

## Simpson Family Values

[Edited Transcript]

**A Sermon by Kim Lynn  
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My family jokes that the TV remote at our house is stuck on the Home and Garden Channel. I also freely admit to enjoying PBS, BBC America, the Food Channel, and HBO. But the show I've always considered somewhat of a guilty pleasure is *The Simpsons*. So I was surprised to come across a book at Barnes and Noble entitled *The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh! of Homer*. I bought it, thinking it would be a great topic for one of our summer sermons and I pitched the idea to the head of the worship committee, Arlen Goff. He agreed. Unfortunately I hadn't exactly read the book before making this suggestion, and it turned out the book wasn't as funny as I thought it should have been. This led to another partially formed idea for a sermon on UUs and humor, so I went searching on the Internet where I came across literally hundreds of references to religion and *The Simpsons* – most of which cited a book titled *The Gospel According to the Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of America's Most Animated Family*, by Mark Pinsky, a religion writer for *The Orlando Sentinel*. Having learned my lesson the first time, I didn't rush out and buy this book. But I was rather astonished to see that lot of other intelligent and sophisticated people apparently really, really like *The Simpsons*. And that a number of strange bedfellows think that it is one of the most religion-friendly shows on television today. Articles on the show's portrayal of religious life have appeared in *The Door*, a religious humor magazine; *PRISM*, a monthly magazine published by Evangelicals for Social Action; the liberal *Christian Century* and the conservative *Christianity Today*. Pinsky's book was reviewed by a visiting theologian and biomedical ethicist for *Duke University Magazine*. The show was the subject of a master's thesis by a graduate student at Pat Robertson's Regent University, and was a main feature of a 2001/2002 winter undergraduate class offering at Catholic Siena Heights University in Michigan entitled Religion, Philosophy, & Pop Culture. Maybe all of this shouldn't have been such a surprise, since, as theologian Reinhold Niebuhr says, "Humor is a prelude to faith, and laughter is the beginning of prayer". By the way, I did buy the book last week.

Of course, all of the preceding is not to say that the show is universally praised for its treatment of religion, or even universally praised period. Conservative curmudgeon and former Education Secretary William Bennett said that there was nothing wrong with Bart Simpson "...that a Catholic school, a paper route and a couple of soap sandwiches wouldn't straighten out." No less an authority on family values than President George Herbert Walker Bush, in a speech to religious broadcasters, called for a society more closely resembling *The Waltons* than *The Simpsons*. To which cartoon character Bart replied, "Hey, we're just like the Waltons. We're praying for an end to the Depression, too."

So what is it about *The Simpsons* that has generated all this discussion? Proceeding on the assumption that nearly everyone here has at least some familiarity with father Homer, mother Marge, son Bart, daughter Lisa, baby Maggie, and a few other Springfieldians, let's look at how *The Simpsons* came to be what *The Gospel's* book jacket calls "...one of the most theologically relevant programs in prime time".

The characters that would eventually become the Simpsons began screen life in 1988 as an occasional feature on Fox's *The Tracey Ullman Show*. The cartoon was a hit and creator Matt Groening expanded the concept to series-length. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1989, the special *Simpsons Roasting Over an Open Fire* aired on Fox, and television hasn't been the same since.

In its early years, *The Simpsons* focused on eight-year-old Bart: in his words, "Underachiever - and proud of it". What most of us remember from that time are his catchphrases "Don't have a cow, man" and "Eat my shorts." Individuals and religious organizations were critical of the smart-alecky kid and the show's irreverence. Based on his interview with the show's staff, Mark Pinsky estimates that 80 percent of the show's writers over the past dozen years have been either skeptics or atheists. But there also are, or have been, practicing Catholics and Jews, and those who consider themselves believing Christians, if not fans of organized religion. Over the course of the 90s, the characters that the writers created for fictional Springfield are a microcosm of American religious - and particularly Protestant - types, and the series has evolved into one of the only shows to consistently depict religion and faith as an integral part of American life.

