be fun! [parishioners laugh] No, really, it can be a crazy party, with clouds and lasers and miracles.

Homer: And chili fries!

Bart: A real preacher knows how to bring the Bible alive, through music, and dancing, and Tae-Bo! [jumps into the aisle and begins Tae-Bo-ing]
[parishioners cheer]⁵⁴

⁵² "Bart Sells his Soul," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Greg Daniels, dir. by Wesley Archer, Fox: 8 October 1995.

⁵³ "Homer the Heretic," *The Simpsons*, writ. by George Meyer, dir. By Jim Reardon, Fox: 8 October 1992

Bart's change of interest in the church comes from his attendance at a revival meeting earlier in the episode:

Announcer: *[as upbeat music plays in the background]*... for the healing love of Brother Faith!

Faith: Oh, Good Lord! *[audience cheers]* Oh, I feel it in my belly now, Springfield. Unh! Can you feel the power?

Audience: Yes!

Faith: Do you want to be saved?

Audience: Yes!

Faith: Now correct me if I'm incorrect, but was I told it's untrue that people in Springfield have no faith? Was I not misinformed?

[miscellaneous mumbling sounds from the audience] The answer I'm looking for is, "yes."

Audience: Yes!

Faith: *[singing]* Now let's hear it,

For the Holy Spirit.

No need to fear it,

Just revere it.

He works in Heaven,

That's a 24-7. That's right.

Check the Bible! Yeah.

John 2:11. Jump back!

Feel it! Feel it! Whoo!

Bart: Wow, he dances better than Jesus himself!

Bart manages to help Brother Faith work a 'miracle.' Brother Faith tells Bart that he has the power to make miracles happen. After the service, Bart confronts Brother Faith about what really happened:

Bart: Excuse me, Brother Faith? I've gotta know -- how did you *really* get the bucket off my Dad's head?

Faith: Well, I didn't, son. You did. God gave you the power.

Bart: Really? Huh. I would think that He would want to limit my power.

Faith: *[laughs]* Oh, yes, Lord. When I was your age, I was a hellraiser, too. *[holds up Bart's slingshot]* My slingshot was my cross. But I saw the light, and changed my wicked ways.

⁵⁴ "Faith Off," *The Simpsons*, writ by Frank Mula, dir. by Nancy Kruse, Fox: Jan. 16, 2000.

Bart: I think I'll go for the life of sin, followed by a presto-change-o deathbed repentance.

Faith: Wow, that's a good angle. [*contemplates for a second*] But that's not God's angle. Why not spend your life helping people instead? Then you're also covered in case of sudden death.

Bart: Full coverage? Hmmm.

Bart is excited over what he has heard. As a result he stages a revival in his backyard, complete with lasers, lights, and special effects. As Bart's revival gets under way, Milhouse (Bart's best friend) steps onstage to address the sizeable crowd.

Milhouse: Okay, Springfield! How many of you are in horrible pain?

[*crowd cheers*] Then put your souls together for Brother Bart!

[*Bart skateboards into the tent and does a flip onto the stage. He catches the board as it falls from the air*]

Bart: [*holding up skateboard*] Satan, eat my shorts! [*crowd cheers again*]

[*singing*] I was a sinner, a real bad kid. What thou shalt not, I shalt did.

Neighbor's cat I tried to neuter, Took a whiz on the school's computer.

Sherri + Terri [*school friends dressed in choir robes*]: He took a whiz, oh, yes he did.

Bart: But now I changed, you can't deny. Come on up, and testify.

Sherri + Terri: Testify, testify, come on up and testify!

Abe [*Grandpa*]: My hip's misbehavin'. [*Bart knocks his cane away*] Hey!

Sherri + Terri: Testify!

Patty [*Bart's Aunt*]: Got a nicotine cravin'. [*Bart slaps away the cigarettes*]

Sherri + Terri: Testify!

Frink [*Town's person*]: Got a cramp in my glavin'. [*Bart kicks Frink's rump*] Oy!

Bart: Testify!

All: Testify! Testify!

[*Bart dramatically holds up two lit Roman candles, one in each hand. The flames shoot off to his sides*]

By contrast, at the First Church of Springfield, Sunday services are almost entirely empty. This motivates Reverend Lovejoy to try something new.

Lovejoy: Perhaps it's time to fight razzle with dazzle.

[*produces a guitar, and tries to play it, inducing wicked feedback*]

Mi -- Michael row, row, roooow the boat ...

Todd Flanders: Is he killing that guitar, Daddy?

Ned Flanders: Yes, son.

A different experience with worship affected Lisa so much, that she choose to leave the First Church of Springfield and seek a different path.⁵⁵ After Homer accidentally blew up the church, Montgomery Burns offered to rebuild FCS. He brought in contractors and a PR specialist to turn FCS into a profit making business machine. Three weeks later, at the church's "Grand Opening," the audience is treated to see along with congregation members all the church's new offerings.

Upon entering the sanctuary, the Simpson family strolls past the money-changing stand. Bart pauses for a few pictures with his face sticking through a hole in a recreation of the famous "Last Supper" painting. Any congregation can pretend to be Jesus in the scene for a quick photo. The old pews have been removed and replaced by cushy, new, padded seats with cup-holders. On all the free space, up around the sanctuary, ad space has been sold to local businesses. On the pulpit is a revolving sign – more ad space – and the first sermon in the new church is delivered by a local business mascot. This is too much for Lisa, who sulks for a while, before noticing her face on the jumbo "God Cam" television screen hanging above the altar. Under her face is the tag line "Pouting Thomas." Lisa had had enough, and she storms out of church.

The Bible⁵⁶

The Bible's chief role on *The Simpsons* is to help validate arguments. When trying to make a case, the Bible becomes the resource of choice to cite whether or not the passage is correct, or even close.

⁵⁵ "She of Little Faith," *The Simpsons*, Fox: 16 December 2001.

⁵⁶ "Simpsons Bible Stories" is an episode of Old Testament parodies. Please refer to the episode on the attached CD for further examples of how *The Simpsons* use the Bible.

[When Lisa wants to play hockey]

Homer: Lisa, if the Bible has taught us nothing else, and it hasn't, it's that girls should stick to girls sports, such as hot oil wrestling and foxy boxing and such and such.⁵⁷

[When Bart is assumed by the congregation to be stealing from the church collection plate]

Lovejoy: Now, for our offertory reading, Lisa Simpson -- who we'll all be keeping an eye on.

Lisa: I know most of you have already judged my brother guilty without any proof, but doesn't the Bible teach us, "Judge not, lest ye be judged," Reverend?

Lovejoy: [sullen] I think it may be somewhere towards the back.⁵⁸

[While Homer is debating over whether or not to attend church]

Homer: God Himself told me I should seek a new path.

Rev. Lovejoy: [*suspicious*] Oh, really...

Rev. Lovejoy: Homer, I'd like you to remember Matthew 7:26. "A foolish man who built his house on sand."

Homer: And *you* remember... Matthew ... 21:17!

Rev. Lovejoy: "And he left them and went out of the city into Bethany and he lodged there"?

Homer: Yeah... [*regains his nerve*] Think about it!⁵⁹

[While gambling]

Ned: Aw, leave me out of this, Homer. Games of chance are strictly forbidden by Deuteronomy 7.

