

Introduction

If you have ever watched *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, or *Family Guy* and laughed uproariously before asking “Why did I find that funny?” then this book is for you. Inside you will find a theory of satire that will help you to understand why you laughed and what you learned. If you have never watched these programs and are horrified that somebody would find depictions of God aiming a sniper’s rifle at your head, Jesus miraculously increasing his friend’s wife’s breasts, or the Virgin Mary “shitting blood on the Pope”¹ humorous, this book will help you to understand why these jokes tell you significant things about yourself and American society. It will guide you through the process of analyzing how humor teaches people about different religions’ beliefs and ideas while defining what constitutes good religious practice in 21st century America.² Analyzing humor matters because popular culture is an important vehicle for teaching people of all ages about religion and its place in our society.³ The ideas presented here will help you to understand jokes that are broadcast through television programs around the globe, how they reflect social divisions in the United States, and how their humor reflects social, political, and religious biases.

This book focuses on *The Simpsons* (FOX 1989-present), *South Park* (Comedy Central 1997-present), and *Family Guy* (FOX 1999-2002, 2004-present) because they are wildly popular, have had a significant impact on cultural consciousness, and are brimming with religious references. Each has produced over two hundred episodes, is beloved by countless fans, moves billions of dollars in merchandise annually, is syndicated globally, and is recognized for its wit, intelligence, and social commentary. Over 95% of *Simpsons* episodes, roughly 84% of *Family Guy* episodes, and about 78% of *South Park* episodes contain explicit references to religion.

Without these programs the current television landscape would look very different. Inspired by these shows, syndicated animated sitcoms for adults have proliferated and have helped to teach audiences how to think about religious diversity.

These programs are also contentious. Moral watchdogs have targeted each series for its portrayal of the family, religion, sex, and drugs and *South Park* has been singled out for its profanity. These controversies help to shape the programs' humor, giving them material for further jokes and helping them to establish their place in America's culture wars.⁴ The humor in these three programs is not inherently funny. Indeed, nothing is "funny because it is funny." Our mental maps of the world shape our sense of humor. This cultural foundation makes humor interesting and significant because jokes tell us about their tellers' assumptions.

This book explores three questions: 1) *What do you have to believe about different groups classified as "religions" and the role of "religion" in society to find jokes in the three sitcoms humorous?* 2) *What do the patterns in these programs tell us about the popular construction of "religion's" significance in America?* and 3) *What can a critical assessment of religion in the public sphere through popular culture tell us about American civil life?* These questions are related to the overarching argument of this book, which is that jokes about religion are tools for teaching audiences how to interpret and judge religious people and institutions. If we want to understand how popular perceptions of religion are taught to large segments of society through popular media we need to take humor seriously. This book analyzes how jokes about religion communicate a worldview concerning religion's proper place in American society. Each of the three programs discussed portrays, in a different way, what it means to be a good religious American through its humor. This volume examines the ways in which each program presents core morals and values, arguing for humor's importance in transmitting these ideas

about religion's place in American life. Drawing on this analysis, the book offers a new theoretical model of religious satire which is based on the sociologies of knowledge, religion, and humor and which helps us to understand how these three programs and other humorous popular media contribute to larger discussions about religion in American public life. This book also explains how creators of satirical media craft and manipulate public knowledge about different religious groups.

Why focus on television comedy to make the case for how satirical media presents interpretations of different religious groups and communicates what good religious practice is in America? Television entertainment is useful because of its ubiquity. The Nielsen Company, which remains the gold standard for measuring television consumption, reported that 116.3 million American homes had a television in 2014, reaching an estimated 296 million people over the age of two.⁵ Even with new viewing options on smartphones, tablets, and Internet streaming the average American adult (18+) spent four hours and thirty-two minutes watching television in the third quarter of 2014.⁶ Television remains a socializing force in American life, reaching massive audiences with its content delivered through entertainment genres such as dramas, game shows, and sitcoms, which compete for viewers' attention with more informational formats such as news and documentaries, which are becoming more entertaining in order to compete with entertainment programming.⁷ As successful television programs adjust to new content arenas, they are still streamed online, highlights are watched on YouTube, and episodes are downloaded. Television's content remains relevant, though it is now being consumed across multiple platforms.⁸ When we also take into account that American broadcast media is syndicated globally, a successful program's ability to spread its message to millions—if not billions—of people is reason enough to continue paying attention to the medium.⁹

Why focus on these three programs? There are other relevant animated sitcoms, such as *King of the Hill*, *Futurama* (a product of *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening and *Simpsons* writer David X. Cohen) and *American Dad* (by *Family Guy*'s creator Seth MacFarlane) that could have been included, among others. This book also could have focused on other sitcoms that are not animated, but two factors make focusing on *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy* particularly instructive. First, animation allows for a much broader and more vivid world than live action. Rather than being limited by casting costs, the creation of sets, or the necessity of relocating a cast and crew for a “special” episode, animation is limited only by the artists', writers', and voice actors' imaginations and abilities. Thus, each of these programs is able to expand well beyond a few fixed locations, allowing them to showcase a variety of religious situations, characters, and settings. *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy* are frequently compared in popular discourse, are among the longest running animated sitcoms, and among them total over 1000 episodes. This is a rich source of data and allows for a thorough comparison.

In teaching religion, I have found that when I start quoting examples from *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy* students respond. They know Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, the Indian immigrant who runs the local Kwik-E-Mart in the Simpsons' hometown of Springfield and has a Shrine to Ganesha in his store. They can make sense of “spirituality” in Homer Simpson's spiritual quest in “Homer the Heretic.” They understand cult jokes in *South Park* and quote *Family Guy* to me. It is significant that these young adults do not know the basics of most world religions but they have learned something about how to interpret different religious traditions from these television shows. Boston University religious studies professor Stephen Prothero contends that Americans are remarkably ignorant about religion—both their own (if they have

one) and others'. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life confirmed Prothero's hypothesis with a poll about general religious knowledge, on which the average score was 16/32. Atheists and agnostics scored highest with an average score of 20.9/32 while Hispanic Catholics scored the lowest with an average of 11.6/32.¹⁰ Arguing that this is a civic problem, Prothero suggests teaching biblical literacy and world religions in secondary schools and making world religions part of postsecondary studies' core curriculum.¹¹ Yet, my students apparently learned *something* from shows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. But what do these programs teach? How do they teach it? And what are the assumptions about religion undergirding the programs' depictions? This book answers these questions.

The programs' power lies in their popularity, pervasiveness, and recountability. They present references that contain information people from different walks of life can understand and draw upon to make sense of the world. This book uses the concept of *ignorant familiarity* to refer to 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 others to make decisions about how to treat them, but that familiarity is based in ignorance.¹² Among the different types of incomplete knowledge humans often employ to understand others and their religions are stereotypes (e.g., Native Americans are closer to nature and “more spiritual” than whites), theological ignorance (e.g., that Catholics worship the saints), and racial-religious prejudices (e.g., that Jews secretly run the world). Ignorant familiarity is useful for explaining why the different programs' creators use the religious humor they do, how it 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.

