Religion in *The Simpsons*

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Beginning in 1989, *The Simpsons* has undoubtedly become a large contributor to popular culture. The program examines both common and controversial societal issues. Religion in popular culture is discussed through the episode “Homer the Heretic.” This episode looks at religious issues through the contrast of practicing faith and secular spirituality. The significance of religion in *The Simpsons* allows audience members to reflect on society and focus on the ultimate subjectivity of reception through the relationship between consumer and producer in popular culture.

“Homer the Heretic” examines Homer Simpson’s avoidance of church and his ultimate decision to leave the service altogether. Homer marks several influences on his family: his wife, Marge, and his three children, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie. After Marge tells Homer to get ready for church, he refuses and stays at home. The rest of the family attend mass in the cold weather with only the visualizations of Hell to keep them warm in lieu of the building’s broken furnace. A scene apposes Homer’s laid-back day at home with several issues that arise at the First Church of Springfield. Taking advantage of the freedom of being home alone: Homer openly swears, walks around in his underwear, creates a fattening “moon waffle,” and so on. This is highly satirical as Homer, later addressed as “the heathen,” has a rewarding day, while the Christians are locked inside the church due to the frozen doors. Desperate for salvation, Lisa starts praying the “Our Father,” and Bart tells her it is “neither the time nor the place.” The Simpson family returns home to discover Homer had the best day of his life, and declares he will no longer be attending church. He rationalizes by questioning God’s omnipresence and their choice in practicing the right religion. Bart, known for his ill-mannered persona, agrees

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with him in an evangelist form. Later that night, Homer meets God in a dream and explains his choices. After conversing with “the Big Cheese,” Homer starts his own religion, believing they have an agreement. Bart and Lisa ask why Homer is allowed to stay home instead of going to church, and Marge tells them he is wicked. Attempting to win over his children, Homer alludes to a man who practiced his own beliefs in an unorthodox fashion, making implications towards Jesus. Later, Homer encounters Krusty the Clown and Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, who both practice religions outside of Christianity. Rejecting or mocking them, Homer avoids all religious activities and people.

Another scene apposes the Simpson residence and the church. In juxtaposition, Reverend Lovejoy’s sermon influences Homer’s actions. Reverend Lovejoy preaches, “Pride goeth before destruction,” while Homer states, “everybody is stupid except me,” then accidentally sets his house on fire. Ned Flanders, his exceedingly religious next-door neighbour, and a fire crew containing Krusty and Apu, rescue Homer. Surrounded by loved ones, Homer elucidates God’s vengefulness. Ned and Lovejoy tell Homer that God did not set his house on fire, but rather worked in the actions of his friends, be it Christian Ned, Jewish Krusty, or “miscellaneous” (Hindu) Apu. Homer tells Reverend Lovejoy he will return to church the following week. Homer’s loud snoring in the front row of the church follows, as he encounters God in another dream. This episode shows religion in popular culture with the comedic use of allusions and satire.

*The Simpsons* is very self-aware of its popularity and influence on popular culture. Its massive audience critically analyzes social topics, specifically focusing on the blind obedience to authority. Furthermore, writers and producers, such as Matt Groening

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2 *The Simpsons*, “Homer the Heretic.”
3 *The Simpsons*, “Homer the Heretic.”
and George Meyer, use ambiguous perspectives toward religiosity as a means for
critiquing religious practice. David Feltmate observed that religious critique in “Homer
the Heretic” occurs mostly through characterization. He states, “those personalities, and
the shared cultural assumptions about religion that exist among the writers, are born of
people such as Groening and Meyer who view authority, blind faith, and obedience with
suspicion.”

Due to their large following, The Simpsons greatly influences popular
culture. Standing between controversial arguments found in common “culture war”
debates, it focuses on gender, sexuality, race, and religion. In agreement, Matthew A.
Henry noted, “[The Simpsons]…makes regular interventions into heated debates
surrounding many of the contentious issues that have been gathered under the umbrella of
the ‘culture wars’.” The program influences controversial issues through its popularity,
regardless of its acclaim. Rather than outlining clear answers in these debates, The
Simpsons opens choices for viewers to examine, thereby allowing them to think for
themselves. When faced with complex subjects like religion, two comedic forms are used
to guide the audience through contentious disputes: satire and undercutting. Satire is used
to comically critique religious practices. For example, we see the Flanders family in a car
chase with Homer, in their attempt to persuade him with a song about Noah. This scene is
“most appropriately read as a condemnation of zealotry,” by conveying the extreme
attempts of conversion by missionaries. However, satire is undercut at times to mitigate
unpleasant reactions. As such, Homer says he will attend church again, suggesting his

