

The Simpsons

By

Jenna Mowbray

Supervisor: Dr. Richard Ascough

Master's essay submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree Master of Arts in the School of
Religion

at

4
5
7
8

10
14
20
22

24

My eternal thanks to my parents who have supported me in my endeavour to continue pursuing my academic goals.

Thanks to my supervisor Dr. Richard Ascough for his patience and guidance.

Thank you to the wonderful group of students with whom I shared this experience with.

Thank you to all those at the Queen's School of Religion for their support and making this process an atmosphere of learning and growth.

is a popular American television show that has been on the air for almost thirty years. Religion has had a prominent place in the series, as the writers look to parody life in the United States. While the setting is in a predominately Christian town and nation, there are portrayals of those who follow non-Christian religion. Using David Feltmate's concept of ignorant familiarity, this paper looks closer at how non-Christian religions are portrayed throughout the series. Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, New Religious Movements, Indigenous Spiritually and Other Traditions appear at various points in the series. How these traditions are portrayed reflect how the average viewer can recognize non-Christian religions. The complex nature of these portrayals through established characters and new characters, illuminate how writers expect people to understand and recognise the religious identities of the characters and references that they make

The Simpsons

The focus on religion, media and culture began in the 1950s and 1960s and has grown

Klassen writes that “when popular culture takes on the themes of religion and spirituality, religious studies scholars cannot afford to cast it aside as simply entertainment. These products, and the way people interpret them say much about the religious aura and attitudes of our societies” (Klassen 2014,1). From this, we can see that the intersection of religion and popular culture is an important area for the scholar to consider to better understand how people are integrating belief systems into their lives.

There are many issues to consider when talking about religion and popular culture, the first is to consider how these terms are defined. Both

through mass media. It can be seen to be reflective of the mores and values that a larger society holds. This reflects Bruce Lincoln's discussion of *Culture and Class*, in which the capital 'C' culture reflects the high culture, and the lower case 'c' culture represents the popular culture. Lincoln distinguishes between these two types of culture as representing a differentiation between those with the power and wealth in society and those without, and therefore 'Culture' is not attainable for all and is controlled (Lincoln 2009, 412). Clark argues that the wide appeal of popular culture does not exist in a vacuum, as "it fails to acknowledge that products and practices which are widespread and widely appreciated, can achieve this status in a variety of ways...[they] may arise as a result of the conscious efforts by some to influence the value of others" (Clark 2012, 7). The assumption is that *popular culture* is something that is easily recognizable by the broader population, but it is unable to reflect every single individual identity. Popular culture is also closely tied to commodification as it is often spread through mass media, which is tied to capitalist consumption. Forbes argues that *popular culture* "both reflects us and shapes us" (Forbes 2000, 4). In this way, popular culture is a valuable area to bring under academic scrutiny, as it can give insight to societal ideology and explain why certain values and mores are prevalent in a society.

Religion also is a term that is highly debated. Forbes argues that the definition of religion needs to be broad and inclusive, to reflect the various ways that people consider themselves to be and practice being religious (Forbes 2000, 9). He does not land on "one conclusive definition"

have learned what religion is and what the religious do “from their elders, family, religious traditions or larger society” (Clark 2012, 3). For Clark, while defining religion is of academic interest, when we are considering how the lived experience of religion manifests in their everyday life, the important aspect is to consider how the people describe it. Many scholars turn to phenomenological or functional definitions to match how people experience both religion and popular culture.

Bringing together religion and popular culture gives the scholar a chance to study the lived experience of people. Lived religion and material religion reflect ways in which the ‘religious’ manifests in the daily lives of humans. Material religion looks at religion outside of texts and doctrine, it concerns itself with cultural productions of the practitioners (Meyer et al, 2010). From this perspective, we are not focused on what higher authorities may dictate what it means to be a member of a religious group, but what those that label themselves as group members consider their religion in their daily lives. Through this lens, we can see how the study of Religion and Popular Culture can tell us about the on-the-ground practices and beliefs of human beings.

first came to television audiences in 1987 as bumper shorts for

more intelligent than the rest of her family and most of those around her, she has a passion for social justice but also is shown to succumb to ponies like a stereotypical little girl; and baby Maggie, while she does not talk, her actions show her to be the protector of her family and wise beyond her years. Being an animated comedy these characters have not aged nor changed much in 30 years. Their identifying characteristic is their bright yellow skin. They live in the fictional town of Springfield in an unnamed state in the USA, though their appeal is somewhat universal as the show is seen all over the world in more than 70 different countries and in dozens of languages (Pinsky 2007, 2). The show has become a recognizable part of American (and perhaps even Western) popular culture. It is an important artefact to understand the changes in ideas about larger trends in American society. Humour itself is an important aspect as we need to understand to why a joke is funny.