The Three Programs

We can credit *The Simpsons* for launching contemporary adult-oriented television cartoon sitcoms. Before the program debuted on the fledgling FOX television network in December of 1989, America had been exposed to the Simpson family through a series of shorts on *The Tracey Ullman Show* (FOX 1987-1990). Underground cartoonist Matt Groening created *The Simpsons*, which was brought to the small screen by iconic television producer James L. Brooks, who had previously worked on such hits as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS 1970-1977) and *Taxi* (ABC 1978-1982, NBC 1982-1983). Brooks was a fan of Groening's comic strip *Life in Hell* and asked the cartoonist to turn it into bumper cartoons for *The Tracey Ullman Show*. Instead of relinquishing *Life in Hell* to FOX, Groening created the Simpson family—overweight and dim-witted father Homer, mother Marge with her blue hair and devotion to family, the bratty troublemaker and eldest child Bart, Lisa the brilliant and talented middle child, and the non-verbal baby Maggie. A new sensation was born.

The early Ullman shorts were crudely drawn and lacked the dynamic characters that *The Simpsons* would later develop, but the sketches captured people's imaginations and attracted enough attention for FOX to turn them into an independent program. After the third co-creator, Sam Simon, helped assemble the writing staff the program was launched. In its first year *The Simpsons* made \$1.4 billion for FOX and was a massive popular culture sensation. Since then there have been over 550 episodes, thirty-one Primetime Emmy Awards, a Peabody Award, and *The Simpsons Movie* in 2007, which grossed over \$527 million worldwide.¹³ Set in the American every-town of Springfield, the program became known for topical satire, writing that was

hilarious and heartfelt, and dozens of well-developed characters. While the show's popularity has declined, it was still drawing roughly three million viewers for each new episode's initial broadcast twenty-five years after its first episode. It will go down in history as one of television's greatest commercial and artistic successes as the writing and voice acting have been consistently recognized for their excellence.¹⁴

The Simpsons has been treated as groundbreaking television, pushing postmodern thought into popular entertainment through its self-referential style and stretching the boundaries of what cartoons can do while also depicting the world beyond animation in a realistic way.¹⁵ The program is seen as a site of oppositional culture.¹⁶ President George H. W. Bush even targeted it for its depictions of family values.¹⁷ The show has also been praised in different venues for presenting religion as family friendly,¹⁸ a revelation of American culture's need for reformation,¹⁹ and a critical assessment that balances the positives and negatives of religion in American culture.²⁰ The two major analyses of religion in *The Simpsons* are offered by *Orlando Sentinel* journalist Mark Pinsky and theologian Jamie Heit. Pinsky contends that *The Simpsons* is "not at all dangerous or threatening to the status quo, it is a sweet funny show about a family as 'real' as the faith lives of many Americans."²¹ Heit, on the other hand, argues that *The Simpsons* implores contemporary American Christians to reform their ways. He writes, "Its [*The Simpsons*'] goal is, in part, to elicit a response from its viewers to address Christianity's problems before they lose the chance to do so."²² These two analyses are incomplete. Pinsky's analysis does not explain the implications of *The Simpsons*' critical depictions of certain traditions. Meanwhile, Heit's argument suffers from his faulty thesis that *The Simpsons* is calling on Christianity to reform. He reads his theological concerns into the program, though the program itself offers a broader look at American culture. *The Simpsons* does not set out to offer

theological solutions to contemporary Christianity's situation, nor is it calling for Heit's specific solutions of moving away from the neoconservative political and economic forces that characterize conservative American Protestantism.²³ Pinsky and Heit's analysis set the stage for this book because they both show that *The Simpsons* offers insight into American religion, but needs to be analyzed critically in light of American religious diversity.

While *The Simpsons* was rising to its critical heights in the 1990s, *South Park* was born in 1997 after struggling filmmakers Trey Parker and Matt Stone—who bonded at the University of Colorado at Boulder over a shared love of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC 1969-1974)—made a short cartoon for a studio executive who had asked them to make a video Christmas card to send to his friends. They created the infamous *The Spirit of Christmas* short in which Jesus and Santa Claus fight each other over the meaning of Christmas. In this film we learn that Christmas is really about presents and we are given valuable moral advice including, “don't say pig fucker in front of Jesus.”²⁴ After the video went viral Comedy Central signed Parker and Stone, and upon its 1997 debut, *South Park* became the fledgling network's biggest hit.

From its inception, *South Park* has featured the antics of four fourth-grade boys (for the first three seasons and for some of the fourth they were in third-grade): Stan Marsh is an average middle-class child who is usually perceptive and critical of social hypocrisy. Stan's best friend, Kyle Broflovski, is the son of a Jewish lawyer and a stereotypical Jewish mother. Kyle shares Stan's perceptiveness and without Kyle's Jewishness it would be hard to tell the two characters apart. On the other hand, Eric Cartman is an extremely bigoted, greedy, and manipulative child with self-esteem issues whose perceptiveness varies in relation to how an event affects him. Cartman always seems two steps ahead of his competition when he can manipulate a situation for his selfish interests. If he does not care, then the issue does not register in his egocentric

world. Finally, Kenny McCormick is a poor boy who is dressed in a parka, who mumbles incomprehensibly, and whose weekly demise was a running gag for the first few seasons.²⁵

South Park focuses on the boys' ability to see through the silliness of the adult world around them and the show purposefully exaggerates situations so that they can be humorously explored and criticized through satire. Religion is a popular target, as the tiny Colorado town of South Park experiences everything from a Catholic sex abuse scandal, to a cult scare, to even a boxing match between Jesus and Satan.²⁶ While the program is easily the most scatological and vulgar of the three programs discussed in this book, it is also a critical darling. Like *The Simpsons*, *South Park* has won five Emmys and a Peabody Award for its biting satire. It ranks consistently among Comedy Central's most popular programs and it sparks political discussions, in part, due to its short production schedule—episodes are made in one week, while *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* episodes take roughly ten months to construct. This schedule allows *South Park* to tackle sensitive issues which the audience may forget if Parker and Stone had to wait ten months to bring them to air. Their treatments of the Catholic sex abuse scandals, the 2005 controversy over caricatures of Muhammad,²⁷ and Richard Dawkins' rise in popularity after *The God Delusion*²⁸ was published exemplify *South Park*'s ability to critically engage topical subjects on short notice, which is a key factor in their ability to construct religious satires.

A body of scholarly criticism has developed around *South Park*'s depictions of religion.²⁹ Yet, excepting sociologist Douglas Cowan's article on *South Park*'s "All About Mormons?" and cultural studies scholar Ted Gornelos' critical evaluation of *South Park* as oppositional culture, scholars tend to continue to repeat the idea that *South Park* is an equal opportunity offender when it comes to religion.³⁰ In one sense this is true—many religions are satirized in *South*

Park—but just as in *The Simpsons*, some religions are fairer game than others. Australian cultural studies scholar Toni Johnson-Woods puts it best when she writes:

The problem is not divine leadership—God, Jesus, Moses, and other religious deities fare pretty well—but earthly hypocrisy. *South Park*'s secular humanism offers every religion equal opportunity. Belief in a higher deity or deities is fine, even encouraged, but be wary of politicized religion, warns the show. Religion is just another powerful institution that needs to have its cages rattled. The show's irreverence promotes a healthy skepticism about religious dogma. The morality of a culture is reflected in the ability of its adherents to learn simple moral lessons and to lead “good” lives.³¹

As we will see, Woods' synopsis needs more nuance. *South Park* teaches viewers to be a “good” person through a comparison of religious hypocrites and those who live according to certain moral principles. Yet, what is “good” is contentious and needs to be unpacked through an analysis of numerous episodes, moving us beyond a more shallow argument that all religions are treated equally.

