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God in the Details

American Religion in Popular Culture

Second Edition

Edited by
Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy

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Chapter 12

Homer the Heretic and Charlie Church

Parody, Piety, and Pluralism in *The Simpsons*

Lisle Dalton, Eric Michael Mazur, and Monica Siems

> Most of the family shows are namby-pamby sentimentality or smarmy innuendo. We stay away from that.
>
> Matt Groening

The story goes like this: Marge and Homer take some time for themselves and leave Bart, Lisa, and Maggie with Grandpa. Agents from child welfare discover the children running amok and place them into foster care with the neighbors. The new foster father, Ned Flanders, faints upon hearing that the children have never been baptized, so he packs up the children and his own family and heads for the Springfield River. Homer, missing the point, panics because "in the eyes of God they'll be Flanderseses." At the river, Homer pushes Bart out of "harm's way," and the baptismal water falls on his own head. When Bart asks him how he feels, Homer responds, in an uncharacteristically pious voice, "Oh, Bartholomew, I feel like St Augustine of Hippo after his conversion by Ambrose of Milan." When Ned Flanders gasps, "Homer, what did you just say?" Homer replies nonchalantly, "I said shut your ugly face, Flanders!" The moment of spiritual inspiration has passed, and the children are back with their parents, unbaptized and safe ("Home Sweet Home-Diddily-Dum-Doodily").[1]

The prominent role of religion and the attitude toward it are not unique to this episode. Once a week for nearly the past two decades (and more in syndication), *The Simpsons* has proved itself unafraid to lampoon Evangelicals, Hindus, Jews, and religion generally. The frequency of religious plots and subthemes would itself be enough to distinguish this show from other prime-time fare. Not since the Lutheran program *Davey and Goliath* has a cartoon addressed religion so forthrightly. But while that Sunday morning program carried moral lessons of faith, this Sunday evening program ridicules the pious, lampoons the religious, and questions traditional morality. Instead of sermonizing at the audience, this program speaks with them, and possibly for them as well.

This half-hour series emerged as one of the most popular shows of the 1990s, and it regularly addresses issues involving institutional religion—including

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representations of religious traditions, discussions of moral and religious themes, and portrayals of mythological figures—as well as that which is often labeled "spirituality." Regular characters include a Hindu convenience store manager, a Jewish entertainer, an Evangelical neighbor, and a Protestant minister. Evil, morality, sin, the soul, and other religious themes are openly discussed. In terms of the genres associated with the show—the situation comedy and the animated cartoon—*The Simpsons* represents quite a departure from traditional fare in which religion is rarely if ever addressed. The writers' treatment of religion might even be construed as a heresy of sorts. Yet it is often an insightful heresy, for although the program thrives on satire, caricature, and irony, it does so with a keen understanding of current trends in American religion. *The Simpsons* implicitly affirms an America in which institutional religion has lost its position of authority and where personal expressions of spirituality have come to dominate popular religious culture.

"Don't Have A Cow, Man!": Reactions to *The Simpsons*

The Simpsons were the brainchild of Matt Groening, who developed the characters in short cartoons on the *Tracey Ullman Show* in the late 1980s. When *The Simpsons* aired in January 1990, it was the first animated prime-time series on American television in more than two decades. An immediate success, within a year it was the highest-rated show on its network and was often among the top ten shows on television. It occasionally outperformed *The Cosby Show*, a family-oriented situation comedy that dominated the ratings in the late 1980s. Over time, its weekly ratings have declined, but the program still consistently ranks as one of the network's top shows. Its success has continued in syndication, ranking first among reruns during the 1994–95 season (Freeman 1995, 14).[2] The program has become so popular that it is able to attract popular cultural icons (including actors, comedians, musicians, athletes, and talk-show hosts) as guest "voices."[3]

The Simpsons has also been a merchandiser's dream. During its first season, more than a billion dollars' worth of licensed Simpsons merchandise was sold in the United States. In 1991, licensed manufacturers shipped up to a million T-shirts per week. In an example of the show's cultural impact, some school principals banned a shirt featuring Bart and the slogan "Underachiever and Proud of It" (Riddle 1994, A5), and unlicensed merchandise (including one with Bart depicted as an African American) is commonplace despite millions spent to enforce copyright (Lefton 1992, 16).

This popularity also brought intense scrutiny from critics. Emerging amid the family values debates of early 1990s, *The Simpsons* has undergone close examination for its portrayal of family life. One famous jibe came from President George H. W. Bush in a 1992 speech before the National Religious Broadcasters association, in which he called for "a nation closer to *The*