The overwhelming majority of religious programming on television is evangelistic outreach. Other than "boutique" religious shows such as *Touched by an Angel* and *7th Heaven*, most popular prime-time television series avoid anything other than the most tangential references to religion, although weddings and funerals are often central to the plot. On *The Simpsons*, however, according to one analysis, some 70% of episodes contained at least one religious reference, and in 11%, the plot centered on a religious issue. "Right-wingers complain there's no God on TV," Matt Groening said in an interview in *Mother Jones* magazine. "Not only do the Simpsons go to church every Sunday and pray, they actually speak to God from time to time. We show Him, and God has five fingers - unlike the Simpsons, who only have four."

Just about everyone in the fictional town of Springfield attends the First Church of Springfield, presided over by the Reverend Timothy Lovejoy, whom writer Ryan Beiler describes as "...[a] quasi-omni-denominational pastor [with] the sanctimonious and sedative drawl of a televangelist on Valium." Homer once referred to him as "that guy who gives those sermons at church: Captain Whatshisname." Sometimes he's a fundamentalist book-burner: on the episode where Lisa discovers what appears to be the skeleton of an angel, Lovejoy rejoices that, "Science has faltered once again in the face of overwhelming religious evidence". Ultimately, the so-called skeleton turns out to be a publicity stunt for a new shopping mall. On other occasions, Lovejoy seems to be burned out and just going through the motions - for instance, he uses the public library's Bible, and once told Ned Flanders that the world's religions are "...all pretty much the same". He preaches a sermon titled, "Gambling: the 8th Deadly Sin," but his church holds bingo and Monte Carlo nights. The marquee announces other sermon topics such as "Evil women in history: from Jezebel to Janet Reno"; "No shoes, no shorts, no salvation"; "God welcomes His victims"; and "Next Sunday: the miracle of shame". In one episode, Marge tells her kids that they need to go to church "to learn morals and decency and how to love your fellow man." The scene then cuts to Rev. Lovejoy reading from the pulpit: "With flaming swords the Aramites did pierce the eyes of their fellow men, and did feast on what flowed forth". As Ryan Beiler points out, "The scripture is bogus, but you and I and Matt Groening know there's worse stuff that really **is** in the Bible."

Even Lovejoy's non-violent sermons, which according to Marge are always about "constancy" and "prudissitude", are examples of why many real churchgoers are turned off by rote recitations from a passionless pulpit. Lovejoy drones: "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 ..." he's then interrupted by Bart making snoring noises and telling the preacher that he's bored. Lovejoy responds by saying, "Hey, I'm doing my best with the material I have."

Although Reverend Lovejoy may represent some of the worst characteristics of mainstream Protestantism, the fact that the pews are packed each Sunday also shows that the citizens of Springfield do find spiritual fulfillment in the presence of their church community, and can get the message in spite of the messenger.

In sharp contrast with The Reverend Timothy Lovejoy is Simpson neighbor Ned Flanders. He's an authentic Christian who puts his faith in action, although he can be overzealous, and he's admittedly thoroughly repressed ("You name it, I haven't done it"). He collects Bibles - including the Aramaic Septuagint, the Vulgate of St. Jerome, the Living Bible and the Thump-Proof Bible. He is such a pious goody two-shoes that he doesn't let his children use dice when playing board games because the playing pieces are "wicked", and the family vacations at what is advertised as "America's Most Judgmental Religious Theme Park." Despite this, as Mark Pinsky says, "He's a doofus, but he's not hypocritical, which has been the sin of most American religious leaders. He's an essentially good person." Though Homer refers to Ned as "Saint Flanders", "Charlie Church", and "Churchy La Femme", Flanders is usually the one who ends up rescuing Homer from whatever mess he's gotten himself into. And when Flanders suffers a breakdown and is condemned by the church, it's Homer who tells members of the congregation, "This man has turned every cheek on his body. If everyone here were like Ned Flanders, there'd be no need for heaven: We'd already be there." Yet even Flanders questions his faith, inevitably comparing himself to Job, when only his home and his business are destroyed by a hurricane: "Why me, Lord? Where have I gone wrong? I've always been nice to people! I don't drink or dance or swear! I've even kept kosher just to be on the safe side! I've done everything the Bible says; even the stuff that contradicts the other stuff! What more could I do?" While Flanders is, of course, a parody like the rest of the characters on the show, he's generally portrayed positively, so much so that Christianity Today placed Ned Flanders, garbed as a medieval saint, on the cover of its February 5, 2001, issue, calling him the most well-known Christian on American college campuses.