Family Guy is the youngest of the three programs discussed in this book. The brainchild of Seth MacFarlane, a New England cartoonist who had moved to Los Angeles to work at the legendary Hanna-Barbara animation studios after graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design, *Family Guy*'s genesis lies in two short films: MacFarlane's thesis project, *The Life of Larry*, and *Larry & Steve*.³² While the character designs are different, we can hear early versions of *Family Guy*'s family guy—Peter Griffin—and his anthropomorphic dog, Brian, in Larry and

Steve. Indeed, the bumbling New England idiot that is Peter is already apparent in Larry and the brilliant but sarcastic Brian is impossible to miss in Steve. After *Larry & Steve* aired on Cartoon Network's *What a Cartoon* series, FOX asked MacFarlane to produce a pilot, which eventually became *Family Guy*.

The program originally aired after Superbowl XXXIII on 31 January 1999 and went on to suffer one of the worst fates any new program can endure. After a successful first season, FOX constantly changed *Family Guy*'s time slot, putting it up against heavyweight programs such as *Frasier* (NBC 1993-2004) and *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004). *Family Guy*'s audience could not find the program, the ratings suffered, and in 2002 the program was cancelled. But that did not spell the end. Cartoon Network acquired the syndication rights and made *Family Guy* part of their Adult Swim line-up. With a secure time slot, the program became a hit and when DVDs began flying off the shelves, FOX resurrected the program in 2004. It has been running ever since.

Family Guy is a parody of New England and American family life. Often unfavorably compared to *The Simpsons*, the program features an edgier perspective on American life. Set in the fictional town of Quahog, Rhode Island, Peter and Brian are joined by Peter's devoted, if somewhat devious wife, Lois, and their three children: Meg, the social outcast; Chris, an overweight simpleton; and their genius baby Stewie. The program has evolved over time, moving away from its infamous cutaway scenes to more plot driven escapades. It has always been rife with cultural references, ranging from the topical to the obscure, and pulls as few punches as it can while being aired on a major television network. This is especially true of its depictions of religion, which have become more vicious and critical over time. Indeed, while *South Park* and *The Simpsons* present different religions as having some viability, *Family Guy* has become increasingly hostile towards religious organizations and people.³³

Towards a Theory of Religious Satire

To analyze satirical portrayals of religion we need to integrate three theoretical streams: a working definition of religion, a theory of culture, and a theory of how religion and culture are sources for making satire. We need a definition of religion so that we know what we are talking about when we discuss “religion jokes.” We need a theory of culture so that we can explain how different groups of people come to create jokes by combining their ideas about religion with their sense of humor. Finally, we need a theory of satire to explain how those jokes are composed from different stocks of knowledge for competitive social purposes.

A Working Conception of Religion

Religion is hard to define. It is not that most people do not have some notion of what constitutes a “religion,” but rather that those conceptions are blurry.³⁴ Scholars of religion are no better, having turned disagreement about “religion’s” definition into intellectual blood sport. For the purposes of this book, however, we need a working definition of religion. Recognizing that there are numerous definitions which could be employed, this book builds upon William James’ definition from the third lecture in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, “the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”³⁵ For James, religion starts with a conviction that there is something more to this life than what our senses tell us is present. This belief in the world’s inherent order allows humans to adhere to a

religion despite what would be taken as disconfirming evidence in other situations.³⁶ James' definition is valuable because it encompasses a wide range of activities without being unnecessarily restrictive. The unseen order is psychologically powerful without relying upon the existence of gods, spirits, or the supernatural. It is also a fully human conception in that we believe in the unseen order's existence and change our behavior according to the order's standards.³⁷ That said, James' definition suffers from being too individualistic. Someone who hears a voice they think is God providing ethical instructions has a belief in an unseen order, and if they change their behavior to reflect these convictions they are harmoniously adjusting themselves to it. The community that supports and cultivates religious action is absent in this example, but communities are essential for our understanding of religion. They support, shape, and project the unseen order—making it seen in this world to the best of human ability.³⁸ If this caveat is taken into account, then our new definition is: *A religion consists of the social structures and institutions that facilitate, support, and protect the belief that there is an unseen order and that our ultimate good relies on harmoniously adjusting to it.*

This definition is broad enough to encompass the traditions which are commonly considered religions. It can also include phenomena that are not widely treated as religions (e.g., sports fans).³⁹ This ambiguity is useful and throughout this book the term religion will flow between traditions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam and “religious” behaviors that guide us to adhere to an unseen order. We still need to narrow what we are discussing to something manageable and comparative with everyday life in the United States. This book examines groups that are popularly considered religions or “religious” in mass media, religious studies textbooks, and, most importantly, in the programs themselves. This choice enables us to

include phenomena such as “spiritual” and “New Age” beliefs and practices and some “cults” in our data set, even if some people might not consider them “religions.”

Our definition of religion allows us to emphasize two issues that can be mined for humor. First, religions have to convince people that there is an unseen order, and this attempt can invite skeptical questions from non-adherents. As sociologist Peter Berger argued in *The Sacred Canopy*, “All socially constructed worlds are inherently precarious. Supported by human activity, they are constantly threatened by the human facts of self-interest and stupidity.”⁴⁰ Building on his earlier work with Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality*,⁴¹ Berger argues that people create religious worlds through everyday interactions in which they externalize ideas, objectivate them (treat them as objective reality instead of subjective externalizations), and reintegrate these objectivated ideas into their lives as guiding principles (internalization).⁴² Religions are “plausibility structures” (the sum total of our knowledge of the real world and the explanations why things are the way they are)⁴³ which draw upon our “social stock of knowledge” (“knowledge of [our] situation and its limits”),⁴⁴ a common pool of knowledge that is shared within a group and sometimes widely (although not always completely) within a society. Plausibility structures need to remain believable when questioned, so we develop legitimations—answers to questions about the “why” of institutional arrangements—as a way of intellectually protecting our religious worlds. Berger identifies four levels of legitimations: a pretheoretical level that contains simple traditional statements (e.g., “we have always done it this way”); an incipiently theoretical level which contains proverbs, moral maxims, and traditional wisdom; explicitly theoretical statements which can become long and convoluted in their logic; and when the meaningful order of the world achieves a level of self-consciousness.⁴⁵ For our purposes the most significant levels are the second and third levels of

legitimation because they are the explanations that comedians draw upon most often when they challenge, mock, subvert, and satirize religious groups. As legitimations are repeated they become sedimented (“they congeal in recollection as recognizable and memorable entities”).⁴⁶ Eventually, these sedimentations become institutions, which are patterns of behavior and rules that exist as social standards apart from the individuals who habitually perform them.⁴⁷ These terms—externalization, objectivation, internalization, plausibility structure, social stock of knowledge, legitimation, sedimentation, and institutionalization—permeate this book because, as will be discussed shortly, humor arises when what is expected differs from what happens. When we start seeing the unseen order as something that human beings work hard to maintain, the human efforts themselves belie the idea that the unseen order is “just the way things are.” This contradiction between human effort and presumed naturalness of the given order of things is rife for attack.