Homer: Seven, eh?

[Homer places his chips on seven; the ball lands in the seven slot]

Homer: Way to go, Flanders! The Bible's finally pulling its weight. Got any more holy numbers?⁶⁰

⁵⁷ "Lisa on Ice," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Mike Scully, dir. By Bob Anderson, Fox: 13 November 1994.

⁵⁸ "Bart's Girlfriend," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Jonathan Collier, dir. by Susie Dietter, Fox: 6 November 1994.

⁵⁹ "Homer the Heretic."

⁶⁰ "Viva Ned Flanders," *The Simpsons*, writ. by David M. Stern, dir. by Neil Affleck, Fox: 10 January 1999.

Prayer⁶¹

Prayer is something the Simpsons do as necessary. About half the time these prayers are at meal time, or bed time, and when it is Homer praying, they are often quite humorous.

Homer: Good drink... good meat... good God, let's eat!⁶²

Homer: Dear Lord: The gods have been good to me. For the first time in my life, everything is absolutely perfect just the way it is. So here's the deal: You freeze everything the way it is, and I won't ask for anything more. If that is OK, please give me absolutely no sign. 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.⁶³

Homer: Dear Lord, thank You for this microwave bounty, even though we don't deserve it. I mean... our kids are uncontrollable hellions! Pardon my French... but they act like savages! Did You see them at the picnic? Oh, of course You did... You're everywhere, You're omnivorous. Oh Lord! Why did You spite me with this family?⁶⁴

Homer: And Lord, we are especially thankful for nuclear power, the cleanest, safest energy source there is. Except for solar, which is just a pipe dream.⁶⁵

In times of trial or challenge, when there seems to be no other way, Simpson family members will often turn to pray as their last resort. The interesting thing is that at these moments God almost always hears and answers their prayer.

[Bart in fear that he will fail his test prays]

Bart: 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

⁶¹ For more examples, see the clips of the episode "Pray Anything" on the attached CD.

⁶² "Eating Dinner," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Matt Groening, Fox.

⁶³ "And Maggie Makes Three," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Jennifer Crittenden, dir. by Swinton O. Scott III, Fox: 22 January 1995.

⁶⁴ "There's No Disgrace like Home."

⁶⁵ "Bart vs. Thanksgiving," *The Simpsons*, writ. by George Meyer, dir. by David Silverman, Fox: 22 November 1990.

test and be held back. I just need one more day to study, Lord. I need Your help!

Lisa: [watching] Prayer... the last refuge of a scoundrel.

Bart: 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.⁶⁶

[As Bart falls asleep it begins to snow, and school is canceled the next day. Bart struggles but manages to study and get a D- on the exam. Jubilant, he acknowledges that "Part of this D-minus belongs to God."]

[When a terrible hurricane hits Springfield, Marge decides to pray for the safety of her family]

Marge: Dear God, this is Marge Simpson. If you stop this 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...

Lisa: Wait! Listen, everybody.

[sunlight shines and birds chirp]

Lisa: The hurricane's over.

Homer: He fell for it! Way to go, Marge!⁶⁷

[When Bart sells his soul and is unable to get it back]

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

[starts to cry] I hope you can hear this.⁶⁸

[his soul - written on the contract piece of paper - floats down from above. His sister Lisa had bought it back for him]

God

God plays an active role on *The Simpsons*. God is present on the show to members of the Simpson family when they find themselves in times of need. When prayer is offered up, God seems to always respond in some way and immediately.

Several of these examples we have already seen in the section above.

⁶⁶ "Bart Gets an F," *The Simpsons*, writ. by David M. Stern, dir. by David Silverman, Fox. 11 October 1990.

⁶⁷ "Hurricane Neddy."

⁶⁸ "Bart Sells His Soul."

The representation of God as God however, outside of textual references is more limited. God has appear in character three times on the program

In the episode "Simpsons Bible Stories," Homer and Marge act out the roles of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.⁶⁹ In this sequence of scenes, God is played by Ned Flanders (voice) and is represented as a large arm reaching down from the clouds cloaked in Flanders's green sweater. What distinguishes God from his creation is in the fingers; creation has four, God has five. While this episode is the re-telling of bible stories, somewhat more definitive representations of God occur in the episodes "Homer the Heretic," and "Pray Anything."

In "Homer the Heretic," Homer finds himself in bed on Sunday morning, not wanting to go to church.⁷⁰ Marge tries dragging him out of bed, but with no luck. Homer decides to stay home. While he enjoys his time at home, sleeping in, taking a nice hot shower, making his favorite breakfast, watching television and winning a radio contest, the rest of the family finds themselves frozen into a church with no heater and stranded in the church parking lot with a car that will not start. When they finally make it home, Homer announces that he has "been having a wonderful day, and I owe it all to skipping church!" His rationalization attempts for never again returning to church include: "And what if we picked the wrong religion? Every week, we're just making God madder and madder!" and an interaction with his daughter:

Lisa: Why are you dedicating your life to blasphemy?

Homer: Don't worry, sweetheart. If I'm wrong, I'll recant on my deathbed.

⁶⁹ "Simpsons Bible Stories," The Simpsons, writ. by Tim Long, Larry Doyle, and Matt Selman, dir. By Nancy Kruse, Fox: 4 April 1999.

⁷⁰ "Homer the Heretic."

Marge, Reverend Lovejoy and the Flanders all try to get Homer to reconsider, but he declines.

At night, Homer has a dream encounter with God on his living room couch:

God: Thou hast forsaken My Church!

Homer: [*in fear*] Uh, kind-of... b-but...

God: But what!

Homer: 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: [*pause*] Hmm... You've got a point there.

God: You know, sometimes even *I'd* rather be watching football... Does Saint Louis still have a team?

Homer: Naw, they moved to Phoenix.

God: Oh. Right.

[*Homer explains that what bugs him most about church is the sermons. God couldn't agree more.*]

God: That Reverend Lovejoy *really* displeases Me. I think I'll give him a canker sore.

[*Homer explains that he'll just worship God in his own way. God agrees.*]

God: It's a deal." Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to appear in a tortilla in Mexico.⁷¹

As for an understanding of God, the Simpson family, particularly Homer is slightly confused. After his dream, Homer describes God as having "Perfect teeth. Nice smell. A class act, all the way."⁷² In the episode "Pray Anything," the town of Springfield floods in a terrible storm brought about (the audience can assume) by Homers blasphemy. Trying to characterize God after a flood destroys Springfield, Homer states that "God is capable of great wrath and great mercy. But mostly great Wrath!"⁷³ In the very last scene, the camera pans up to heaven where we see God, as an old, white male,

⁷¹ "Homer the Heretic."

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ "Pray Anything."

wearing a white robe and sandals (This is the same characterization as in Homer the Heretic), sitting with the Kentucky Fried Chicken colonel and Buddha sitting at his right hand side. Buddha suggests that the town's people have suffered enough, while God is primarily concerned with the colonel feeding him his popcorn Chicken. God asks the colonel to finally tell him what is in those special spices.

