

**Christian, Jew and Miscellaneous: Representation of Minority Religion in *The Simpsons***

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## **Abstract**

*The Simpsons* 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. These ideas suggest a broader trend of how people recognize and understand non-Christian religion in their everyday lives.

## **Introduction: Religion, Humour and *The Simpsons***

### *History of Religion and Popular Culture*

The focus on religion, media and culture began in the 1950s and 1960s and has grown exponentially over the last twenty years (Lynch *et al* 2012, 1). The exponential growth is reflective of the technological advances, mass media communications, and the ability to interact on social media and the internet to gain access to new forms of media (2012, 1). No longer are we limited in what we consume, and we can search out different ideas or insulate ourselves in our preconceived notions. Lynch *et al* write that “contemporary media and culture encourage the ‘deregulation’ of religious ideas and symbols, allowing them to circulate through society in ways that are increasingly beyond the control of religious institutions” (2012, 1). For example, there is a major presence of those opposing Scientology on the internet through websites set up by former members. This allows for former members to share their stories from the inside and share with those that would never have had any contact with insiders. There has been a lot of secrecy around the beliefs of Scientologists and the internet has allowed those who have left to share information with the worldwide audience. Lynch *et al* tie the work of religion, culture and media to the study of lived religion, in that the scholars working on these topics “are interested in everyday social and cultural practice” (2012, 1-2). They also see that there has been a shift “as work on media and culture has increasingly shifted its focus from textual analysis to the uses of media and culture, so work on lived religion has recognized the importance of media and cultural products in everyday life” (2012, 2). In moving from a textually based focus on the study of religion to one focused on lived experience scholars can better understand the actual beliefs and actions of the people ‘on the ground’ in a society. A textual and doctrinal analysis is still important, but it presupposes that there is a homogeneity in a group, when there may not be.

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.

### *Defining Religion and Popular Culture*

There are many issues to consider when talking about religion and popular culture, the first is to consider how these terms are defined. Both *religion* and *culture* are terms used to describe a broad swath of human activities. *Culture* is defined by Forbes as that which “includes the whole range of human products and thoughts that surround our lives, providing the context in which we live” (Forbes 2000, 2). Terry Ray Clark further writes that “the term ‘culture’ should be used to refer to *all* the potentially signifying products and practises of a society, regardless of the economic, political, religious or social class in which they originate” (Clark 2012, 6). In this culture is a vague term used to encapsulate all sorts of human activity and thought, and therefore the scholar needs to make sure that the terms of what they are exploring are defined for the reader.

Forbes defines *popular culture* apart from *high* and *folk* culture. The assumption is that the high culture reflects an elite, sophisticated audience that is limited in its scope. Not everyone has access to high culture and it is connected to a more educated and wealthy class of people. Folk culture is also limited in its audience, but this is because it is limited to a community or region, even a family group. Examples of folk culture are orally transmitted customs for a specific community. Popular culture then has a large, broad audience as it is communicated

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 *culture*, 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" (2000, 9) of religion but recognizes that the definition will be shaped by the cultural artefact being considered, whether the scholar is looking to see an activity as having a religious connotation or what themes are being presented as being religious. Clark argues that the shifting definition of religion is only true in the academic world and that those outside this framework

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.

### *The Simpsons: America’s Most Popular Nuclear Family*

*The Simpsons* first came to television audiences in 1987 as bumper shorts for *The Tracey Ullman Show* and then were given their own series in 1989 and they have been an anchor for the Fox Network ever since. Thirty years after their debut new episodes are still produced and watched by millions of viewers. The show focuses on a traditional nuclear family: father Homer, a dimwitted Nuclear Safety inspector with a quick temper but a good heart; mother Marge, a stay at home mom with passion for helping and caring for others; son Bart, the prototypical menace who hates school, pulls pranks and causes general mischief wherever he goes; daughter Lisa,



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.

### *Method and Theory*

The religiosity of *The Simpsons* has been of interest to scholars as the show has captured the attention of and reflected American culture. Jonathon Gray calls the show “global television’s most prodigious and most well-known example of parody” (Gray 2006, 5). Most of the religiosity is seen to focus on Christianity as Springfield, the setting of the show, is seen to be a Christian town. Through parody, the show is critical towards Christianity and how it “fails to live up to its traditionally valuable social role and to point out the risks that breakdown produces” (Heit 2008, 3). If the viewer is familiar with the use of parody on the Simpsons about other aspects of American culture, then we can assume that they will interpret new information in a similar way. Gray argues that *The Simpsons* uses hyper-stereotypes, which relies on the viewer recognizing that criticism is being leveled at the process of stereotyping and therefore might be lost when viewers are presented with images about religious practices that they have

not encountered. To determine the ways in which conventional<sup>1</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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 conventional religion on Robert Towler's definition, which put "institutionalized religion, the religion associated with the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury, the parishes, other world faiths and the new religious movement" (10) and was used in their original research in 1980.

widespread superficial – and often erroneous – knowledge about groups of people that other groups use to facilitate social interaction. Ignorant familiarity exists when people think they know enough about the other to make decisions about how to treat them, but that familiarity is based on ignorance. Among the different types of incomplete knowledge humans often employ to understand others and their religions are stereotypes (e.g., Native American are closer to nature and “more spiritual” than whites), theological ignorance (e.g., the Catholics worship the saints), and racial-religious prejudice (e.g., that Jews secretly run the world). (Feltmate 2017, 4-5)

Along with Gray’s argument about the hyper stereotypes that the writers use to critique mass media, we can see that when it comes to depicting non-Christian religions, the writers of the Simpsons turn to recognizable aspects of these traditions and that there will not be the critique that is seen of the Christian faith. Feltmate finds that ignorant familiarity “builds upon commonly held misconceptions and how different religious groups in the United States have been unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged through their depictions in popular media” (2017, 5). By looking at the characterization of the religious identities of established and new characters that exist outside the Christian ‘norm’ of the society we can better understand the way that minority religion is understood by the viewing public. Analysing the representations of these religions will show how otherness is viewed in the series and show how it represents an ignorant familiarity with other religions.