Religions are often presented as having a special connection to “the sacred.” The term sacralization is used throughout this book to explain the ways in which humans make things sacred. This conceptualization builds upon the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim’s work.⁴⁸ Durkheim argued that religion results first from people separating the sacred and profane, and second, from their orienting their lives around the sacred. Nothing is inherently sacred or profane. Instead, these qualities are ascribed to different objects, actions, and ideas. Things that are considered sacred are “set apart and forbidden,”⁴⁹ marking them as special. “Sacred” is a category around which groups construct their collective identities. Since sacredness is ascribed and not inherent in an object, a thing has to be sacralized in order to direct group members’ responses, a goal which is achieved through rituals that enable people to attach positive feelings to the object in question.⁵⁰ Sacredness is, however, “highly contagious,”⁵¹

which Durkheim suggests helps religions to become cognitive organizers, bringing everything together into a meaningful whole. Practically, this means that once something is identified as sacred then this significance extends to everything else that comes in contact with the object or idea.

Sociologist Robert Bellah adds an important twist to this discussion of what can be considered sacred. In “Civil Religion in America” Bellah presents American *culture* as being infused with sacredness.⁵² Political speeches are his main focus; he notes that there is a widely held belief in America that the United States is divinely sanctioned as Earth’s model nation. While Bellah would later abandon the term “civil religion,”⁵³ others continue to find American culture deeply infused with a sense of sacredness about the nation, its purpose, and its future, a sacredness which seeps into politics and popular culture alike.⁵⁴ The belief that America and its founding ideas and documents are sacred elevates the first amendment to the constitution of the United States of America with its protections for religion and freedom of speech to sacred status. For religious groups, this means that they have a sacred right to pursue their religious interests. For comedians criticizing those religious groups, what they have to say is also protected—even if it comes across as slanderous.

Civil religion and civil rights are significant forces shaping *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy*’s humor, especially emerging from the tradition among comedians of interpreting the first amendment as a license to offend dominant sensibilities. Drawing from George Carlin’s fights with the Supreme Court over his infamous “Seven Dirty Words” bit and Lenny Bruce’s frequent run-ins with authorities over obscenity, for many contemporary comedians the first amendment protects and enables the comedian’s power to speak freely about what he or she sees as profound social problems. Indeed, without the freedom to speak there

could be no questioning of government, no deconstructions of social norms with rapier wit, and no attacking of the beliefs or actions of religious leaders without risking the wrath of public officials. Historian Stephen Kercher demonstrates that post-War comedy draws this security from the precedents set by a group of liberal comedians who dared to challenge social conventions and introduced American culture to satire that challenged McCarthyism and other forms of totalitarianism that arose when the nation's moral ideals failed.⁵⁵ Contemporary American comedy loses its ability to speak truth to power without the sacredness of the first amendment and the belief in equality arising from the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. This belief in freedom of speech's sacredness is a powerful idea that the different programs use to organize and rank the different religious groups they satirize.

The second issue arising from our definition that can be mined for humorous purposes is that religions in United States have to deal with religious diversity. When religions encounter each other the taken-for-granted assumptions behind their unseen orders are implicitly challenged. Sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow argues that there are four reasons why religious diversity is socially significant: "First, there are some who believe that greater diversity poses a threat to democracy itself. . . . Second, there is concern that greater religious diversity raises difficult practical questions about fairness and decency. Third, there are those who fear that increasing diversity is undermining long-held American values. And fourth, there is a set of arguments suggesting that the *religious* dimension of religious diversity is itself an important cultural challenge that needs to be taken seriously."⁵⁶ Religious diversity exposes deep anxieties about how to live as a community of people with different unseen orders and it requires religious groups to explain others' presence.⁵⁷

We need to keep these issues of religious pluralism, instability, and competition in mind because strange behaviors and, by extension, “normal” ones, become significant factors in determining which religions are acceptable or not in each program’s satirical worldview. These distinctions are the framework upon which satirical worldviews are founded and all three programs are active participants in what has been called the culture wars.⁵⁸ America’s negotiations of religious diversity are built by comparing different groups and then attacking differences rather than emphasizing similarities. The tensions and ethical contradictions that arise from these similarities and distinctions make them useful fodder for humor.

Culture and Knowledge

Our definition of religion, especially when we take Berger’s and Durkheim’s insights seriously, invites us to look at religion as something that touches all arenas of human life. If an unseen order has something to say about how we should organize families, regulate sexual relationships, or govern our nation states, then making the unseen order visible extends to all social arenas. Even if the United States has a formal separation of church and state, the two are intertwined in practice and in people’s lives. This book draws insights from the sociology of culture dealing with how symbols and their interpretations are used to establish moral boundaries within and between communities. Sociologist Michèle Lamont argues that moral boundaries “are drawn on the basis of moral character.”⁵⁹ Moral boundaries are important because they are part of a stock of knowledge for evaluating different religious groups based on the qualities of their members. As Americans continue to equate morality with religion, each religious group’s plausibility structure is infused with arguments about the correctness of their moral positions.

They are, as anthropologist Mary Douglas would argue, ways of maintaining purity against defilement.⁶⁰ As we will see in our discussion of humor, hypocrisy or a moral legitimations's general inefficacy is generally sufficient to justify assaulting another group to reinforce one's own moral boundaries.⁶¹

Moral boundaries are contested in the mass media through the use of symbols. The cartoons in question are especially powerful in contributing to long-standing sedimented legitimations because they are constantly repeated. Successful television shows live in perpetuity through reruns on basic cable and streaming over the Internet. Their legitimations are available long after their initial cultural moment has passed. Effective use of cultural symbols facilitates the transmission of ideas to audiences decades after an initial broadcast because of how they use the tools in their "cultural tool-kits." Sociologist Ann Swidler coined the term "cultural tool-kit" to explain how people draw from their cultural stocks of knowledge to engage situations as they arise.⁶² We should, however, keep in mind sociologist Michael Schudson's criticism that media tends to trade in "cultural objects" that have a host of sedimented ideas already associated with them (e.g., the different values people place on publically displayed crosses) rather than create new cultural objects from their "tool-kits" when telling stories.⁶³ In other words, when writing a sitcom, the creators will draw cultural objects from their cultural tool-kits and use them in a way that they think will communicate positively with a wide audience. This approach ties back into the sociology of knowledge, as our social stock of knowledge is legitimated within our moral boundaries. We communicate which things, ideas, and traditions are sacred through the use of cultural objects.⁶⁴ Once things are sacralized, they can be arranged into what Gordon Lynch calls "hierarchies of sacred forms," which exist when sacred forms are culturally arranged in such a way that one dominates the others. When this happens subjugated sacred forms still circulate in

society, but the dominant form sets the agenda for their interpretation.⁶⁵ Evaluating how cultural objects teach us about moral boundaries helps us to see which sacred forms have been institutionalized. For example, in *Family Guy*'s episode "April in Quahog" Stewie is playing with *Thundercats* and *He-Man* action figures when he turns, faces the screen, and addresses the audience, "Yeah, that's right, you buy your kids ridiculously homoerotic dolls and then ask what happened? Yep, your gay son is on you buddy. Explain that to your god." This joke explicitly attacks American masculinity and its association with heterosexuality in conservative Christian culture. *Family Guy* is generally pro-homosexuality and this joke supports its politics by turning the tables on Christians who claim that homosexuality is unnatural and caused by immorality. Taking the cultural objects of "action figures," God, and conservative Christian rhetoric about homosexuality being an abomination before God, *Family Guy* inverts the Christian moral boundaries and puts the supposed moral failure of homosexuality back onto the conservative Christians, inverting the conservative Christian hierarchy of sacred forms in the process.