In the episode, "Missionary Impossible," while running away from PBS, to whom he has promised a \$10,000 donation he cannot afford, Homer becomes a missionary in the South Pacific.⁷⁴ In two scenes, Homer tries to explain God and Christianity to the people as he understands it:

[Homer tries to spread God's word by reading from the book of "Puhsalms," and tries to answer the islanders' to questions about religion]

Lisa, Jr. (islander): Amy said that there are lots of religions. Which is the right one?

Homer: Well, not the Unitarians. If that's the one true faith, I'll eat my hat.

Ak: If the Lord is all-powerful, why does He care whether we worship Him or not? Ak just saying.

Homer: Well, Ak, it's because God is powerful, but also insecure, like Barbara Streisand before James Brolin. Oh, he's been a rock.

Ak: Why are you building chapel?

Homer: Because you're all terrible sinners.

Q'Toktok: Since when?

Homer: Since I got here. Now either grab a stone or go to Hell.

[The islanders, eager to avoid an eternity of hellfire and brimstone, pitch in to help. Soon, the chapel is finished.]

Homer: Well, I may not know much about God, but I have to say we built a pretty nice cage for Him.

Jesus

⁷⁴ "Missionary Impossible," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Ron Hauge, dir. by Dean Moore, Fox: 20 February 2000.

One cannot have Christianity without Christ. The heart of the religion is a statement of faith in Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection. On *The Simpsons* however, this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, Jesus or Christ is hardly a topic of discussion at all. For a community of protestant believers, there is a noticeable lacking in the mention or belief in Jesus Christ. Instead, Jesus appears in the show's one-liners:

Rev. Lovejoy: All things are about Jesus, Homer, except this. Your son has been working in a burlesque house.⁷⁵

Homer: Oh, everything's too damned expensive these days. This Bible cost 15 bucks! And talk about a preachy book! Everybody's a sinner! [*Opening to a page*] Except this guy.⁷⁶

Rev Lovejoy: [*While a tank's gun is pointed at the church*] Not the church! Jesus lives there!⁷⁷

[*Lisa, upset over the fact that while Marge is in the hospital Homer and Bart will not help out around the house, convinces the two that they have leprosy but placing a mixture of Oatmeal and green food coloring on their skin while they are asleep. The next morning, the two wake up in horror*]

Bart: Why would God punish a kid? I mean, an American kid?

Bart: At Sunday school, they said the lepers were cured by some bearded dude.

Homer: Jesus?

Bart: Yeah, that sounds right.

Homer: Oh, I think were on the outs with Him. But I know someone who's even holier than Jesus.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ "Bart After Dark," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Richard Appel, dir. by Dominic Polcino, 24 November 1996.

⁷⁶ "Itchy and Scratchy Land," *The Simpsons*, writ. by John Swartzwelder, dir. By Wes Archer, Fox: 2 October 1994.

⁷⁷ "Brother's Little Helper," *The Simpsons*, writ. by George Meyer, dir. by Mark Kirkland, Fox: 3 October 1999.

⁷⁸ "Little Big Mom," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Carolyn Omine, dir. by Mark Kirkland, Fox: 18 May 1999.

When the First church of Springfield is rebuilt after a rocket destroys it a light up Jesus figure modeled after the Las Vegas Strip Cowboy replaces the entrance⁷⁹

“Other” Religions

All other religions on *The Simpsons* are characterized as ‘others.’ While the show suggests that a diversity of faith exists within the town of Springfield, very little dialogue between faiths, or individuals of various faiths about their beliefs take place. The scenario suggests that there is the Christina majority and then the ‘others.’ What is interesting to notice is that many of the comments come from Reverend Timothy Lovejoy, who himself shares a weekly radio program called “Gabbin with God” with the town Rabbi and Priest. Examples of these ‘other’ identifying comments are plentiful:

Bart: Can you give us the rabbi's address?

Rev. Lovejoy: Oh, sure thing. Let me just check my non-Christian rolodex.⁸⁰

Rev. Lovejoy: [*When Marge asks him about the last rites*] That's Catholic, Marge. You might as well ask me to do a voodoo dance.⁸¹

[*His neighbors, each of whose faith he has condemned, rescue Homer from a fire*]

Homer: The Lord is vengeful. [*falls to his knees*] Oh Spiteful One, show me who to smite, and he shall be smoten!

Ned: Homer, God didn't set your house on fire.

Rev. Lovejoy: No, but He *was* working in the hearts of your friends and neighbors when they came to your aid, be they [*points to Ned*] Christian, [*Krusty*] Jew, or [*Apu*] ... miscellaneous.

Apu: Hindu! There *are* 700 million of us.

Rev. Lovejoy: Aw, that's super.

⁷⁹ “She of Little Faith.”

⁸⁰ “Like Father, Like Clown,” *The Simpsons*, writ. by Jay Kogen and Wallace Wolodarsky, dir. by Jeffrey Lynch with Brad Bird, Fox: 24 October 1991.

⁸¹ “Homer Simpson in: ‘Kidney Trouble,’” *The Simpsons*, writ. by John Swartzwelder, dir. by Mike B. Anderson, Fox: 6 December 1999.

Bart: Mom, can we go Catholic so we can get Communion wafers and booze?

Marge: No one is going Catholic, 3 children is enough thank you.⁸²

Homer notes that Apu isn't in church, but Apu corrects him: He has a shrine to Ganeesha in the employee lounge. Homer walks over to the multi-armed elephant,

Homer: Hey, Ganeesha. Wanna peanut?"

Apu: Please do not offer my god a peanut.

Homer: No offense Apu, but when they were handing out religions, you must have been out taking a whiz.⁸³

These examples stand on their own as strong illustrations of the caliber of humor characteristic of *The Simpsons*. They also attest to the significance of religion on the program. Yet, alone, they do not say much without interpretation. Like all texts, television programs can and do operate as texts to be interacted with and interpreted by an audience. It is in the interpretation that meaning is established and found. Now that we have the examples, we will turn to the interpretation of these texts, specifically the ways in which they are subversive plays on Christian tradition, and models of cultural convention upheld.

⁸² "Lisa Gets an 'A,'" *The Simpsons*, writ. by Ian Maxtone-Graham, dir. by Bob Anderson, Fox: 22 November 1998.

⁸³ "Homer the Heretic."

Chapter 4

WATCHING *THE SIMPSONS* WATCHING US WATCHING THEM: CONVENTION, SUBVERSION, AND AUDIENCE

The images of Christianity that we have considered appear first and foremost to be moments of humorous entertainment. This is especially true for audience members who are well versed in religious and theological understanding, with pop culture, and with the show itself. *The Simpsons* truly rewards those who pay attention not only to the show's content but also to the nuances of reference each scene incorporates. Yet, the show does not exist solely to entertain. The attention to detail, the incorporation of referential material on a given topic (religion, politics, pop culture etc.), the self-referential moments, and the goal of connecting the audience with the world of Simpson characters, suggests that more is going on than only entertainment.

SUBVERSION OR CONVENTION?

