

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS VS. THE SIMPSONS

FOUNDATIONS FOR SPIRITUAL LIFE

SP520 – Fuller Seminary

December 9, 2004

Jim Guida

TABLE OF CONTENTS

WHO ARE “THE SIMPSONS”	Page 3
YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME	Page 5
YOU SHALL NOT MAKE ANY IDOL TO WORSHIP	Page 6
YOU SHALL NOT MISUSE THE NAME OF THE LORD YOUR GOD	Page 7
REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY BY KEEPING IT HOLY	Page 8
HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER	Page 9
YOU SHALL NOT MURDER	Page 10
YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY	Page 11
YOU SHALL NOT STEAL	Page 11
YOU SHALL NOT GIVE FALSE TESTIMONY AGAINST YOUR NEIGHBOR	Page 12
YOU SHALL NOT COVET YOUR NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE... NOR ANYTHING THAT BELONGS TO YOUR NEIGHBOR	Page 14
CONCLUSION	Page 14
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SOURCES USED	Page 15

WHO ARE “THE SIMPSONS”

“The Simpsons” is a half-hour animated television show that has been broadcast on the Fox network since December, 1989.¹ The program is a cultural icon from which such dubious expressions as “Don’t have a cow!” and “Eat my shorts” have emerged. The phrase “D’oh!” coined by father Homer Simpson, has even earned its way into The Oxford English Dictionary.² The Academy of Television Arts and Sciences has awarded the show twenty Emmy’s, the academy’s award for excellence.³ For fourteen years, this television show has been viewed each week by over 15 million Americans.⁴

World leaders, such as British Prime Minister Tony Blair (who has voiced an episode of “The Simpsons”), former US Attorney General John Ashcroft and even the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, have professed their appreciation of the show.⁵

The show is not without controversy, but regardless of how one feels about it, “The Simpsons” is an important part of modern culture and, as it often deals with faith, spirituality, the Bible and God, an investigation of how it handles those subjects is valuable, especially in relation to the Christian-Judeo laws handed down to Moses from God which we call the Ten Commandments.

¹ http://www.snpp.com/guides/episode_list.html

² <http://www.snpp.com/news/060101.html#doh>

³ <http://www.emmys.tv/awards/awardsearch.php>

⁴ Averages garnered from ratings information provided at [Http://simpsonsgazette.tripod.com/](http://simpsonsgazette.tripod.com/)

⁵ Keslowitz, Steven. *The Simpsons and Society: An Analysis of Our Favorite TV Family and Its Influence in Contemporary Society*. Hats Off Books. Tucson, AZ. 2004. 9.

The definition of Spirituality we will use in this paper is taken from McGrath's "The Journey":

"Spirituality is all about the way in which we encounter and experience God and the transformation of our consciousness and our lives as a result of that encounter and experience. Spirituality is about the *internalization of our faith*. It means allowing our faith to saturate every aspect of our lives, infecting and affecting our thinking, feeling, and living."⁶

By its "cartoon" nature, the Simpson family does not grow or age. As such, any "transformation" must occur within the 22 minutes of program found in each episode. However, this definition will prove valuable in examining those 22 minutes as a microcosm of life.

The Simpson family lives in Springfield and consists of Homer, the lazy, beer-drinking Dad who works at the nuclear power plant; Marge, the home-maker Mom who lives for her house and her family; Bart, (an intentional anagram for "Brat"), a skate-boarding wiseacre and the oldest at a perpetual 10 years old; Lisa, the intellectual, saxophone-playing, MENSA-believing, vegetarian, Buddhist at 8 and Maggie, whom we estimate at about a year, as she can only walk a few steps, preferring to crawl, doesn't speak, and carries an ever-present pacifier. The family is supported by a community of other family members, neighbors, associates and friends.

This paper shall examine each of the Ten Commandments and look at a "Simpsonian response" to that commandment. Keeping in mind that there are

⁶ McGrath, Alister. *The Journey – A Pilgrim in the Lands of the Spirit*. Doubleday, New York. 1999. 10

over 300 episodes of “The Simpsons”, as well as the shorts that preceded the show by two years, hundreds of comic books, trading cards, games, audio recordings and other reference materials available, the length of this paper precludes using only the barest of source materials and to that end we will stay with the original, 30-minute programs, and usually a minimum of those to illustrate each point.

YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME

Praying to God, the Creator, obliquely referred to as the Father of Jesus, is a common occurrence in “The Simpsons” – albeit the prayers are usually in the form of “If you do this for me, God, I promise I won’t...” When Bart says there is no such thing as a soul and sells his for \$5, he soon realizes the error of his way and prays,

“Are you there, God? It’s me, Bart Simpson. I know I never paid much attention in church, but I could really use some of that good stuff now. I’m afraid-I’m afraid some weirdo has got my soul and I don’t know what they’re doing to it. I just want it back, please. I hope you can hear this.”⁷

There are many such examples of the family and others interacting with God, including an appearance by the Supreme Being in one of Homer’s dreams (“Perfect teeth, nice smell. A class act all the way.”)⁸ But Bart is the family member most often affected by his belief in God, usually with the conscience of

⁷ Simpsons, The. Fox Television Network. 3F02: “Bart Sells His Soul.” Oct. 8, 1995

⁸ Ibid. [9F01](#) “Homer the Heretic.” Oct. 8, 1992

his sister, Lisa, to guide him. When Bart is in serious trouble, he turns to God in prayer, not always piously (“Well, old timer...”) but always sincerely (“...if anyone can do it, you can.”)⁹

Although the Simpson family recognizes a Supreme Being, we must also make room for another member of the community, Qwik-E-Mart convenience store owner and friend of the family, Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, a Hindu who keeps his faith by having a shrine to *Ganeesha*, his god, in the employee lounge. However, like the community in Philip Hallie’s *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*¹⁰, the differences do not matter as much as the similarities.

YOU SHALL NOT MAKE ANY IDOL TO WORSHIP

There are many episodes dealing with icons of religion – an angel¹¹, a waffle with God’s face¹², retellings of Bible stories¹³, along with those stories primarily dealing with spirituality. But in one story, an idol to worship is created – not *by* a Simpson, but *of* a Simpson. “Treehouse of Horror” stories are those that are not considered part of “The Simpsons” world but are the imaginary part of this imaginary show. One such episode included a feature wherein Lisa accidentally creates a tiny world, wherein “The (citizens) bow, revealing a statue of Lisa. She then realizes that she is granted the status of godhood, as she is the one who created this world.” Sadly, Lisa, the most level-

⁹Ibid. [7F03](#) “Bart Gets an F.” Oct. 11, 1990

¹⁰Hallie, Phillip. *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. New York. HarperCollins Publishing. 1979

¹¹The Simpsons [5F05](#) “Lisa the Skeptic” November 23, 1997

¹²Ibid. [1F14](#) “Homer Loves Flanders.” March 17, 1994

¹³Ibid [AABF14](#) “Simpsons Bible Stories” April 4, 1999

headed of the Simpson clan, becomes a tyrant in this story, losing all sense of spirituality – believing all should be for her. The closing lines of the story have Lisa talking to “her” people, saying, “Shouldn't you people be groveling? And bring me some shoes. Nice ones.”¹⁴ There is none of the Benedictine humility we find in Joan Chittister’s *Living Distilled from the Daily*¹⁵ in this Lisa Simpson.

YOU SHALL NOT MISUSE THE NAME OF THE LORD YOUR GOD

Abusive language would not be found in this family show. However, when Homer does use language, he explains it by saying “Maybe I curse a little, but that’s the way God made me and I’m too old to stop now.”¹⁶ God is more of a presence in his life, as if someone put a large box in his living room, but without any of the consciousness or transforming qualities that come with truly knowing God. Though not defaming God, Homer *has* forgotten the name of God’s son, Jesus Christ. In “Homer the Heretic”, we hear him saying, “Kids, let me tell you about another so-called ‘wicked guy’. He had long hair and some wild ideas. He didn’t always do what other people thought was right. And that mans name was...I forget.” Another episode finds Homer in dire straits and calling out “Help me, Jebus!”¹⁷, using the name of Jerusalem before it was conquered by King David.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid. [4F02](#) “Treehouse of Horror VII.” Oct. 27, 1996

¹⁵ Chittister, Joan. *Wisdom Distilled form the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*. (San Francisco: Harper. 1990

¹⁶ Pinsky, Mark. *The Gospel according to The Simpsons*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. 2001. 16.

¹⁷The Simpsons. [9F01](#) “Homer the Heretic.” Oct. 8, 1992

¹⁸ Pinsky, Mark. 26.

Homer generally attends worship faithfully, though fitfully (see the exception below) and in many of the cases where Homer's spirituality is questionable, this is more due out of ignorance than any vice. In *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, we read:

Homer fulfills the role of the American spiritual wanderer. Though linked culturally (if unsteadily and unenthusiastically) to biblical tradition, he regularly engages a mosaic of their traditions, mythologies, and moral codes, (stumbling) along, making the most of his limited understanding of their complexities.¹⁹

Homer's actions are no worse than the average "NASCAR Dad" but, sadly, are no better either.

REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY BY KEEPING IT HOLY

This commandment is specifically addressed in "Homer the Heretic," an episode which finds Homer staying home from church and having "the best day of his life."²⁰ He believes that "if God wanted people to worship him for an hour a week, he should have made the week an hour longer."²¹

The "punch line" to the episode finds Homer asleep on a Sunday morning away from church, as a lighted cigar falls on some "Playboy" magazines, causing his house to begin burning. The Springfield Volunteer Fire Department, consisting of "Christians, Jews, and (pointing to the Hindu, Apu) Miscellaneous" puts the fire out. Homer is not told that, if he had worshipped God in church with his family, this wouldn't have happened, but instead, the

¹⁹ Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds., *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York; Routledge, 2000).

²⁰ The Simpsons [9F01](#) "Homer the Heretic." Oct. 8, 1992 (Note: All quotes in this section are from this episode unless referenced)

²¹ Pinsky, Mark. 19

house is saved because God “was working in the hearts of your friends and neighbors when they came to your aid.” There is no recognition of the fourth commandment, but instead in God’s hand moving the hearts in the faith community to help Homer. Nobody tells Homer that, by neglecting the opportunity for corporate worship, he misses out on “the human response to catching a glimpse of God in all His radiance and glory.”²²

HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER

God does not tell Moses to “Honor your Father and your Mother...if they are deserving of it.” The commandment reads to do so “...so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.”

Although it is easy to honor Mother Marge, Father Homer provides a challenge. Homer is “at once the best and worst of American dadness”²³ and generally, there is very little respect given to him by either Bart or Lisa. Maggie, the littlest Simpson, shows the most respect to her parents. Her only recorded word is “Daddy”, unfortunately spoken after Homer leaves the room²⁴ and when given the choice of being with a family who will love her and give her the much neglected attention she deserves, or to stay with her original family, most of whom are in the river having just avoided a baptism,

Homer looks toward the bank and sighs, "Oh, there's my sweet little Maggie." She looks to his outstretched arms, then over at the Flanders family, who stand clean and dry on the bank with a butterfly flying and a rabbit hopping around them. In the water, meanwhile, Homer,

²² McGrath, Alister. *The Journey: A Pilgrim in the Lands of the Spirit*. New York: Galilee. 2000. 62

²³ MacGregor, Jeff. “More Than Sight Gags and Subversive Satire.” *New York Times*. June 20, 1999. 27

²⁴ The Simpsons 9F08. “Lisa’s First Word” (“Lisa” sic). December 3, 1992

*Bart, and Lisa look sodden, and a frog jumps out of the water. **Maggie starts to walk toward the Flanders, but just then, Marge walks around the corner. Maggie reaches for her mother, and Marge scoops her up and spins around with her in the sunlight.***²⁵

Despite this lack of respect, the family unit, as a whole, does remain intact. The family “truly possesses a keen influence on one important aspect of our family life – that being unity within classic familial structure.”²⁶

YOU SHALL NOT MURDER

Although death is no stranger to this television show (Dr. Marvin Monroe, Frank Grimes, Bleeding Gums Murphy, Maude Flanders, et al²⁷), murder has been attempted only once by a Simpson family member, in a take-off of the highly popular TV Show *Dallas* and their season cliff-hanger “Who Shot JR?” (CBS Television, 1980). The Simpson’s spoof, title “Who Shot Mr. Burns?” had a similar cliff-hanging ending, with resident billionaire, C. Montgomery Burns, suffering from a near-fatal gunshot wound. The sinner breaking this commandment was the angelic Maggie, who shot Burns as he literally was taking candy from the baby.²⁸ Despite Maggie’s deed, she was not punished because “she did not possess malicious motives for firing the gun....Since she is a baby, her actions can never truly be deemed reprehensible, as her very being is composed of a dearth of malevolence.”²⁹ However, Eric Bronson raises the questions “Was it self-defense? An accident perhaps? After all, the gun did

²⁵ www.snpp.com. 3F01. “Home Sweet Home-Diddily-Dum-Doodily” October 1, 1995

²⁶ Keslowitz. 196

²⁷ Ibid. 83

²⁸ The Simpsons 2F20 “Who Shot Mr. Burns?” September 17, 1995

²⁹ Keslowitz. 60

belong to Mr. Burns and only ended up in Maggie’s hands due to his own carelessness.”³⁰ The intentions of the speechless child are locked away behind her ever-present pacifier, but can lead to a much larger question – when is killing justified?

YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY

This adult topic has found itself in “The Simpsons” at least four times, twice involving Homer³¹, once with Marge³² and once with Apu³³. Although Apu does fall prey to the sin, Homer and Marge remain true to their marriage vows. This is mostly indicative of the generous spirit found in Marge for her often inconsiderate husband, but also recognizes that, at the core of this selfish, ignorant man beats a heart that knows where his love and his loyalty lie.