The religiosity of

not encountered. To determine the ways in which conventional¹ other religions like Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and New Religious Movements, Indigenous Spirituality and Other traditions are portrayed in *The Simpsons* we will consider episodes where the Non-Christian religion is a prominent aspect of an episode's plot and a character's identity. We will consider what images are used to represent the religion as well as what is said and done by the characters. Some of these religions are represented by conversion of one or more family member, while others are tied to established characters and, even in a few cases, the introduction of completely new characters. The characterization and identities of Krusty the Clown and Apu Nahasapeemapetilon represent established characters with Jewish and Hindu identities respectively, and their prominence across the series shows how they both have negotiated their religious identities in Springfield. The introduction of a Muslim family in the 20th season brings Islam into the show with actual characters, although we will explore the ways that Islam has been referred to throughout the series and what this means for Muslim representation. The conversion of Lisa Simpson to Buddhism allows for a discussion on Western Buddhist Converts and the way that the Buddha and the Dali Lama are used to show a singular view of Buddhist practices. New Religious Movements, Indigenous Spirituality and Other Traditions will round out the plethora of ways that religions from around the world have been referenced by the writers of the series.

In *Drawn to the Gods*, David Feltmate introduces the idea of ignorant familiarity to understand the way viewers understand the jokes. He describes it as a

¹ The consideration of what is a conventional religion is based on the study by Knott, Poole and Taira (2013) in which they looked for religions and religious themes on British television. They based their use of the term

widespread superficial – and often erroneous – knowledge about groups of

this is an Orthodox Jewish community, while these same images tell the uninformed, or those with some ignorant familiarity with Judaism, that there is a difference that separates these Jews as other. The role of the Rabbi in the community is shown as a young Krusty and his father walk down the street. Rabbi Krustofsky is stopped by several members of the community for advice on furthering their education, having more children, and what car to buy (which the Rabbi asks for the asker to reform the question as an ethical question, and is then asked if “it is right to buy a Chrysler”). Young Krusty then tells his father that he wants to be a clown when he grows up, which his father rejects saying that “a clown is not a respected member of the community. Life is not fun, it’s serious.” After defying his father and performing as a clown Krusty is found out and his father tells him he has brought shame on their family and that he never wants to see him again.

For Rabbi Krustofsky being a Jew and Clown is not compatible. While it is not explored explicitly how Krusty feels about this, throughout the episode he is shown getting more and more despondent about his separation from his father, and this can reflect that he sees his life as empty without his father and by association his faith. He does not deny that he is a Jew, but he also is not shown practicing any Jewish rituals in this episode (rituals and traditions shown in episodes after this one are explored below). The main thrust of the episode is the Simpson children engaging with the Rabbi in philosophical debate in an attempt to mend the rel

ritual significance. It is worth reiterating that while Jewish spectators are likely to see such customs as a natural part of a scene, non-Jews do not necessarily even 'see' the actions portrayed" (2008, 302). This speaks to the idea of ignorant familiarity, in which the viewer can recognize some aspects of the representation but not its entirety. Therefore, those viewers that

and broadcast live. The event turns into a garish spectacle, with the Beach Boys, The Lion King, the world's largest Latke as part of the entertainment. The event is capped off with Krusty spinning actor and celebrity Mister T (who is not even Jewish) on a menorah shooting off

similarly dressed man (the assumption is that this man is a Jew as well) by dancing around. It is of note that Krusty never directly deals with his father's objections, which are played as more passive aggressive than direct. His father was clearly willing to perform the wedding and therefore it seems he put his opinion aside for the sake of his son.

In the 2014 episode "Clown in the Dumps" Rabbi Krustofsky passes away. After being roasted by his fellow comedians Krusty looks to his father to assure him that he is funny. In the middle of talking to him the Rabbi passes away saying "eh" so Krusty is left wondering what that means and whether his father appreciated his humour. The funeral is held in a synagogue and Krusty speaks a Yiddish proverb "An empty barrel reverberates loudly, today my heart is that barrel". The images in the synagogue show menorahs and the star of David. The congregation has men and women sitting together, which is reflective of more liberal synagogues. One aspect of this episode is Krusty dreaming of Jewish heaven. In his first dream, his vision of Jewish heaven is interrupted by his father reminding him that there is no Jewish heaven and that he needs to help people to help himself feel better. Krusty learns from Bart that his father's favourite student is a Rabbi who shares Krusty's brand of humour, from this Krusty believes his father must have thought he was funny. He tells Bart "My father respected me but couldn't tell me, that's Jewish heaven." Resolved he again dreams of Jewish heaven in which he and his father float in the dead sea with cocktails. The mixture of the real-world ritual with the corresponding beliefs help to shape an idea of what death means for Krusty with respect to his Jewish identity.

There is no one episode that deals with Jewish holidays and festivals. In "Like Father Like Clown" when Bart and Lisa visit the Rabbi the sign on the synagogue, Temple Beth

Springfield, reads “This Saturday ‘Coping with Christmas’”. In “Today I am a Clown” Krusty refuses to work on Saturdays to observe the Sabbath, though he seems to have made no objections before. When studying for his bar mitzvah his father covers the rules for Jews and one is that they must eat Chinese food on Christmas. In the episode “The Nightmare After Krustmas” Krusty has trouble bonding with his daughter around the holiday season as she is a Christian and he doesn’t celebrate Christmas, leading the Simpsons to step in to welcome the Clown and his offspring into their home to help them come together (this episode is discussed in more detail below). Hanukah is only mentioned at the end of the episode in a scene in which it appears that the Christian God and Jewish God are sitting together (the Christian God has the classical image of a long flowing white robe and beard, the Jewish God looks the same but wears a prayer shawl and a star of David around his neck, neither have their faces visible). The Jewish God says “Krusty is back on team Hanukah”, while the Christian God argues that though his baptism went wrong he was still “under the water”. This image of separate Gods resonates the separation of Jewishness and Christianness and with the Jewish God needing visual cues to identify himself (i.e. the star of David) shows that he is the deviation from the norm. In terms of ignorant familiarity, this shows that the writers know that the viewer will recognize ‘God’ but needs to be adorned with certain visuals to tell the viewer what they are seeing. The norm for the viewer is a God with a white robe and flowing beard.