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Waltons than *The Simpsons*."[4] Other critics have damned *The Simpsons* as a symptomatic expression of the contempt for traditional values that permeates American culture. In his critique of the entertainment industry, Michael Medved catalogs instances of religious characters portrayed as duplicitous, hypocritical, insincere, and even criminal (Medved 1992). He cites one scene from *The Simpsons* in which Bart utters an irreverent prayer ("Two Cars in Every Garage, Three Eyes on Every Fish") as proof of the industry's pattern of religious insensitivity. Another media critic, Josh Ozersky, places *The Simpsons* in a wider critique of "anti-families" that included 1990s-era programs *Roseanne* and *Married … With Children*, noting that while "the playful suppression of unhappiness has always been one of TV's great strengths," this breed of sitcom also deflects public concern away from social disintegration related to the decline of the family. As such, the irony and sarcastic humor of these shows—though he admits *The Simpsons* often tends toward "witty and valid social criticism"—serve to extend television's unhealthy influence over the American public's self-image. "TV," he laments, "has absorbed the American family's increasing sense of defeat and estrangement and presented it as an ironic in-joke." And while this mocking might temporarily placate the dysfunctional tendencies of our times, it does not "lift the spirits." Ozersky argues that the deployment of irony in the face of domestic discontents is an "assault on the family and on all human relationships" since it acts as the "antithesis of deep feeling," "discourages alarm at the decline of the family," and disparages the "earnest, often abject bonds of kin" that lie at the heart of family life. He urges readers to reject "the soullessness of TV's 'hip, bold,' anti-life world" (Ozersky 1991, 11–12, 14, 93).

Despite such condemnations, reactions to *The Simpsons* have not been entirely negative. Many writers (in secular and religious periodicals) praise the show's clever writing and, oddly enough—considering this is a cartoon—its realism. Danny Collum praises *The Simpsons* for "grasping the complexity and ambiguity of human life." He credits it for its insightful, even realistic portrayal of an American family that is frequently abrasive, argumentative, and beset by financial problems. Collum notes that—at the time he was writing—the Simpsons were among the few TV families that went to church or consulted a minister. And while he recognizes their religiosity tends toward "pretty lame K-mart evangelicalism," it merits consideration because it shows characters striving for a "moral anchor" and a "larger sense of meaning" in the midst of otherwise chaotic and aimless lives (Collum 1991, 38–39). Chiding religious groups and educators who have denounced the series as promoting bad behavior, Victoria Rebeck praises it as sharp satire that shows how parents are often ill equipped to cope with their children's (and their own) problems. For her, this comes as a welcome departure from the "pretentious misrepresentation of family life that one finds in the 'model family' shows" (Rebeck 1990, 622). Similarly, Frank

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McConnell notes that *The Simpsons* "deconstructs the myth of the happy family" and "leaves what is real and valuable about the myth unscathed … They are caricatures not just of us, but of us in our national delusion that the life of the sitcom family is the way things are 'supposed' to be" (McConnell 1990, 389). He praises the show's humanism and rapid-fire humor, which he considers "profoundly sane."

"Gabbin' about God": Scholarly Viewing of Religion and Television

That *The Simpsons* generates such divergent reactions from critics suggests that it has struck a sensitive nerve that lies close to the heart of the public debate over the portrayal of religious values in the media. In an ambitious 1994 study of religion on television, researchers conducted a five-week analysis of religious behaviors on prime-time shows. After cataloging the activities of 1462 characters in 100 episodes, the study found that religion was "a rather invisible institution" in prime time; fewer than six per cent of the characters had an identifiable religious affiliation, and religiosity was rarely central to the plots or the characters. The report concluded that "television has fictionally 'delegitimized' religious institutions and traditions by symbolically eliminating them from our most pervasive form of popular culture" (Skill *et al.* 1994, 251–67, especially 265). The study may have been biased; other explanations for the "symbolic elimination" of religion in prime-time television range from skittishness about offending religious adherents to alleged irreligiosity within the entertainment industry.[5] Nonetheless, as Medved claims, the result is programming that often seems an "affront [to] the religious sensibilities of ordinary Americans" (Medved 1992, 50).

On the other hand, other scholars argue that it is better to analyze television using broader conceptions of religion. For them, the very act of watching television serves as a religious event—a domestic ritual of devotion to stories that would function like religious narratives in other cultures and eras. Gregor Goethals, borrowing from sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, asserts that television provides a symbolic universe that serves as an overarching framework for ordering and interpreting experience (Goethals 1981, 125; see also Greeley 1987). Hal Himmelstein analyzes television programming in terms of various persistent "myths," including "the sanctity of the ordinary American family," "the triumph of personal initiative over bureaucratic control," and "the celebration of celebrity." He further argues that these myths sustain the political and economic needs of various social institutions (Himmelstein 1994, 3, 10).

These debates over religion on *The Simpsons* reflect what anthropologist Clifford Geertz called the "intrinsic double aspect" of cultural products that are both models of and models for reality. Does *The Simpsons* reflect our attitudes—particularly toward religion—or does it shape them? Does

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television act as mirror to show us ourselves as we really are, or as we ought to be? As the reactions to *The Simpsons* suggest, it is an important debate. Geertz argues that such cultural patterns "give meaning … to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves" (Geertz 1973, 93). The reaction to *The Simpsons*, mirroring broader debates about America's values and morality, suggests that the show serves as a model of contemporary belief and behavior in American life; the show is a microcosm of what Americans currently do and do not hold sacred. This picture of America delights some, and appalls others. And although *The Simpsons* targets many social institutions, myths, and presumptions, religion inspires some of the show's sharpest satire, and correspondingly some of its best insights into contemporary America.

