

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

WHAT THE SIMPSONS HAVE TO TEACH UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS

THE REV. DR. ANDREW C. KENNEDY
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THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

1342 North Astor Street • Milwaukee WI 53202

Telephone: 414 273-5257 • Fax: 414 273-5254

E-Mail: office@uumilwaukee.org

Visit us on the World Wide Web at www.uumilwaukee.org

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The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

Words for All Ages

*It may be helpful to note that prior to the sermon, Mr. Kennedy informally dialogued with the congregation (both adults and children), noting that about 15 million Americans, and about 60 million people in 70 countries around the world, watch The Simpsons each week. It is the Fox network's third most popular show. He confessed he has seen the show only about a dozen times so he is clearly going out on a limb here, but that he reads about such things (in journals and books). He went on to recommend Mark Pinsky's book, *The Gospel According to the Simpsons*.*

Mr. Kennedy also recommended that parents exercise their parental responsibilities since the show is clearly aimed towards teenagers and adults and even though it is a cartoon, it is probably not age-appropriate for young children. At this point each of the Simpson family members (Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, & Maggie) were introduced and briefly discussed with the assistance of audio clips of each of the characters plus Ned Flanders, the fundamentalist Christian who lives next door to the Simpsons.

Reflections

The elder George Bush declared to the National Religious Broadcasters in 1992, "We need a nation closer to the Waltons than the Simpsons." In an episode of *The Simpsons* that followed just three days later, the Simpson family is seen watching the president's attack on them on their TV. They are puzzled. Noting the sharp economic downturn that the elder Bush administration was then enduring, Bart cracks, "We're just like the Waltons. We're praying for an end to the Depression, too." Shortly thereafter, Barbara Bush shot back, "*The Simpsons* is the dumbest thing I've ever seen."¹

Similarly, former Education Secretary William Bennett publicly questioned the values being promulgated by *The Simpsons*. The Mayor of Newark, New Jersey asked retail stores in the city to stop selling Simpson tee-shirts. The principal in an Orange County elementary school banned students from wearing Simpson tee-shirts to school.

America's preachers picked up the anti-Simpsons scent, too, seeing *The Simpsons* as another irrefutably ugly sign of the demonstrable decline of Western civilization.

At first blush, at least, it is hard to argue with these critics. There is much about the show, from my limited exposure, that strikes me as shallow, negative, crude and juvenile. Considering the leading characters, Homer and Bart, this is hardly surprising. Bart may offer grace at mealtimes, for example, but his idea of grace is, "Rub a dub, dub, thanks for the grub," which is not much worse than his father Homer's grace: "Good drink, good meat, good God let's eat."

Meanwhile, not only are millions of people watching *The Simpsons* both here in America and around the world, but the show has garnered considerable critical acclaim. Now in its fourteenth season, *The Simpsons* has been nominated for thirty-four Emmys and has won sixteen. It has also won a prestigious Peabody award. So, even though people like me may have at first, at least, like Barbara Bush, largely dismissed the show – because, at a casual glance, it sure looked "dumb" to me – nevertheless, after reading some articles, essays, and the book *The Gospel According to The Simpsons*, I've come to the conclusion that there is a lot more than meets the eye.

And little wonder since apparently there has been a virtual pipeline that runs directly from Harvard University (and the *Harvard Lampoon*) to *The Simpsons* writing staff. Richard Appel, a graduate of Harvard

¹ Bush, Barbara, cited by Pinsky, Mark I., *The Gospel According to The Simpsons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 1.

and the Harvard Law School, left a job with the U.S. Attorney's office in Manhattan to write comedy for *The Simpsons* in Los Angeles. Appel told the *New York Times* in 1997, "It's like there's a conveyor belt now of people coming out here [from Harvard]."²

One of the things that is interesting here is the turnabout of *The Simpsons'* reputation in the religious community. What critics gradually began to notice, amidst all the juvenile gags and gaffs, is the integral role of religion in the life of the Simpson family and the Simpsons' world. The Simpsons, unlike most familiar characters on television, attend church every Sunday. It is a regular part of their life. Even Bart, who rebels against virtually everything else, inexplicably accepts going to church week after week, even if he complains about the boring sermons. The Simpsons say grace before meals and, especially in crises, pray to God. And God often answers their prayers, intervening in their world, albeit in unexpected (and often humorous) ways. The next-door neighbors are evangelical Christians. In fact, most of the characters believe in the traditional Christian three-storied universe with God, angels, and heaven above; Earth in the middle; and Hell and Satan below.