Krusty and his father use many Yiddish words and phrases to emphasize their Jewishness. In his overview of the series, Pinsky finds “Yiddish expressions, usually voiced by Krusty, abound: tucchus (butt) and yutz (empty head), plotz (burst), bupkes (nothing), ferkakteh (execrable), schlemiel (bungler), and schmutz (mess)” (2007, 166). Even Bart, after failing to

convince Rabbi Krustofsky to reunite with his son utters “Oh vey!” Krusty’s use of Yiddish is also the catalyst to discovering his daughter has been raised Christian (as discussed in detail below), and her use of Yiddish at the end of the episode sends the message that she has embraced a little of her Jewish heritage.

The visual representations of Jewishness are used to denote the otherness of the Jews in Springfield. In the Jewish neighbourhood, the men and women are dressed differently than the regular crowds in other parts of the town. The men and women are dressed in darker colours with head coverings and the men sport long beards. The yarmulke is present on men and boys, though most men wear a wide brim hat. There are also prayer shawls on men’s shoulders, even when they are shown selling wares from a cart and not praying. The most prominent visual is the star of David. Krusty’s dressing room door has the star shaped like the star of David, as are the stars on the Jewish walk of fame. The Jewish God wears a star around his neck and the star is used to denote buildings and stores that are Jewish. For the viewer, the use of these words and images continue to emphasize the otherness of Jewishness, as no other characters talk or look like this.

brings him a sandwich with “bacon, lobster and treif”. He then yells that he also ordered “camel, extra cloven”. Food is one of the more recognizable aspects of Jewish identity; many people have heard of kosher. They may even know that involves the abstaining from certain foods, most notably pork. Krusty’s inability to stick to the kosher rules may show that he either does not think that it is an essential part of his Jewishness or that he is a ‘bad’ Jew. He doesn’t make any mention that he does not keep kosher so for him to indulge it may mean that for him this is not part of his Jewishness. In terms of ignorant familiarity, the writers assume that the viewer would

1999). Overhearing the conversation Marge invites the father and daughter to join the Simpsons for Christmas. In the same fashion Krusty turned his bar mitzvah into a garish production, he arrives at the Simpsons with a camera crew, taking the opportunity to film a Christmas special in which he promotes various commercial products. Sophie becomes upset at this and kicks her father out of the Simpson house, telling him that he has ruined the holiday. Krusty then runs into Reverend Lovejoy who has been pressured to find new converts to prove his efficiency to his

Further pressured to secure Krusty's Christian identity Lovejoy arranges for a baptism in the middle of winter in the frozen river. Sophie seems skeptical, asking her Dad if he's sure he want to be baptised in the freezing water and that it seems "meshuggina", showing that she has incorporated some of his Jewishness into her identity by using Yiddish. Krusty tells his daughter "I want to be a total Christian for you babe" and then falls through the ice and is carried off by the current. Trapped under the ice he has a vision of his father. Worried his father is upset about him converting, his father advises him that "There's no one religion that makes you a good father, all you've got to do is think of your children before

Feltmate in considering the study of religion popular culture, we must remember that “American Judaism is diverse, but Krusty is recognizable as a stereotype that marks him as an ethnic, rather than a religious, Jew” (2017, 88). In his analysis of the series, he finds that “Jewish traditions only matter to Krusty when he faces an identity crisis... Krusty’s ethno-religious identity as a Jew matters when he wants to see himself as complete” (2017, 88). This reflects the analysis of Dalton who found that

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 (2001, 242).

Therefore, Krusty is seen as having many flaws in his character, and as the only main Jewish character, this may lead to viewers getting the wrong understanding of Jewishness. Pinsky suggests that there is an “unconscious anti-Semitism” (2007, 148) in the show, which would not be surprising with only one major Jewish character who is flawed. Pinsky’s examples are that Lovejoy has a rabbi in his “non-Christian rolodex”, Homer uses to prove he

hec’0.20 0 Tm /T0.2 (l) 11 Tf () n (pa) 0. n

The character Apu Nahasapeemapetilon first appeared in the eighth episode of the first season. Working behind the counter at the Kwik-e-Mart, he is presented as a brown skinned man with an Indian accent. As the Simpson family's purveyor of Squishees, magazines, lottery tickets, sweet treats and fatty foods, Apu's appearance is frequent as the Simpson family turn to him for their convenience needs.