"Home Sweet Home-Diddily-Dum-Doodily": Welcome to Springfield

It is the world of the Simpson family that feeds the recriminations and fears of those who despise it, while offering humor, irony, succor, and a subtle morality play for those who adore it. Through the television lens (or more appropriately, its mirror), viewers see the mundane lives of the Simpsons, and themselves in the reflection—an odd but often uncannily accurate portrait of Americana. The cast represents a cross-section of ages, genders, races, and religions; it includes police officers, teachers, entertainers, clergy, bartenders, and janitors. The Simpson family includes Homer (a dim employee at a nuclear power plant), his wife Marge (a devoted but overworked housewife), and their children: Bart (a good-natured but mischievous boy), Lisa (a precocious, sensitive girl), and infant Maggie.

The fact that the characters are cartoons presents an interesting dynamic, separating the "reality" of our lives from the "pretend" world of the Simpsons. Even so, the family presents noble truths, painful realities, and ironic depths in a very "real" way, enabling viewers to identify with the sentiments and to be altered by them. This two-way relationship invites viewers to enter the Everytown of Springfield,[6] to visit the Simpsons' world and perhaps comprehend how it informs their own. While they rarely "mug" for the camera, the self-reflexive actions of the characters help by constantly acknowledging their television status. From the show's opening sequence that depicts the characters racing home to watch their own opening credits, to the frequent subreferences to other television shows, networks, and personalities, viewers are reminded of television's importance in the lives of the Simpson family and—since we are watching them watch—our own. Indeed, as if to mock our own viewership, the Simpsons' television is often alluded to as the sixth (and most appreciated) member of the family. The Simpsons watch television and are conscious of its influence over their lives, while we

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watch them and ponder, fret, and complain about how they are reflecting and shaping our thoughts and attitudes.

In Springfield, representatives of religious communities are rendered as stereotypes, easily identifiable to viewers and easily objectionable to adherents. The only regularly appearing Jewish character, Herschel Shmoikel Krustofski (Krusty the Clown), is the star of Bart and Lisa's favorite television program. He is anything but devout. A gross caricature of a stereotypically secularized Jew corrupted by wealth and fame, Krusty is addicted to cigarettes, gambling, and pornography. He dislikes children, finances his lavish debt-ridden lifestyle by over-marketing his own image unabashedly, and fakes his own death to avoid paying taxes. In an episode that parodies *The Jazz Singer*, Krusty recites a Hebrew prayer while visiting the Simpsons, and later admits that as a youth he disappointed his father by abandoning rabbinical studies to become a clown. The rest of the episode involves the attempts by Bart and Lisa to reconcile the estranged father and son. Using advice from various Jewish sources, they eventually succeed ("Like Father, Like Clown").[7]

Another character, Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, is manager of the local "Kwik-E-Mart" and one of the few identifiable Hindus on network television. Apu practices vegetarianism, maintains an in-store shrine to the elephant-headed deity Ganesha (quite plausible insofar as Ganesha's connection to prosperity appeals to the ambitions of the Hindu diaspora), and marries according to Hindu ritual. In Springfield, however, Apu must endure the slights of his incredulous customers; Homer belittles Apu's diet, throws peanuts at the shrine, and suggests that Apu "must have been out taking a whiz when they were giving out gods" ("Homer the Heretic"). More problematic is the inference that South Asians manage all convenience stores; Homer joins Apu on a Himalayan pilgrimage to visit the high "guru" of Kwik-E-Marts, and during a visit to a seaside town, the Simpson family stops at a local convenience mart managed by another South Asian ("Homer and Apu"; "Summer of 4 ft. 2").

The subjects of the most mockery, however, are the Simpsons' evangelical Christian neighbors, the Flanders family. Exceedingly cheerful, Ned, his wife Maude, and their "goody-goody" children Rod and Todd provide the perfect foil to the Simpson family. They are polite, well-liked, righteous, generous, peaceful, and neighborly—all qualities the Simpsons seem to lack. They are also extraordinarily pious: spotting escaped zoo animals running through town, Ned exclaims that he has seen the elephants of the apocalypse. Maude reminds him that the Bible describes four horsemen, not elephants. "Gettin' closer," he replies ("Bart Gets an Elephant"). Bart uses a special microphone to fool Rod and Todd into thinking that God is communicating with them over the radio. On another occasion they bounce on a trampoline and exclaim, "Each bounce takes us closer to God," and "Catch me Lord, catch me," before crashing into each other ("Radio Bart"; "Homer Alone").

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Stereotyping is not the only way institutional religion is lampooned; religious leadership is the butt of much of the program's humor. Though other religious figures appear on the program (most notably in an ecumenical radio program titled "Gabbin' about God" with a minister, Krusty's father the rabbi, and a Catholic priest ["Like Father, Like Clown"]), there is no doubt that the Reverend Timothy Lovejoy represents all clergy—to their general misfortune. When ever-righteous Ned Flanders telephones Lovejoy upon learning that the Simpson children were never baptized, Lovejoy—clearly annoyed by Flanders' intrusion—suggests that Ned consider another religious tradition: "They're basically all the same," he notes before hanging up. When Marge asks if a particular activity is a sin, Lovejoy picks up the Bible and exclaims, "Have you read this thing lately, Marge? Everything's a sin" ("Home Sweet Home-Diddily-Dum-Doodily"). He encourages Marge to seek a divorce during a weekend retreat she and Homer attend to fix their marriage ("War of the Simpsons"). And when a comet threatens to destroy Springfield—and immediately after Homer laments not being religious—Lovejoy is seen running down the street yelling, "It's all over, people, we don't have a prayer" ("Bart's Comet").[8]