The often-silly representations of Christianity on *The Simpsons* suggest the show takes a highly critical approach to the religion. Whether the writers employ Lisa's intellectualism to critique the unscientific, thus unsubstantiated, claims of Christianity, or Homer's blatant disregard for symbolic artifacts within the church or 'proper' conduct in religious settings and conversations, the message seems to challenge Christian belief. In many ways, the show's representations appear to be subversive attacks against the institutionalized church, pointing out its failings, problems, or hypocrisy. The audience can read Ned's continual Christian compassion regardless of the situation at hand as silly and stupid, especially when Homer mocks it as such. Reverend Lovejoy's lack of faith and Marge's guilty faith may make the whole institution of Christian belief seem ridiculous. *The Simpsons* may not stand in opposition to the Christian faith, but the show

is quite overt in criticism of human belief, uses/abuses, and (mis) understanding of that same Christian faith. Its challenges, paired with the show's willingness to hold nothing sacred, demonstrates the sort of subversive satire the show uses for many topics, including Christianity.

On the other hand, these same images of Christianity that we have examined suggest a different, alternative meaning. On their surface they appear to challenge Christianity, but their inclusion in the show maintains the establishment of Christianity as a cultural norm. Even though the program makes satirical farces out of religious rites, traditions, and practices, the show nevertheless maintains the normativity of Christianity in America. Every Sunday morning, most of Springfield's residents find a seat in the pews of the First Church of Springfield. God does exist as a real "character" in the lives of Simpson characters. God also acts in the lives of Simpson characters. The Simpsons find themselves in moral, ethical, and religious dilemmas, as do all characters on the show. These characters have religious experiences, both positive and negative ones. Christianity and religion play a role in the identity of characters, whether or not the subject is engaged. Christianity and faith remain an ever-present reality of plot lines, scenes, and jokes throughout the show.

What these images point to is the establishment and maintenance, at least on an unconscious level of what I will call 'conventional Christianity.' *The Simpsons* subscribes to this conventional understanding of Christianity on a very basic level. As is true for most Americans, it assumes that almost everyone in Springfield is Christian. The general beliefs of the town characters and members of the Simpson family represent a kind of generic Christianity. This belief and understanding is not overtly expressed (in most

cases) but lies just under the surface of thought and action. It is maintained unconsciously through the subscription to the following set of values by the characters of the show:

- Sunday School understanding of scripture.
- Ethics based worldview (Good people go to heaven, bad people to hell)
- Church/worship as a social event rather than sacred experience
- Prayer as necessary
- One is "Christian because you are suppose to be"
- Belief in God, but a lack of engagement of God in matters of science, reason, human endeavors except for rhetorical purposes (If God is on your side of an argument it makes your case appear stronger).
- A view of the church, denominational dogma, and God as unchallengeable/unquestionable entity

While these values seem to be most prevalent in the belief systems of members of the Simpson family, even the most devout characters on the show can and do fall into this pattern of belief about God and the role of being a Christian. This can be specifically seen in Ned Flanders's consistent and conscious striving to reach Christian perfection and Reverend Lovejoy's constant feelings of failure in his faith and work.

Both of these situations may resonate strongly with audience members who themselves are Christian. The dilemma over faith, grace, and works has been debated for centuries, and is raised by many Christians at some point in their development. This link between the audience's own personal experience with Christianity and the shows presentation of 'conventional Christianity' support the reason why a conventional interpretation for the representation of Christianity on the show may be the program's intention. This link which can be made between the core underling beliefs of the audience, who in America may subscribe to this mediocre understanding of the religion, and the core unconscious belief system of the Simpsons and their town help to make the connection between audience and program that allows *The Simpsons* to say anything at

all. This is the case not only with religion, but also politics, family/the home, and other cultural norms. This connection, as has already been discussed, is crucial to the show's message creating possibilities, because without it, the show would be only entertainment. If *The Simpsons* had no significant connection with its audience, it would be little more than a children's cartoon.

Does *The Simpsons* provide a subversive message of challenge against institutionalized Christianity and everyone who subscribes to it? Or, does the show help to support and maintain the belief that America is a Christian nation? In some senses, this is a question of audience, which we will discuss shortly. Different audiences are free to interpret the message of the show differently. Critics will tend to take the first view. Fans may be more likely to take the second, especially those who wish to make the case that *The Simpsons* is one of the most religious, most Christian, or most moral shows on television. I would like to suggest that it is not one or the other, but potentially both.

SUBVERSION AND CONVENTION

The relationship between the show's message of conventional Christianity and its moments of subversive satire is rather unique. The two do not operate as a dualism. The conventional view of religion (or any concurrent theme for the program) does not stand opposed to, nor is it mutually exclusive of the satirical subversive images the show presents. Instead, the relationship is dynamic. Convention and subversion work together as a dialectic of interdependent mechanisms that engage each other. Neither the convention, nor the subversion, can stand on its own and succeed. Rather convention establishes an unconscious base of assumption running under the scenes and episodes of the show. This base of understanding is shared between audience and the animated

characters. *The Simpsons* tries to reflect the shared cultural beliefs of the public in this conventional form. Since these beliefs are represented on the show, these cultural values are validated for audience members, mostly because they are the only available option presented. For example, the nuclear family is a traditional American value. Because primarily all representations of family on *The Simpsons* subscribe to this model, the lack of alternative representation validates the value of the nuclear family. More often than not, these simple cultural truths are so obvious that they go unnoticed by the majority of the show's audience.

The American perception of Christianity - the assumption that everyone in America is Christian, and, by default, Protestant - is an example of the validation of conventional Christianity which runs just below the conscious surface of *The Simpsons*. Every Sunday we *do* see nearly everyone in Springfield attending the First Church of Springfield (Protestant). While almost no one would stop to think about these brief scenes, the fact that this is the case supports the existence of Protestant Christianity as an American convention. This base of belief is maintained so that the show may take a subversive satirical look at just such conventional belief. Upon the conventional base that has been so carefully laid that it is not noticed, *The Simpsons* dares to challenge the very values it is validating. In a much more overt and often blatant fashion, Simpson characters break the norm without often knowing it. In their behavior and sharp comments on the veil, which separates the sacred from ourselves, is revealed.

A dissonance forms between the audience's behavior and the behavior of Simpson characters. By recognizing what the Simpson characters do, it is necessary for the audience member watch to think about what they would do in the situation. This

process illuminates the conventions the show itself is based on and trying to subvert. The audience members come to see their beliefs through the subversion of the material by Simpson characters. Through the subversion, the conventions becomes clear.

Let us consider three examples to see how this process works. In the episode "Pray Anything," Homer 'discovers' prayer as a way to solve his dilemmas.⁸⁴ While attending a WNBA game, Ned Flanders is chosen to shoot a basket for \$50,000. With a "Praise the Lord, my seat has scored," Ned heads down to center court. Before taking the shot, Ned prays. Ned makes the basket. When he receives the check, Ned mentions that he is going to donate it to charity – "Bibles for Belgians" – that motivates the team owner to double the amount of the check. Homer finds himself frustrated at Ned's great luck. To add insult to injury (in Homer's eyes), the parking lot attendants offer Ned the opportunity to drive the 'Wiener Mobile' home from the game because his car is inaccessible due to traffic. Homer falls to the ground, upset: "How come all the good things happen to Jesus H. Nice?!"