### **The Jewish Identity of Krusty: A Religious Clown Thing**

#### *A Jewish Entertainer?*

Krusty the Clown was not created as a Jewish character. Creator Matt Groening based him on the local television clown from his childhood, Rusty Nails. Groening at first conceived the character as being Homer in disguise to explore the idea that the Simpson children idolized this celebrity but disrespected their father while they were one in the same. After leaving that

idea behind Krusty became his own character, representative of celebrity culture and a way for the writers to make fun of show business. Krusty's Jewish background is revealed in the third season's episode "Like Father, Like Clown". The episode plays out as a parody of the classic movie *The Jazz Singer*, in which the son of a Cantor is rejected by his father for pursuing a career in jazz music. The writers wanted to use this story line and therefore re-cast Krusty as the son of a Rabbi. Invited to the Simpson household for dinner, the family asks their guest to say grace. Claiming that he's "a little rusty" Krusty begins to speak in another language. "He's talking funny talk" Homer laughs. Lisa corrects him by identifying the language as Hebrew and stating "Krusty must be Jewish". Homer retorts "A Jewish entertainer? Get out of here!", to which Lisa replies "Dad, there are many prominent Jewish entertainers including Lauren Bacall, Dinah Shore, William Shatner and Mel Brooks". Astounded, Homer exclaims "Mel Brooks is Jewish?!". Krusty then breaks down and reveals to the Simpsons his heartbreaking estrangement from his father.

In telling the story of Krusty's early life the writers and animators make certain choices to portray Jewishness in Springfield. Krusty reveals that his real name is Herschel Krustofsky and that he comes from a long line of Rabbis, and so his father expected him to follow in this tradition. Krusty's Jewishness is related to his ethnic and familial identity. For him, Jewishness is not something that he has chosen, but that he was born into. This is reinforced in the setting of the Jewish community in Springfield. Krusty grew up in the "Lower East Side" of Springfield, which is visually represented like that of an ethnic neighbourhood in a larger city. Men are seen wearing dark clothing and hats that are reminiscent of Hasidic style. They have long beards and side locks while boys are shown to wear yarmulkes in the street. Women wear modest dresses and scarves over their heads. Without stating it out loud, the visuals tell the informed viewer that

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 relationship between father and son. It is interesting that they look to change the view of Rabbi Krustofsky, reflecting the idea that it is he who is out of touch and not Krusty. Krusty is seen to live in the mainstream community, he entertains the children in Springfield in a popular television show and he is shown as being part of the community in town meetings in other episodes. Krusty’s rejection of

his father's narrow view of Jewish practice, that Krusty must follow him to become a Rabbi, suggest that he is more assimilated into the "secular" culture of Springfield.

The debate between the Simpson children and the Rabbi reflects the rabbinical traditions of debate and reinterpretation and reinforces the modern idea of assimilation of Jewishness. The children go to the Rabbi with quotes from the Torah, the Babylonian Talmud, and Rabbi Simon Ben Eliezer, which Lisa has found through intensive research. She is shown surrounded by books titled *The Big Book of Chosen People*, *Views on Jews*, *Jewishness Revisited*, and multiple texts with titles in Hebrew. Rabbi Krustofsky engages with the children and has a rebuttal to every source they find about either holding children close (he calls upon the commandment to honour your father and mother), the role of the jester (he rebuts with the call to study the Torah all day and night) but is thrown off when they offer a quote from a "great man": "[The Jews] are a swinging bunch of people. I mean I've heard of persecution, but what they went through is ridiculous!... But the great thing is that after thousands of years of waiting and holding on and fighting, they finally made it!", which comes from the memoir of Sammy Davis Jr. a well-known Jewish convert and entertainer. The Rabbi is won over by what he calls an eloquent summation of his people's struggle and says, "if a performer can think that way maybe I'm upside down about this problem" before breaking down because of the time lost between himself and his son. Reunited on Krusty's show the two hug and sing together. It is the Rabbi who needs to change his views on Jewish identity and not Krusty.

This episode is of interest as the writers consulted Rabbis in their script writing process. The reception from those in the Jewish community was favourable, and the episode won an Emmy for the voice acting of Jackie Mason for Rabbi Krustofsky (Mason himself is an interesting choice for this role as he was a Rabbi who became a comedian). Pinsky quotes Rabbi

Daniel Wolpe as saying that “the episode was brilliant, first of all because of the use of real Jewish sources. Second of all, because it was an interesting take on the greatest of contemporary Jewish dilemmas, which is the battle between tradition and modernity” (2007, 158). This reinforces the view that Rabbi Krustofsky is representing a more traditional and orthodox view of Judaism that rejects assimilation, and in the end, he loses out and realizes that all he got from his strict belief was a fractured relationship with his son.

After his revelation as a Jew in “Like Father, Like Clown” Krusty then becomes the stand in for Jewishness in the series. When Homer explores a different aspect of spirituality in “Homer the Heretic” Krusty is shown coming to his door, yarmulke on, to ask for money for the Brotherhood of Jewish Clowns. Asked by Homer if it’s a “religious thing” Krusty replies “it’s a religious clown thing”. His identity as a clown and a Jew is cemented in his mind. The writers then use Krusty to explore and use Jewish rite, rituals and other aspects in their story telling.

### *Rituals, Rites, Lore and Traditions<sup>2</sup>*

Pearl and Pearl (1999) found in their exploration of Jewish characters and themes on television shows between 1948-1997 that “among the many ways of portraying Jews and Judaism on popular TV shows, none is more frequent and direct as the depiction of Jewish rites and rituals, traditions and customs. As the most tangible form of religious expression and identity, ritual is a natural focus of television when it turns its attention to religious issues” (15). This section will explore the ways in which Krusty, after the revelation of his Jewish identity, reinforces this identity through rites and rituals but that his Jewish identity is easily brushed off when it is not the focus of the story. For Koven, the use of familiar images means that “non-Jews can see, and enjoy the depiction of Jewish customs within a film without fully understanding the

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<sup>2</sup> Title adapted from Chapter One of Pearl and Pearl (1999).

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 are not familiar with certain aspects of Jewish tradition might not recognize every aspect of Jewishness presented in the show. It also means that those looking to tell a story for a broad audience will have to either educate them or rely on popular conceptions, that results in stereotypes.