Lovejoy's anemic approach condemns all religious leadership, and is part of a larger critique of religious traditions consistent with the other stereotypes and the actions of the regular characters. After eating potentially poisonous sushi, Homer prepares for death by spending his last moments listening to the Bible on tape. Unfortunately, the "begats" put him to sleep, causing him to miss the sunrise he had hoped to die watching ("One Fish, Two Fish, Blowfish, Blue Fish"). (He survives.) Bart responds to a request for grace with a somewhat irreverent prayer: "Dear God: We paid for all the stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing" ("Two Cars").[9]

The program also uses familiar supernatural religious figures for comic effects. Both Satan and God have appeared on the program, and their portrayals mix the sublime and demonic with the ridiculous, presenting them as much human as they are supernatural. Satan is a familiar visitor to Springfield; in various episodes he offers Homer a doughnut in exchange for his soul; holds appointments with Montgomery Burns, the devious owner of the local nuclear plant; and uses a personal computer to keeps tabs on lost souls. Satan manifests in different forms, and typical of the program's use of irony, he is portrayed in one episode by Ned Flanders ("Treehouse of Horror IV"). In contrast, God is a cross between Mel Brooks' "Two-thousand-year old man" character and Charlton Heston's aged Moses—a familiar stereotype with a humorous and not-too-blasphemous sting. As might be expected of an anthropomorphic God, however, certain divine attributes (omniscience, omnipresence) seem lacking; in a meeting with Homer, God inquires whether St Louis still has a football team (at the time, it did not) and later excuses himself to appear on a tortilla in Mexico ("Homer the Heretic").

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The depictions of God and Satan reinforce the morality play qualities of the Simpson characters. Homer, as Everyman, is a poorly educated working man. He is simple, well-meaning, loving, and committed to his family, regardless of how much they annoy him. Marge, as Charity, is always doing for others, particularly her family, while neglecting herself. In the few cases where she is self-indulgent, she ends up plagued by guilt, and though tempted by vices, she always returns to care for her loved ones. The eldest child, Bart, as Temptation, is the animated Tom Sawyer. He is an irascible boy who never studies, serves detention, plays pranks, yet loves his sister, obeys his mother, and occasionally respects his father. The eldest daughter, Lisa, as Wisdom, is the smart student and teacher's pet, the child who dreams of Nobel prizes and presidential elections, and who relies on her saxophone and the Blues to release her from her torment. The youngest child, Maggie, represents Hope, the embodiment of innocence and vulnerability.

Juxtaposed with the dubious portrayals of institutional religion are nuanced and intricate examples of admirable and noble behavior. Krusty, Apu, and Ned are volunteer fire-fighters who help put out the burning Simpson home after Homer falls asleep on the couch smoking a cigar (and skipping church) ("Homer the Heretic"). Ned, despite Homer's frequent ribbing and abuse, adheres closely to the Christian ideals of turning the other cheek and practicing charity. He invites the Simpsons to his barbecues, shares football tickets with Homer, offers to donate organs (without solicitation), lets the town come into his family's bomb shelter to avoid a comet's destruction, and agrees to leave it and face near-certain doom when it becomes too crowded ("Homer Loves Flanders"; "When Flanders Failed"; "Homer's Triple Bypass"; "Bart's Comet"). Even the Simpsons, "America's favorite dysfunctional family" (Rebeck 1990, 622), often overcome their John Bunyanesque characterizations. Marge and Homer reject opportunities to be unfaithful, attend a retreat to save their marriage, and drag the family to a seminar to improve their communication skills. Homer attempts to improve his relationship with his father, hunts down his half-brother, and tolerates his annoying sisters-in-law. Though constant rivals, Bart and Lisa share genuine affection and occasionally work together; when Lisa becomes the star goalie of Bart's rival ice hockey team, the two put down their sticks and exit the rink arm-in-arm rather than compete for their parents' love. Bart even solicits the assistance of a Michael Jackson sound-alike to help write Lisa a birthday song ("Life on the Fast Lane"; "The Last Temptation of Homer"; "Colonel Homer"; "War of the Simpsons"; "Bart's Inner Child"; "One Fish, Two Fish"; "Grandpa vs. Sexual Inadequacy"; "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?"; "Lisa on Ice"; "Stark Raving Dad").

The diverse attitudes toward religion come together in the episode titled "Homer the Heretic." Refusing to attend church, Homer embarks on a journey of personal spirituality, encounters Apu's Hinduism and Krusty's Judaism, and ultimately comes face-to-face with God. During a dream, God

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grants Homer permission to miss church, and when he awakens he is a changed man: calm, peaceful, and able to commune directly with nature. The following week, while asleep on the couch, Homer sets the house alight, and the volunteer fire department (Krusty, Ned, and Apu, or as Reverend Lovejoy puts it, "the Jew, the Christian, and the miscellaneous") rushes to put it out. Homer questions the value of attending church, since the Flanders' house is also on fire. "He's a regular Charlie Church," Homer notes, suggesting that religious faith did not protect the Flanders' home. But just as Homer utters these words, a providential cloud forms over the Flanders' home and rain extinguishes the blaze—but leaves the fire burning the Simpson home. Asked by Marge if he has learned anything, Homer notes that God is angry and vengeful. The Reverend Lovejoy replies that it is the charity of the pluralistic volunteer fire department and not God's anger that is the lesson to be learned. The house is saved, and so is Homer's faith—in humanity, if not in God.