Later, Homer is on the couch watching television, when a Ken Burns special comes on. Homer feels a strong need to change the channel but cannot find the remote. He recognizes that he could simply get up and change the channel manually, but that would be too much work. So instead, he decides to try Flanders method. Homer prays: "Oh merciful Lord, who has blest mankind with two kinds of clam chowder, help me find the remote." Homer opens his eyes to find the remote sticking out from underneath the couch. Homer grabs the remote and changes the channel, exclaiming "Yes! I got my wish!"

⁸⁴ "Pray Anything."

While this scene may be making a mockery of prayer, it really illustrates underlying assumptions about the nature of prayer. For Homer, a few things appear to be true: 1. There is a God, and 2. God rewards those who pray to God. Praying to God for Homer is very much like asking Santa Claus for presents at Christmas. In finding the remote, God has granted Homer his wish, which verifies Homer's assumptions, since he attributes the find to the pray he offered up. While audience members may laugh at the humorous prayer Homer offers, or how he has missed the point of prayer, for audience members who notice the satire at work, this prayer strikes closer to home. What makes the scene disturbing is that often we find ourselves falling into Homer's line of thought on prayer. We pray for A's on exams and papers, to find a parking spot, to win awards or the lottery, or to win games. Later in the episode Homer remarks, "I thought God only helped professional athletes and Grammy winners. But now I realize he helps schmoes like me too." Through Homer's seemingly irreverent prayer, we as audience members become aware of our own similar behavior and tendency towards a Santa Claus understanding of our communication with God.

The examples of worship that frustrate Lisa to the point of walking away from the Christian faith point to some of the mixed conventional comforts associated with the contemporary church. After Lisa walks out, the rest of the episode represents the combined efforts of Lisa's family and the minister to win her back. Using Christmas, a promised pony, and a candy cane, the family thinks they can win her back to the fold. The whole episode illustrates our general confusion over the meaning of cultural symbols and Christianity's relation to them. At the same time, Lisa finds herself in an interesting position. She is not against her family, God, or the Christian faith necessarily, but its

misuse for profit, and its inability to act in the world consciously to end suffering and exploitation of others. In order to make the congregation comfortable, in Lisa's eyes, the message and role of the church has been neglected. The sad situation is that her dilemma is not that far-fetched a possibility within the contemporary Christian church in America.

There are two other instances of challenge against the church and the commodification of Christianity that can be helpful to our discussion. The first appears in the episode "The Joy of Sect," in which Simpson's writers challenge the distinction of dogmatic, religious tradition.⁸⁵ When a cult (the Movementarians) comes to town and leads most of the First Church of Springfield's believers 'astray,' Reverend Lovejoy offers up a sermon on cults to his nearly empty church:

Rev. Lovejoy: 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 40 times, but first let's pass the collection plate!

In the 300th Anniversary special, the Simpson family finds itself in a sticky situation.⁸⁶ Bart has decided to divorce himself from the family over the fact that Homer spent all of the money Bart earned shooting commercials as a child. Marge is trying to reconcile the situation at the dinner table, where she offers up a new philosophy she wishes the family would start following: "Forgive and Forget." Homer chimes in, mentioning how whenever he is in a dilemma he thinks of his bracelet. Homer holds up a silver-plated WWJD bracelet for the table to see. Lisa agrees, "Yes, what would Jesus do?" Homer exclaims back "Jesus!? I thought it was Geppetto."

All three of these examples point to the delicate balance of belief and behavior in the contemporary Christian church in America. These scenes illustrate our conventional

⁸⁵ "The Joy of Sect," The Simpsons, writ. Steve O'Donnell, dir by Steven Dean Moore, Fox: Feb 8, 1998.

⁸⁶ "The Simpsons 300th Episode," The Simpsons, Fox: 16 February 2003.

understanding of Christianity and adaptations of the Christian message to support our own ways of life. These adaptations affect how we use Christianity to validate and make our lives comfortable without thinking about the cost of our behaviors or at whose expense our choices are made. Our culture of consumption has brought Christianity along with it, producing a hybrid institution of comfort. Comfort hardly seems to be what the life of Jesus or the biblical texts testify to. Christianity is not supposed to make the comfortable more comfortable but offer "comfort [to] the afflicted, [and] afflict the comfortable."⁸⁷ Jesus challenged the religious convention of his day. Yet, as Christians today, free to adapt the doctrine and have, in America, in general, 'the good life' we seem to forget this. As author Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer writes in the introduction to his book,

Jesus Against Christianity:

The Jesus of history would be...trouble by the accommodating theologies of many wealthy churches where Christ displaces Jesus and the Spirit that guided his life, where church growth eclipses discipleship, and where affluence cripples spirituality and reinforces a deepening social divide. ... Why, might he ask, do people buy WWJD bracelets, WWJD mugs, WWJD shoelaces, WWJD pens, WWJD calendars, WWJD lapel pins, WWJD rings, WWJD T-shirts, WWJD hats, WWJD playing cards, WWJD stuffed animals, and WWJD totebags without paying attention to my life? Why invoke my name when you have so little interest in the social setting in which I lived, who killed me and why, my confrontation with the powerful forces of oppression, the alternatives I proclaimed and embodied, and the images of God that shaped my life and faith.⁸⁸

Jesus stood in opposition to the comfortable, challenging that comfort, while comforting the challenged. His medium was the Jewish faith. While it is an unfair analogy to compare *The Simpsons* to Jesus, the messages in some sense are not all that

⁸⁷ Martin E. Marty, *The Disorganization of Organized Religion*, December 1994, in Illinois Periodicals Online, <http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipoi/ii941228.html>, (5 May 2003). This quote is often attributed to Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Workers Movement.

⁸⁸ Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus* (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 2001) p ix.

different. *The Simpsons* is a show about watching television and it uses television to stand in challenge to its audience's sense of comfort. Through this intricate process of establishing the conventional and then subverting the conventional in order to point it out, the show catches us where we are at, illustrating our assumptions and our hypocrisies. But the question is, are we aware of it?

THE AUDIENCE: WATCHING, LAUGHING, INTERPRETING

Whenever examining television texts, it is crucial to consider the role of the audience in the creation of meaning, since it is left with the raw message to interpret. The intent of the writers or producers of the show matters little if the audience is unable to grasp the message they intend to send. In much the same way, the audience holds the power of interpretation over writers and producers in that they may construct or create a meaning for the text that is very different from the original intentions. Audience members are able to individually and collectively find meaning in any text placed before them and may indeed find multiple meanings among them. What may offend one could just as easily influence, support, or inspire another. Just like art or literature, the meaning of television texts left to the interpretation of those who view it.

Different audiences see different things. Many people watch *The Simpsons* simply for a good laugh and to be entertained. There are casual fans, critical fans, and regular fans. Then, there are the fanatical fans, who watch the show with the same religious fervor that Homer dedicates to beer and television. Many of these fans also participate, in the show after the program, ends by creating websites, participating in web discussions, forums, trading stories, clips, pictures, songs, and Homerisms (quotes by

show characters) over the web.⁸⁹ There are television audience members who do not watch *The Simpsons* but still are aware of *The Simpsons* as a icon of popular culture. There are non-viewers who are not aware of *The Simpsons* at all. All of these audience members take part in interpreting *The Simpsons*. The meaning and messages of the program are the results of their interpretation.