The Simpsons, *South Park*, and *Family Guy* have each developed a tool-kit for representing what the series thinks of different religions by selectively appropriating cultural objects available in the wider culture. These patterns have been institutionalized over time and demonstrate moral boundaries for evaluating different religious groups. This book uses the concept of institutional resonance ("meanings that are sanctioned by, and enacted within powerful institutional frameworks"⁶⁶), and the evaluative categories of institutional consonance and institutional dissonance to explain how different religious traditions either meet or fail the moral standards at each program's core. All institutions require ongoing legitimation and institutional adherence is the degree to which people's behavior follows institutionalized standards. Institutional consonance occurs when new ideas which are considered legitimate and

build upon already held beliefs and ideas are integrated into pre-existing plausibility structures. Institutional dissonance occurs when new ideas are considered illegitimate according to pre-existing plausibility structures. Each program has institutionalized an unseen order and evaluates different religions and their moral claims from this central position. When claims meet a program's standards they are consonant, and when they do not, they are dissonant. Discerning how the unseen orders of America's religious groups resonate with the underlying unseen orders of each program is key to understanding religious satire in these programs.

Religious Satire

This book introduces a new theory of religious satire. This theory relies on Berger and Luckmann's concepts of legitimations, sedimentation, social stock of knowledge, plausibility structure, and institutionalization; the Durkheimian theory of sacralization; the sociology of culture's insights into moral boundaries and cultural objects; and cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall's methodological insight that the style of presentation is a key to a cultural product's epistemological origins.⁶⁷ Humor and religion build upon these concepts because they are both eminently human phenomena. This theory of satire stresses incongruity, conflict, protecting one's plausibility structures, and attacking that of an opponent.

A satirist attacks an opponent's plausibility structure by humorously showing its ideological inconsistencies and demonstrating how the opponent's assumed norms are incongruous (logically inconsistent) with reality. Traditional humor theory posits three different explanations for why we laugh: Superiority (we laugh at an opponent's inferiority), relief (we laugh to relieve psychological pressure), and incongruity (we laugh at the pleasant resolution of

confusion).⁶⁸ Sociologist Murray Davis puts the three theories into a useful interrelationship, writing “an individual (1) who perceives through humor an ‘incongruity’ in the outer world, (2) expresses through laughter the ‘release’ or ‘relief’ of being subjectively unaffected by this objective contradiction, and (3) consequently feels his laughingly sustained subjective integration manifests his ‘superiority’ to the humorously disintegrated object.”⁶⁹ Most contemporary theories emphasize incongruity. The idea is simple—humor arises from the pleasant resolution of something that we encounter as incongruous that, as folklorist Elliott Oring notes, arises in a context that is considered appropriate for humor.⁷⁰ Otherwise we are just confused or puzzled. But in order to find something incongruous we first need a sense of congruity—an ordered understanding of the world. In other words, we need a plausibility structure. The rules, powers, and basic assumptions about how the social world operates are in place from previous generations of humans interacting with each other by the time we are born. Anything that deviates from this social order is problematic. The world we are socialized into provides our sense of congruity. Yet, how we think the world works, how others think it operates, and how it actually functions can be completely different. When faced with these incongruities, we need some way of reconciling them.

Sociologist Anton Zijderveld offers us a useful set of tools for creating humor from incongruity. Building on Berger and Luckmann’s sociology of knowledge and sociologist Max Weber’s concept of “ideal types,” Zijderveld contends that scholars and societies construct ideal types which rarely, if ever, match the reality they purport to explain. Ideal types are useful heuristic tools that are not the thing itself. Jokes build upon the discrepancies between ideal types and reality. To illustrate this incongruity between reality and ideal type, consider an example from *The Simpsons* that satirizes the well-known Christian claim that Christianity teaches people

to love others as they love themselves. When the Protestant minister Timothy Lovejoy tells Ned that “there’s more to being a minister than not caring about people,”⁷¹ the joke explicitly plays upon the incongruity between a man who, ideally, tries to love others and the fact that he openly acknowledges that he does not care about them. The juxtaposition between the ideal type of a minister who embodies Christian teaching and the character of Rev. Lovejoy demonstrates how our rationalizations lead us to expect him to care about others as much as himself, but this ideal type is a rationalized behavior, not a description of Lovejoy’s actual indifference towards others. That this depiction is familiar—in the sense that viewers may know a minister who has stopped caring about his flock—facilitates the way the incongruity between the ideal type of a Christian who lives by the golden rule and the lived reality of self-centered and cruel Christians is transmitted to the audience.

Zijderveld argues that humor exists when we play with institutionalized meanings in a situation defined by laughter.⁷² Juxtaposing ideal types with familiar social examples which do not meet expectations allows us to see our taken-for-granted existence as something relative and constructed, rather than permanent and given.⁷³ Understanding humor, however, requires deep cultural knowledge. People have to share values and plausibility structures—the same social stock of knowledge—in order to play with jokes’ meanings.⁷⁴

Once a basic understanding of our world is established, we can see that joking serves a variety of social functions. It can reaffirm reality, assuring us that our assumptions about life are stable. Reinforcing reality forges group solidarity and allows humor to be used to exclude others.⁷⁵ In other words, humor reinforces and makes explicit moral boundaries. We can now incorporate superiority theory’s assumptions that we laugh at an inferior’s weaknesses. Humor’s role in conflict situations, with the need to reinforce an in-group’s reality against an out-group’s,

is at work in all three programs.⁷⁶ While Zijderveld did not emphasize conflict, it is an implicit component of Berger's theories about religious pluralism and the existential threats different religions pose for each other.⁷⁷ Legitimations exist for offensive and defensive purposes. They are intellectual tools meant to protect plausibility structures against opponents.⁷⁸ Jokes are, therefore, legitimations. They employ meanings, playing with them within a plausibility structure's logical confines. Even if jokes relativize reality, making us aware of our world's precariousness, in a pluralistic situation they can become effective tools for determining who is within our social group and who is not.⁷⁹

The sociology of humor offers us a variety of useful tools for connecting humor to the "seen order" and its social differences. Sociologist Giseline Kuipers argues that humor conveys standards and works as a form of symbolic capital, always marking social and moral boundaries between groups.⁸⁰ Sociologist Christie Davies' theory that there are two general types of ethnic jokes in the world, stupid and canny, is also useful for explaining how social and moral boundaries become equated with inherent characteristics in excluded groups.⁸¹ For Davies, stupidity is "a general and universal quality and has come to include and to refer particularly to an inability to understand and cope with those technical aspects of the modern world that are common to most countries rather than simply to a lack of understanding of local customs, practices, or forms of speech."⁸² Ethnic groups which are marginal in society, but also closely related to the dominant group, are often considered stupid, as Pollack jokes in the United States or "Newfie" jokes in Canada demonstrate. Jokes about canniness, on the other hand, imply "cleverness and rationality, but it is a shrewd cleverness, and a calculating rationality applied in the pursuit of personal advantage. Indeed, jokes about 'canny' groups often depend . . . on their

alleged disposition to use these qualities in ways and in contexts that others find ludicrously inappropriate and excessive.”⁸³ Scots and Jews have historically been these jokes’ main targets.