### *Krusty’s Adult Bar Mitzvah*

In the 2003 episode the show again covers Krusty’s Jewish identity in an explicit way in the main story of “Today I Am a Clown”. After wandering down to his old neighbourhood, which again resembles the community seen in “Like Father Like Clown”, Krusty discovers he is not included on the Jewish Walk of Fame (tagline: Where the Chosen Get Chosen). Upon consulting the curator of the walk, he admits that while he was circumcised as a baby he never had a bar mitzvah as a young man. The curator tells Krusty that without a bar mitzvah “in the eyes of God and the Springfield Jewish Walk of Fame committee you are not a Jewish man”. Devastated he consults his father to learn that Rabbi Krustofsky did not arrange the celebration as he worried Krusty would make a mockery of it. Krusty decides to have a bar mitzvah as an adult. With his newfound zeal, Krusty incorporates his Jewish identity into his show. He puts on a yarmulke and presents a cartoon in which a Rabbi cat is performing a bris on a baby mouse. Krusty’s bar mitzvah is planned as a televised event. After being fired he looks to use the event to regain his fame and show. The event, which is advertised as “Krusty the Clown’s Wet’n’Wild Bar Mitzvah” with the message: Warning first two rows may get converted, is held in a stadium



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 fireworks. The audience, shown to wear head coverings, cheers loudly, but Krusty notices his father looking disappointed. After the show, he tells his father he wants a *real* bar mitzvah in a temple. This pleases his father greatly. The final scene shows Krusty in the synagogue, reading from the Torah with his prayer shawl and his father looking on. He ends with saying "Now I am a man". This shows the importance of the ritual for Krusty and his Jewish identity. Without the bar mitzvah, he saw himself as no longer a Jew nor an adult. The viewer is left to understand that this ritual is a crucial part of Jewish identity in Springfield.

#### *A Funeral and A Wedding*

In the 2010 episode "Once Upon a Time in Springfield" Krusty wants to marry his latest co-star, Princess Penelope. Their wedding is shown happening in the Springfield Country Club and being performed by Rabbi Krustofsky. Under the traditional *chuppah* we see the men wearing yarmulkes to signify that this is a Jewish wedding. Though there has been no mention of religious difference before this point, Rabbi Krustofsky appears to be skeptical of this interfaith marriage. He announces that "we are here today to marry a Jew and a Congregationalist, is that even a thing?". Assured it is, he says "let us continue with this mockery". Clearly the Rabbi is not on board with this union, and his disapproval is consistent with other representations of marriage between Jews and non-Jews found by Pearl and Pearl on other television programs which featured conflict and tension between those marrying non-Jews and their families. When Krusty decides to not go through with the wedding because he has been married 15 times before and loves Penelope so much he believes he doesn't deserve her, his father celebrates with a

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.

#### *Sabbath and Other Festivals and Holidays*

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.

#### *Symbols – Words and Pictures*

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.

### *Krusty Can’t Keep Kosher*

One of the most prevalent jokes about Krusty and his Jewishness is his inability to keep kosher. In “Today I am a Clown” he seems to not even be able to pronounce the word kosher. When his father, going over the rules for Jews, tells him to abstain from pork, Krusty is shown about to bite into a sandwich with a pig face on it. In the show that reveals his Jewishness, “Like Father Like Clown”, Rabbi Krustofsky finds out that Krusty’s namesake sandwich in Izzy’s Deli is “ham, sausage and bacon with a smidge of mayo on white bread”. When Krusty is hospitalized in “The Nightmare before Krustmas” and he learns his daughter has been raised Christian, after wondering how anyone could ignore the traditions of the Jewish people the nurse

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 be able to recognize that Jewish identity can mean a specific diet.

These examples show how Krusty is identified as Jewish to the viewer and how his Jewish identity is constructed. In a recent episode, he converts to another religion so that the way he constructs his religious identity can be compared.

#### *Krusty the Christian*

In 2000, the series introduced Krusty’s daughter Sophie. In the initial episode in which she appeared no mention was made of Krusty’s Jewishness or whether Sophie considered herself Jewish. In the 2016 episode “The Nightmare After Krustmas” Sophie reappeared for the second time in a larger capacity. In this holiday-set episode Krusty finds out, through her confusion and failure to recognize his use of Yiddish words, that Sophie has been raised Christian. Upset, he wonders out loud how her mother could “ignore the sacred traditions of the Jewish people” before receiving his lunch, as mentioned above, a lobster, bacon and treif sandwich. Clearly, Krusty himself does not follow all the traditions of his own people. Sophie says she just wants to spend the holidays with her father, but he tells her he does not celebrate Christmas. He does not mention Hanukkah as an alternative, perhaps reflecting the fact that Christmas and Hanukkah are not as interchangeable as other television programs has made them out to be (Pearl and Pearl

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 superiors. Overhearing Krusty say he's looking for something "to make my heart feel better" the Reverend approaches him, telling him that Jesus is reaching out to him. By coincidence Krusty sees a glowing figure through the window behind Lovejoy, exclaiming that "Oh my God I see him! I am a Christian". The audience then sees that the figure is just a man being tasered by the police.

In the next scene, Reverend Lovejoy introduces the newest member to the congregation, Krusty the Christian, who enters singing Amazing Grace. Much like when he became more serious about his Jewish identity before his bar mitzvah, he also realigns his TV show to reflect his new Christian identity. His show is now referred to as the *Sober Contemplation Hour*, he exclaims "He is Risen", wears a cross on his lapel and features a cartoon in which the normally violent Itchy and Scratchy are portrayed as devout Christians quoting scripture. Sophie is touched, saying "Wow Dad, you wrecked your entire show just to prove you love me". In contrast, in "Today I am a Clown" Bart makes a comment that suggests that Krusty incorporating his Jewish identity has made his show better and there is no change to the violence in the *Itchy and Scratchy* cartoons as the before mentioned scene of a Rabbi Cat performing a bris on the baby mouse ends with the mouse killing the cat.

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 yourself". Therefore, Krusty doesn't need to become a Christian to be a good father to Sophie, he just needs to put her needs first. Saved from the river, Krusty is reconciled with his daughter and his faith, as he is shown with Sophie and being cared for by a Jewish ambulance with Hebrew letters and "Orthodox" written on it. The paramedic brings him a prayer shawl to cover his shoulders.

#### *Conclusion: The Jewish Clown Thing*

Overall the Jewish identity of Krusty is one of ethnic otherness. As he is a character that has existed for almost 30 years with various writers putting their own ideas on him, it is not surprising that his Jewishness is often relegated to something that marks him as different from the other characters. In the show, besides his father, the only regularly occurring character with some sort of Jewish identity is the Old Jewish Man. He does not have a proper name or identity, he just shows up in some episodes as a comedic background character. There has been mention of other characters being Jewish, but none have had such an expansive exploration of their identity as Krusty. To understand Jewishness in *The Simpsons* is to look to Krusty's Jewish identity. This may be problematic as Krusty is nowhere close to a perfect observant Jew, though this imperfection reflects the reality of the lived religion of Jewish people in America. For

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 *et al* 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 *Fiddler on the Roof* to prove he knows about Judaism, and Principal Skinner thinks Yom Kippur sounds like a made-up holiday. These instances may show more about the ignorant familiarity of the situations than anti-Semitic rhetoric. These jokes are pointed more at the character’s lack of knowledge, which may be identifiable by the viewer. Surely if they have a vague notion of Jewish holidays they may not recognize the name Yom Kippur. The use of popular culture in *The Simpsons* always suggest a meta critique in that people think they have knowledge of something and therefore Homer saying that *Fiddler on the Roof* will tell him all he needs to know about Judaism is the prime example of ignorant familiarity in this context.