Within this diverse group of audiences, a target audience for the program does emerge, and it is not children. As Lisa once remarked, "If cartoons were meant for adults, they'd put them on in prime time."⁹⁰ Just as *The Simpsons* is on in prime time, its intended audience is primarily adults: "It's meant for the educated, the intellectual, the pop culture-conscious."⁹¹ These individuals are the show's 'thinking' fans. If this was not the case, the writers would not include all the references to pop culture, politics, religion, literature, and so on. This target audience is composed of people who, unlike Homer Simpson, "are not entranced by the hypnotic glow of the TV, but are rather aware of it and able to comprehend it or laugh at it."⁹² For them, "watching each episode is a test of these fans' awareness of the media-saturated world [in which] we live."⁹³

Each group of audience members represents a different level of engagement, dedication to watching the program, and interpretation. What a casual viewer or critic of the show might see as offensive, a regular or fanatic fan may understand as part of the show's satirical humor. Religion causes debate among these different groups on the issue

⁸⁹ A simple Google search of the key term "The Simpsons" returns over 2 million site hits. These include fans sites as well as massive indexes to the show including: thesimpsons.com (Official Website); The Simpson archive (snpp.com) which includes show scripts, episode and topic reference lists and written commentary; and The Simpson 100 (simpsons100.com) which lists the top 100 Simpson fan sites.

⁹⁰ "Krusty Gets Busted," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Jay Kogan and Wallace Wolodarsky, dir. by Brad Bird, Fox: 29 April, 1990.

⁹¹ Horowitz, Jon, "Mmm ... Television," Par. 3.

⁹² Ibid., Par. 17.

⁹³ Ibid., Par. 19.

of whether or not *The Simpsons* keep some things sacred, or are simply sacrilegious, subversive, and ignorant of something culture general does question. As producer Mike Scully noted, "People can say hurtful things to each other about their weight, their race, their intelligence, their sexual preference, and that all seems up for grabs, but when you get into religion, some people get very nervous."⁹⁴ That was precisely the problem that occurred during a Simpson's Super Bowl episode in which show writers were trying to mock Super Bowl commercials.

Inspired by an old ZZ Top video, the commercial spoof showed a dusty service station where a car pulled up to the pumps and the nerdy driver got out, looked around and hit the horn. Gyrating to rock music, three scantily clad babes emerged from the station seductively, and as the driver's eyes widened, they seductively flipped open the hood, shook off the squeegee and plunged the gas nozzle into the tank. The driver was even more excited when spotting a glittering cross hanging in one of the wiggling female's ample cleavage. Voice over: "*The Catholic Church: We've made a few...changes.*"⁹⁵

While for some audience members this spoof provided a moment of laughter, for others it represented *The Simpsons*' willingness to "take on" anyone – in this case, the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, the Catholic Church, and specifically the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights did not laugh, but instead instigated a campaign against *The Simpsons*.⁹⁶

INTERPRETING THE MESSAGE

Considering the system of convention and subversion initiated by the program, and the differences in audiences, due to their watching habits and individual perspectives,

⁹⁴ Rosenberg, "Fox Does have Standards...", Par. 12.

⁹⁵ "Sunday, Cruddy Sunday," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Tom Martin, George Meyer, Brian Scully, and Mike Scully, dir. by Steven Dean Moore, Fox: 21 January 1999. The voice over was later changed to remove the word "Catholic". Cited in Rosenberg, Par. 15.

⁹⁶ Rosenberg, par. 14.

I would argue that four interpretations of the role of Christianity on *The Simpsons* are possible. First, audience members may miss both the subversion and convention altogether. Some fans simply enjoy the show as nothing more than prime-time entertainment. It serves them a good laugh and that is about all. These audience members do not wish to make the connections; they just want to watch the show. The danger, however, is that they are still not free from the conventional messages the program sends. Unaware of the messages they are receiving, the cultural beliefs of these entertainment-only fans are still being shaped by the unconscious conventions of the program, as is the case with any program they watch.

The second interpretive group will see the subverting of Christian symbols, themes, and doctrine without catching the conventional interplay of messages. These critics of the program only see the active images on the screen and miss the meaning attached underneath. The danger for them is that they will miss what is really going on and condemn *The Simpsons* because they are missing the point. They will also miss the fact that their cultural beliefs are also being strengthened every time they watch the program, though they do not stop to think about it.

The opposite scenario is the third interpretation of the show. These audience members look below the surface and make the connections, seeing the conventional themes and threads of Christianity (or other cultural institution/truth). These fans act like apologists of the program, arguing that it is the most moral or most religious show on television. They downplay the subversive message in order to highlight a positive interpretation of Christianity on the show. The danger is that they will try so hard to make their case that they may miss the moments when Christianity as portrayed on *The*

Simpsons really does miss the mark. They may become wrapped up in promoting a version of "conventional" Christianity, which in itself is not Christian at all.

The final interpreters are, in my opinion, the show's ideal watchers. These individuals are aware of both the subversive and conventional messages of the program. They are able to watch the program and understand the movement from unconscious convention to subversive twist. They realize that the subverted message helps illustrate the conventions they themselves subscribe to. In doing so they may be able to examine their beliefs and seek out further understanding, conversation, or meaning. *The Simpsons* for these audience members may serve as a goad, provoking them in their own discovery of what it means to be a Christian in America, while not settling for the conventional answers American culture or *The Simpsons* hands them on a platter.

Whichever route of interpretation individual audience members use, what is crucial to remain aware of is the dynamic between subversive play on conventional beliefs seen regularly on *The Simpsons*. The subversive satire tends to be overt and recognizable, but for audience members who are willing to pay close attention and become 'thinking viewers,' the significance of the conventional messages cannot be overstated or overlooked.

For Christianity, these conventions may exist to provide consistency on the show from episode to episode. They may also serve to provide consistency between the audience and the program. While the show is a wall upon which audience members may project their beliefs to be challenged, pulverized and handed back to them, the simple underlying stability of basic 'truths' keep the show slightly believable. It helps maintain the illusion that the world of *The Simpsons* is not so different from the audience's own.

Perhaps the maintenance of this illusion allows audience to partake in the cultural critiques of conventional Christianity the show offers. In return, audience members may come to see the conventionality of their own behaviors and beliefs. Whatever the reason, the existence of this underlying support for the status quo makes it possible to see how *The Simpsons* supports the same view of Christianity it readily critiques.

CONCLUSION:

"AH, TV RESPECTS ME. IT LAUGHS WITH ME, NOT AT ME!"

The Simpsons is not a religious program. Religion is a theme on *The Simpsons* primarily because it is part of the audience's experience. Just as religion, primarily Christianity, is a part of the American experience, so too it is part of the life of the Simpson family and Springfield characters. And as an animated program, *The Simpsons* has the freedom to critique and satirize the American experience of Christianity in a way other television programs cannot.

