

Simpsons have soul

John Dart
Christian Century

Copyright 2001 Christian Century Foundation. Reprinted by permission from the January 31, 2001, issue of the Christian Century. Subscriptions: \$49/yr. from P.O. Box 378, Mt. Morris, IL 61054.

THE ENORMOUS POPULARITY of The Simpsons, now in its 12th television season, suggests that religious people have a sense of humor--contrary to the usual wisdom in Hollywood. The program takes more satirical jabs at spiritual matters than any other TV show, yet the erratic cartoon family has an appreciative audience among many people of faith and among many analysts of religion. The reason? Perhaps it's because The Simpsons is an equal-opportunity satire: it shrewdly targets all sorts of foibles and hypocrisies, not just religious ones. Perhaps it's also because the show is exceptionally aware of the significant place religion has in the American landscape.

"The Simpsons is not dismissive of faith, but treats religion as an integral part of American life," says William Romanowski of Calvin College, author of *Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life*. "Episodes that I've seen are not so much irreverent toward religion, but poke fun at American attitudes and practices."

Homer Simpson, the show's awesomely underachieving Everyman, moans about going to church ("What if we pick the wrong religion?"), and invites daughter Lisa to watch an afternoon football game with him, saying it "helps get rid of the unpleasant aftertaste of church." Nevertheless, churchgoing is a regular Simpson routine--a practice rarely seen or mentioned in other TV shows.

Prayer is also a common Simpsons activity--especially when some special pleading is in order. Young Bart prays when he starts missing his soul--which he sold to another boy for a few dollars. Wife Marge asks God to stop a hurricane and save her family, adding, "We will be forever grateful and recommend you to all of our friends."

One of Romanowski's favorite episodes is one in which Homer justifies himself to God: "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?" Homer later concludes, "So I figure I should try to live right and worship you in my own way." It turns out that God has no problem with that. According to Romanowski, scenes like this aptly capture American individualism. "Episodes generally leave the matter of God and religion open to multiple interpretations, perhaps so as not to potentially alienate audience members, but also as a reflection of American attitudes," he said.

Religious content appears in nearly 70 percent of the shows, according to a study by John Heeren of California State University at San Bernardino. Heeren spent eight weeks last year watching reruns of 71 programs from the first 11 years of the series. He counted at least one religious reference in 58 percent of the shows and "religion as the context" in 11 percent.

"This would seem to be a far higher proportion than is found in most other programming, with the exception of a specifically religious show like Touched by an Angel," said Heeren, who previously examined religious content in newspaper comics. Comic strips from the 1950s through the 1980s took an increasingly secular attitude toward religious symbols, Heeren said, whereas The Simpsons displays a "much greater freedom in the lampooning of these symbols."

In the world of the Simpsons, God is omnipotent, capricious and responsive. After Homer and another man compete as snowplowers, then form a common enterprise, Homer is moved to proclaim, "When two best friends work together, not even God can stop them." From the heavens a voice is heard, "Oh, no?" and rays of sunlight rapidly melt all the snow.

Wanting to repay God for saving him from a fire, Homer prays, "Oh, spiteful one, show me who to smite and they shall be smoted." When Homer asks God the meaning of life, God tells Homer he has to wait until he dies to find out. Homer says he can't wait that long, and the deity quips, "Can't wait six months?"

TWO REGULAR CHARACTERS help keep the religious themes spinning: Ned Flanders is the hypercheerful evangelical next door, and the Reverend Timothy Lovejoy is the smarmy, amorphously Protestant pastor of the First Church of Springfield.

Even God agrees with Homer that Lovejoy's sermons are boring, Heeren points out. Confessing that the pastor "really displeases me," God says, "I think I'll give him a canker sore."

Some of The Simpsons church humor is a mild sort, typical of an earlier era of churchgoing--about sleep-inducing sermons or tactics to elicit more money in the offering ("And as we pass the collection plate, please give as if the person next to you was watching," Lovejoy intones). But most of the satire is culturally savvy in the extreme, with a sharp critical edge. For example, the sign outside First Church of Springfield reads at various times "God, the Original Love Connection," or "Today's Topic: He Knows What You Did Last Summer," or "Private Wedding: Please Worship Elsewhere" or "God Welcomes His Victims."

Religious satire abounds in an episode on the Movementarians, a sect that temporarily seduces most of the Simpson family. Lovejoy takes on the sect in his sermon: "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." When the plate returns nearly empty, the pastor starts pouring gasoline on the church floor, lamenting, "I never thought I'd have to do this again."

Upon departing Springfield, the sect leader takes off in a shiny spaceship. An astonished Lovejoy gasps, "Oh mercy, he's the real deal? The minister rips off his clergy collar, throws it on the ground and stomps on it. Seconds later, the flimsy spaceship falls apart and crashes. Lovejoy spots his collar: "How did that get down there?"

Lovejoy appears on a hip Sunday evening radio program called Gabbin' with God with Catholic and Jewish representatives. But as Heeren points out, the pastor's religious knowledge and tolerance have definite limits. When Marge asks Lovejoy if he will conduct last rites for gravely ill Grandpa Simpson he replies, "That's Catholic, Marge. You might as well ask me to do a voodoo dance."