The local convenience store can be seen as a sight of modern consumer culture, bringing together odds and ends that people want and need. The role of immigrant convenience store clerk is a role seen in many parts of North America, and Apu reflects this trend. When other convenience store employees are shown they too are represented as ethnic others, the Speed-E-Mart in Shelbyville is run by a Chinese immigrant and when Homer goes to buy fireworks in another town he is greeted by a character who looks like Apu

Gods, Gurus, Karma and the Ganges

The complexity of Apu's Hindu identity can be seen by tracking the representation of Hinduism over the series. This can give a glimpse into the ways that Western audiences

not know any details about the figure. Later, after Apu and others have saved Homer from a house fire, Reverend Lovejoy tries to impress upon Homer the importance of faith:

Lovejoy: [God] was working in the hearts of your neighbours who came to your aid, be they Christian, Jew or [pointing to Apu] Miscellaneous.

Apu: Hindu! There are 700 million of us.

policy his slipup is shown on the local news and Apu looks to the Simpsons to amend his ways.

Going to the Simpsons' door he looks for Homer to help him:

Apu: I have come to make amends, sir. At first, I blamed you for squealing but then I realized it was I who wronged you. So, I have come to work off my debt. I am at your service.

Homer: You're selling what now?

Apu: I'm selling only the concept of karmic realignment.

Homer: You can't sell that! Karma can only be portioned out by the cosmos. [Slams door]

Apu: He's got me there.

This is his first reference to karma, and Homer's knowledge of the topic is a joke as he is usually portrayed as ignorant on such things. Apu is taken in by the Simpsons where he introduces them to spicy food, vegetable based dishes, Bollywood and yoga postures. Apu connects his spiritual identity with his former role as he refuses to return to the Kwik-E-Mart as "that is the scene of [his] spiritual de-pantsing". For Apu his shame is spiritual. After realizing that he needs the Kwik-E-Mart in his life, he and Homer head to India for him to ask the CEO for his job back. The first Kwik-E-Mart is presented as a store high in the mountains. "Not that convenient", Homer observes, to Apu's displeasure. The CEO is an elderly brown man with a long white beard, sitting on a large cushion. His title is "the Benevolent, enlightened President and CEO of Kwik-e-mart, and in Ohio Stop O Mart". A sign over his head reads "The Master Knows All but Combination to Safe". Telling them to approach he says that he will answer three questions,

which Homer wastes as long as he is actually the new

seems to fit with the view of the wise man, or guru. There are similar characters seen in the episodes “Homer’s Triple Bypass” and “Kamp Krusty”. In the first, Homer goes to ask for money from various religious leaders, ending with him in front of a lean brown man with a turban and wearing nothing but a covering around his waist. He is surrounded with statues that have elephant tops and rooster bottoms. In the second episode Homer and Marge are doing yoga in front of the television with a similar looking man telling them that “Your neck is a well-cooked piece of asparagus”. These images of gurus represent authority in Hinduism, especially the Head of the Kwik-E-Mart, who is a spiritual and capital leader. While the CEO did not grant

Apu: Oh, yeah, what was I thinking with that? Who needs the infinite compassion of Ganesh when I have Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman staring at me from *Entertainment Weekly* with their dead eyes!?! Look at me! I've betrayed my heritage, sir.

Apu feels he has brought shame to his family and his tradition, he decides he wants to be an American, but as the real him. Luckily, he is eligible to take a citizenship test and passes. Apu is then an Indian American. For Apu, there is no problem with his being both an Indian and an American.

In "The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemetilons" Apu finds out that the time has come for his arranged marriage, which he sees as a religious obligation. In this episode, it is revealed that Apu's family has a Brahmin heritage, though no further information is given about what this means, ostensibly because the plot involves the Simpson family deceiving Apu's mother into thinking Apu is married to Marge and the children are well versed in "their" tradition. This covers the fact that the writers don't have to explain the belief system of Hindus, while making a joke about that fact. When the deception is uncovered, Apu is then forced, in his mind because of tradition, to fulfill his obligation to the arranged marriage. In this the viewer is treated to the visuals of a Hindu wedding ceremony. There is a sacred fire, which is made sacred with what appears to be a Christian hymn book. Characters are seen wearing traditional Indian clothing

doorways have an interesting design. While the Simpson home has rounded doorways, Apu's home has doorways with a dome on the top, making a shape that may be recognized as being part of Indian/Middle Eastern architecture. We see these types of shapes when the action takes place in India, for example the airport in "Homer and Apu".

In "Eight Misbehavin'" Apu and Manjula are interested in starting a family. Manjula

India. It would be strange for Hindus, such as Apu and Manjula, to hold this building in reverence, when there are so many other ancient Hindu temples. It may be that because the Taj Mahal is recognized as an Indian building, that Western audiences would recognize it, forming to the concept of ignorant familiarity.

Reincarnation is often brought up in relation to Apu. In “The Sweetest Apu”, despondent about his separation, he contemplates suicide. He looks at his reincarnation chart, which shows he has been a tiger, a snake, an oaf (styled like the Mad Magazines’ Alfred E. Neuman), a goat in a hat, and finally himself,

not mean that it cannot be used as an ethnic representation for Apu. The complexity of his Hindu and Indian identities may meet in this type of image where it reaffirms his Indian ethnic heritage over his religious identity. While religious and ethnic identity are not necessarily synonymous with each other, there can be overlap. In this case, the image of the Taj Mahal may be solely Indian for Apu and therefore any religious connotation is unimportant. This is representative of the complexity of identity. In terms of Apu being a fictional character created by non-Indian, non-Hindus, it is not unfair to suggest that the complexity of identity has been overshadowed by being able to use the ignorant familiarity of the viewer to understand Apu's background.