And so, perhaps, is the viewers', if the focus shifts from the show's content to its context, to what is happening on this side of the glass. Reverend Lovejoy's sentiment—that "God was working in the hearts of your friends and neighbors when they came to your aid"—represents the sort of generic Christianity prevalent in today's mainline Protestant churches and in most television portrayals of religion. Against the backdrop of declining religious authority, increasing personal choice, and "flattening" of doctrines into more palatable themes, television presents revamped morality plays such as this in which personal piety, religious pluralism, and sincere goodness rate higher than denominational adherence and church attendance. The show's coda reinforces this point: having promised to be "front row center" in church the next Sunday, there is Homer, snoring through Lovejoy's sermon, dreaming of another *tête-à-tête* with God (in which God informs Homer not to be upset, since "nine out of ten religions fail in their first year").

"Send in the Clowns": Analyzing The Simpsons

It is helpful to take a step back and remember that this is (after all) a cartoon, written by comedy writers and drawn by comic artists. Several episodes feature gestures that highlight the characters' traditionally animated hands: three fingers and a thumb. Indeed, whatever "reality" is posited in the program is of the viewers' making. By working both sides of the reality mirror, the show engenders feelings of both identity and difference—the characters are both "us" and "not us." They are "us" in the sense that they are not ideal, but "not us" in the sense that—their cartoonishness aside—they fall far shorter of the mark than we think we do. The television mirror here is a funhouse one, which provides an exaggerated, distorted, yet still recognizable image of ourselves. Ozersky notes this, and criticizes the show not only for failing to provide a positive model, but for rewarding an attitude of

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superiority and ironic smugness in its viewers. Closer to the mark, however, might be Rebeck's observation that such critics "have missed the point. *The Simpsons* is satire," and as such its characters "are not telling people how to act" (Rebeck 1990, 622).

Interestingly, Rebeck illustrates her point with a religious-themed episode; she compares *The Simpsons*' detractors to a minor but recurring character in the show, the Sunday school teacher. Beleaguered by the children's questions about whether their pets will go to heaven—particularly Bart's inquiries about an amputee's leg and a robot with a human brain—she finally blurts out, "All these questions! Is a little blind faith too much to ask for?" ("The Telltale Head"). At best, some critics want proactive television that encourages viewers to maintain a level of "blind faith" in certain cherished ideals and values. At worst, they lambast *The Simpsons* because it fails to reinforce our society's "dominant ideology" with its cherished myths of eternal progress and traditional authority structures.

But exposing a myth to ridicule and debunking it are two different things. Recall that McConnell's highest praise for *The Simpsons* was that "it deconstructs the myth of the happy family wisely and miraculously leaves what is real and valuable about the myth unscathed" (McConnell 1990, 390). Rebeck notes that the Simpsons are not characters to be emulated, but "if anything, they are giving people an outlet so they won't have to act out" (Rebeck 1990, 622). Herein lies another paradox; it is precisely *because* the program fails to offer us any sustained ideals of its own—least of all desirable ideals that challenge the majority—that it serves as a negative model for mainstream ideals of family and religion, if only by default, and offers instead a catharsis generated by a good laugh.

If many of television's early sitcoms were little more than thinly veiled presentations of the "American dream," *The Simpsons* and shows like it come much closer to actually representing "comedy" than most of its predecessors. Himmelstein notes that, to those having difficulty handling "the chaos of daily life," comedy represents "the logical order of the ideal" by revealing the "ludicrous and ridiculous aspects of our existence." It is most powerful, he concludes, "when it is possible for both the artist and the spectator to note the contradictions and value conflicts of society." Comedy shades into satire when it deals with what he calls "traditional and ever-present irritations which people know as evils but which they also find themselves powerless to eradicate" (Himmelstein 1994, 77).

On *The Simpsons*, the disjunction between the way things are and the way they ought to be persists, and any bridge across that gap proves temporary and largely unrecognized by the supposedly victorious Simpsons themselves. At the end of an episode, the family often debates the "lesson" they've learned, with none of them seeming to get the point. Thus, if the inclusion of humor at the expense of institutional structures marks *The Simpsons* as satire, this recurring failure to offer true resolutions distinguishes it as irony.

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Defined by literary critic Alan Wilde, irony in our era is "a mode of consciousness, a perceptual response to a world without unity or cohesion" which nonetheless bears "the potential for affirmation" of both the world's absurdity and its "unfinished" nature (Wilde 1981, 2, 6). Here it seems that the models "of" and "for" society coalesce. Rebeck notes, "The Simpsons show us … what it was about our upbringing that made us brats as kids and neurotic as adults" (Rebeck 1990, 622). They do not show us how to remedy those conditions, implying that they don't need fixing. In an imperfect world one fares best by behaving imperfectly.