## **My Hindu Friend**

### *Introducing Apu*

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 but wears a turban (perhaps suggesting a Sikh heritage). Even Apu's catchphrase, "Thank you, come again!" is reflective of his role as convenience store clerk. He uses this phrase after commercial transactions and it reflects the idea of customer service. Even after arguing or berating a customer he offers the phrase in a chipper fashion in parting.

As one of multiple characters in Springfield, Apu stands out in his differing ethnic background. It is clear to the viewer that Apu comes from "outside". Like Krusty, his otherness is connected to his ethnic heritage, but unlike Krusty, Apu's different religious identity did not require a 'coming out', and his Hindu identity is tied into his Indian identity.

*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 recognize this Eastern tradition. There are many ways that Hinduism is relayed to the audience such as the gods of the Hindu pantheon, gurus, Karma and even the sacred character Ganges. Through looking at how these play out in the series, the nature and complexity of Apu's religious and ethnic identities are shown to fall in line with the idea of ignorant familiarity. In the episode "Homer the Heretic" Apu's religious identity is confirmed to be that of a Hindu. Skipping church, Homer heads into the Kwik-E-Mart for a treat and finds Apu behind the counter, leading to this exchange:

Homer: Apu I see you're not in church.

Apu: Oh, but I am, I have a shrine to Ganesh the god of worldly wisdom located in the employee lounge.

Homer: Hey Ganesh, want a peanut?

Apu: Please do not offer my God a peanut.

Homer: No offense Apu, but when they were handing out religions you must have been out taking a whiz.

Apu: Mr. Simpson, please pay for your purchases and get out and come again!

In this exchange Apu makes clear his religious affiliation. While he does not use the word Hindu at this point, we see that he has a shrine to the elephant-headed deity Ganesh. We will see the show return to Ganesh several times to represent the Hindu pantheon. The pervasive use of Ganesh may suggest that the writers think that this is a familiar image, though the audience may

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.

Lovejoy: Aw, that's super.

Lovejoy's labeling of Apu as 'miscellaneous' and his somewhat condescending reply, may reflect the otherness and disconnect from the public eye of Hinduism in America. In the episode "Homer's Barbershop Quartet" Apu, as a member of the Quartet, has to deal with his ethnic identity as the group is signed on by a record producer. Finding his last name Nahasapeemapieton "too foreign", the producer rechristens him Apu De Beaumarchais. The joke being that a long and complicated European name is better than a long and complicated Indian name. In response Apu says "That is great dishonour to my ancestors and my god, but okay!". Apu is fine to give up his identity for fame and fortune. Later in the episode, when asked by a reporter if "it's really true that you're an Indian?" Apu answers, "By the many arms of Vishnu I swear it is a lie!", showing that you can't take his beliefs away from him. (Vishnu also makes an appearance in a later episode, "Bart versus Australia" as sitting in the middle of the earth pressing buttons with various hands.) Apu's denial of his identity is a joke as it is clear that he is Hindu by his response.

The conflation of convenience store clerk, Indian and Hindu is most evident in the episode "Homer and Apu". After it is discovered through Homer getting sick that Apu is selling expired meat products, Apu is fired from the Kwik-E-Mart. Though he was following corporate

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 asking whether he is actually the head of the Kwik-E-Mart. The CEO then says, "I hope this has been enlightening, thank you come again". The presentation of the CEO

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 his wish, Apu is restored to his beloved Kwik-E-Mart after taking a bullet for his replacement, the act of bravery leading to his immediate reinstatement.

Other aspects of Apu’s identity are explored further as the series continues and his character becomes more prominent. In the episode “Lisa the Vegetarian” Apu helps Lisa learn how to handle her newfound vegetarianism with tolerance in respect to her meat loving family. In “22 Short Films About Springfield” he is the focus of a vignette where he absconds from his duties in the Kwik-E-Mart for 5 minutes to party with other Indians, including his brother Sanjay. Titled “The Jolly Bengali”, it may point to Apu being from a specific area in India. In “Much Apu about Nothing” the citizens of Springfield get riled up about illegal immigration. Apu confesses to the Simpsons that he is living in Springfield with an expired student visa. When protesters show up at his door he offers his statue of Ganesh some Yoo-hoo, a chocolate flavoured beverage, to make them go away. Convinced he needs to make himself appear more American, he then adopts an American way of speaking and hides his statue. When Homer notices, the following conversation happens:

Homer: Hey, you got rid of that goofy sacred elephant statue.

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. Nahasapeemapetilons" 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 including Saris, garlands, tunics and turbans.

In "Simpson Tide" Apu joins the National Guard with Homer stating that "Although my religion strictly forbids military service, what the hey, I'm in too!" Apu's nonchalant view of his religion's view on military service may suggest that he doesn't hold his beliefs as firmly as he may think he should. In the episode "Midnight Rx" Apu and Ned Flanders argue in the backseat of the car like children over their respective faiths:

Apu: Homer! Tell Mr. Ned to stop trying to convert me!

Ned: I was just telling him how brave he is to worship a false god.

Apu: I do not worship one god, ok? I worship a whole super team of deities that -Ow, ow! OK, he just pinched me!

Ned: Well, where's your super team now?

Homer: Listen, you two! I'll tell you who the true god is if you're both quiet for the rest of the trip!

Ned: But the Bible says-

Apu: But the infinite-

Homer: All right, I'm coming back there!

Apu: Save me, Shiva!

Ned: Why don't you just call out for Hawkman?

Apu: Why don't you shut up!

Ned's disrespect for Apu's beliefs gives way to the image of the Evangelical trying to convert the "savage". The audience has seen Flanders as the stereotypical Evangelical Christian who often ridicules and judges those not of the same faith. Ned calling Apu's belief that of "false gods" is consistent with his character framing his beliefs as the only valid form of belief. The audience may use their ignorant familiarity to read that there is a colonial context to religion in India, and that Evangelicals emphasise the importance of conversion and testimony to see that Ned's actions towards Apu are expected. The humour comes from the context of them fighting like children in the car and Homer having to discipline them in this fashion.