Davies contends that jokes about stupidity and caniness help the dominant ethnic groups who tell them deal with the tensions of modernity by deflecting their anxieties onto peripheral groups. Jokes are minor social controls because they implicitly praise majorities while explicitly ridiculing minorities.⁸⁴ However, Davies has argued that jokes do not start wars and are not usually reasons to fight.⁸⁵ He argues that jokes are “not social thermostats regulating and shaping human behavior, but they are social thermometers that measure, record, and indicate what is going on.”⁸⁶ This analogy is useful because jokes and popular comedies such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy* can give us a sense of the cultural climate. They can tell us who is considered dominant, stupid, and canny in society. For example, in *The Simpsons*, Ned Flanders, the Simpsons’ evangelical neighbor who follows the Bible to the point that he keeps kosher “just to be on the safe side,”⁸⁷ is portrayed as stupid because of his inability to think apart from Biblical-literalist Christian dogma. Meanwhile, the Hindu Apu is canny because he represents the model minority stereotype applied to high achieving Indian Americans, and the stereotype of a greedy convenience store clerk who applies an exorbitant mark-up to his goods. *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy* are thermometers that measure certain sets of values. To understand the programs’ jokes viewers need to understand the way each program manipulates everyday knowledge to craft its humorous arguments, even if viewers do not agree with these presentations.

Davies, however, ignores a volatile and important element in his sociology of ethnic jokes. Omitted from his survey are jokes about hated groups. Oring’s study of cartoons in the White Aryan Nation’s periodical *WAR* exemplifies the extremes to which humorists will go.⁸⁸

Arguing against Freud's contention that humor is a sign of repressed attitudes and that if the attitudes were aired humor would disappear,⁸⁹ Oring demonstrates that the racist group uses humor to further its agenda. He presents a variety of cartoons from the magazine, including one depiction of a smiling African American with a stocking cap, large mouth with thick lips and a missing tooth, wide nose, and a sign that says "Will Make Excuses for Food."⁹⁰ This caricature combines some of the most gratuitous stereotypes of African Americans, including the ideas that they are lazy and make excuses while expecting handouts. The joke itself works on the association between the man's sign and some homeless people's signs which read "Will Work for Food."⁹¹ These jokes reflect a particular worldview, and Oring contends that *WAR*'s founder Tom Metzger would include such depictions "to imagine—rightly or wrongly—other laughers like oneself."⁹² In short, *WAR*'s cartoons are another example of using humor to build community through exclusion. Throughout this book Davies' and Oring's insights are combined to show that jokes which are told about marginal groups provide us with insight into how those groups are found wanting according to the joke-teller's standards. Religious groups that are seen as central are valued, while all other groups are judged and found lacking. Stupidity, canniness, and dangerous qualities that justify hatred are all criteria that can be used to marginalize religious groups through satire.

Satirists work with a social stock of knowledge and frame it in a way that exposes juxtapositions between the joker's plausibility structure, which is treated as congruous with how the world should be, and an opponent's plausibility structure, which is viewed as incongruous. Satire is rooted in social conflict between competing plausibility structures, but the ability to disseminate an ideological position through a humorous program—say, a mass mediated, syndicated, animated sitcom—gives certain satirists disproportionate power compared to

others.⁹³ All knowledge workers (not just satirists) pursue and use knowledge for the benefit of those with similar perspectives, but in a pluralistic society knowledge is inherently contentious. Knowledge is not just a way of coming to know “the truth,” but it is also a weapon with which to discredit opponents.⁹⁴ For example, each program discussed in this book attacks Christianity because Christians often seem to fall short of their tradition’s presumed moral standards. Homer Simpson once summarized Christianity as “the one [religion] with all the well-meaning rules that never work out in real life.”⁹⁵ This joke demonstrates how *The Simpsons* incorporates opposing viewpoints into its humor as a means of criticizing them. While Christians may advance ethical principles based on doctrine and tradition, this joke emphasizes the disjunction between ideal type and lived reality. It relies on a cultural familiarity with the basics of Christian belief and exposes the basics’ faults for comedic advantage.

Jokes are satirical when their humor is used to attack opposing perspectives.⁹⁶ Satirical jokes bring different unseen orders and their moral boundaries into conflict and use humor to expose the inconsistencies in an opponent’s viewpoint. When a joke undermines an opponent’s plausibility structure, it reinforces the joke teller’s unseen order. Satirical jokes take knowledge about a religious tradition and frame it according to a symbolic system that shapes an interpretation of the religion. This satirical framing draws upon deeply held cultural differences which are expressed in a narrative format that helps us understand the situation being represented and the appropriate social response. Satire enables this transmission to take place by strategically employing ignorant familiarity and inverting social norms so that we not only learn why a satirist’s opponent is inferior, but also what should be done about them.

Consider the following example of how sacredness is conducted through religion and across other institutions while satirizing Christianity in *Family Guy*’s episode “And I’m Joyce

Kinney.” In this episode the Griffins are identified as regular church attenders. Indeed, Lois is the church organist and a favorite parishioner of the priest. As the episode progresses, however, we learn that in her youth Lois made the pornographic film *Quest for Fur*. Scandal ensues after her past is announced on the local news and the priest throws her out of the church. Later, she returns and tells the judgmental congregation:

You know, I’ve been coming to this church for years. I’ve heard all the stories. Who did Jesus hang around with? Mary Magdelene. And who was she? A prostitute. Which means if they had cameras back then, I bet she would have done a porno. [*People whisper in astonishment as Peter rolls in a projector and Meg flicks a switch, lowering a projection screen which covers the cross.*] And if she did, I know that Jesus would have forgiven her. Am I any worse than Mary Magdelene? And more importantly, are you all better than Jesus?

She then plays the porno and the priest exclaims, “I know I’m a man of God, but that [*beep*] is hot!” The congregants stand and cheer as the episode concludes.