In other words, as crude and rude as the show is at times, with the exception of explicitly religious television shows like *Touched by an Angel* and *Seventh Heaven*, Christianity plays a larger part of *The Simpsons*, the critics began to notice, than any other prime-time network sitcom or drama. Indeed, one academic study found that there was some religious content in 70 percent of show's episodes. Not that the Simpsons are exemplary Christians; far from it. And not that they are particularly sophisticated or articulate Christians, either. Bart once asked his father Homer, for example, what the family's religious beliefs were. Homer replies, "You know, the one with all the well-meaning rules that don't work in real life. Uh, Christianity."

As more people picked up on the presence of religion imbedded in *The Simpsons* show, opinions in the religious community began to change. The Simpsons appeared on the covers of both *Christianity Today* and *The Christian Century*, which are two religious journals at opposite ends of the theological spectrum. William Romanowski, author of *Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life*, wrote, "*The Simpsons* is not dismissive of faith, but treats religion as an integral part of American life."³ The Reverend David Bruce, webmaster of something called hollywoodjesus.com, which uses popular culture to spread the gospel of Christianity, goes even further, calling *The Simpsons* "the best Christian family on television."⁴ Similarly, David Dark, writing in a journal published by an organization called Evangelicals for Social Action called the show, "the most pro-family, God-preoccupied, home-based program on television."⁵

Not everyone is willing to go as far as Dark and Bruce in their praise of *The Simpsons'* treatment of religion, however. Paul Cantor, professor of political science at the University of Virginia, demurs a little, saying, "*The Simpsons* is not pro-religion -- it is too hip, cynical and iconoclastic for that. Yet even when it seems to be ridiculing religion, it recognizes, as few other television shows do, the genuine role that religion plays in American life. . . . "[I]n Homer Simpson," professor Carter adds, it "also suggests that one can go to church and not be either a religious fanatic or a saint."⁶

And guess what? Even Barbara Bush has come around. In a published letter she addressed to "Marge Simpson," who clearly is the most faithful of the Simpsons, the former First Lady called the animated family "charming" and complimented them on, "setting an example for the rest of the country."⁷ If the Simpsons are setting an example for the rest of the country, we are in deep trouble, folks! But that's what she said.

² Appel, Richard, cited by Pinsky, op. cit., p. 134.

³ Romanowski, William, cited by Pinsky, op. cit., p. 7.

⁴ Bruce, David, cited by Pinsky, op. cit., p. 7.

⁵ Dark, David, cited by Pinsky, op. cit., p. 8.

⁶ Cantor, Paul, cited by Pinsky, op. cit., p. 9.

⁷ Bush, Barbara, cited by Pinsky, op. cit., p. 5.

And some example! Even after Barbara Bush's compliment, *The Simpsons* portrayed the elder President George Bush in retirement driven to utter exasperation with Bart such that the President winds up spanking him. This infuriates Homer. Why? Because his preferred form of corporal punishment is not spanking, but strangulation! Such an example for the country!

II

According to Mark Pinsky, author of *The Gospel According to the Simpsons*, all Christian denominations are targets of *The Simpsons* gentle jabs, but especially two of the denominations. One is the Catholic Church. The town's most prominent Catholic is Mayor Joe Quimby, who is a crook, a lush, and a womanizer whose build and accent remind many viewers of Teddy Kennedy. There are running gags at the expense of the Catholic Church about prayers in Latin, Holy Water, and so forth. Things finally came to a head in November of 1998 when an episode aired that found the Simpsons driving home from church one Sunday. Bart is starving. So he asks his mother Marge if the family can become Catholic. Why? "So we can get Communion wafers and booze." Rather than correct Bart's caricature of the Catholic's sacrament of communion, Marge compounds it by indirectly referencing the Vatican's opposition to birth control, saying, "No one is going Catholic. Three children is enough, thank you."

This episode caught the attention of a conservative, New York-based group called the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. The Catholic League protested. Fox network responded politely and the matter was eventually dropped.

Then, a couple of months later, on January 31, 1999, *The Simpsons* aired an episode on Superbowl Sunday. The episode poked fun at the creative and expensive, but also sometimes confusingly obscure commercials that are often aired during the Superbowl. They also poked fun at the advertising campaigns being carried out by different groups within the Catholic Church that were seeking to show that the Catholics are changing with the times. The episode's satirical "commercial" was based on an old music video featuring the Texas rock band ZZ Top. A car pulls into a gas station in the middle of nowhere. The driver gets out and, seeing no one, honks the horn for service. Three buxom, scantily clad young women come filing out of the station. One lifts the hood of the car suggestively while another slides the gas pump nozzle into the tank. But the driver's eyes are riveted to a shiny Christian cross dangling near one woman's quivering cleavage as the rock music soars. What is this "commercial" all about? The voice-over explains: "The Catholic Church: We've made a few . . . changes." Watching the commercial at home with her mother, Lisa Simpson aptly pronounces it "weird."

Understandably, the Catholic League saw it as not just weird, but as offensive and complained to the Fox network again. Fox executive producer Mike Scully explained the rationale behind this episode to a television critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, "The joke was an observation on crazy Superbowl commercials, not a comment on the Catholic Church. We had the idea for the content of the commercial first. Then we pitched several tag lines. One of the writers pitched the Catholic Church line, and it got the biggest laugh."⁸ Despite the protestations of Scully and others, the Fox network finally agreed to omit the Catholic Church reference in future re-runs of the offending episode.

Interestingly, according to Mark Pinsky, author of *The Gospel According to the Simpsons*, in addition to the Catholics, the second religious group that is most frequently targeted for lampooning on *The Simpsons* is us -- the Unitarian Universalists.⁹ As Homer once put it, "If that is the one true faith, I'll eat my hat."

⁸ Scully, Mike, cited by Pinsky, op. cit., p. 105.

⁹ Pinsky, op. cit., p. 6.

The children of the Christian fundamentalist next door, Ned Flanders, have a video game called Billy Graham's Bible Blaster. The goal of the game is to squarely zap the nonbelievers that are going across the screen. If you successfully zap a nonbeliever, they are then converted to Christianity. Those who are hit with only a glancing blow, we learn, are not converted, earn no points, and turn into Unitarians!

So, all faith groups are lampooned on *The Simpsons*, but especially the Catholics and the Unitarians.

III

Now, let's look a little more closely at Ned Flanders, the fundamentalist next door. Ned is an Oral Roberts University graduate who is never without a Bible. Christianity totally permeates his life. Let me give you some examples. His doorbell chimes alternate between "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" and "Bringing in the Sheaves." Together with his family, he prays at meals and before bed. He goes to church three times a week and tithes, contributing to seven other congregations just to be on the safe side. The family carves Bible dioramas out of pumpkins at Halloween.

Ned firmly believes in the Second Coming, being certain, in other words, that Jesus will return to earth at any time. In fact, one day he mistook Lisa's backyard saxophone practicing for the angel Gabriel's trumpet sounding the arrival of the Judgment Day. Similarly, Ned once mistook an escaped elephant from the local zoo for one of the four horses of the Apocalypse.

But notice this: Ned is steeped in loving his neighbors and in exemplifying Christian ethics. For example, Ned volunteers at hospitals, soup kitchens, and a homeless shelter. He is a scoutmaster and a Pee Wee football coach. He recycles, is active in the PTA, and volunteers for the marital stress hotline. Wednesday is "tithe day" at the Flanders' home, when the family joins together to do good deeds. Ned even once donated one of his lungs and one of his kidneys for anyone who might need one. Ned is a generous guy!

Flanders is a successful Christian evangelical. He is blessed with well behaved children, and he enjoys a successful marriage. As goofy and straight-laced as he is, Flanders is not portrayed as a complete goody-two-shoes. He has his failings and we see those from time to time. And, after all, he does have his own beer keg in his basement. Imported beer, no less.

Now, here's the point. There are an estimated fifty million fundamentalist Christians in this country - one in every five Americans. Now, spiritually, because of the decidedly mixed baggage that many of us carry with respect to Christianity, a lot of us have real problems with Christians, from time to time, especially with fundamentalist Christians. We tend to avoid them and, unfortunately, from time to time, we put them down. Ned Flanders may be a naïve, sanctimonious, goody-two-shoes doofus, but let me ask you, in terms of deeds, not creeds (in terms of what he *does*, not his religious *beliefs*, in other words), who would you rather have as a neighbor - Homer Simpson or Ned Flanders? Who would you rather have as your heart surgeon, or as the pilot of the plane you are about to board? How many of us tithe - give 10 percent - either in time *or* money, whether to the church or to other worthy organizations? Many fundamentalists do "walk their talk."

After Ned Flanders' wife Maude died on the show about two years ago, Frederica Mathewes-Green, an author and former columnist for *Christianity Today* magazine, wrote an open letter on Beliefnet.com about the suddenly available widower Ned Flanders. She wrote, "Ned is endlessly cheerful because he is pure in heart. He treats everyone around him with generosity and kindness, and can't imagine they wouldn't treat him the same way. He is incapable of cynicism or contempt," unlike most residents of Springfield. While he

may be a fool, she observes, he is the kind of fool who makes the world a better place. Flanders is... “a beam of light in a depressing little town” and the nicest person on the show.¹⁰

Ironically - and it is *very* ironic considering what we Unitarian Universalists stand for - I would suggest that one of the things *The Simpsons* may have to teach to Unitarian Universalists is tolerance and respect for Christians, and especially for fundamentalist Christians.

Consider it.

¹⁰ Mathewes-Green, Frederica, as quoted and paraphrased by Pinsky, op. cit., p. 57.