Another aspect of Apu's Indian identity is shown through the architecture and decoration of his home. In "I'm with Cupid" we see the inside of Apu's apartment for the first time, and the

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 cuddles with Maggie and speaks to her in Hindi, which Marge confuses for baby talk. Apu is convinced to have children when he considers "Who will float my corpse down the Ganges?". We see an image of this in the later episode "Kiss Kiss Bangalore" when Mr. Burns floats down the Ganges with his 'friends' that turn out to be corpses. Apu and Manjula welcome octuplets, and in the episode "Bye Bye Nerdie" they look to Homer and his baby proofing business to fix their home. Homer finds a problem with a pointy Deity, a large Shiva stature in their living room, and fixes it with novelty foam fingers. Well relieved that there will be "no more Shiva related pokings" both Apu and Manjula gasp when Homer suggests that they "might want to switch to a nice round Buddha". This conflation of Hinduism/Buddhism as Eastern traditions that are interchangeable reflects the idea that viewers in the West might not understand the complex history of Hinduism and Buddhism and their connection.

In "The Sweetest Apu" Apu cheats on Manjula. He knows that it is bad karma, and she throws him out after he confesses. The Simpsons invite them both over for dinner to reunite the couple and Bart, Lisa and Maggie dress up as Ganesh, much like their father did earlier, to try and order the couple back together. They also order a fudge likeness of the Taj Mahal to help them remember their heritage. It is interesting that it was also depicted as their being a picture of the Taj Mahal above their bed. This is interesting for two reasons, first, as a tomb it is a strange symbol for them to have over their bed. Secondly, the Taj Mahal is an artifact of Muslim rule in



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, and that he will be reborn as a tape worm and then as assistant to Saturday Night Live’s producer Lorne Michaels. He remarks that “it’s going to be a tough couple of lifetimes”. He is stopped by Manjula and the couple reunite. In “Treehouse of Horrors XVI” Apu appears in a story in which Mr. Burns hunts his fellow men. When Apu is shot, a rabbit looking like him jumps up from behind his corpse and yells “You cannot kill a Hindu”. The rabbit then becomes ensnared in a trap and shouts “Jesus help me!” After being injured when the Kwik-E-Mart is destroyed in “Much Apu About Something”, Homer remarks at Apu’s survival:

Homer: He's got nine lives!

Apu: I am a Hindu, sir. Not a cat. I have infinite lives! During some of which I may be a cat. In those I... do have nine.

*Conclusion: There are 700 Million of Us*

Apu’s identity can be seen to be wrapped up in what Feltmate calls ignorant familiarity. His Hindu and Indian identities are wrapped up together and images for both are used interchangeably. Most striking is the use of the Taj Mahal, which would be recognizable for most North American viewers as a symbol of India. When we look closer at the meaning and identity of the structure though, we find that it does not represent a Hindu identity. But this does

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

represented will help educate the public about those that they may perceive as ‘different’ from themselves.

### **Praise Be Oliver: Representations of Islam**

Islam in *The Simpsons* has a very different portrayal than other religious traditions. While we have seen the exploration of faith for established characters through their religious identities being one facet of their characterization, when Islam was the focus in the 2008 episode “Mypods and Boomsticks” the show introduced brand new characters. Before this point, there had been no named Muslim characters or even much reference to Islam. The references that we do find are used for satire against other issues and not about representing Muslims in Springfield.

#### *Muslims and Islam Pre-9/11*

In the first season episode “Krusty Gets Busted” after Krusty is arrested for robbery newscaster Kent Brockman reports that his “arrest shocked Springfield packing its churches, synagogues and mosques”. As this is before Krusty is revealed to be Jewish, this remark may be more about satire about the elevated status of celebrity in American culture than showing that there is a diversity of religious communities in Springfield. If there are any mosques in Springfield, the viewer has never seen one. Mosques are mentioned again in the episode “Sideshow Bob’s Last Gleaming”. Lisa is excited to go to the local air show, as she tells her family “I want to meet the first female stealth bomber pilot. During the Gulf War, she destroyed 70 mosques and her name is Lisa too”. We can see this as a comment on America’s military activities in the Middle East. While Lisa is excited to see a female pilot with her name, it also points to her notoriety being about the destruction of religious buildings. As the episode aired in 1995, it can criticize the Gulf War which ended just 4 years earlier.

We see this continued connection of Islam and American conflict in the episode “Two Bad Neighbours” where Homer tries to sell his “Ayatollah Assholia” t-shirt at the neighbourhood garage sale. When coming across the t-shirt in their attic Marge is ready to get rid of the shirt:

Marge: Can we get rid of this Ayatollah T-shirt? Khomeini died years ago.

Homer: But, Marge! It works on any Ayatollah: Ayatollah Nakhbadeh, Ayatollah Zahedi...even as we speak, Ayatollah Razmada and his cadre of fanatics are consolidating their power.

Marge: I don't care who's consolidating their power.

The title of Ayatollah is seen to be in connection to ‘fanatics’ and those that may be a threat. It is not explained or explored that Ayatollah may just be a label for a teacher or leader in a certain branch of Islam. Homer further shows the power of this connection as he riles up the crowd to sell the t-shirt:

Homer: Say, that Ayatollah thinks he's better than America. Is he right?!

Crowd: Boo!

Man: Yes.

Homer: Well for \$5 you can sock it to him in style!

Homer doesn't identify who the Ayatollah is that he is referencing, and the crowd doesn't seem to be concerned with that. We also see the mention of Ayatollah in “I Love Lisa” where Krusty jokes that during a celebration of his show “I started this show so long ago the Ayatollah only had a goatee”. We will see in further episodes that long beards are often associated with Islam, though they were also associated with Jewishness in Krusty's childhood neighbourhood. We also hear the use of Ayatollah as a generic “villain” character in the episode “Bart Sells his Soul” where Bart's friend Milhouse buys his soul (as represented on a piece of paper) and then plays in

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 Khomeini and the Iranian revolution are pushed farther back and other figures are associated with Islam in Western media.

Unlike the series *South Park*, *The Simpsons* has never portrayed Muhammad. In fact, the only mention of the prophet is in the episode “Mayored to the Mob” from 1998 in which Homer, showing a rare flash of understanding, questions how loyal he needs to be as a bodyguard to the mayor.

Leavelle: As a bodyguard, your only loyalty is to your protectee. Not to your family. Not to your country. Not to Muhammad.

Homer: Even during Ramadan?

Homer seems to understand the importance of Ramadan to a Muslim. Ramadan is again mentioned in “Grift of the Magi” where at the end of ‘Krusty’s Nondenominational Holiday Funfest’ he says “have a merry Christmas, happy Hanukkah, crazy Kwanza, a tip-top Tet and solemn dignified Ramadan. Now a word from my god, our sponsor”. We can see that after the earlier discussion of the conflation of Hanukah and Christmas that Ramadan also gets lumped into this configuration. Unlike Christmas, the date of Ramadan is not fixed to the Gregorian calendar and therefore it occurs at different periods in that calendar.