And then there's Homer. He's a habitual liar - but he tells wife Marge: "It takes two to lie - one to lie and one to listen". When Marge chastises Bart for trying to lie his way out of a bad situation, Homer tells her: "Marge, don't discourage the boy! Weaseling out of things is important to learn. It's what separates us from the animals! Except the weasel." He's the embodiment of the seven deadly sins. For example, gluttony - he wraps a half-cooked waffle around a stick of butter - and eats it. Homer's knowledge of theology is as weak as his ability to resist temptation. He refers to the time when God teased Moses in the wilderness, and he believes that Hercules and the Lion is a Bible story. Asked by Bart what the family's religious beliefs are, Homer answers, "You know, the one with all the well-meaning rules that don't work in real life. Uh, Christianity." But even Homer is sometimes confused about what the family believes in. Watching the "Rapping Rabbis" on television, Homer asks Marge, "Are we Jewish?"

What Homer does remember of the Bible tends to be Old Testament. Thinking that a house fire he started by falling asleep with a lit cigar was a punishment from God, Homer falls to his knees and cries: "The Lord is vengeful! Oh Spiteful One, show me who to smite, and he shall be smoten!" And when Marge suggests that Otto, the stoned school-bus driver, move into the Simpsons' garage after losing his house, she says, "I know we didn't ask for this, Homer, but doesn't the Bible say, 'Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do

unto me...?" " Yes, Homer replies, "but doesn't the Bible also say, 'Thou shalt not take... moochers into thy... hut?' " Homer also engages in the time-honored tradition of bargaining with God. "God, if you really are God, you'll get me tickets to that game." Ned Flanders then shows up at Homer's door with tickets. "Why do you mock me O Lord?" Homer moans.

Even Marge, Homer's long-suffering wife isn't above the bargain prayer. When the latest natural disaster threatens to wipe out Springfield, Marge says, "Dear Lord, if you spare this town from becoming a smoking hole in the ground, I'll try to be a better Christian. I don't know what I can do... Hmm... oh, the next time there's a canned food drive, I'll give the poor something they'll actually like instead of old lima beans and pumpkin mix." But mostly, Marge is a combination of compassion, conviction, and common sense. When Rev. Lovejoy neglects his pastoral care duties, Marge takes over the church's advice line, becoming the popular "Listen Lady". When Lovejoy and Flanders protest an exhibition of Michelangelo's David at the Springfield museum, it is Marge who goes on television defending Art. And in an episode based on the classic story *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, Homer sells his soul to the devil for a donut. It is Marge who triumphs in Hell's courtroom when she produces a copy of their wedding picture, where Homer wrote a pledge that he gave **Marge** his soul forever. Marge shows that you can follow your head **and** your heart. She's like a lot of folks, accepting the good news message and rejecting what is counter to it. She tells her oldest daughter, "There has to be more to life than just what we see, Lisa. Everyone needs something to believe in."

If Marge is the show's moral center, then bad boy Bart definitely lives on the fringe. In one episode, Bart starts on his way to Heaven after a traffic accident, but because he did not hold on to the handrail of the escalator and spat over the edge, he is sent to Hell. Satan checks his computer and discovers that a mistake has been made.

**Devil:** Boy, is my face red... According to this you're not due to arrive until... nearly a century from now.

**Bart:** Say, is there anything I can do to avoid coming back here?

**Devil:** Oh, sure, yeah, But you wouldn't like it.

**Bart:** Oh, OK. See you later then.

**Devil:** Remember! Lie, cheat, steal and listen to heavy metal music!

**Bart:** Yessir!

The character of Bart, according to creator Matt Groening, is a composite of himself as a child, the cartoon Dennis the Menace, and Eddie Haskell of *Leave It to Beaver*, all boys who did bad stuff and got away with it. While Bart represents rebellion against authority, one of the most important roles he fulfills on the show is similar to that of the boy in "The Emperor's New Clothes". From his previously-mentioned critique of Revered Lovejoy's boring sermons, to the controversial mealtime grace, "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing", Bart gives voice to feelings that many adults secretly agree with, but would certainly never say out loud.