The Simpsons can and does talk about Christianity in a way we audience members generally would not. The characters engage with religion, faith, and religious institutions in a manner most humans would be relatively uncomfortable doing. While an animated Homer Simpson can dance around the sanctuary in his underwear, turning the church cross into an air guitar, drinking beer out of the Communion chalice, and substituting his television for the church altar, only the most socially unaware human being would dare do. While Bart Simpson dares to substitute into the Sunday service his own hymn, *In the Garden of Eden (In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida)*, by I. Ron Butterfly (Iron Butterfly) or to ask his Sunday school teacher whether or not a lost leg will be waiting for you in heaven, for most of us, these behaviors would be simply out of the question.⁹⁷

As subversive as the show might be, and as much as it may challenge everything that should remain sacred, in the end, *The Simpsons* both critiques and supports its own audience's conventional idea of American Christianity. Whether or not we want to admit it, we (the audience) are all members of the First Church of Springfield. The unthinkable

⁹⁷ "Bart Sells His Soul," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Greg Daniels, dir. by Wesley Archer, Fox: 8 October 1995.

comments and behavior of Simpson characters, especially Homer and Bart, speak to our rebellious nature while at the same time highlighting the sacred taboos we don't

challenge. They ask the questions we all wish we could and say what we will not.

Homer himself when sitting with God on the couch states it pretty clearly: "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?"⁹⁸ Homer's general understanding of God is one who blesses him when things are good and when things go bad, who is a vengeful power out to get him because he isn't as good as the next guy. Indeed, several other items, namely food, beer and television, all of which are tangible and present in his home life take the place of God. Yet he always winds up back in church, sitting front and center dressed up in Sunday best and fast asleep (snoring even) the next Sunday. Bart feels free to challenge God even when praying: "Dear God: We paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing."⁹⁹ Prayer is usually self-serving on the show and God is active and present on *The Simpsons* schedule rather than on God's own.

Lisa's rationality symbolizes our contradictory experience with God and technology. It is the idea that God created, but we make things happen. After the Flood threatened to destroy Springfield, Lisa manages to explain away scientifically all of the potentially divine interventions except for one: why the rain suddenly stopped when Reverend Lovejoy prayed. This one thing which she can find no scientific explanation for she credits to Buddha, who at the end of the program is seen sitting with God up in heaven. Marge represents the guilty Christian experience. While her life did not work out the way she had planned, she is willing to make the best of it and occasionally that

⁹⁸ "Homer the Heretic."

⁹⁹ "Two Cars in Every Garage, Three Eyes on Every Fish," *The Simpsons*, writ. by Sam Simon and John Swartzwelder, dir. by Wesley Archer, Fox.

means bribing or bargaining with God. She means well and attempts to do all she can to ensure the salvation of her family (or at least Lisa). Her overwhelming guilt often serves as the catalyst to bring her to God.

The show critiques religious hypocrisy, which preaches one thing and then does another. While some of the hypocrisy jokes are obvious, including many of the examples aforementioned in the discussion of the episode "She of Little Faith," others lie in the details and the character of Reverend Lovejoy and Ned Flanders. Lovejoy's depression and loss of faith stems from his inability to be as good as Ned. He has lost touch with his congregation:

Lovejoy: Hmmm. I'm a shepherd without a flock. [looks heavenward] What have I done to lose them?

St. Eleutherius: [comes to life in a stained glass window, surrounded by a bright light] The real question is: What have you done to keep them?

Lovejoy: [gasps] St. Eleutherius of Nicomedia!

St. Eleutherius: That's my name, don't wear it out.

St. Bartholomew: To inspire men, you must be brave. I introduced Christianity to Mongolia. It didn't take, but it was worth a try.

St. Lucian: Tell us, good Reverend, what great deeds have you done to inspire the hearts of men?

Lovejoy: Well, I had the vestibule recarpeted.

St. Donickus: I've appeared in over eight thousand visions, and that's the lamest reply I've ever heard.

Lovejoy: Oh, now please, I, I thought saints were supposed to be friendly.

St. Donickus: You ... you're just lucky God isn't here.

[the light fades, and the saints return to their repose on the windows]¹⁰⁰

His sermons are a product of his own shame and yet serve to shame the entire congregation. By contrast, Ned routinely does everything he thinks God wants, even when it is impossible. As Ned prays when his home was destroyed by a hurricane, "Why me, Lord? Where have I gone wrong? I've always been nice to people. I don't drink or

¹⁰⁰ "In Marge We Trust," The Simpsons, Writ. by Donick Cary, Dir. by Steve Moore, Fox: 27 April 1997.

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."¹⁰¹

The church services themselves remain so boring and monotonous that it is no wonder Homer falls asleep. These services have been rendered boring by the other deity in the Simpson family—television. Occasionally they do try to jazz things up at the First Church of Springfield—as was the case when Reverend Lovejoy rescued Ned from a pen of wild Baboons and made it the theme of his Sunday sermon:

Lovejoy: Baboons to the left of me. Baboons to the right. The speeding locomotive tore through a sea of inhuman fangs. A pair of the great apes rose up at me but -- bam, bam! -- I them flying like two hairy footballs. A third came screaming at me ... [imitates hissing baboon] [quietly resolved] ... and that's when I got mad.

Homer: Now, that's religion.¹⁰²

--yet more often than not, they miss the mark

Watching *The Simpsons* is a journey into our television sets so that we may be able to watch ourselves. We get to see our own idiosyncrasies, hypocrisies, and thoughts and taboos manifested before us in the shape of animated social satire. Individual viewers approach each program from a different point of view and never will we catch all the jokes *The Simpsons* make. However, collectively they also approach the show with a general set of beliefs and ideologies that are shared by the community of Springfield. It is this set of beliefs and ideals which are enhanced into caricatures of Springfield residents and episode themes. These are the topics for the majority of satirical humor and cultural critique on the show.

¹⁰¹ "Hurricane Neddy."

¹⁰² "In Marge we Trust."

The Simpsons is really all about us. After all, like all television, the world of *The Simpsons*, and the religion of *The Simpsons*, is simply an altered mirror image of our own. Like Homer, we all like to receive credit when things are good, and have no quarrels with God when our life is going as we would like it to. Like Homer, we blame God when things are not going as we think they should. We like to revel in our intellect and explain all that we can scientifically, as Lisa loves to do. We feel and think what Bart dares to say. We experience the guilt that forces Marge and ourselves to bargain with God. Collectively we all seem to believe in an understanding of Christianity that bases itself upon a system of rewards and punishments, on good versus bad. The logic is that the good are rewarded with heaven (Flanders) the bad are not (Simpsons).¹⁰³ Our lives are good and blest because God not only likes us, but is like us. God on *The Simpsons* is an old white man with a long white beard. He is not very different from the Simpsons themselves. Heaven is white and up above, hell is hot and down below. Church is boring, Fundamentalists are loony and ministers are full hot air. The joke that has been pulled on us is that it is these conventions, our own beliefs, which are being simultaneously supported and mocked every time we watch.

According to *The Simpsons*, Christianity in America is a creative dialectic. The writers and producers have created a cultural construct, supported through the audience's own assumptions, misrepresentations, and ideas and in turn giving us (the audience) a set-up: the Springfield religious experience which leads Homer to ask, "What's the name of that religion with all the well-meaning rules that don't work in real life?" Lisa responds, "Christianity."¹⁰⁴ As Americans, we are collectively the richest and most

¹⁰³ "Simpsons Bible Stories."