Ozersky sees *The Simpsons* functioning this way, with profoundly negative implications for society. He argues that the show makes viewers "less inclined to object to the continuing presence of unsafe workplaces, vast corporations, the therapy racket, and all the other deserving targets of *The Simpsons*' harmless barbs" (Ozersky 1991, 92). But Ozersky fails to see another side to the "irony" coin. For segments of society who *cannot* object to those failings, *The Simpsons* reminds them that they are not *completely* powerless as long as they can laugh at the forces that oppress them. James Chesebro identifies irony as the "communication strategy" of the disenfranchised that reassures an audience because it presents characters who are "intellectually inferior and less able to control circumstances than is the audience" (Chesebro 1979, quoted by Himmelstein 1994, 79). In other words, the character's life is more absurd than the viewers'—a funhouse mirror. This is especially true in cases of what Chesebro calls "unknowing irony" in which the character's "ignorance and social powerlessness" are not feigned. Archie Bunker, the somewhat pitiable and perennially unredeemed bigot of *All in the Family*, is a perfect example of "unknowing irony" from the pre-*Simpsons* television era. In order for ironic programming to serve as a model "for" society, he had to remain unredeemed. Otherwise the show would have been something substantially different from what it was. As Himmelstein notes, self-knowledge and self-criticism in Archie would "sacrifice" the show's "unknowing irony" and turn it from "a biting artistic revelation of bigotry in a contemporary social milieu" to a "a popularized group-therapy session thrown in the audience's face" (Himmelstein 1994, 125). And while *The Simpsons* contains far fewer "serious" moments than *All in the Family* did—Homer is clearly more absurd and less pitiable than Archie ever was—the two proceed in a decidedly "live and don't learn" manner.

Not surprisingly, Homer's lack of intellectual and moral progress is expressed most powerfully in the religious-themed episodes. The accidental baptism in the Springfield River mentioned earlier elicits in him only temporary piety. He becomes a messianic leader for the "Stonecutters" (a men's organization modeled on Freemasonry), but his attempts to get the members to dedicate themselves to charitable acts causes the group to disband ("Homer the Great"). In the "Homer the Heretic" episode, not even a

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face-to-face encounter with the Almighty can change Homer's character. At every turn the opportunity for redemption passes, and Homer is back where he started: marginal, powerless, and unenlightened. In all these episodes, it is not unbelief that is counseled, but rather belief in basic values (for example, charity, camaraderie, and support) in a different way—within the family rather than outside it. In the end, Homer realizes the folly of striving too hard to "belong," and instead ends most episodes proud and confident of who he is, warts and all. As Richard Corliss notes, "Homer isn't bright, but he loves his brood." He is also a faithful husband and father who "will do anything—go skateboarding off a cliff, defy his boss, buy Lisa a pony—if the tots scream loud enough and if Marge gives him a lecture" (Corliss 1994, 77). In other words, Homer's progress (or lack thereof) in each episode reveals a character who can be counted on to do the right thing, if accidentally or begrudgingly. This conveys a sense of an underlying human goodness, however many layers of ineptitude one might have to penetrate to find it.

"All The World Loves a Clown": The Simpsons as Religious Archetypes

And thus we return to the notion of the Simpsons—especially Homer—as "us" and "not us." He has the same values and desires, but expresses them in a buffoonish style. This is the key to discerning the significance of *The Simpsons* not only as satire of religious phenomena, but also as a religious phenomenon in itself. The history of religions has many examples of clowns who convey messages to the faithful. Historian Don Handelman describes the linguistic connections between "buffoon" and "fool" and notes the "affinities" between the fool in medieval drama and the clown as religious performer. According to Handelman, "Clowns are ambiguous and ambivalent figures … The clown in ritual is at once a character of solemnity and fun, of gravity and hilarity, of danger and absurdity, of wisdom and idiocy, and of the sacred and the profane" (Handelman 1987). A character such as Homer Simpson oscillates between knowing and not knowing, between knowing that he knows and not knowing that he knows. He approaches the divine but simultaneously defames it, and thus embodies the irony of a character who knows no real resolution.

In some religions, the identity and difference between clowns and their audiences is an immensely significant dialectic—that paradox of "us" but "not us." In the Hopi tradition, ritual clowns perform actions backward, upside down, or in an otherwise ridiculous fashion—for example, entering a plaza by climbing head-first down a ladder. They may engage in exaggerated simulated intercourse and perform other activities that violate Hopi social norms. Interpretations have stressed two aspects: entertainment value, and the pedagogic value of illustrating the foolishness of misbehaving. In this sense, Hopi clowns foster a sense of superiority among the audience

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members who know more and are more sophisticated than the clowns. However, as Emory Sekaquaptewa notes, clowns, while parodies of the society, must be recognizable in order to have an effect. It may be a funhouse mirror, but it's still a mirror, and clowns show that the way *not* to behave is precisely the way we often behave in an imperfect world. As Sekaquaptewa explains, clowns show that people "have only their worldly ambition and aspirations by which to gain a spiritual world of eternity … We cannot be perfect in this world after all and if we are reminded that we are clowns, maybe we can have, from time to time, introspection as a guide to lead us right" (Sekaquaptewa 1989, 151).