While this narrative certainly contains the standard situation comedy formula of introducing a problem, having a series of madcap adventures, and resolving the problem satisfactorily before returning things to normal for next week, it also speaks to the way in which sacredness is administered for satirical purposes. Christianity has had a troublesome history with sexuality and pornography is taboo in most congregations. Lois’ story shows how the unseen order is maintained by attaching positive sacredness to the church and negative sacredness to pornography.⁹⁷ It was insufficient to claim that Lois was no longer sacred. Instead she had to be

removed from the group as a threat. Her experience in pornography cannot be associated with good, it is evil. Yet, her restoration depends upon a rebuttal based on a narrative that is also considered sacred—the life of Jesus as told in the four gospels of the Christian scriptures. It is only by saying that Jesus would not have shunned her that she can make her case before the people capitulate to their base sexual instincts, reintegrating Lois into the congregation. The legitimations justifying her exclusion and inclusion were built on theoretical logic that only makes sense within the context of Christian theology and history. After all, if you are not a Christian and have no qualms with pornography, why would Lois need to be shunned from your company? How Christianity shapes other institutions such as family, sexuality, and mass media all play a role in shaping the stereotyped Christian response in this example. Presenting their behavior as ultimately hypocritical undermines the moral boundaries that many Christians draw between good Christian morality and consuming pornography. In this case, score one for the people who like their pornography and do not worry about what Christians have to say. Different unseen orders have been brought together, one plausibility structure has been attacked, and moral boundaries and *Family Guy*'s unseen order have been reinforced. This is satire's religious work.

Finally, our theoretical framework of humor rejects Berger's moralistic interpretation of humor in *Redeeming Laughter*, which echoes classic and contemporary works in religion and humor studies that see humor as a way into a "comic world" of happiness.⁹⁸ In this tradition, satirical humor mobilizes knowledge to attack moral failings and to show us the way to the divine. Earlier, in *A Rumor of Angels*, Berger argued that laughter is one of the "signals of transcendence" that affirms the existence of something greater than our socially constructed worlds.⁹⁹ The theory of satire presented in this book rejects this notion because while humor—especially satire—inverts social norms and reveals different ways of living, that interpretation's

moral direction needs contextual evaluation, which Berger's analysis lacks. Any understanding of society gained in a "finite province of meaning"—experiences such as dreams, religious visions, or paranormal encounters that are by definition extra-ordinary—*always* has to be reinterpreted into the cognitive and institutional frameworks that shape everyday life if it is to be available as a legitimation.¹⁰⁰ Although Berger is aware of humor's critical capabilities, in emphasizing a finite province of meaning's universality he departs from an empirically testable theory of humor. Throughout his oeuvre, Berger theorizes humor as something that is universal not only in the sense that every society experiences humor, but that those experiences have similar content.¹⁰¹ By framing his analysis in theological terms he takes us away from looking at what actual humorous instances signify. As Douglas writes, "all jokes are expressive of the social situations in which they occur."¹⁰² Therefore, in a study of religious humor in animated sitcoms, we have to identify the social situations that a program represents, the institutionalized bodies of knowledge it draws upon, and the critical position it takes on different social issues. Whether or not they direct us towards a universal truth is knowledge unavailable to the sociologist.

Satire is the art of using one plausibility structure to attack another through humor. Satirists take appropriate incongruities which arise from a conflict between the moral boundaries that are established by the different legitimations that support institutionalized religious plausibility structures and reinforce their own plausibility structures by denigrating their opponents. Humor is a tool for quickly drawing upon cultural knowledge to protect one unseen order from the threat of another. Religious satire is, therefore, religious in a twofold sense. It is religious in part because its content deals with "religion" and it is religious because the desecration of an opponent is the sacralization of one's own plausibility structure. While some

may see this as a moral “correction” of somebody else’s error, sociologically it is evidence of an ongoing competition between unseen orders for the privilege of enforcing one definition of reality over another upon society at large. Satire is fought in an arena defined by humor, but that does not make the battle any less vicious. We can understand how satire is used in the religious arena if we pay close attention to the ways in which satirists draw our attention to institutional consonance and dissonance. To hear these institutional resonances we need an appropriate method.

Watching Cartoons as Work

Methodologically, two routes were taken to identify the patterns of how religion is humorously portrayed in spoken words, visual depictions, and plotlines in *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy*. First, I undertook what Stuart Hall calls “a long preliminary soak.”¹⁰³ I have watched these programs for decades and am familiar with their perspectives on religion from repeated viewings. Then, to test for religion’s presence, I watched every episode of the three programs, pausing to write down references to religion in each episode that was not a “religion episode” (an episode in which religion drives the plot), and taking notes on the religion episodes. There is a tremendous amount of material that can be classified as “religious” in the three programs. Indeed, through the 2014-2015 seasons, 529 of *The Simpsons*’ 552 episodes, 209 of *Family Guy*’s 249 episodes, and 200 of *South Park*’s 257 episodes contained a clear religion reference. Furthermore, I categorized thirty *Simpsons* episodes, eighteen *Family Guy* episodes, and forty-one *South Park* episodes as “religion episodes.” I did not transcribe the religion episodes. Instead, I made notes about their content in order to keep the narrative structure and

direct quotes available the same way I would if I were using a book that was open on my desk beside me.

Among the non-religion episodes some references are insignificant when it comes to analyzing a program's view on religion's role in public life. For example, in one *Simpsons* episode Homer Simpson's father, Abraham, accuses his son of being "no angel behind the wheel."¹⁰⁴ While this is, technically, a reference to religion (you have to know what an angel is to understand the expression), it is not a commentary on religious life in the United States. By contrast, there are numerous times when Cartman's anti-Semitic jokes in *South Park* or *Family Guy*'s anti-Semitic content feels less like a religious jab than an ethnic one, but because those lines are blurred in Jewish life and culture I have included them and they are discussed in this book.

That said, there is a substantial amount of material in each of these programs that comments—either with a snappy one-liner or an extended morality play—on religion's significance in modern life. Each program's perspectives on major social issues regarding religion are elaborated in two ways. The first way is to pay close attention to the "religion episodes" since those are the longest, best developed statements on religion that the programs offer. We can study their narrative structure, as which characters are presented as honest believers and which as hypocrites are telling signs that allow us to evaluate religion through fictional characters' actions. To borrow from sociologist Erving Goffman, each cartoon sets its own dramaturgical stage upon which its characters perform.¹⁰⁵ As a theoretical lens, dramaturgy invites us to see all of social life as a structured play. While we each improvise within our roles, to break out of them would disrupt social life. The dramaturgical stages of our lives are largely set before us and we are socialized into them (e.g., educational settings, religious performances,

medical practice). The ability to modify the performance's rules to suit one's interests is the artist's creative license. Each program's creative team crafts their dramaturgy from common elements in American culture so that viewers are familiar with the rules of social interaction that structure the programs. They are not creating social behavior from nothing. Instead, they are taking what is familiar and using familiar settings and behavior to stage their critiques. This material is also tied into controversies and cultural struggles, suggesting that the shows' creators find it useful to draw upon a body of religious knowledge for humorous purposes, even if they cannot be sure their audience will understand these references. Out of these examples, a pattern for interpreting religion in each program emerges.

Second, I took short scenes, one-line jokes, and quick visual references to religion in other episodes as corroborating evidence. If the "religion episodes" are the major performance pieces in each program, the other information is what helps to project the depth and details that allow ignorant familiarity to develop and satirize contemporary religious people. Ned Flanders, the Simpsons' evangelical neighbor, is an excellent example. Ned is a complex stereotype of evangelicals. He makes numerous references to scripture, religious politics, and Christian ethics in episodes in which he has a minor role. Those examples are significant because they continue to develop the character and reinforce the interpretations established in the religion episodes.