Mecca is mentioned in the episode “Pokey Mom”. After Marge befriends an inmate while teaching painting at a prison, she invites him to stay at the Simpson home when he is released. After showing him the basement where he will stay the inmate says “It’s more than I deserve ma’am. Now, which way is Mecca, cause I got a little praying to do.” Marge, flustered but not seemingly alarmed responds “Uh, Mecca... well, let’s see...” until the inmate interrupts her with laughter and reassures her he’s Jewish. The humour in this exchange is that the convict thought

that being Muslim would be alarming to Marge. This episode was from January 2001, and we can see that the pre-9/11 image of Islam is relegated to jokes about otherness and not reflecting the experience of Muslims.

### *Post 9/11 and the Bin Laden Family*

In 2004 the episode “Bart-Mangled Banner”, Bart accidentally disrespects the American flag by mooning it. When the incident becomes national news and the Simpsons are seen as pariahs, one scene shows the news reporting on the reaction “overseas”. In the scene, we see brown men in turbans and tunics celebrating in the streets (which appears to be a marketplace) with guns. It then switched to a woman wearing a black burka holding a picture of Homer. “Simpsons be praised! Praise be to Springfield!” she shouts. Behind her are other women wearing burkas among the men seen previously. She then begins to ululate. The anchor returns and says “But not everyone is ululating tonight. The President announced that he is pointing warhead at...”. The imagery here is clearly representing images used in new media to reinforce the image of Islam as an enemy of America. There is no distinct county named but the images of the people are recognizable as “Islamic”. We don’t see any diversity of the people. Four years later would see the introduction of the first Muslim inhabitants of Springfield.

The character of Bashir bin Laden is introduced as Bart’s new friend. Bashir and his parents have immigrated to Springfield from Jordan, and are identified as Muslims. The focus of the story is not the experience of this family as Muslims in Springfield but on Homer who misunderstands a conversation between Bashir’s parents and believes that Bashir’s father is going to commit an act of terrorism. The viewer is aware of the misunderstanding before Homer, and the humour is supposed to come from our perception of Homer being prejudiced against this family without reason. Homer thinks that the father is going to blow up the Springfield mall,

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 Muslims should not be trusted.

Lenny: Hey Carl, any idea which direction Mecca is in?

Carl: Why don't you ask Homer, he ought to know by dint of his son's new friend.

Homer: Hey, Bashir's great...

Moe: Homer this is serious. This Bashir kid is Muslim and therefore up to something.

Homer: Oh, I can't believe that until I see a fictional TV program espousing your point of view.

[Moe turns on the TV to show a parody of 24, in which an FBI agent interrogates a terrorist]

Homer: Oh my god, what can I do?

Carl: Well if you want to stop Bashir and his war on American principles, you could discriminate against his family in employment and housing.

They then convince Homer to invite the bin Ladens over for dinner at his house so that he can interrogate them. Marge emphasises their Muslimness by telling Homer she is proud of his open-mindedness of inviting "Bart's Muslim friend's Muslim family" over. At the dinner, Bashir's parents tell the Simpsons they met while studying science and technology at University of Jordan. Homer then presents them with a cake decorated like the American flag and suggests that they cut it or else they show that they don't love freedom. Bart berates his father for his actions and Mr. bin Laden scolds Bart by saying that disrespecting Homer does not show them respect. After the bin Ladens leave, Marge is upset that Homer is teaching Bart intolerance. He heads over to apologize but notices Mr. bin Laden loading TNT into a crate. Homer jumps to the conclusion that he is a terrorist.



Homer then has a dream sequence in which he rides a magic carpet and is antagonized by a genie, representing Islam and stylised in the manner of Disney's *Aladdin*. The genie tells him that he is there to destroy the decadent Western society and proceeds to change the local church into a mosque, the Reverend Lovejoy into an Imam, and yells words like Ramadan, and Hussain without any context for the viewer. Homer then goes to eavesdrop on the bin Ladens and, only hearing snippets of their conversation, believes that Mr. bin Laden is going to blow up the Springfield Mall. In truth, Mr. bin Laden works as an implosion expert and has been tasked with the demolition of the old mall. Homer tries to get information out of Mina after her husband leaves, telling her she should let him in her house because of her people's hospitality. Homer attempts to trap her and misspeaks several Islamic terms. Homer says "Praise be Oliver" and "Corona" instead of Allah and Qu'ran. Mina and Homer snack on almond paste and when he is alone he finds out that Mr. bin Laden is heading to the Springfield Mall. Chaos ensues and Homer interrupts the planned implosion by throwing the dynamite in the river and destroying a bridge. The final scene shows the bin Ladens and Simpsons together in the Simpson backyard with the banner "Pardon My Intolerance" hanging from the house. Marge tells Lisa to add the bin Ladens to their Christmas card list with their Jewish friends.

In the episode "Greatest Story ever Do'hed" the Simpsons travel to Israel. We see some portrayals of Islam in the episode. First, Bart is chased down by the tour security officer, a young girl, for causing trouble. He tries to hide in a group of men but is found out when the men bow down to pray. Second, the Dome of the Rock is featured as a prominent setting. Homer, suffering from 'Jerusalem Syndrome' believes that he is the Messiah to unite Jews, Christians and Muslims. The tour guide helping the others find Homer tells the family that the Dome of the Rock is where Christians and Jews believe Abraham was going to sacrifice Isaac, and that

Muslims “believe something too”. Homer’s message to the people in the Dome is one of picking up themes that unify the faiths, Peace and Chicken.

*Conclusion: Which Way is Mecca?*

In his study of Muslim portrayals in Western media, Hussain found that “Muslims are not recognized on American television as citizens of their own country, but instead are portrayed as dangerous immigrants with a religion that is both alien and wicked” (2010, 57). It seems the writers have tried to subvert this portrayal by showing that what is usually seen on television is not reflective of the truth. Unfortunately, by focusing on Homer and not the Muslim characters (Bashir’s father is never even given a name) the viewer is left with a very one-dimensional view of Islam. Hussain writes that

many other factors contribute to Muslim identity in North America. There are questions of religious affiliation. Is one a Sunni or a Shi‘i? Is one a member of the Ahmadiyya, a Muslim group that is proscribed in Pakistan? Is one a member of the various Sufi orders that are found in North America? Is one a member of the working class, or does one have a higher socio-economic status? Can one pass as “White,” or does one’s ethnicity prohibit this? (2010, 73).