Thus sacred clowns, through their mockery of norms, serve to reinforce a tradition's values. They "contradict the laws of society to remind people of distinctions between the sacred and profane. They cross ordinary boundaries in order to define them" (Bastien 1987). *The Simpsons* represents both a model of and a model for contemporary American society, not only because it reveals contemporary attitudes about religious institutions, morality, and spirituality, but also because it functions in the time-honored way of religious satirists. As Joseph Bastien notes, "Traditionally, religions have employed humor and satire to bring people together and dissolve their differences. Clownish antics … [are] not intended to desecrate the sacred but to dispel some of the rigidity and pomposity of the church-goers" (*ibid.*). The targets of *The Simpsons*' ridicule are hardly malevolent forces, but rather exponents of what Victoria Rebeck calls a "sincere but useless" form of religion, teaching us that the most ridiculous thing a person can do is take anything in life too seriously (Rebeck 1990, 622). "The laughter of fools," Bastien says, is "praise to a God who disdain[s] pride among his people" (Bastien 1987). But surely such a God would permit us to be proud of ourselves for getting the joke.

Conclusion: "A Noble Spirit Embiggens the Smallest Man"

In a cartoon universe that thrives on irony, satire, and endless subversion, there can be no heresy save an unreasonable dedication to convention. In Homer's world, and perhaps in our own, there is no longer a well-defined orthodoxy against which a meaningful heresy might be mounted. This does not diminish the fact that the Simpsons fulfill the important function of the sacred clowns—sustaining what is important by poking fun at religious conventions. What is important to believe and do, however, defies description. In keeping with the show's insight into the contemporary religious scene, there is a persistent message of a loss of institutional authority (although institutional practice and loyalty linger) coupled with diverse forms of personal and noninstitutional religiosity. In this light, the would-be "heretic" Homer fulfills the role of the American spiritual wanderer; though linked culturally (if unsteadily and unenthusiastically) to biblical tradition,

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he regularly engages a mosaic of other traditions, mythologies, and moral codes. In the face of these ever-shifting layers of meaning, he stumbles along, making the most of his limited understanding of their complexities. His comic antics remind us that the making of meaning (religious or otherwise) is ever an unfinished business, and that humor and irony go a long way toward sweetening and sustaining the endeavor.

Post-Script: The Hoary Heresy

In February of 2009 *The Simpsons* surpassed *Gunsmoke* as the longest-running prime-time series in American history. Well into its twentieth season, over 438 original episodes have been aired, and the show has won virtually every award given out by the television industry. Add to this a successful feature film, a wide-ranging Web presence, comic books, video games and toys, and *The Simpsons* arguably has as large and diverse a footprint in American popular culture as any television series in history. A generation of Americans has now grown up with the show, and it runs continuously in syndication around the world in over a dozen languages. Although rumors about cancellation have circulated for years and ratings have fluctuated, it has been renewed through 2011 and the principal cast members have signed contracts to continue their roles.

Our original intent with this chapter was to examine critically the religious dimensions of the show, particularly where these afforded insights into contemporary American religion. In doing so, we believe our efforts helped set the tone for subsequent writing about religion on the Simpsons. Over the past decade, other scholars, journalists, and even theologians have taken up the religious dimensions of the show. Probably the best known book-length study is Mark Pinsky's *The Gospel According to the Simpsons* (2001), which drew judiciously on our work in the first edition of *God in the Details*. More recently, other texts have argued for a "systematic theology" embedded in the show and promoted its use for pastoral purposes (Heit 2008). Some of our original insights are now dated—for example, the prime-time "taboo" against religious topics and characters found in content analyses of the 1980s lifted in subsequent decades. In part this was due to the expansion of cable networks, some of which began to pursue niche religious audiences. Another factor was the higher public profile of religion in American public life that corresponded to the political potency of conservative Protestantism. But certainly the innovative approach to religious topics developed by *The Simpsons*' creative teams deserves some credit for opening the door to more religious content on television. In our estimation, the show's "core religious values"—a playful mixture of subversive satire, irony and subtle affirmation—that emerged in the early seasons have been sustained. Thus our analysis of early-season favorites like "Homer the Heretic" and "Homer vs. Lisa and the

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Eighth Commandment" resonates with religiously themed episodes in later seasons.

The show has continued to explore the religious lives of its main characters, and even some minor characters, in considerable depth. Usually this has involved forays into the varied dimensions of American Christianity. Episodes have looked at faith healing ("Faith Off"), missionary work ("Missionary Impossible"), apocalypticism ("Thank God Its Doomsday"), prayer ("Pray Anything"), and denominational switching ("The Father, the Son and the Holy Guest Star," aired 2005). The public debates about religion and its place in society—often identified as the "culture wars"—get regular airing on the show, including two episodes on the evolution debate ("Lisa the Skeptic" and "The Monkey Suit") and another on the rise of Christian theme parks ("I'm Goin' to Praiseland"). Of course, the most persistent religious dimension of the show has been the relationship between the Simpsons and their evangelical neighbor, Ned Flanders. Although Ned undergoes a significant crisis of faith in one episode ("Hurricane Neddy"), and loses his wife in another ("Alone Again, Natura-Didily"), his character typically is shown as a committed Christian, struggling to maintain his cheerfulness and ethical ideals in the face of the frequent taunts and tribulations perpetrated by his less devout neighbors. That he sustains his faith, more or less, throughout, perhaps helps explain the show's broad appeal. Shrewdly, its creators hit upon a formula that secular fans can read as sharp religious critique of narrow-minded scriptural literalism. At the same time Christian viewers (who have embraced Ned) can find parables of patience and forbearance.