To arrive at the patterns for identifying the criteria for including and excluding different religious groups I used qualitative methods of content analysis common to cultural studies of mass media and religion. Following Hall, this is not a work of content analysis that finds the substantive interpretation of religion each program offers in the quantity of the references. Were this a work of purely numerical quantity, it would focus almost exclusively on God, Jesus,

Christianity, and Judaism. Instead, I follow the path that Hall characterizes as the way of the literary/linguistic and stylistic analysis:

The analyst learns to ‘hear’ the same underlying appeals, the same ‘notes,’ being sounded again and again in different passages and contexts. These recurring patterns are taken as pointers to latent meanings from which inferences as to the source can be drawn. But the literary/linguistic analyst has another string to his bow: namely, strategies for noting and taking account of emphasis. Position, placing, treatment, tone, stylistic intensification, striking imagery, etc., are all ways of registering emphasis. The really significant item may not be the one which continually recurs, but the one which stands out as an exception from the general pattern—but which is *also* given, in its exceptional context, the greatest weight.¹⁰⁶

Our interest is in how these programs deal with contemporary religious diversity in the United States through humor. That means, for example, that while they may not write many episodes exclusively about Muslims (*The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* each have one episode, *South Park* has five), Islam’s importance in the contemporary United States merits an extended discussion of a comparatively small sample because how these programs understand Islam helps to explain how they understand the roles of stigmatized minority religious groups in America. Qualitative understandings of the patterned depictions of different religious groups help us to understand the different religious stratifications across the three programs with much greater clarity than sheer numbers can provide.

This type of content analysis is fruitfully used by various scholars in religious studies and the sociology of religion such as Douglas Cowan, Heather Hendershot, Kathryn Lofton, Melani McAlister, and Gordon Lynch.¹⁰⁷ These scholars all study the content of specific media—which ranges from religious documents, magazines, and films to news media and television entertainment—with the goal of identifying relevant cultural scripts within them that comment on the broader society while simultaneously contributing to it. This ideological criticism focuses on how cultural producers create products from a broad range of beliefs, ideas, and symbols circulating in society, an approach that differs from other methodologies for studying mass media and religion including audience reception studies,¹⁰⁸ studies of fan cultures,¹⁰⁹ or examinations of media's use in everyday life in which the audience is the arbitrator of a cultural production's meaning.¹¹⁰ These other studies use interviews and observations to determine cultural objects' meanings by examining a group's claims about an object's significance rather than investigating the object itself for the claims that people make through it.

While other methods have yielded valuable insights into the relationship between religion, mass media, and the broader culture in which we live, qualitative content analysis is employed in this book because it is best suited to answering the question of how a shared stock of knowledge is used to compose jokes about religion in the United States. This book is grounded in an approach that treats cultural products as the creations of group activities that contain their creators' ideologies. In this book these expressions are transmitted through the genre conventions of the animated sitcom and contemporary standards of humor.¹¹¹ Studying the jokes through the sociologies of knowledge and religion enables us to understand why the assumptions behind the jokes were considered humorous in the first place and they tell us a great deal about the worldviews of three different groups behind the programs. These programs are

truly collaborative efforts, as writers, producers, animators, voice actors, and network executives, among others, all contribute to the final product. For this reason, this book refers to each program's "creators" because each episode is the end result of numerous interpersonal dynamics behind the scenes between people who share the goal of creating the best product they can for audience consumption. From writers' rooms to animators' decisions about how to portray a religious character or scene; from the voice actors' expressions to the producer's final editorial decisions, the "creative teams" are discussed throughout this book because unless a specific writer, actor, editor, or artist who created a particular example can be identified, each example is treated as a collaborative product that reflects a shared "sense of humor." In this, each of the three programs' humor is sociologically relevant. Their humor is a product of shared group sensibilities and reflects sociological patterns that structure that humor instead of being the product of an individual genius.

Where to Now?

The following five chapters discuss how each program presents and interprets different religions, demonstrating not only how each program uses humor to create a religious hierarchy, but also how they evaluate religion's place in the larger social fabric of contemporary America. Chapter one asks the simple question: *Which religious traditions are considered good and why?* Tackling constructions of "spirituality" and atheism across the three programs, this chapter demonstrates that certain features make a religion good in the worldviews of each of these three programs: It is individualistic, it is not tied to a geographic region or ethnic (read: "non-white") identity, it is not consumerist, and it is based on human reason. There are problems with this

conceptualization of spirituality—namely the way disadvantaged people’s religious traditions and ethnic identities are displaced from their historical and social roots so that they can be turned into consumable goods for middle-class American consumers. Chapter one’s purpose is to establish a foundation for the framework used in these shows to judge other religions as lacking. As we will see, each series has a somewhat different worldview and promotes different values. *The Simpsons* privileges individual spiritual seeking which scientific rationality holds in check, *South Park* favors individual creativity as a spiritual pursuit, and *Family Guy* embraces atheism and scientific rationality, while also allowing for individual spiritual exploration.

Chapter two examines how and why other groups are excluded, starting with the problem of “ethnic” religions for the three programs. Native American religions, Hinduism, and Judaism—traditions that are intimately tied to specific ethnic groups—offer the opportunity to ask the question of whether or not non-white people can fully integrate into American society as religious participants. The answer for these programs in each case is an uneasy “no.” Ethnicity is seen as exclusive and “ethnic” characters are relegated to the margins, “set apart and equal” if you will. This chapter also considers the problem of anti-Semitism and how it reproduces an ignorant familiarity that Jews are different and that there are limits to trusting them.

Chapter three asks when Christians can be good citizens. Using the programs’ debates around the Bible, God, and Jesus and a detailed examination of Ned Flanders from *The Simpsons*, it narrates Christianity’s potential in the three programs while also highlighting what they each see as Christians’ failures. This chapter reveals tensions running through the three programs between moral behavior and holding beliefs that each program finds incongruous for different reasons. Chapter three foreshadows chapter four, in which Christian bigotry, greed, and malevolence—in the form of Christian proselytization, sexual ethics and sexual violence, and

editorial censorship—are used as examples of dangerous behaviors that keep Christians from ever fully participating in the good civil sphere as defined by these programs.

Chapter five concludes our tour of the way different religious groups are represented with a consideration of those groups which are hated. We first examine cults and new religious movements and how the programs replicate the fears of “dangerous” and “evil” religions, excluding those who find meaning in these religions. Then we turn to Islam—which has made some inroads in the programs in recent years—to consider not only how the programs changed their perspective on the world’s second largest religion in recent years, but also how they are constrained by post 9/11 politics that continue to stigmatize Muslims, especially in American popular culture.

Finally, the volume concludes with a discussion of why the humorous depictions of religion in these programs matter for the public presentation of religions, how their relative merits are discussed and evaluated, and what tools viewers should bring to their viewing experiences. It will help us to understand why humorists are drawn to religious life and why humor is a strategic cloak for what can sometimes be the dirty, vicious, and slanderous enterprise of publicly criticizing religion.