Mentioning and showing Hindu beliefs such as multiple gods, reincarnation and Karma represent a broad view of Hinduism that does not reflect the wide berth of traditions found among the people of India and their diaspora. In terms of real Hindu immigrants, it is multicultural inclusion that American Hinduism tends to cultivate. In her ethnographic study of American Hinduism, Kurien found that

[l]eaders of Hindu American umbrella organizations have been trying to recast and reformulate Hinduism to make it a suitable vehicle for Hindu Americans to use to assimilate into multicultural America. They have taken upon themselves the task of simplifying, standardizing and codifying the religion to make it easier to understand, articulate, and practice. (2004, 371)

Kurien also found that "estimates of the proportion of Indian Americans from a Hindu background range from 45–65 percent" (2004, 368). While the presentation of Apu can be seen as representing one type of Hindu found in America, it does lack the overall notion that Hinduism, as Kurian writes, is "an extraordinary array of practices, deities, texts, and schools of thought" (2004, 370). It would be impossible for any television program to completely and accurately reflect all the nuances of religious practices, but seeing that a lived experience is

We see this continued connection of Islam and American conflict in the episode “Two

his backyard with his army men invoking Ayatollah as the force they are fighting. The use of Ayatollah is kept to the episodes from the 1990s, as memories of K

when in fact he is employed as a demolition expert in the destruction of the old mall. While the new characters are portrayed as well educated, polite and friendly, it is of note that it is specified they emigrated from a Middle Eastern country and that the plot revolves around a suspicion of terrorism. The Muslim characters are not seen as natural citizens, and like Apu, they have the status of immigrant added to their religious and ethnic identities.

Bart first meets Bashir after smelling something cooking. He finds Bashir roasting lamb on the barbeque. Trying it, Bart remarks that it is delicious and he didn't know lamb was for eating, even though in past episodes Marge has served lamb chops to her family. The idea is that this is a 'foreign' food for Bart. Bart also meets Bashir's mother Mina, who is wearing a white hijab and modest clothing. Their identity as Muslims is not made clear to Bart at this time, though the visual of Mina's headscarf would be telling for viewers that are aware of the images seen in the media of Muslim women. Especially in terms of the controversial nature of veiling in many Western nations, such as France, the viewer may be familiar with the image of Muslim women wearing head coverings. Food is mentioned again when Bart is advising Bashir on the cafeteria selections at Springfield Elementary.

Bart: The only thing that's safe is the pork chops.

Bashir: My religion says I can never eat pork.

Bart: (shocked) A different religion?

Besieged by bullies, Bashir says that he is Muslim, causing one bully to shout "it's your fault I can't carry toothpaste on an airplane". Bart turns the bullies on each other as he points out that they are also part of different religions. Bashir walks with Bart to the Simpson home and Homer overhears the boys parting saying "Salam Alaykum", which Homer confuses for a funny catchphrase. Bashir then impresses Homer with his politeness. There seems to be no issue with

Bashir's religion until later when Homer goes to Moe's Bar and his friends try to convince him that

and scientific. After the First Church of Springfield is destroyed (accidentally this time by Homer), it is used to accumulate profit by Mr. Burns who turns to marketing practices such as billboards, sponsorships and sermons being given by product mascots. Angered, Lisa vows to never return to church and so begins her search for a new religion. Previously Lisa has been depicted as “a pessimistic atheist whose only faith is in clear-eyed scientific reason” (Turner 2004, 272) which makes her prime for the trope of Western Buddhist convert. Mitchell speaks of the popular “narrative in which a disillusioned, often social outcast and more often white, will seek outside the boundaries of normative culture for salvation. In this search, her or she will come upon the ‘oriental monk’, an often mystical (and sometimes magical) figure who offers a way of life or set of teachings to enable the Western seeker to overcome their current ills” (2012, 314-315). Lisa fits this narrative and her journey leads her to randomly stumble upon the previously unseen Springfield Buddhist Temple.

In the temple, she finds two known characters, cronies of her father, Lenny and Carl, as well as Hollywood actor and well-known Buddhist Richard Gere. Gere has talked publically about his Buddhist identity to many media outlets and his support of the Dalai Lama and Tibet while promoting his various film projects. The Buddhist devotion of Lenny and Carl was previously unknown

Carl: What about the Dalai Lama?

Lenny: Who's the Dalai Lama?

Carl: You know, the 14th Reincarnation of Buddha?

Lenny: Who's Buddha?

Richard Gere: It's a good thing Buddhism teaches freedom from desire, because I've got the desire to kick your ass!

Lenny's ignorance can be seen as a glimpse into the detachment of Modern Western Buddhism from its Asian roots. Images and reference to the Buddha and Dalai Lama are the most visible reference to Buddhism in the series outside this episode, so it is interesting that Lenny would have such ignorance.