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4 David Feltmate, “It’s Funny Because It’s True? The Simpsons, Satire, and the
Significance of Religious Humor in Popular Culture,” Journal of the American Academy
5 Matthew A. Henry, The Simpsons, Satire, and American Culture (New York: Palgrave
6 Henry, The Simpsons, Satire, and American Culture, 178.
enthusiastic return. Yet he sleeps in church, thus undercutting his keenness exerted from his former statement. Satire and undercutting allow viewers to face controversy light-heartedly. These methods carefully humour the audience as a result of the show’s self-awareness. Religion must be presented in a non-serious way, therefore, to avoid shock and negative uprising.

Aware of their significance, The Simpsons is presented as a satire. Consumers acknowledge the representation of the average American family through the Simpsons whether they are avid fans or not. Satire demonstrates both public activities that everyone admits to doing, and private activities that many wish not to acclaim. For example, religious people who do not attend church regularly agree with Homer’s argument of God’s omnipresence and worshipping in our own schedule. Presenting this in a satirical form, that is, a form “designed to censure human failings and follies,” we find it comedic and, as a result, acceptable to comply with. Satire allows audience members to laugh at themselves and subtly reflect on their actions as represented through Springfielders. The Simpsons does not focus solely on critiquing the average nuclear family, however. In the episode, God is satirized they mutually complain about church duties. Author of the first religious source about The Simpsons, Mark Pinsky states, “Mike Scully…insists that God is not off-limits as a target, although there are considerable challenges.” This evokes the boundlessness in satire as it regards everything in society. Paul Cantor observes satire and religion in coalescence. He states, “when The Simpsons satirizes something, it acknowledges its importance. Even when it seems to be ridiculing religion, it

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7 Henry, The Simpsons, Satire, and American Culture, 10.
recognizes…the genuine role that religion plays in American life.”

As aforementioned, audience members view controversial material with humour, allowing self-reflection through characters. In addition, satire allows Springfield to be viewed as a microcosm of society and human experience. Characters, no more than average, are all subject to satire. News reporter Kent Brockman, is satirized through the over-exaggerated reports of fire as “insatiable, remorseless, unquenchable,” only for the fire to be extinguished seconds later. Satirizing supporting characters like Brockman make Springfield more relatable.

Tim Delaney observed that “The Simpsons may be viewed a microcosm of the human experience…viewers are able to place themselves in the position of The Simpsons characters because their experiences mirror our experiences.”

The relationship between viewers and characters lead society to be viewed through the eyes of a “dysfunctional family in Middle America,” whilst reminding viewers of Springfield’s similarities to themselves.

The emotional connection of viewers to characters is a fundamental quality of fiction. Necessary for viewers to live vicariously through characters in the work, The Simpsons allows viewers to have a stronger attachment with representations they closely identify with, opposed to representations they are foreign to. Jennifer McMahon observes fiction in regards to knowledge. She states, “fiction thus expands our knowledge base by

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10 The Simpsons, “Homer the Heretic.”
11 Tim Delaney, Simpsonology: There’s a Little Bit of Springfield in All of Us (New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), 390.
letting us learn from experiences we would not have in real life.”¹³ Impossible or unthinkable experiences are attainable through fiction. Thus, fiction gains larger audiences, as viewers do not partake in activities to experience them. Some Hindu viewers, for example, identify with Apu as Homer mocks Ganesha, a Hindu deity. Non-Hindu viewers associate with Apu’s irritability from others’ lack of understanding toward their religion or belief(s). Oppositely, Apu is a synecdoche for Hindus who face ignorance from non-Hindus. Therefore, an emotional connection with fictional characters leads to gained identification of viewers. Returning to Apu, non-Hindu viewers empathize with his experience surrounding ignorant comments. “By encouraging individuals to identify with characters,” McMahon states, “fictions encourage not only the admirable activity of sympathy, but also the morally relevant ability to empathize.”¹⁴ The Simpsons holds a great amount of diversity and presents a pluralistic religious society. Fiction creates opportunities for audience members to explore other religious realms through pluralistic characterization.

