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South Park's War on U. S. Religions

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The popular animated satire *South Park* was first aired on Comedy Central in August of 1997 and has been under constant scrutiny by viewers ever since for its raunchy, offensive, and outright vulgar brand of social critique. The show follows the story of four eight-year-olds: Stan Marsh, Kenny McCormick, Kyle Broflovsky, and Eric Cartman. This group of fourth graders live in the small town of South Park, Colorado and face the very same social, political, and spiritual troubles that have plagued Americans for the 18 years that the show has been running. A major theme of this show is the innocent nature of the children of South Park, who are often the voice of reason for parents and other adults in town. Although these fourth-grade kids are usually apathetic to and ignorant of the current events of the world, they are often the ones who have to solve the larger questions in modern society. The topic of religion is a common issue brought up by writers and co-creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone, an eccentric duo that can only be described as the yin-yang renaissance twins of the 21st century.

Parker's and Stone's many talents have spanned a wide range of media, including their recent Broadway Musical entitled *The Book of Mormon*, which hit stages in 2011 after they wrote a critically acclaimed episode of *South Park* that critiqued Mormonism. *South Park* has won five Emmys for Best Animated Show and *The Book of Mormon* has won four Tony awards in addition to one Grammy. The evidence is clear; the writers of this lowbrow, blatantly offensive mockery of a TV show are smarter than they lead on.

South Park's brand of satire is one that "pushes the limit of good taste," (qtd. in Scott 153) when compared to other animated comedy shows. Shows that were established around the same time, such as *Family Guy*, *American Dad*, *Robot Chicken*, and *King of the Hill*, feature very few discussion of religious or other cultural phenomena, nor do they experience the same uproar from the religious community.

This is likely the outcome of two phenomena—the first of which is the fact that conventional television stations, like Fox, who air *Family Guy*, *King of the Hill*, *The Simpsons*, and *American Dad*, are under the most scrutiny because of broadcasting laws, which largely limit their ability to criticize American culture. Secondly, the creators of *South Park* don't really care a whole lot about how their show is perceived. In fact, the opening disclaimer before each episode states that the show “should not be viewed by anyone.”

Although *South Park* is meant to be a satirical comedy show—and it is often disregarded because of its outright absurdity—the points it makes about religion are based heavily in fact and are worth analyzing in the context of America's declining acceptance of religion. However, it is important to note that many of the messages in the show aren't meant to be taken literally. Recently, *South Park* has started to be viewed as a viable, American social critique that prods at potential solutions to the problems experienced by the religious sects of the world.

After researching the writers' backgrounds, education, and attitudes, in addition to reading about the topics covered in some of these episodes, one quickly realizes that this staple of American arrogance features many lessons about the emphasis of religion in American society. Some specific episodes that outline this trend are “Spontaneous Combustion,” “About the Mormons,” “Cartoon Wars (Part 1 and 2),” “Trapped in the Closet,” and “The Mexican Staring Frog of Southern Sri Lanka.” