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God and The Simpsons

The Spirituality
of Springfield



A DARE BOOKLET

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The Spirituality of Springfield

In 1987, when the producers of Fox Television's *The Tracey Ullman Show* asked cartoonist Matt Groening to contribute some animated segments to their program, they had in mind using the characters from his popular strip *Life in Hell*. Groening, however, realized that he would lose control over creations that had been profitable to him, and so he created new characters: the Simpson family. In dozens of short interludes over the next two years, this dysfunctional clan proved

to be so popular that they were deemed to be ready for prime time. On December 17, 1989, Fox broadcast *Simpsons Roasting Over an Open Fire*, a Christmas special that introduced a wider audience to the world of Springfield and its cartoon inhabitants. Since this first episode, *The Simpsons* has proven to be a television phenomenon – pleasingly lucrative for its network, having generated over \$1 billion in revenue, and an enduring hit with a wide audience.

Though it has won millions of viewers, the show has also made countless enemies. It has been preached against from pulpits, castigated by educators, worried over by parents and denounced by the President of the United States himself: in a speech to religious broadcasters, and again in his 1992 State of the Union Address, George Bush called for a society which more closely resembled *The Waltons* than *The Simpsons*. (Bart’s reply was, “Hey, we’re just like the Waltons. We’re praying for an end to the Depression, too.”)

There is an irony here. Despite its many critics, *The Simpsons* is, in truth, a very moral program and, arguably, a very religious one as well. Certainly its episodes are full of references to God, Christianity, the after-life and ethics. A closer look at *The Simpsons* and religion may well illustrate some important issues concerning the place of faith in North American popular culture.¹

Who Cares About Religion?

Television abounds in religious programming, but most of what is shown is produced by faith groups as an evangelistic outreach to the viewing audience. Very little of it is ever shown on the major networks or during the most heavily watched periods. In fact, it would be fair to say that religion is virtually absent from prime time TV. Consider the most popular shows

of the last decade: *ER*, *Ally McBeal*, *Frasier*, *Law and Order*, *Home Improvement* or *Friends*. How many episodes showed the characters of these sitcoms and dramas going to church? discussing God? talking about the importance of religion in bringing up children? It would appear that the lawyers, psychiatrists, doctors, policemen, lovers and parents who populate these programs never think that the life-and-death encounters or the little daily struggles they endure can be illuminated or better understood in the light of religious faith.

That is not the case with *The Simpsons*. There we know a great deal about the spiritual life of almost every one of the characters. Most of the cartoon cast attend the First Church of Springfield, a middle-of-the-road Protestant church, presided over by the Reverend Timothy Lovejoy, but other characters are identified as Jews, Catholics, Hindus, Hare Krishnas, “Movementarians” or snake-handlers. The children of the town go to Sunday School – usually unwillingly, and Bart does have to be frisked for weapons – but theological issues interest them when they are there. When the teacher announces that the day’s topic is Hell, Bart is delighted. “All right!” he enthuses, “I sat through Mercy and I sat through Forgiveness; finally we get to the good stuff!”

The Bible is referred to frequently: on TV and radio, in counseling the troubled, and (of course) in the pulpit. Ned Flanders, the evangelical next-door neighbour of the Simpsons, has a large collection of versions in his house – including the Aramaic Septuagint, the Vulgate of St. Jerome, the Living Bible and the Thump-Proof Bible. Homer, however, finds the book expensive and preachy: “Everybody’s a sinner,” he complains, “except this guy!”² It is also largely irrelevant: “If the Bible has taught us nothing else – and it hasn’t – it’s that girls should stick to girls’ sports such as hot-oil wrestling, foxy-boxing and such and such.”

When the Simpsons argue, they often turn to the Bible for guidance. For example, in trying to decide whether to let bus-driver Otto stay in their house, Marge says:

Doesn't the Bible say, "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me?"

Stuck for a suitable Biblical reply, Homer improvises:

Yes, but doesn't the Bible also say, "Thou shalt not take... moochers into thy... hut?"

In fact, Homer's Bible ignorance is pretty comprehensive. Reverend Lovejoy tells him:

Homer, I'd like you to remember Matthew 7:26, "A foolish man who has built his house on sand."

Homer replies: And you remember... Matthew... 21:17!

Lovejoy: "And he left them and went out of the city into Bethany and lodged there?"

Homer: Yeah... think about it!

Homer also refers to the time when God teased Moses in the wilderness and believes that Hercules and the Lion is a Bible story. When placed in a situation where his life depends on reciting a Bible verse, all he can come up with is "Thou shalt not... "

Saying grace seems to be a regular part of mealtime at the Simpsons household. Though piety is sometimes lacking on the lips of the young ("Rub-a-dub-dub, thanks for the grub," says Bart) the family elders often use it as an occasion for more heart-felt messages to the Almighty. Homer prays:

Dear Lord, thank you for this microwave bounty, even though we don't deserve it. I mean... our kids are uncontrollable hellions. Pardon my French, but they act like sav-ages! Did You see them at the picnic? Of course You did: You're everywhere, You're omnivorous. O Lord! Why did you spite me with this family?

When Krusty the Clown visits the Simpsons he gives the blessing in Hebrew:

Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu, melech ha'olam hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz.³

On *The Simpsons*, God, the Devil, Heaven, Hell and angels are all treated as having objective reality. Homer, in fact, meets God. He and the Creator of the Universe discuss Homer's decision to stay home from church and God admits that he himself is not a big fan of sermons or of Reverend Lovejoy, to whom he thinks he will give a canker sore. Later, when Homer has agreed to go back to church and he falls asleep in the pew, he has another vision of God. Homer asks him the meaning of life, and God reveals that he knows old jokes:

God: Homer, I can't tell you that. You'll find out when you die.

Homer: I can't wait that long!

God: You can't wait six months?

Homer and Bart both have encounters with the devil as well. After a traffic accident, Bart starts on his way to Heaven but, because he did not hold on to the handrail of the escalator taking him to the Pearly Gates, and because he spat over the edge, he is sent to Hell. Satan, however, has to tell him that a mistake has been made:

Devil: Boy, is my face red... According to this you're not due to arrive until the Yankees win the pennant. That's 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!

In an episode which features the family falling asleep in church during the Easter service and dreaming their own Bible stories, Marge awakes to find that the end of the world has arrived. She watches the Flanders family being lofted toward eternal bliss while an opening to Hell appears for the Simpsons. She wonders, "Why aren't we ascending into heaven?" and concludes sadly, "Oh, right. The sins."

Reflecting Reality

Which view of religion more accurately reflects that held by the majority of North Americans – that of *The Simpsons* or the rest of prime time TV? Perhaps surprisingly, the cartoon world of Springfield is closer to reality. For tens of millions of people on this continent, religion is an integral part of their lives. In Canada, polls taken in 2000 suggest that:

- 84% of the adult population believe in God and, for most, this understanding of the divine is within the Christian framework;
- 69% agreed that God had provided a way for the forgiveness of their sins "through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus"; and
- 66% agreed that the Bible was "the inspired word of God."
- Despite the recent rash of movies with a Satanic theme, the Devil appears to have less of a hold on the public imagination than God does. Only 48% believed that he was alive in the world today.⁴

In the United States religion is even more popular:

- 86.2% identify themselves as Christians while an additional 4.2% claim to follow another faith.

- Even those who term themselves "non-religious" find it hard to escape a Supreme Being. Paradoxically, 60% of those who claim to have no religion also say that they believe in God and pray to him often.
- At 44%, church attendance in the U.S. is higher than in any other western industrialized country except Ireland and Italy.
- Among African-Americans, religiosity is particularly high: 94% of those surveyed said that a close personal relationship with God was their ultimate goal, more important than good health or a comfortable living.

It seems that the old theory that modernity would inevitably lead to the death of religion and the triumph of secularism has been proven wrong.

The Sins of Religion

Television has a reputation for being the enemy of organized religion and certainly, as a social satire, *The Simpsons* is quick to point out the short-comings of organized faith in contemporary North America. Strangely enough, the show's writers do not treat religion as harshly as they do the legal profession or the nuclear power industry, but they do find a target-rich environment in The First Church of Springfield.

The hypocrisy of ministers is consistently exposed. Though Lovejoy preaches against "Gambling: the 8th Deadly Sin," his church holds Bingo, Reno and Monte Carlo Nights. Bart and Milhouse buy a MAD magazine with its famous folding back page, which asks the question:

'What is it that television evangelists worship the most?'

"I'll say God," says Bart.

"I'll say Jesus," opines Milhouse.

Folding the page reveals the answer: 'Money.'

The judgmentalism of Christians is also frequently pointed out. Maude Flanders, in fact, goes to camp to learn how to be even more judgmental. When Helen and Tim Lovejoy meet Marge at the chili cook-off, the following nasty conversation ensues:

Helen: Howdy, howdy, Marge and Home... oh, my mistake. Homer's not even with you. Probably just knocking back a few "refreshments." [chuckles]

Marge: Thank you for your concern, Helen. Homer isn't drinking today.

Helen: Oh! I think it's lovely that he said that. And that you believed him.

Lovejoy: Now, Helen, let us not glory in Homer's binge drinking. There but for the grace of God goes Marge herself.

When Ned has been arrested for a traffic offence he approaches church the next Sunday with trepidation, but his wife assures him, "Oh, don't worry, Ned, this is a house of love and forgiveness." Naturally, when he enters he is greeted with:

"There he is, Ned Flanders... the fallen one... the evil one... bet he's the one who wrote 'Homer' all over the bathroom."

After Krusty the Clown is falsely accused of a crime, it is Lovejoy who leads a mob burning the merchandise of Krusty, whom he terms "the clown prince of corruption."

Church is Boring

The criticism of religion that will resonate most strongly with many churchgoers is the one that church services are boring. The Simpson children relish the moments just after church

because, they explain, it is the longest period of time before they have to go again.

Lovejoy's choice of Bible readings is often ill advised. For example:

And so when Eliphaz came down from Mount Hebron bearing figs, he offered them to Moheem, who you will remember is the father of Sheckhom, and to Hazar on the occasion of their matrimony, much in the same . . .

His sermons, which according to Marge are always about "constancy" and "prudissitude", put many to sleep. They certainly evoke a negative reaction in Bart:

Lovejoy: 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 ...

Bart: I've got two words for this sermon... [makes snoring noises]

Lovejoy: Am I boring you, Bart?

Bart: Well, to be honest, yes.

Lovejoy: Hey, I'm doing the best with the material I have.

Bart: But church can be fun! [parishioners laugh] No, really, it can be a crazy party, with clouds and lasers and miracles.

Homer: And chili fries!

Bart: A real preacher knows how to bring the Bible alive, through music, and dancing, and Tae-Bo! [jumps into the aisle and begins kick-boxing as parishioners cheer]

Sideshow Mel: He's kicking it old school!

Lovejoy: [to himself] Never give them an opening.

Criticisms such as these are not entirely unfair and, indeed, are often echoed by many churchgoers. In fact, taken as a whole, the treatment of religion on *The Simpsons* is relatively benign. Its frequent appearance as a topic reflects the importance of faith in the mainstream of North American society.

We might even conclude from watching *The Simpsons* that religion is good for people.

Is Religion Good for You?

This is not a proposition that currently finds much favour in Hollywood. Religion is not as absent from motion pictures as it is from prime-time television but, when it appears, it is very frequently portrayed as something dysfunctional, frightening or oppressive. A disproportionate number of cinematic killers, psychopaths and other villains, for example, seem to be overtly religious: *Cape Fear's* Max Cady (played by Robert De Niro) is tattooed with Bible verses and dies while speaking in Pentecostal-like tongues. The murderous John Doe of *SE7EN* (Kevin Spacey), the psychopathic Annie Wilkes of *Misery* (Kathy Bates) and the evil Warden Norton of *The Shawshank Redemption* (Bob Gunton) are all identifiably Christians. When they're not killing people, cinematic Christians can also be found acting as narrow-minded bigots – the judgmental neighbour in *Edward Scissorhands*, the disapproving pastor in *Footloose*, or the self-righteous mayor in *Chocolat* – or as sexual or financial hypocrites in countless films about the excesses of televangelists.

There is, however, a good deal of evidence in the real world which suggests that regular church attendance and a genuine religious faith convey benefits. For example, the adherents of religion lead healthier lives. Those who attend a church, temple or synagogue at least once a week have been found to live longer, stay healthier longer, and suffer lower rates of tuberculosis, emphysema, cirrhosis of the liver, chronic bronchitis, fatal one-car accidents, suicide and various types of cancer.⁵

A recent finding by doctors at Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health was that people who go to church

regularly have less arteriosclerotic heart disease. The annual death rate from such disease was nearly 900 per 100,000 among “less than weekly” attendees but only about 500 for every 100,000 persons among weekly churchgoers.⁶

In areas of mental health, religious citizens are also likely to be better adjusted, to be less depressed and to have better self-esteem than their non-church-going neighbours. Their marriages are likely to be more stable and overall they will be slightly happier. The enormous 1994 *Sex in America* survey actually found that the most sexually fulfilled women were conservative Protestants.⁷ Children of frequent worship attendees are also more likely to be generous, empathetic to the needs of others, forgiving and honest. Among the explanations offered by social scientists for these beneficial phenomena are a cleaner lifestyle, the effect of prayer and the support of a religious community.⁸

On *The Simpsons*, no one manifests Christianity or a healthy lifestyle more openly than Homer's evangelical neighbour Ned Flanders does. Though 60 years old, he looks far younger and is possessed of a lean and muscular physique. When asked for the secret of his youthful appearance (“It's the holy water, right?”) Ned explains:

Listen folks, there's no magic formula. I just follow the three "c"s: clean living, chewing thoroughly, and a daily dose of vitamin Church!

The Power of Prayer

Viewers of *The Simpsons* frequently see the inhabitants of Springfield at prayer. Bart, who had denied the existence of the soul, thinks he is taking advantage of a chump when he sells his to friend Milhouse for \$5, but he grows increasingly restless when not having a soul seems to make a difference in

his life. He tries to buy it back from Milhouse but discovers that his pal has already traded it for Pogs. Growing desperate, Bart prays:

Are you there, God? It's me, Bart Simpson. I know I never paid too much attention in church but I could really use some of that good stuff right now. I'm afraid some weirdo's got my soul and I don't know what he's going to do with it.

Homer has an interesting slant on prayer. When Marge wants to tell him that she is pregnant with their third child, Homer interrupts:

Can't talk now, praying. Dear Lord, the gods have been good to me and I am thankful. For the first time in my life everything is absolutely perfect the way it is. So here's the deal: you freeze everything as it is and I won't ask for anything more. If that is OK, please give me absolutely no sign. [pause] OK, deal. In gratitude, I present you this offering of cookies and milk. If you want me to eat them for you, please give me no sign. [pause] Thy will be done. [eats food]

One of Marge's prayers will strike home to all those who have attempted to bargain with God or to those who have cleaned out the back of the pantry in response to canned food drives:

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... Mmm... 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.

Moreover, prayer almost always works! Any regular viewer of *The Simpsons* will note that God answers those who pray almost immediately. God saves Todd Flanders when he is play-

ing the role of baby Moses in the basket but is swept away by the rushing river. He knocks down a pin for the all-Christian bowling team, the Holy Rollers. Here is Homer on football and petitionary prayer: "God, if you really are a God, you'll get me tickets to that game." Right away the doorbell rings and there is Ned Flanders: "Heidely-ho neighbour, want to go the game with me? I've got two tick..." Homer slams the door: "Why do you mock me, O Lord?"

Though real prayer is not the magical formula that it appears to be on *The Simpsons*, over 1200 studies have been conducted in the last few years exploring the connection between prayer and healing. Some of these have suggested that praying brings gratifying, even mysterious, results.

In 1999, for example, researchers at the Duke Clinical Research Institute found that intercessory prayer had a positive effect on health even when patients did not know they were being prayed for. One hundred fifty patients with heart problems were randomly assigned to five treatment groups. One group received only the usual medical care. Others received standard treatment plus one of four different types of alternative therapy: healing touch, relaxation, imagery or off-site intercessory prayer. The names of those to be prayed for were given to strangers of a variety of religious persuasions, including American Carmelite nuns and Nepalese Buddhist monks. At the end of treatment researchers found that patients receiving alternative care showed a 30% reduction in "adverse outcomes" compared with people in the standard-care-only group, but patients in the prayer group fared best, with adverse outcomes reduced 50% to 100% compared to the standard therapy group.⁹

A 1999 article in *The Archives of Internal Medicine* agreed that patients who had been prayed for had better medical outcomes.¹⁰ In fact, Dr. Herbert Benson, director of Harvard

University's Mind/Body Medical Institute, calls the relationship between prayer and healing being "hard-wired to God."¹¹

Religion and community care

One morning Homer Simpson decides that he will stay home from church and indulge himself in some of life's simple pleasures: drinking beer, walking around in his underwear, smoking cigars and reading *Playdude* magazine. He has rejected the pleas of his pious wife, dodged his evangelical neighbours, and refused to contribute to a religious charity. Nevertheless, when disaster strikes, it is the religious community of Springfield that comes to his rescue. Homer falls asleep while smoking and his cigar drops on to his pornographic magazine, causing a house fire. The volunteer fire brigade rushes to save his house, while neighbour Ned braves the flames and drags Homer to safety.

Homer still has not quite learned the right lesson, however. Thinking that the fire was God's punishment for his refusal to attend church, he falls to his knees and cries: "The Lord is vengeful! Oh Spiteful One, show me who to smite, and he shall be smoten!" Ned reassures him that God did not set his house on fire, and Reverend Lovejoy adds:

No, but He was working in the hearts of your friends and neighbors when they came to your aid, be they [pointing to Ned] Christian, [Krusty] Jew, or [Apu]... miscellaneous.

One of the enduring strengths and attractions of religion is its ability to form people into caring communities. This was seen at the very beginning of the life of the Christian church, when it pooled its resources to assist its needy, offer hospitality, rescue abandoned children and provide funerals even for strangers. The 4th-century emperor Julian the Apostate, a per-

secutor of Christianity, is said to have remarked, "See how they love each other!" and to have complained that they looked after "not only their own beggars but ours as well."¹² This aspect of religion is clearly visible in the cartoon world of *The Simpsons*.

The First Church of Springfield under the Reverend Timothy Lovejoy may not be the hardest-working church in show business but it does try. It runs a thrift shop where cheap clothing can be bought. (Its motto is "Nobody beats the Rev" – a take-off on the slogan of a US electronics chain.) It also offers addiction counseling and marriage encounter sessions.¹³ When a hurricane destroys part of Springfield (a very small part that seems confined to the Flanders' home and business) it's the church which offers Ned Flanders and his family a place to stay.

In doing all this, the Church of Springfield is an animated reflection of most North American churches of all denominations. Some have argued that practical care for the population in western countries was, in fact, an invention of the Church, and such care has remained one of its chief concerns for the past two millennia. Such things as the educational system of the Western world, its hospitals, orphanages, leprosy hospitals, foundling homes, old-age refuges, asylums, soup kitchens, libraries, hostels, hospices, efforts to alleviate the suffering of prisoners, prostitutes and the insane, and lending institutions catering to the poor, all originated with the Christian church.

It was only at the beginning of the 19th century that these functions began to be taken over by the secular state. Now, early in the 21st century, when the welfare state is retrenching, the public is once again looking to the church to fulfill that role mandated by Jesus in his example and his teaching.

The Big Questions

The church is not just a community of service, however. It is also a community of meaning, a place where questions of identity and purpose can be asked and answered for adults and children. For children, of course, the big questions are not necessarily the same as they are for adults:

Milhouse: Will there be cavemen in heaven?

Sunday School Teacher: Certainly not!

Bart: Uh, ma'am? What if you're a really good person, but you get into a really, really bad fight and your leg gets gangrene and it has to be amputated. Will it be waiting for you in heaven?

Sunday School Teacher: For the last time, Bart, yes!

The teacher is also forced to consider whether a ventriloquist and his dummy will both go to heaven (answer: the ventriloquist will go but the dummy won't) and what would be the fate of a robot with a human brain. She finally snaps under the theological pressure and cries: "I don't know! All these questions! Is a little blind faith too much to ask?" But adults have big questions too. When Moe the surly bartender has a fundamental question about the value of his life, it is to the church that he turns and Marge Simpson, the "Listen Lady," is there to encourage him.

This does not mean that all the hard questions posed on *The Simpsons* are answered on the show. Among the thought-provoking queries that the show asks but does not answer are: if God is so great, why does he need to be worshiped? what is the purpose of suffering? and what is the nature of the after-life? These questions, fortunately, are also discussed in churches, and some, at least, find satisfying answers there.

Belonging and Believing

Human beings find meaning by believing and belonging. One without the other is insufficient. This is particularly true for younger people, born into an age of dissolving certainties, where marriage and family are regarded as temporary and disposable; where the notions of truth and certainty are often ridiculed; and where right and wrong are up for grabs. Where can any of us find the foundations on which to build a firm understanding of the universe and of our place in it?

For many, the answer lies in the church. Professor Donald Miller, executive director of the Center for Religion and Culture at the University of Southern California, notes that Gen Xers have been referred to as the Lonely Generation, one abandoned by parents and shattered by divorce. For this generation, religion "offers a community in which they can find a faith and a meaning that transcends simply themselves."¹⁴ The spiritual quests of their parents often seem individualistic and egocentric, and have little appeal for this demographic group, which has always valued the communal, almost tribal, experience of going to raves, clubs and rock concerts.

At a deeper level, this very human need for relationships can find profound satisfaction in religion. In dealing with ultimate meaning questions of Life, the Universe, and Everything (as Douglas Adams described them), it is valuable to be surrounded by others who are on a similar journey. The 81% of Canadians polled who make the assertion that one can live a good Christian life without the church are missing the point. There is no virtue in depriving oneself of the rewards of collective religious experience: the friendships, the strength in numbers, the counsel of the more experienced, the benefits of prayer, the joys and solemnities of worshipping the Creator with one's fellow creatures. Conversely, there is little point in

depriving the religious community of the contribution each individual can make. Paul, one of the earliest Christian teachers, made this point almost two thousand years ago in describing the life of the church:

We are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the whole, not the other way around. The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body... Let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be... Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.¹⁵

It is in that kind of context, with others who are learning to love, that we begin to figure out the ultimate questions.

Why Be Good?

When Homer overhears Flanders berating a TV technician for suggesting that for an under-the-table \$50 he would install free cable TV ("I should box your ears, you... you... Sneaky Pete!"), he decides that the Simpson family should benefit from this illegal arrangement. Even the normally upright Marge is won over after reading the pamphlet "So You've Decided to Steal Cable," which helpfully corrects some misconceptions about cable. For example:

*Myth: It's only fair to pay for quality first-run movies.
Fact: Most movies shown on cable get two stars or less and are repeated ad nauseam.*

Lisa, however, is made of sterner moral fabric and tries to persuade her father that stealing is wrong.

*Lisa: Dad, why is the world such a cesspool of corruption?
Homer: [to himself] Oh, great... [speaking up] All right, what makes you say that?*

Lisa: Well, in Sunday School, we learned that stealing is a sin.

Homer: Well, DUH.

Lisa: But everybody does it. I mean, we're stealing cable as we speak.

Homer: Oh. Look at this way, when you had breakfast this morning, did you pay for it?

Lisa: No.

Homer: And did you pay for those clothes you're wearing?

Lisa: No, I didn't.

Homer: Well, run for the hills, Ma Barker! Before I call the Feds!

Lisa: Dad, I think that's pretty spurious.

Homer: Well, thank you, honey.

Later Lisa repeats her efforts and makes it clear that she is acting from religious conviction:

Lisa: Hi, Dad. I think stealing cable is wrong, so I am choosing not to watch it in the hopes that others will follow my example. That's the last you'll hear from me on the matter. Thank you for your time.

Homer: Hey, Lisa... "Racing From Belmont"! Horsies!

Lisa: Sorry, I'd rather go to heaven.

Lisa seems to do right out of a dread of going to Hell. But is this what God is really like, damning us to eternal agony for stealing cable TV? That seems a little extreme, and it does prompt us to ask if there are other reasons for obeying God, other than fear. Probably the best reason is that God is the creator of life and his commands are the manufacturer's instructions for getting the best out of living. One reason Jesus came among humankind was to show us what a life perfectly committed to God's way could look like. He said "I have come that people might have life in all its fullness."¹⁶ People found this attractive and followed him because they saw this richness of living and wanted to learn it from him.

This means that we want to do right, not because of fear of hell, but because we want to imitate Jesus and thus live life in the way the Creator intended. Of course, his path of self-sacrificing love not only rewards us but also demands from us in return. This sort of love is enormously difficult and quite unnatural for human beings, but its consequence is profound: it means that each individual is exalted far beyond the judgment of their fellow humans. In Christian understanding, the universe “is peopled exclusively with royalty.”¹⁷

This is not to suggest that we can dismiss all notions of Hell. Jesus, the world’s most loving person, warned us about it, so it is a concept we must take seriously. C.S. Lewis’ view may be helpful here. God, he says, gives us what we choose: if we follow Jesus in this life, heaven is merely the natural fulfillment of what we have sought. If we choose not to follow God, he does not force us unto heaven. “The doors of Hell,” says Lewis, “are bolted on the inside.”¹⁸

People: Good or Bad?

People are paradoxical. On the one hand, the idea that people are of infinite worth is the basis of Western political thought. It results in an ethic which demands that human beings be treated with great respect, on an equal basis, and with no exceptions. On the other hand is our experience that humankind is in a sense “fallen”, that we have a natural inclination toward selfishness.

As one consequence of this paradox, in Christian thought there are no easy distinctions to be made between good people and bad people. Alexander Solzhenitsyn saw this during his imprisonment in a Soviet concentration camp, and reflected that “the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties – but

right through every human heart – and all human hearts.”¹⁹

This is a lesson that the inhabitants of Springfield could have benefited from when they tried to blame immigrants for increased taxes, crowded public facilities and even Bart’s failure to be a good student:

Moe: You know what really aggravates me? It’s them immigrants. They wants all the benefits of living in Springfield, but they ain’t even bother to learn themselves the language.

Homer: Hey, those are exactly my sentiments.

Our fallen nature also means that we are unable in the long run to sustain moral behaviour without the aid of God. When we turn from God, or ban him from the public sphere, the possibility of decent behaviour declines. As Bob Dylan sang on his *Slow Train Coming* album, “You’re gonna have to serve somebody,/ Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord/ But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.” Morality can rest either on a foundation of God’s love or on a man-made substitute – but the track record of the latter is not an encouraging one.

Conclusion

The followers of Jesus whom we encounter on *The Simpsons* are by no means perfect examples of the spiritual life. The Reverend Lovejoy is a burnt-out idealist often just going through the motions. Marge Simpson believes she can bribe God (in return for sparing her house from the hurricane she promises that she will recommend him to all her friends). Lisa is frequently self-righteous and, as Ned Flanders says, is “Springfield’s answer to a question no one asked.” Both the late Maude Flanders and Helen Lovejoy are more narrow-minded than loving. And even Ned, that supremely generous,

self-sacrificing, cheery good citizen and loyal friend, is too concerned with petty legalisms and obsessive self-scrutiny.

These denizens of the First Church of Springfield, however, are no different from the human beings found in churches every Sunday: we are an imperfect lot. Born into an imperfect world and made worse by experience, our only hope for improvement lies in the love of the God who embraces us as he finds us and helps us grow into the people he longs for us to be. For that reason alone, we will be imitating Ned, who vows that he can be found in his church “every week, rain or shine.”

Notes

1. The most valuable Simpsons site on the internet can be found at www.snpp.com. There you can read the episode capsules from which all of the excerpts here are taken, as well as numerous articles on the religious aspects of the show, including a version of my article “God and *The Simpsons*,” which was originally published in the 1996/97 volume of *The Journal of North American Religion*.
2. “This guy” refers to Jesus!
3. “Blessed are you Lord, our God, king of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”
4. The best website for statistics on religious belief and church attendance is www.adherents.com, while the Canadian figures were derived from an article in *The Toronto Globe and Mail*, April 22, 2000.
5. These and other health benefits of religion are described in such sources as: “While We’re At It,” *First Things*, October 2000; Michael Argyle, *The Social Psychology of Everyday Life* (London: 1992); “Spiritual side of healing edges into doctor’s office,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 12 Sep 2000; and *The Congressional Record: Testimony to the House Appropriations Committee, Chairman, Congressman John Porter, November 5, 1997*, by James S. Gordon, M.D.
6. David Larson, Mary Greenwold Milano, and Constance Barry, “Religion: the forgotten factor in health care,” *The World & I*, Vol. 11, 02 Ed., 1 February 1996, 292.
7. Robert T. Michael, John H. Gagnon, Edward O. Laumann and Gina Kolata, *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 127, 129.
8. Reginald W. Bibby and Donald C. Posterski, *Teen Trends: A Nation in Motion* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1992), 248.

9. Pamela Gerhardt, "Studies of healing power of prayer pose challenges," special to *The Washington Post*, in *The Dallas Morning News*, 23 Dec 2000, 5G.
10. William S. Harris et al, "A randomized, controlled trial of the effects of remote, intercessory prayer on outcomes in patients admitted to the coronary care unit," *The Archives of Internal Medicine*, 1999: 159 (19): 2273-2278.
11. Herbert Benson and Marg Stark, *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), cited in Lauran Van Dam, "Mindful healing: an interview with Herbert Benson," *Technology Review*, Vol. 99, 1 Oct 1996, 33.
12. Quoted in Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, c. 39.
13. After one such session, dealing with the problems of the Simpsons' turbulent relationship, Reverend Lovejoy says: "Marge, as a trained marriage counselor, this is the first instance where I've ever told one partner that they were 100% right. It's all his fault. I'm willing to put that on a certificate you can frame."
14. "New orthodoxy and how some in the current generation are seeking the roots of traditional spirituality," *Talk of the Nation* (National Public Radio, 21 Dec 2000).
15. Paul's "Letter to the Romans," chapter 12, verses 3 to 14, in *The Message* translation by Eugene Peterson (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993).
16. *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 10, verse 10.
17. Greg Tinder, "Can We Be Good Without God?" *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1989. This article can be found online at www.theatlantic.com/politics/religion/goodgod.htm, while a Marxist atheist response by Bob Avakian to the same question

- can be found on *The Revolutionary Worker's* website at www.rwor.org/a/v20/980-89/987/moral.htm.
18. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Collins Fontana, 1965 [1949]), 115.
 19. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 615.