Images of the Buddha in the series always portray him as a larger figure. As we saw above, the statue of Buddha in the Springfield Temple was that of a large figure, so we see that also in "Pray Anything" he appears beside God and Colonel Sanders sitting on a cloud in the sky. It is inferred that while all three have been prayed to, Buddha actually is responsible for the miracle seen by the town. When Homer visualizes the Buddha in "Ti's the Fifteenth Season", he sees a similar looking character, who counsels him to remember that "Presents are material goods and attachment to material goods kills the soul", prompting him to steal all the town's Christmas presents. Buddha is also shown with multiple tattoos, one that says his name as well as a yin yang symbol. Homer disguises himself as a Buddha statue in "Goo Goo Gai Pan", and can pull it off because of his own large frame.

In "Stark Raving Dad" an episode from the third season, it is revealed that Springfield has a Dalai Lama Expressway, which was named so in 1952 when the Dalai Lama visited. Up until that episode, it was considered by the population of Springfield to be the most exciting

thing that had happened in their town. Clearly, Springfield is on his radar as he visits again in the 15th season episode “Simple Simpson”. The Dalai Lama is speaking at the town hall about “Free Tibet”, which we will see is a topic brought up in conjunction with Buddhism. He is referred to as the “Elvis of enlightenment, lean green chanting machine”. His image is not too far off his recognizable face, except in the Simpson yellow. He is shown flying away much like a superhero. These images of the Dali Lama and Buddha are the only direct references to Buddhism outside Lisa’ conversion episode.

Returning to Lisa’s conversion, after Lenny’s inability to recognize the Buddha, Gere mentions his wish for a “Free Tibet”, a sentiment echoed by Lisa, at this point still a non-Buddhist. The political implications of Tibet are presented as something that the modern person is aware of and that the want for freedom is a given. Also of note is that Lisa finds three Westerners in the temple with no Asians or stereotypical Oriental Monks³. It is Gere who teaches Lisa about how the Buddha’s teachings see that the end of suffering is in ceasing of desire, and that all things are impermanent and empty of inherent existence. He gives her a pamphlet to learn about Buddhism and says that nirvana can be attained with right views and right speech. Lisa also learns that positive actions lead to happiness and negative actions lead to unhappiness and that there is no creator god in Buddhism, just the pursuit of enlightenment. The aim of this program is not to teach the immensely complicated dharma of the Buddha, but it does mention the basics: the eight-fold path, the focus on positivity and the demythologizing creation which are all reflective of Modern Buddhism. Lisa then declares herself loudly and proudly a Buddhist. This reflects the idea of one just becoming a Buddhist by saying they are a Buddhist, not having to be a nun or a monk.

³ Jane Naomi Iwamura has explored this trend in her essay “
of note that the writers went with the celebrity angle of Buddhism instead of the Asian connection.

”, it is

Lisa then begins to cultivate her Buddhist image. Upon telling her parents of the end of her spiritual journey, her father forbids her from visiting chat rooms on the internet. This is a significant mention as social media was still in its infancy at the time the episode was broadcast

recognize it in the series. If Richard Gere has talked about Buddhism in the media this may be the only instance that they know of a person being a Buddhist. In general people may be familiar with certain practices that have been adapted by Western practitioners, but would not recognize Buddhism in its Asian context, and therefore the images are focused on how Buddhism is seen in the West. Lisa's conversion may be more relatable as she represents the typical Western convert than if they were to introduce other Buddhist characters.

NRMs, Indigenous Spirituality and Others

Throughout the series, we see representations of New Religious Movements (NRMs)

episode, is considered charismatic and shown living a luxurious lifestyle on the backs of the believers. The group recruiters are shown using psychological techniques to bring members into the fold and when Marge, having escaped, rescues the rest of her family, they send their lawyers to reclaim their “property”. There is an apocalyptic outlook in that the group believes that the time will come when their Leader will take them in his hidden intergalactic vehicle to a new planet in which they will attain perfect happiness. Almost all the citizens of Springfield are shown to have joined the group except for Reverend Lovejoy and Ned Flanders, the Simpsons’ evangelical neighbour⁵. Christianity is actually satirized as the Reverend tells his congregation that “This so-called new religion is nothing but a pack of weird rituals and chants, designed to take away the money of fools. Now let’s say the Lord’s Prayer 40 times, but first, let’s pass the collection plate”⁶.

who are performing a ritual with a cauldron and wearing robes in a circle. They chant: “Dark is she but brilliant, Black are her wings, black on black, She is Lilith, who leadth forth the hordes of the abyss”. They discover Lisa and explain that the ritual is an esbath, which is an ancient ritual celebrating the full moon. They identify themselves as Wiccan, and technically they say, they are witches, but not into broomsticks or pointed hats. They call themselves sisters of the elements. When Lisa doubts their claim that their spells work, she says she’d use magic to get out of a project, which comes true the next day when her teacher is sick. Lisa goes to see the Wiccans again and finds them in the woods with their cauldron, dyeing a white cat black. When she accuses them of making her teacher sick they say that “[they] wouldn’t make her sick, but if the goddess chose to do it, it is her divine wisdom”. Lisa becomes interested in their practice, especially when they mention that they worship nature.