Clearly the lived religious experience of Muslim identity in America is not representable in one portrayal. The portrayal of Muslims in *The Simpsons* is representative of ignorant familiarity. Recognisable symbols in words and visuals tell the viewer that what they are seeing is connected to Islam and Muslim identity but does so in a way that does not represent the nuanced way that religious lives are found in the world.

### **The Conversion of Lisa Simpson: Western Convert Archetype**

In the episode titled “She of Little Faith” the character of Lisa Simpson, fed up with crass commercialization in her family’s regular church, sets out to find spiritual solace in another form. Lisa Simpson is an eight-year-old girl who has been presented as intelligent, progressive

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 to the viewer and both had been seen in the First Church of Springfield. In the temple, Lenny and Carl are sitting in lotus pose meditating, while Richard Gere is tending to a Zen garden. At the front of the temple there is a large Buddha statue, which depicts Buddha as a fat and happy Asian man. These touches suggest a Zen Buddhist temple, but Gere is publicly known as a follower of Tibetan Buddhism and when Lenny calls Gere the most famous Buddhist, Carl directs him towards the Dalai Lama.

Lenny: Richard Gere! The world’s most famous Buddhist!

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 15<sup>th</sup> 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 Monks<sup>3</sup>. 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.

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<sup>3</sup> Jane Naomi Iwamura has explored this trend in her essay “*The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture*”, it is of note that the writers went with the celebrity angle of Buddhism instead of the Asian connection.

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 and Buddhist social media was still to come<sup>4</sup>. She plants a Bodhi tree in her backyard and meditates under it and chants. The conflict of how to be a Buddhist in Western capitalist society is reflected with Christmas coming up for the family. Lisa sees herself as not being ruled by material desire and therefore rejects Christmas not only as a spiritual holiday but as a consumer driven activity. She reaches a personal struggle as her mother tells her she will get a present, a long wished-for pony, if she renounces her new faith. Conflicted, she runs away to consult her mentors at the Buddhist temple. A significant side note is that the pony turns out to not be real, but only an illusion, fitting in with Buddhist ideology of the world being an illusion. Whether this was purposeful by the writers is not clear; Lisa being tricked into doing things to get a pony has been a theme in the program, as with all her rationality and intelligence she is still shown as a ‘little girl’. This is how the writers say how they see the character of Lisa, that she is an eight-year-old girl. As most writers have been men, her characterization as such has often been limited by stereotypical ‘girly’ tropes, hence the focus on ponies.

Back at the Buddhist temple Lisa interrupts the meditation of Gere, Lenny and Carl. She is chided as Gere was “only just about to achieve enlightenment”. Lisa is reassured by Gere that being a Buddhist does not mean that she cannot celebrate with her family; he says that Buddhism respects the diversity of traditions that are based on love and compassion and that she can celebrate any holiday she wishes. Relieved, Lisa returns to her family telling them that she will worship with them and be a Buddhist. Her mother is concerned about this being lip service to

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the popular online group *Buddhist Geeks* formed in 2006, 5 years after this episode aired.

Christianity but Lisa does not seem to care. Being a comedy show that relies heavily on satire, this episode of *The Simpsons* not only critiques the “disturbing coziness of contemporary Christianity’s relationship with corporate-sponsored materialism, it also lampoons Buddhism’s Hollywood-sponsored trendiness” (Turner 2004, 273). From the perspective of modern Buddhism, the viewer is able to see how Buddhist teachings are easily integrated into the life of a modern Western scientifically minded individual. Lisa is able to embrace her new belief system as well as continue within her Western framework.

It is significant that Christmas was used as the event that brought her conflict. As a child, there’s an expectation of the enjoyment of presents during Christmas in the West, which seems to conflict with the Buddhist teachings of attachment. Through Gere, we can see the ability of Buddhism in the West to participate in consumerism. The use of Gere as teacher is tied with the fact that he himself could be seen as “almost as much a product of consumer culture as [product mascots]” (Turner 2004, 274). The viewer is left with the idea that Buddhism supports consumer culture, and that is something that wealthy and middle-class people can participate in for spiritual solace.

The presentation of the conversion of a Western Buddhist in this episode is in line with many aspects of modern Buddhism. There is a connection to science, consumerism, loss of tradition and mythology, and an emphasis on a positive view of the world. Through Lisa, the image of a Buddhist in popular culture is changed from an Oriental monk wearing a robe, or someone from an Asian country, to that of progressive, intelligent, female and reflective of the modern consumer. The way in which Buddhism is portrayed ties directly to the concept of ignorant familiarity. The use of a celebrity to give the teachings to Lisa is perhaps the best example of how people may think they know something about Buddhism and be able to

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), Indigenous Spirituality and few other examples of non-Christian religions that do not have enough material to warrant a full discussion but are still worth a look at. In terms of NRMs, we see *The Simpsons* portray these types of religions on a sliding scale of dangerous to benign (Feltmate 2012). The most fleshed out example of an NRM is the Movementarians.

#### *New Religious Movements*

In "The Joy of Sect" the entire Simpson family becomes members of an NRM called the Movementarians. After Homer is recruited by the group, the family is moved to an agricultural compound where they work harvesting lima beans, surrender their worldly possessions and reorient their worldview towards the teachings of "the Leader". Airing in February 1998, almost a year after the Heaven's Gate suicides, this episode brings together images and ideas from several different NRMs, including Moonies, Scientologists and The Children of God (Feltmate 2012, 202). This includes living together in close quarters, wearing the same clothing, mass marriage ceremonies, doing manual labour for the organization, and surrendering all their property to the Leader, who, while not seen personally by the Simpsons until the end of the



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 neighbour<sup>5</sup>. 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”. The emphasis here seems to be not specifically on NRMs, but religion in general. Overall, NRMs are presented as something to be feared, as they take advantage of those that are ‘weak willed’. Feltmate argues that

[d]isparaging the religious validity of these groups—and the rights that accompany them—has helped make these programs critical darlings, profitable, and pervasive. Through them, we can see how popular culture contributes to the ongoing culture wars about religious validity and NRMs’ place in American society. The power structures the cult stereotype supports are uncritically reinforced through comedy (2012, 212)

While it seems that the critique of NRMs can be applied to other religions, there are no positive aspects of NRMs explored in the episode and therefore the viewer is left with the message that NRMs are not an acceptable experience of religion in the American culture.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> season the episode “Rednecks and broomsticks” features Lisa again exploring a non-Christian tradition with the world of Wiccans. She meets three young women in the woods

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<sup>5</sup> For a deeper discussion of Flanders’ portrayal as an evangelical Christian see Feltmate 2013.

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, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 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 17<sup>th</sup>-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 bad light. The girls are shown to be innocent as Lisa discovers that the blinding is a result of hillbilly moonshine dumped into the local water supply. Lisa shows appreciation and continued interest in Wicca, but her mother tells the other girls that Lisa will not be allowed to join them.

These NRMs are shown in a way that represents the ignorant familiarity that the viewer would have of these traditions. The Movementarians and Wiccans are seen as different and falling into stereotypes. We see aspects of the Movementarians reflecting real life ‘cults’ so the viewer would recognize the living in a commune, wearing similar clothing and having a charismatic leader as having real world counterparts. While the viewer may not understand the complexity of a group like this, they would see what has been stressed in the news media and be able to make connections and judgements about the group. With the Wiccans the viewer sees young girls being persecuted for having connections to witchcraft and being blamed for an unexplained event. For the viewer, the idea of the ‘witch hunt’ is synonymous with the persecution of those that are not necessarily guilty. The emphasis is on the errors of the public perception and not the girls. The difference between the representations of these two groups is

rooted in the ignorant familiarity of the two different types of groups; one that is dangerous and one that is benign.

### *Indigenous Spirituality*

While the previous traditions have had explorations throughout the whole series there are representations of other traditions on a much smaller scale. Indigenous Spirituality is touched upon but rarely explored. For example, the Simpsons are gifted a large Olmec Indian head which is identified as “Ixtapolapoquetl - the God of war” by Mr. Burns. This reflects colonial notions of the indigenous culture’s material culture as consumable. Mr. Burns can buy and give away this monument, which becomes a bit of a background prop in the Simpsons’ basement for several seasons. In “The Seemingly Never Ending Story” the Simpsons visit a local cavern and on display is stalactite which is identified as the local Anahoopi Indians as “the finger of Tsisnajinni, the god of pointing down”. Homer scoffs and says, “Silly Indians, our God made their god”. Again, we have a made-up God/monument appearing without any context of the civilisation that created it and are fictional creations. In the episode “Little Big Girl”, Lisa is frustrated that her family is too boring for the school’s Multicultural Day presentation. After scolding Bart for disrespecting the Lakeland butter mascot (a parody of the Land O’Lakes real mascot), a Native woman, she realizes that Native Americans are a people with a noble heritage, “that anyone can claim”. As her deception about her ‘long lost tribal ancestors’ continues, she comes across other Native people looking to find out more about them. In terms of spirituality, there is a mention of a turtle god and a corn god. There is also talk about the connection between Native peoples and the environment. These are all typical stereotypes used in Western media. *The Simpsons Movie* features an Indigenous woman in Alaska who is never given a proper name. In fact, Homer calls her Boob lady. Homer needs to have an epiphany to realize he needs to help

the others in Springfield trapped in a large dome, and it is through his experience with this woman that this happens. She is identified in the credits as a medicine woman. She uses Inuit throat singing to clear Homer's spirit. She stays in a shelter that looks like a sweat lodge, in its circular and small space. There are totem poles and masks decorating the space. Homer's epiphany finally comes from a hallucination that includes images of his family atop totem poles and in a forest, being slapped by trees. He realizes he needs to save Springfield and heads out on his quest. The medicine woman later appears to him as a vision in the sky and uses her bosom to help him find his way. Indigenous spirituality is co-opted for the characters of non-indigenous heritage for them to have 'spiritual' quests and guide their individual needs.

#### *Other Traditions*

There is also mention of Zoroastrianism in the series. Mr. Burns has a place in his rolodex next to Alienists and Luddites for Zoroastrians. In "The Nightmare After Krustmas" Milhouse seems to be quite interested in Zoroastrianism. Milhouse thinks Zoroastrianism is a 'funny' religion, and that Mazda is a hilarious name. This is reflective of the end of the episode where, as discussed above, the Christian and Jewish Gods are talking and Ahura Mazda comes in drunk and disorderly. Unlike the other two, we can see his face and he is depicted wearing wings and having a hoop around his waist to mimic his traditional image. There is also mention of Taosim in the episode "The Dead Putting Society". To help Bart win his mini-golf tournament Lisa turns to Lao Tzu to teach Bart how to empty his mind to better perform. There is even mention of the Baha'i faith. In "Alone Again Naturally Diddily" Rod and Tod Flanders have a video game called Billy Graham's Bible Blaster and one of the characters that needs to be converted (shot) is Baha'i. When Lisa is looking for a new faith in "She of Little Faith" she passes a sign reading "Bed, Bath and Baha'i". There is also some Voodoo shown in the episode

“What to expect When Bart’s Expecting”. Bart uses a Voodoo spell to make his teacher sick but she ends up pregnant, leading infertile couples to seek him out for help in conceiving.

These small mentions and throwaway jokes may be just the writers using some references that they think only a small portion of the audience will get. In terms of ignorant familiarity, it may spark a small recognition from the audience who may understand more about the topic, but to get the joke one does not have to have studied and understand these different traditions.

## **Conclusion**

There is a clear presence of non-Christian religious traditions in *The Simpsons*. When the writers use these traditions, we see that they are shown as being ‘outside’ the norm of Springfield’s Christian hegemony. Recognizable symbols, words and references are used so the viewer understands that they are seeing a particular tradition.

Much like Pearl and Pearl (1999) found in their exploration of Judaism in popular culture more generally, we find that there are several ways that otherness can be communicated to the audience. Dress and clothing are major aspects of identifying otherness. Characters are drawn wearing traditional garb, be it Krusty in a prayer shawl, Manjula in a Sari, Mina bin Laden in a hijab, the Dali Lama in a robe or the Movementarians in their identical robes. This is a quick way for the viewer to recognize and know the ethnicity and/or religion of a character. Words are another way to denote the otherness. We hear Yiddish and Hindi spoken and there is a use of Islamic terms by the Muslim characters and others. Chanting is heard in connection to religious activity, be it Lisa meditating under her Bodhi tree or the Wiccans in their sacred circle. We see characters acting out rituals and rites, such as Krusty and his Bar Mitzvah, weddings that conform to religious standards, Muslims praying, and Apu appeasing his statue of Ganesh. We

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 not have a complex understanding. The complexity of religious identities means that no one can have a complete knowledge of all religious activities. When writers want people to recognize aspects of these religions they use stereotypes that play off people’s ignorant familiarity with these traditions. The representation of minority and non-Christian religion shows how ignorant familiarity is present in *The Simpsons* for the writers to connect ideas quickly for their audiences.

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“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. Nahasapeemapeitilons”. 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, December 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.

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“The Greatest Story Ever D’ohed”. 457. Directed by Michael Policino. Written by Kevin Curran. Fox Broadcasting, March 28, 2010.

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