While fiction allows identification with characters, animated mediums create distance from representations shown on screen. Animation overlooks impossible actions faced in live-action productions, while avoiding costliness, thus expanding horizons in their possibilities. McMahon views animation as “a powerful reminder that we are not the characters with whom we identify.”¹⁵ As a result, we distance ourselves from animated characters and do not view extreme situations as capable or inevitable. Since scenarios

are less realistic when animated, “the show’s writers have learned…that the viewers are willing to accept jokes and situations if they are presented in an animated form.”\textsuperscript{16} This allows more affective satire because seriousness is diluted in cartoon form. Additionally, animation presents subtle messages through drawing. For instance, God is first depicted having four fingers and a thumb, compared to others with four fingers alone. Delaney states that, “the creators of \textit{The Simpsons}…show [God] the ultimate animated respect as…God always has four fingers and a thumb.”\textsuperscript{17} God is given divinity through the animation of his hands. However, God is not always presented this way. In the final scene, God and Homer converse again, only now they share the same amount of fingers. This suggests the notions of dream versus vision and divine intervention versus personal conversation. With an extra finger, God is raised above Homer. However, with the same amount of fingers, God and Homer are equals. This further suggests the transformation of God as divine and fearful, to loving and understanding.

The subtlety of animation creates the opportunity of allusion. In addition to satire, allusions are used heavily. Indirect communications and subtle messages or jokes are broadened and further understood through intertextuality. According to Jonathan Gray, “[a] text can only ever exist through, inside, and across other texts, and through its readers.”\textsuperscript{18} Intertextuality is explored through allusion and the audience’s perception of it. Discussing a variety of topics, \textit{The Simpsons} is a highly esoteric program. This is displayed through layers of references. Allusions are displayed because audience members “enjoy being involved in the creative process; [that is,] they enjoy filling in the

\textsuperscript{16} Pinsky, \textit{The Gospel According to The Simpsons}, 140.
\textsuperscript{17} Delaney, \textit{Simpsonology}, 205.
blanks for themselves rather than being told everything.”19 Widely understood allusions are common, as viewers share a level of knowledge collectively. The episode alludes to the film Risky Business, as Homer dances in his underwear at home. Broad allusions are comedic on an expansive scale. That is, most people understand the Risky Business allusion because of the scene’s popularity. However, esoteric allusions allow opportunities for subtle schisms between in-groups and out-groups. For example, Homer dresses as St. Francis of Assisi, the patron of animals, and is then followed by animals everywhere. Those who are unfamiliar with St. Francis of Assisi view the scene as comical through farce. Those who understand the allusion, on the other hand, view the scene as comical in a different light. Thus, there is an in-group of esoteric viewers who understand specific allusions through intertextuality, contrasted with an out-group of exoteric viewers who bypass intertextuality and view comedy through farce rather than allusion. Nevertheless, allusions “[are] for the audience to bring to mind certain things and to let connections flow freely,”20 so the perception becomes subjective.

Though allusions create subtle divisions in viewers, an underlying universality is present through ambiguity. The Simpsons focuses American culture, however it satirizes most cultures around the world. Universality occurs from ambiguous statements and the perceptions of viewers. Homer talks about a “wicked guy” who had “long hair, and wild ideas, and…didn’t always do what other people thought was right,”21 leading Christian viewers to think of Jesus. Non-Christian viewers, however, perception of this description

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20 Irwin and Lombardo, “The Simpsons and Allusion,” 82.
21 The Simpsons, “Homer the Heretic.”
ranges with that of Muhammad in Islam to Siddhartha Gautama in Buddhism and other religious figures. The statement is left open-ended as Homer forgets his point and undercuts the allusion by stating, “Marge, you know what I’m taking about. He used to drive that blue car?” Universally, viewers’ assumptions are struck down, creating comedy. Pinsky states, “jokes about God can refer to any of the major monotheistic faiths, and so are less likely to offend any particular denomination.” Hence, generalizing divine figures through ambiguous statements present open-mindedness opposed to decisiveness. In-group and out-group divisions are found universally. The Christian in-group looks at Homer as a heathen because he abandons the church. However, Homer joins a monotheistic in-group when he mocks Apu’s religion. Since Homer is unfamiliar with Hinduism, his monotheistic identification presents itself as an in-group to the out-group of Hinduism. Moreover, Reverend Lovejoy dismisses Apu’s religion as miscellaneous, which reunites Homer with the Christian world, as the Reverend shows ignorance towards traditions outside the Abrahamic understanding.