Lisa then looks to ‘Wiccapedia’ to learn more about Wicca. This shows an online presence for Wiccans. The sections on the Wiccapedia website are: Spells, Potions, Familiars, Dating, , Anti-Acne Spells, Brooms, and Curses. These point to the youth orientation, but also to the popular culture angle of Wicca. There is also a pentagram on the main page with catches the attention of next door neighbour Ned Flanders who says her actions are “Just as I feared, Buddhism has led directly to witchcraft”. He then calls the Witchcraft Advisory line.

The night of Lisa’s initiation, there is a circle of candles and Lisa is dressed in a white robe. The Wiccans ask her “Initiate, how does one enter the circle?” and she replies, “With perfect faith and perfect love”, they then pour grape juice in a chalice chanting “JOIN US, JOIN US” and having Lisa drink from the cup. They are interrupted by the police who arrest the young women. Clearly, the citizens of Springfield see Wiccans as a threat, as they have gathered

outside the courthouse to protest the Wiccans. This is the “First Witch trial in 12 years” reinforcing that Springfield might not be so open to Wiccans. The young women chant together “Goddess Lilith who knows our hearts are pure, oh, queen of magic show our persecutors that they are blind, they are blind!” At which point half the town goes blind. When the judge dismisses the case the mob decides to take their own judgement and backed up by 17th-century law, they construct a dunking stool to determine whether the girls are real witches with supernatural powers or not. The fallacy of the device is that if the girls die, they are proven innocent and if they live they are witches and will then be killed. At this point “The Crucible” is mentioned, Arthur Miller’s play about the Salem witch trials, which paints the persecutors in a

rooted in the ignorant familiarity of the two different types of groups

see symbols, such as the star of David, menorahs, statues of the Hindu gods, statues of Buddha and more. There are references to religious holidays like Hanukah and Ramadan. Food is another issue brought up to denote difference, including Kosher laws, Halal laws and vegetarianism. These are the ways that religious otherness is denoted to the viewer. The ways that many of these are represented are through the idea of ignorant familiarity. The viewer is shown stereotypical and recognizable images that they may not fully understand but they recognize as denoting specific identities. Do the viewers understand the complex nature of Karma? Probably not, but the use of the word makes them aware that this is something connected to Hinduism and therefore they know that the character that uses that term is a Hindu and they have a basic idea about what it means.

The images that we see in our popular culture can reaffirm our basic understanding of other religions. People may see themselves as 'experts' in topics of which they do

Works Cited

Simpsons Episodes Referenced.

- “Krusty Gets Busted.”¹². Directed by Brad Bird. Written by Jay Kogen and Wallace Wolodarsky. Fox Broadcasting, April 29, 1990.
- “Blood Feud”. 35. Directed by David Silverman. Written by George Meyer. Fox Broadcasting, July 11, 1991.
- “Stark Raving Dad”. 36. Directed by Rich Moore. Written by Al Jean and Mike Reiss. Fox Broadcasting, September 19, 1991.
- “Like Father, Like Clown.” 41. Directed by Jeffrey Lynch and Brad Bird. Written by Jay Kogen and Wallace Wolodarsky. Fox Broadcasting, October 24, 1991.
- “Kamp Krusty”. 60. Directed by Mark Kirkland. Written by David M. Stern. Fox Broadcasting, September 24, 1992.
- “Homer the Heretic”. 62. Directed by George Meyer. Written by Jim Reardon. Fox Broadcasting, October 8, 1992.
- “Homer’s Triple Bypass”. 70. Directed by David Silverman. Written by Gary Apple and Michael Carrington. Fox Broadcasting, December 17, 1992.
- “I Love Lisa”. 74. Directed by Wesley Archer. Written by Frank Mula. Fox Broadcasting, February 11, 1993.
- “Homer’s Barbershop Quartet”. 82. Directed by Mark Kirkland. Written by Jeff Martin. Fox Broadcasting, September 30, 1993.
- “Homer and Apu”. 94. Directed by Mark Kirkland. Written by Greg Daniels. Fox Broadcasting, February 10, 1994.

“Bart Sells His Soul”. 132. Directed by Wesley Archer. Written by Greg Daniels. Fox Broadcasting, October 8, 1995.

“Lisa the Vegetarian”. 133. Directed by Mark Kirkland. Written by David S. Cohen. Fox Broadcasting, October 15, 1995.

“Sideshow Bob’s Last Gleaming”. 137. Directed by Dominic Polcino. Written by Spike Feresten. Fox Broadcasting, November 26, 1995.

“Two Bad Neighbors”. 141. Directed by Wesley Archer. Written by Ken Keeler. Fox Broadcasting, January 14, 1996.

“22 Short Films About Springfield”. 149. Directed by Jim Reardon. Written by Richard Appel, David Cohen, Jonathan Collier, Jennifer Crittenden, Greg Daniels, Brent Forrester, Rachel Pulido, Steve Tompkins , Josh Weinstein, Bill Oakley and Matt Groening. Fox Broadcasting, April 14, 1996.

“Much Apu About Nothing”. 151. Directed by Susie Dietter. Written by David. S. Cohen. May 5, 1996.

“The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemapetilons”. 185. Directed by Steven Dean Moore. Written by Richard Appel. Fox Broadcasting, November 16, 1997.