In another episode, when Lovejoy is citing the various religious traditions of the neighbors who saved Homer's life, the minister pauses in the case of Apu, the Indian who runs the Kwik-E-Mart. He finally labels him "miscellaneous." Apu objects, saying he is Hindu, and that "there are 700 million of us." Lovejoy says soothingly, "Ah, that's super."

In the mid-1990s, when some Simpsons episodes made fun of a sculpture of Ganesha, the popular elephant deity in the Hindu pantheon, some southern California Hindus objected. Prithvi Raj Singh, president of the Federation of Hindu Associations, said a Fox Television spokeswoman returned his call. "She said it was not a planned attack on Hinduism," Singh said. "The show treats other religions humorously too," she said. The explanation was accepted and the matter was dropped.

Fox did not so easily placate the media-savvy Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. The New York-based Catholic League raised its eyebrows at a 1998 episode featuring this exchange in the Simpsons' car while driving home from a church service:

Bart: "I'm starving. Mom, can we go Catholic so we can get communion wafers and booze?"

Mom: "No, no one is going Catholic. Three children is enough, thank you."

Thomas Chavez, Fox's manager for broadcast standards and practices, wrote to the Catholic League, saying in part that Bart, like many unknowing children, "sees the wafer merely as food and wine as a forbidden drink." He said that Marge's response "may be perceived as short and curt," but that she was responding by "stating why she would not be comfortable converting to Catholicism."

On January 31, 1999, an episode that followed Fox's broadcast of the Super Bowl showed a gas station scene in which a trio of buxom, scantily clad women greet a driver. One of the women bends over to reveal a large cross, then says, "The Catholic Church--we've made a few changes." This prompted the Catholic League to organize more protests.

Deluged with angry letters, Fox directed writers to lay off Catholics, according to Los Angeles Times television critic Howard Rosenberg. He reported that Mike Scully, executive producer of The Simpsons, complained bitterly about the directive, but was told that any future episodes containing offensive lines should not be attributed to Catholics. Scully was told it was OK to target "Methodists, Presbyterians or Baptists," but not Catholics. When the program appeared as a rerun in May, the reference to the Catholic Church was changed to "the church."

Conservative evangelicals have generally either seen the positive side of the show or taken a live-and-let-live stance. A 1992 master's thesis at Pat Robertson's Regent University complimented the program. "While it may not completely resonate with the evangelical Judeo-Christian belief system, The Simpsons does portray a family searching for moral and theological ideals," wrote Beth Keller.

Her favorable comments and others' were cited in a 1999 article in the Orlando Sentinel by religion writer Mark Pinsky. His *The Gospel According to The Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of America's Most Animated Family* will be published late this year by Westminster John Knox Press. Pinsky quoted the conservative Family Research Council's Robert Knight, who noted that the Simpsons do function in a moral universe in which "evil often--if not always--is punished

with consequences." PRISM, the monthly published by Evangelicals for Social Action, has called the series "the most pro-family, God-preoccupied, home-based program on television."

The main characters and the show's concepts were created by cartoonist Matt Groening. Groening has said that with The Simpsons on the air, "right-wingers" should not complain about God not being on television. Not only does the Simpson family speak to God, "we show Him, and God has five fingers--unlike the Simpsons, who have only four," he told Mother Jones magazine. Groening told The Simpsons Archives Web site (www.snpp.com) last year that the program's "Krusty the Clown" is based on a real TV "Christian clown" he watched as a kid in Portland, Oregon.

Fans of the show note that Marge is rock-solid faithful, so much so that she once detained Jehovah's Witnesses longer than they wanted to stay. Lisa, only eight, is spiritually wise beyond her years.

MOST OF THE religious content of the series comes from George Meyer, "who is generally considered a mad genius, with emphasis on `mad,'" said Steve Tompkins, former writer for the show, who spoke to a seminar last fall at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Like many of the writer-producers who have worked on the program, Tompkins said, he once was associated with the Harvard Lampoon magazine.

Tompkins was with the show in its sixth, seventh and eighth seasons--the last one being 1996-97 when he was listed as a co-producer with Meyer and Scully. Tompkins then left to become executive producer for PJ's, a claymation program created by actor Eddie Murphy.

Simpson writers "were atheist Jews or atheist Christians, and only two of us were churchgoing Christians when I was there," said Tompkins. Yet, despite the frequent focus on religion, "there is no agenda one way or another," Tompkins said. "It's all about the joke." Other writers want the story line to be true to the character, and still others seek "an omnidirectional assault on anything that is sacred--hypocrisy will be mocked at all times," he said.

Asked how he and other writers view the show's two main foils for religion, Tompkins said, "Lovejoy is pretty much a pan-denominational windbag." As for nerdy Ned Flanders, "there is a lot of affection for him ... even though he is often the object of humor and annoyance."

In a well-remembered episode, Flanders saves Homer from a house fire, an act of love and courage which rekindles Homer's faith. Lisa declares, "This is truly an act of God." Homer doubts it--the house of faithful Ned Flanders is now engulfed in flames. But just then a cloudburst puts out the fire and a rainbow appears.

A Christian Science Monitor writer last year opined that The Simpsons has lasted so long because, for all their manifest flaws, "the Simpsons love each other." And no matter how acerbically the writers skewer human pretensions and social ills, "there's a kindly spirit about the show," wrote M. S. Mason. Or as Tompkins observed, "Somehow there is goodness at the end" of every show.

John Dart is the CENTURY's news editor.