In addition to its limning of the Christian mainstream, the Simpsons' spiritual curiosity often wanders down the varied paths of American religious pluralism. Noteworthy episodes include one where Lisa, upset at the "megachurching" of Springfield, adopts Buddhist ethics ("She of Little Faith"), and another in which Apu, owner of the local convenience store, gets married in a Hindu ceremony in the Simpsons' backyard ("The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemapetilons"). In "The Joy of Sect," the Simpsons join a cult called the Movementarians. Although ostensibly satirizing groups like Scientology and intentional communities like Rajneeshpuram, the episode simultaneously skewers mainstream misunderstanding and moral panic in response to new religions. Krusty the Clown, a rueful lapsed Jew in early seasons, finally becomes a bar mitzvah in season 15 ("Today I am a Clown"). Islam, perhaps the most challenging tradition for an American comedy show, finally gets a Simpsons treatment in 2008 ("Mypods and Broomsticks"). As the range of traditions covered has expanded, so has the criticism—often with the same ambiguity that we found in our survey of critics from the show's early years (these were mostly from Christian and Jewish writers). Thus, for example, Pinsky finds that while some American Hindus see Apu as an offensive stereotype and dislike the show's flagrant

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distortion of doctrinal issues, others recognize that the primary target of the show's satire is mainstream ignorance of Hindu traditions (Pinsky 2001, 128–29).

Why the persistent emphasis on religion and religious characters? Perhaps the obvious answer is the longevity of the show, which has afforded (even demanded) explorations of every facet of American culture, religion included. Add to this the economic advantages enjoyed by cartoons; one actor can voice multiple characters, hence the affordability of having lots of them, including the spiritually inclined. More qualitatively, why has the show maintained a relatively consistent tone in its treatment of religion? For all their mockery and satire, the creators seem genuinely affectionate toward their main characters and their spiritual striving. Our original essay argued that *The Simpsons*' humor, particularly its use of irony, was a strategic response to a sense of powerless and disenfranchisement that had crept in American life in the late twentieth century. Thus it was pitch-perfect for a media-saturated society whose religious sensibilities had strayed from traditional institutions, but not entirely disappeared. The George W. Bush-era assertiveness of "strong religion" notwithstanding, this ironic stance remains potent. By some measures, Americans waver and wander in their beliefs as much as ever, and institutionalized religions (alongside most other major social institutions) have suffered sharp declines in public confidence (Silver 2009). The recognition of this trend as a rich vein for comedy is among *The Simpsons*' greatest strengths—as invigorating today as it was innovative at the show's conception. Early on, its creative teams found their religious path, and, despite occasional twists and turns along the way, have kept the faith. Homer's spiritual pratfalls and confusions endure, in part, because they help leaven enduring anxieties about the eclectic and irresolute condition of American religious life.

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Notes

1 Title names are taken from Richmond and Coffman (1997) and are rarely used on the air.
2 In February 1997, the program passed *The Flintstones* to become the longest running prime-time animated series.
3 See Richmond and Coffman (1997).

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4 See Rosenthal (1992, A17). Writers for *The Simpsons* responded. In one episode Bart quips, "We're just like the Waltons. We're praying for the Depression to end, too." In another incident, Bush administration "drug czar" William Bennett noted he would "sit down with the little spikehead [Bart]" and "straighten this thing out." The show's producers replied: "If our drug czar thinks he can sit down and talk this out with a cartoon character, he must be on something" (Olive 1992, 61).
5 The American Family Association commissioned this study, often highlighting opinions compatible with its criticism of television programming. However, the article eventually appeared in a refereed journal. The study took place during the first year *The Simpsons* aired, and probably included several episodes in its sample. None of the explicitly religious episodes discussed here aired until 1991. There is little quantified research to challenge its basic findings (see *Christianity Today* 1992, 60).
6 Every device is used to obscure Springfield's location. The fact that *Father Knows Best* was located in a "Springfield" seems only to reinforce *The Simpsons*' contrasting image of traditional American television families.
7 Jackie Mason, who trained for the rabbinate before entering show business, provides the father's voice.
8 The comet disintegrates in the thick layer of smog permanently settled over the town, making Lovejoy's rantings that much more ridiculous. However, Ned's personal religiosity is redeemed; he selflessly offers his family's fallout shelter to the unprepared townspeople and leaves it when it fills beyond capacity. The shelter collapses just as everyone—moved by Ned's generosity and singing "*Que sera, sera*"—exits to face down the comet with him. Flanders has, in effect, saved the town twice: once by generosity and once by selfless example, both motivated by his religious sensibilities.
9 This scene inspired Michael Medved's criticism noted above.