¹⁰⁴ "Homerpalooza," *The Simpsons*, Writ. by Brent Forrester, Dir. by Wesley Archer, Fox: 19 May, 1996.

successful human beings on earth with the greatest means available to do most things for others and for ourselves. While we often thank God for our social position we generally do not accept the responsibilities that come with that position. We tend to invoke the name of God whenever we feel like it, and it serves our own motives well. Like *The Simpsons*, we want a God who looks pretty much like ourselves, thinks like we do, and would rather join us on the couch for some exciting television time than be present in a boring service.

Supporters of the way religion is present on *The Simpsons* tend to make the point that despite the criticism of the organized church, "God is not mocked."¹⁰⁵ God instead is an active presence on the show and in the lives of the Simpsons characters. Moreover, "God's presence is always shown as a positive thing in the Simpsons' lives, and consequently, good morals and ethics are usually upheld by the characters."¹⁰⁶ It is questionable whether good ethics and moral responsibility to the degree that they are upheld by the characters is the product of God's presence, or more likely the result of social pressure to be a good ethical person. God is present in the Simpsons' lives, though God seems to appear only as necessary, while the lives of Simpson characters remain mostly in their own control. This image of God combines with the representations of church, the town minister, and the 'model' Christian and the debate over *The Simpsons'* stance on Christianity remains. Does the show "[portray] Christians as being out of touch with reality. [They] make anyone who follows God look like a fool."¹⁰⁷ Alternatively, is

¹⁰⁵ Shalda, par. 11.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., par. 16.

¹⁰⁷ Pinsky, "The Gospel of Homer," par. 16.

it that "Hollow religiosity—something that is built on words and not faith—is very threatened ... What *The Simpsons*' do...is yell at the emperor who has no clothes on."¹⁰⁸

The message of Christianity in America according to *The Simpsons* is a mixed message when audiences finally interpret it. For some who pride themselves in faith and belief in God, *The Simpsons* challenges what they believe, mocking both God and their way of life. For others who have a weak connection to a church, or a belief in God, *The Simpsons* points out Christianity's silly hypocrisy. Yet for some, both believers and non-believers, what the show says is little more than comic fun and entertainment. Still there are those who support both Christianity and *The Simpsons* and feel that they can make the argument showing how Christian the show really is.

As is the case with any text, interpretation will always be open and different audiences or audience members will not agree. Still, armed with the tools this paper offers, including discussions regarding the medium of television, the effects of animation, the importance of characters and caricatures, of audience interpretation, the informed viewer can now raise a flag of caution before quickly passing judgment on the presentation of Christianity on *The Simpsons*.

Aware of the fact that the show both creates and sustains certain cultural meanings, and presents them to the audience, through the process of convention and subversion through satire, we can see that there is more going on with this program than simple entertainment. Meaning is always being established and created. This meaning has an effect on the audience members who partake in it. *The Simpsons*, will continue to shape, challenge, and, validate its audience's understandings of Christianity in America

And who knows, maybe God is watching with us.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., par. 19.

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"Hurricane Neddy." The Simpsons. Writ. by Steve Young. Dir. by Bob Anderson. Fox: 29 December 1996.

"In Marge We Trust." The Simpsons. Writ. by Donick Cary. Dir. by Steve Moore. Fox: 27 April 1997.

"Itchy and Scratchy Land." The Simpsons. Writ. by John Swartzwelder. Dir. by Wes Archer. Fox: 2 October 1994.

"Krusty Gets Busted." The Simpsons. Writ. by Jay Kogan and Wallace Wolodarsky. Dir. by Brad Bird. Fox: 29 April 1990.

"Like Father, Like Clown." The Simpsons. Writ. by Jay Kogen and Wallace Wolodarsky. Dir. by Jeffrey Lynch with Brad Bird. Fox: 24 October 1991.

"Lisa Gets an 'A.'" The Simpsons. Writ. by Ian Maxtone-Graham. Dir. by Bob Anderson. Fox: 22 November 1998.

"Lisa on Ice." The Simpsons. Writ. by Mike Scully. Dir. by Bob Anderson. Fox: 13 November 1994.

"Little Big Mom." The Simpsons. Writ. by Carolyn Omine. Dir. by Mark Kirkland. Fox: 18 May 1999.

"Marge in Chains." The Simpsons. Writ. by Bill Oakley and Josh Weinstein. Dir. by Jim Reardon. Fox: 6 May 1993.

"Missionary Impossible." The Simpsons. Writ. by Ron Hauge. Dir. by Dean Moore. Fox: 20 February 2000.

"Pray Anything." The Simpsons. Fox: 9 February 2003.

"She of Little Faith." The Simpsons. Fox: 16 December 2001.

"Simpsons Bible Stories." The Simpsons. Writ. by Tim Long, Larry Doyle and Matt Selman. Dir. By Nancy Kruse. Fox: 4 April 1999.

"So it's come to this: A Simpson Clip Show." The Simpsons. Writ. by Jon Vitti. Dir. by Carlos Baeza. Fox: 1 April 1993.

"Sunday, Cruddy Sunday." The Simpsons. Writ. by Tom Martin, George Meyer, Brian Scully, and Mike Scully. Dir. by Steven Dean Moore. Fox: 21 January 1999.

"The Cartridge Family." The Simpsons. Writ. by John Swartzwelder. Dir. by Pete Michels. Fox: 2 November 1997.

"The Joy of Sect." The Simpsons. Writ. Steve O'Donnell, Dir by Steven Dean Moore. Fox: Feb 8, 1998.

"The Simpsons 300th Episode." The Simpsons. Fox: 16 February 2003.

"The Telltale Head." The Simpsons. Writ. by Al Jean, Mike Reiss, Sam Simon, and Matt Groening. Dir. by Rich Moore. Fox: 25 February 1990.

"There's No Disgrace Like Home." The Simpsons. Writ. by Al Jean and Mike Reiss. Dir. by Gregg Vano and Kent Butterworth. Fox: 28 June 1990.

"Treehouse of Horror VII." The Simpsons. Writ. by Ken Keeler, Dan Greaney, and David S. Cohen. Dir by, Mike B. Anderson. Fox: 27 October 1996.

"Treehouse of Horror X." The Simpsons. Writ. by Donick Spooky and Tim Long. Dir. by Pete Michels. Fox: 31 October 1999.

"Twenty-Two Short Films about Springfield." The Simpsons. Writ. by Richard Appel, David S. Cohen, Jonathan Collier, Jennifer Crittenden, Greg Daniels, Brent Forrester, Rachel Pulido, Steve Tompkins, Josh Weinstein, and Matt Groening. Dir. By Jim Reardon. Fox: 14 April 1996.

"Two Cars in Every Garage, Three Eyes on Every Fish." The Simpsons. Writ. by Sam Simon and John Swartzwelder. Dir. by Wesley Archer. Fox: 1 November 1990.

"Viva Ned Flanders." The Simpsons. Writ. by David M. Stern. Dir. by Neil Afflek. Fox: 10 January 1999.

"Who Shot Mr. Burns? (Part One)." The Simpsons. Writ. by Bill Oakley & Josh Weinstein. Dir. by Jeffrey Lynch. Fox: 21 May 1995.