“The Joy of Sect”. 191. Directed by Steven Dean Moore. Written by Steve O’Donnell. Fox Broadcasting, February 8, 1998.

“Simpson Tide”. 196. Directed by Milton Gray. Written by Joshua Sternin and Jeffrey Ventimilla. Fox Broadcasting, March 29, 1998.

“Mayored to the Mob”. 212. Directed by Swinton O. Scott. Written by Ron Hauge. Fox Broadcasting, December 20, 1998.

“I’m With Cupid”. 217. Directed by Bob Anderson. Written by Dan Greaney. Fox Broadcasting, February 14, 1999.

“Eight Misbehavin’”. 233. Directed by Steven Dean Moor. Written by Matt Selmán. Fox Broadcasting, November 21, 1999.

“Grift of the Magi”. 235. Directed by Matthew Natsuk. Written by Tom Martin. Fox Broadcasting, Deember 19, 1999.

“Pokey Mom.” 258. Directed by Bob Anderson. Written by Tom Martin. Fox Broadcasting, January 14, 2001.

“Bye Bye Nerdie”. 264. Directed by Lauren MacMullan. Written by John Frink and Don Payne. Fox Broadcasting, March 11, 2001.

“She of Little Faith”. 275. Directed by Steven Dean Moore. Written by Bill Freiberger. Fox Broadcasting, December 16, 2001.

“The Sweetest Apu”. 288. Directed by Matthew Nastuk. Written by John Swartzwelder. Fox Broadcasting, May 5, 2002.

“Pray Anything”. 301. Directed by Michael Polcino. Written by Sam O’Neal and Neal Boushell. Fox Broadcasting, February 9, 2003.

“Today I am a Clown”. 319. Directed by Nancy Kruse. Written by Joel H Cohen. Fox Broadcasting, December 7, 2003.

“’Tis the Fifteenth Season”. 320. Directed by Steven Dean Moore. Written by Michael Price. Fox Broadcasting, December 14, 2003.

“Simple Simpson”. 332. Directed by Jim Reardon. Written by Jon Vitti. Fox Broadcasting, May 2, 2004.

“Bart-Mangled Banner.” 334. Directed by Steven Dean Moore. Written by John Frink. Fox Broadcasting, May 16, 2004.

“Midnight RX”. 341. Directed by Nancy Kruse. Written by Marc Wilmore. Fox Broadcasting, January 16, 2005.

“Goo Goo Gai Pan”. 347. Directed by Lance Kramer. Written by Lawrence Talbot. Fox Broadcasting, March 13, 2005.

“The Seemingly Never-Ending Story”. 369. Directed by Raymond S. Persi. Written by Ian Maxtone-Graham. Fox Broadcasting, March 12, 2006.

“Kiss Kiss Bangalore”. 373. Directed by Mark Kirkland. Written by Dan Castellaneta and Deb Lacusta. Fox Broadcasting, April 9, 2006.

“Little Big Girl”. 390. Directed by Raymond S. Persi. Written by Don Payne. Fox Broadcasting, February 11, 2007.

“Mypods and Boomsticks”. 427. Direct by Steven Dean Moore. Written by Marc Wilmore. Fox Broadcasting, November 30, 2008.

“Rednecks and Broomsticks”. 448. Directed by Bob Anderson and Rob Oliver. Written by

“Much Apu About Something”. 586. Directed by Bob Anderson. Written by Michael Price.
Fox Broadcasting, January 17, 2016.

“The Nightmare After Krustmas”. 606. Directed by Rob Oliver. Written by Jeff Westbrook.
Fox Broadcasting, December 11, 2016.

Directed by David Silverman. 2007. United States: 20th Century Fox, 2007.
DVD.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Abdul-Azim. “Faith in Comedy: Representations of Muslim Identity in British
Comedy”. 11:1 (2013): 91-96.

Busbridge, Rachel. 2013. “‘It’s Just Your Turn’: Performing Identity and Muslim Australian
Popular Culture”. 24.4: 459-477.

Canas, Sandra. 2008. “ : Examining Multi Cultural Spaces of
Nation and Religion”. 20.3: 195-211.

Clark, Terry Ray, and Dan W. Clanton, eds. 2012.

. N 2 ([0 0.24 30(Y) -0.rk20.3:) 0.5 0 50 0 0 Tm /TT1 1 ’

Deacy, Christopher, and Elisabeth Arweck eds. 2009.

. USA: Ashgate.

Feltmate, David. 2017.

The Simpsons, South Park

Family Guy. New York: New York University Press.

_____. 2012. "The Humorous Reproduction of Religious Prejudice: "Cults" and Religious
Humour in The Simpsons, South Park and King of the Hill".

24:2: 201-216.

_____. 2013. "It's Funny Because It's True? The Simpsons, Satire, and the Significance of
Religious Humor in Popular Culture".

81:1: 222-248

Turner, Chris. 2004. *Planet Simpson: How a Cartoon Masterpiece Documented an Era and Defined a Generation*. Toronto: Random House Canada.

Wright, Benjamin. 2011. "Why Would You do that Larry?": Identity Formation and Humor in
". 44.3: 660-677.