Universality of viewers leads to the self-realization of mass audiences within and towards society. Similarly, satire evokes a sense of self-actualization through the comedic representation of society. Satire is a way “to raise awareness about serious issues and to (potentially) effect change.” That is, through satire, viewers learn about their role in society and about society itself. Here, the authority of God in comparison to that of the church is satirized. This occurs through God and the First Church of Springfield’s responses to Homer. While Christians approach Homer directly, God sends his message

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22 *The Simpsons*, “Homer the Heretic.”
indirectly. Viewers see divine intervention is not always direct, while, in contrast, churchgoers respond straightforwardly. This allows viewers to question their personal encounters with religious authorities. Moreover, relatable experiences help the progression of self-reflection. Zealous missionaries are displayed through Ned and Homer’s car chase. The audience is reminded of the pressures experienced by encountering zealous missionaries or other pressurized forces through humour. Likewise, missionaries and other dedicated peoples understand the frustrations that arise from evasion. Self-reflection, when approaching serious matters, is presented through satire.

Consumers reflect on themselves through juxtaposed binary oppositions. Oppositions of virtue and vice are clear as Homer is presented as wicked. He “provokes a full-blown theological debate in the Simpson household”25 by his refusal. Opposition is shown as Homer critiques the impracticalities of religion, followed by his encounter with God. For some, like Pinsky, this accounts for Homer’s confusion towards the worship of God. Others perceive this as Homer’s laziness and an excuse for his actions. The latter statement is associated with Homer’s most dominant vice: sloth. Lisa Frank states, “St. Thomas Aquinas…argued that because it is our duty to serve God, a refusal to do so is a sinful denial of the purpose of our existence.”26 However, Homer’s sloth leads to his personal relationship with God. Without sloth, their encounter would not have happened, and Homer would lack a greater understanding of God. Moreover, the episode critiques religiosity in opposition with secular spirituality. This is juxtaposed through the apposing scenes of the Simpson house and the church. Homer displays the sins that Reverend

Lovejoy recites in Bible passages. Oppositions, in this light, are presented through comedy and remind viewers of the conglomeration of virtue and vice in everyday life. Frank states that, in comparison to the former views of sins, “now…we work with our vices instead of against them, not only accepted them as a core of who we are and what is natural within us, but also as a measure of what we’re capable of.”27 The evolutionary view towards sins, therefore, acknowledges the coexistence of virtue and vice, as both work together symbiotically.

Opposition leads to the subjectivity of consumer reception. Stuart Hall famously discussed the relationship between producer and consumer. He argues that producers create artifacts with a single intent, but consumers view it with multiple perspectives. In short, everything is subjective. When “Homer the Heretic” was first released, many scholars noted its religious significance in popular culture. Others, however, did not discuss the episode at all, thereby showing its lack of influence. Therefore, consumers’ understanding of the episode varies from influential to inconsiderable. Hall believes “in many ways, though American popular culture is available globally, it is consumed in very different ways.”28 The corner of Ned’s house catches on fire and a cloud, particularly hovering his house, extinguishes it. This scene displays God’s favouritism, as he sets Homer’s house on fire and saves Ned’s house from disaster as a result of their religious stances. This scene oppositely displays God’s salvation of both the houses. The viewpoint is dependent on the viewer. Hall’s theory states, “it is even more significant to think

27 Frank, “The Evolution of the Seven Deadly Sins,” 104.
about how her or his social positioning may influence that understanding and practice.”

Recall Homer’s broad allusion to a wicked man: relying on the viewers’ social, cultural, and religious perspective, the allusion of the figure varies. Additionally, “satire depends upon ‘multiple levels of signification and the reader’s willingness to participate in serious interpretive behavior, to read deeply’.\textsuperscript{29} Satire is relative, as levels of significance and participation are not definitive. The perception of consumers’ view towards the artifact does not perfectly align with the intent of the producer, thereby allowing relativity to flourish.

“Homer the Heretic” explores the importance of \textit{The Simpsons} as a form of satire, animation, and fiction. While fiction causes an emotional connection with characters, satire causes the self-reflection of consumers within and towards society. Additionally, allusions lead to subjectivity of consumers. Ultimately resulting from the self-awareness of the program, religion in popular culture is presented as a dominant social mechanism through its relevance in \textit{The Simpsons}.

Word count: 3,000

\textsuperscript{29} Klassen, \textit{Religion and Popular Culture}, 22.
\textsuperscript{30} Henry, \textit{The Simpsons, Satire, and American Culture}, 202.
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