YOU SHALL NOT STEAL

Springfield is riddled with thieves, from the corrupt Mayor Joe Quimby, who takes bribes as a matter of course, to Fat Tony, the “legitimate businessman” to the often-imprisoned “Snake.” But the spiritual heart of the show comes from the Simpson family and we must closely examine Bart’s role in observing this commandment. Though he has been found stealing from the Try-N-Save market, his sister’s piggy banks, and from the answer sheet of

³⁰William Irwin, Mark T. Conrad, and Aeon J. Skoble, eds. *The Simpsons and Philosophy; The D’oh! Of Homer*. Open Court. Chicago. 2001. 35

³¹The Simpsons [1F07](#) “The Last Temptation of Homer” December 9, 1993 and [8F19](#) “Colonel Homer” March 26, 1992

³²The Simpsons [7G11U](#) “Life in the Fast Lane” March 18, 1990

³³The Simpsons [DABF14](#) “The Sweetest Apu” May 5, 2002

fellow students, even Bart knows his limits. While dealing with a crush on the minister's daughter, he finds her stealing from the collection baked in church. "Stealing from the collection basket is really wrong!" He says. "Even I know that."³⁴ Unlike the black-and-white rule that Moses brought down from the mount, Bart views stealing more on a sliding scale.

YOU SHALL NOT GIVE FALSE TESTIMONY AGAINST YOUR NEIGHBOR

"I didn't do it. No one saw me do it. No one can prove anything."
- Bart Simpson³⁵

It is in this commandment that the Simpson family fails most often. Perhaps the only member who has not committed the sin of lying is mute Maggie. Lisa has lied, though it is usually in the belief that the lie is for the good and even Marge has stretched the truth, usually when it means not hurting Homer's feelings. Homer believes that "Weaseling out of things is important to learn. It's what separates us from the animals...except the weasels."³⁶ With advice like this to Bart, can the fruit fall far from the tree? See his quote above for the answer.

There is the redemption found in the world of television situation comedy, as lies are never significantly rewarded or are otherwise dismissed. However, in a critical review of the show, we cannot be so dismissive. Though "The Simpsons" is a vehicle solely designed for entertainment and not moral instruction, its insinuation into our community cries out for us to laugh, yes,

³⁴ William Irwin, 151

³⁵ The Simpsons 7G06 "Moaning Lisa" February 11, 1990

³⁶The Simpsons 1F06 "Boy Scoutz 'N the Hood" November 18, 1993

but also point out the incongruities against the word of God, not as banishment but for the sake of discussion.

YOU SHALL NOT COVET YOUR NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE...ANYTHING THAT BELONGS TO YOUR NEIGHBOR

C. Montgomery Burns is Springfield's oldest, richest and most malevolent citizen, who is "a greedy evil and ruthless capitalist who is willing to walk on a path of corpses to attain his ends."³⁷ Although he is the richest man Homer knows, Burns would "trade it all for a little more."³⁸ His avarice is boundless and the character begs the question, not "Why do bad things happen to good people?" but, "Why do good things happen to bad people?" Burns is the antithesis of the tenth commandment, wanting it all for no other reason than to have it. As a spiritual guide for "The Simpsons" he is always shown as remarkably unhappy and unfulfilled, despite his wealth and power. In fact, he envies Homer, who has so little and yet, so much.

CONCLUSION

"The Simpsons" is an extremely entertaining show. It has its finger on the pulse of America and satirizes its biggest icons. When it asks questions of faith directly, they are almost always fair questions, but as role-models for living the Ten Commandments, they generally fall short.

³⁷William Irwin. 18

³⁸Keslowitz. 63

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SOURCES USED

INTERNET

http://www.snpp.com/guides/episode_list.html (Note: www.snpp.com is the “the Internet's clearinghouse of Simpsons guides, news, and information, voluntarily maintained by members of alt.tv.simpsons and other fans around the world.” Other academic papers can be found on this website at <http://www.snpp.com/misc.html#papers>. The author is grateful for the information provided by this website.)

<http://www.emmys.tv/awards/awardsearch.php>

<http://simpsonsgazette.tripod.com/>

BOOKS

Chittister, Joan. *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*. (San Francisco: Harper. 1990)

Hallie, Phillip. *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. New York. HarperCollins Publishing. 1979

William Irwin, Mark T. Conrad, and Aeon j. Skoble, eds. *The Simpsons and Philosophy; The D'oh! Of Homer*. Open Court. Chicago. 2001.

Keslowitz, Steven. *The Simpsons and Society: An Analysis of Our Favorite TV Family and Its Influence in Contemporary Society*. Hats Off Books. Tucson, AZ. 2004.

MacGregor, Jeff. “More Than Sight Gags and Subversive Satire.” *New York Times*. June 20, 1999.

Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds., *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York; Routledge, 2000).

McGrath, Alister. *The Journey – A Pilgrim in the Lands of the Spirit*. Doubleday, New York. 1999.

Pinsky, Mark. *The Gospel according to The Simpsons*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. 2001.