

If you excise the jokes, *The Simpsons* is a tragedy of operatic proportions—repeated failures and frustrations, punctuated by the occasional, wacky, life-affirming reprieve that returns everything to the status quo. And, like any comedy aimed at a mass audience, it is at its roots doggedly conservative. Leon Trotsky, one of the fathers of Russia's Bolshevik uprising, used to characterize a political movement he opposed as being “left in form, right in essence,” which is to say that his opponents were revolutionary in appearance but reactionary in nature. With *The Simpsons*, I think it may be a similar case: cloaking the show's sacred essence in the guise of profane storytelling, although there is no evidence that this is a result of any conscious, consistent effort on the part of the show's writers and producers. Longtime writer George Meyer argued just the opposite in the *My Generation* magazine article. “It's like a Trojan horse that gets past people's radar because it's superficially conservative,” he said. “The show's subtext, however, is completely subversive and wild.”

Whether the series, once considered so antiauthoritarian, is subversive or supportive of faith is largely in the eye of the beholder. Some Christians remain resolutely unconvinced of its value. The Reverend Francis Chan of the evangelical Cornerstone Community Church in Simi Valley, California, told the *Ventura County Star* in 1999 that he once found the show funny, but gave it up. “It portrays Christians as being out of touch with reality. It makes anyone who follows God look like a fool.”¹

The Reverend Clark Whitten, pastor of Calvary Assembly of God in Winter Park, Florida, one of the largest Pentecostal

churches in that area, tries not to miss a single Sunday night episode. "It's life, it's hilarious, and it's so insightful into the culture," he said. The Anglican Archbishop of Wales, Dr. Rowan Williams, considered a strong candidate to become the next Archbishop of Canterbury, called *The Simpsons* "a positive example to children" and a show with "a strong sense of family values."

In his study of religion in television series, Jim Trammell of the University of Georgia arrived at a similar conclusion. "Despite the church's depicted irrelevance, despite the depicted wrath of God and the likeable character of the Devil, despite the disrespected devoted neighbors, despite the inadequate minister, despite even the insignificance of spirituality upon one's behaviors, the Simpson family, the show's heroes and representatives of the American family, remain committed to their religion."

Some atheists think *The Simpsons* is so proreligion that it's more like a Sunday school lesson than a sitcom. In a 1995 atheists' Internet discussion group, one member wrote, "The central message of the show, I've noticed, is that only the good people are religious and that those who are not are immoral. Some episodes really hammer the point home. And the true religious fanatics in that show are portrayed as the most moral, ethical people around. I stopped watching in disgust a long time ago." Like the Christians, even the atheists are split on the series. "It's a great show," said George H. Smith, author of *Why Atheism?* and *Atheism: The Case against God*. "I think there's a good balance" on religion, he said. "It's a remarkably well-done show."

This appraisal has not escaped the attention of a growing number of commentators who argue that the show is far more conservative and supportive of traditional faith and family values than you would think. “What I do appreciate about *The Simpsons* is that evil often—if not always—is punished with consequences,” said Robert Knight, former director of cultural studies for the Washington, D.C.-based Family Research Council and author of *The Age of Consent: The Rise of Relativism and the Corruption of Popular Culture*. “*The Simpsons* function in a moral universe and, while the show seems to make fun of moral standards, it often upholds those same standards in a backhanded way.”