Lisa Simpson seems to be the only Springfield resident who routinely considers the great moral and philosophical issues of the world, and, more importantly, acts on her convictions. When she's given the chance to sing the national anthem before a football game, Lisa uses the opportunity to announce to the crowd that college football drains funds that are badly needed for education and the arts. When grandfather Abe Simpson unexpectedly inherits a hundred thousand dollars, Lisa is the only one who advises giving it people who deserve it: those on the street and in the slums. Children who need more library books, and whose families can't make ends meet. In one episode, Lisa, brother Bart, and his friend Milhouse have a debate on the nature of the soul. Bart says the soul is just something grownups have made up to scare children, "like the boogie man or Michael

Jackson.” Milhouse disagrees, citing that almost every world religion believes in the concept of the soul. Lisa also agrees, interjecting that the soul is “the most valuable part of you...the only one that lasts forever. Whether or not it is physically real, it’s the symbol of everything that’s fine inside us.” As author Pinsky says, bear in mind that this discussion is taking place in an animated sitcom, not a Bill Moyers special on PBS!

Yet even Lisa can get overwhelmed by carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. Working on a school science project, she accidentally creates a microworld and becomes venerated as a god by the tiny people inhabiting it. Later, when she is shrunk down to their size, her people ask her, as the Creator, why she allows bad things to happen. Her answer? “Shouldn’t you people be groveling?”

As previously mentioned, Springfield is predominantly Protestant. But other religions are represented and skewered also. There is the improbably named Temple Beth Springfield (congregations are usually either Temple or Beth, not both), and the Rabbi is Hyman Krustofsky, father of TV kiddie show host Krusty the Clown. The Catholic Church is Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow and the nuns run Saint Sebastian’s School for Wicked Girls. One of the most kindly characters on the show is Hindu Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, owner of the local Kwik-E-Mart. In keeping with his beliefs, he is a strict vegan, but to his sorrow, his attempts to bridge the gap between East and West with tofu dogs and chutney Squishees have met with complete disinterest from customers. And finally, in a bit of really obscure Simpsonian trivia, the two big, green extra-terrestrials, Kang and Kodo, identify themselves as “Quantum-Presbyterians”.

Unitarian Universalists are not spared, either. Somewhat surprisingly, given our small number of members, we take a disproportionate number of hits. At the church’s Ice Cream Social, Lisa asks Rev. Lovejoy for the Unitarian ice cream. When given an empty bowl, Lisa complains that there’s nothing there. “Exactly,” says Lovejoy. In another episode, Homer exclaims, “If that’s the one true faith, I’ll eat my hat”. And Flanders’ boys Rod and Todd play a video game whose object is to convert sinners by launching lightning bolts at them. When they miss one, they remark “...only winged him; now he’s a Unitarian”.

Author Mark Pinsky cites three episodes as excellent examples of complex moral dilemmas that are presented with a finely crafted balance of insight and humor. The first is “Homer the Heretic”, which explores issues such as how does God want to be worshipped, and, more deeply, why does an omnipotent God need to be worshipped at all? The second is “Homer vs. Lisa and the Eighth Commandment”, with a central plot about so-called victimless crimes like stealing cable TV, where Lisa has to reconcile her disgust with the family’s breaking the law, her concern for Homer’s soul, and the very real desire of a child to keep peace in the house. The third episode is “Like Father, Like Clown”, a reworking of the classic *The Jazz Singer*, where Bart and Lisa try to reunite Krusty the Clown with his father the rabbi.

The purpose of *The Simpsons* is, first and foremost, to entertain. The extensive inclusion of religious topics and activities is deliberate, since it does reflect the importance of faith in American life, and it also provides a great source of comic material. From its initial beginnings as irreverent and iconoclastic, the show has matured into a witty, sometimes wicked, funhouse mirror distorting the reflection of Everywhere, USA. It may not be PBS, but I plan to keep watching, and I hope you will, too.

Source material:

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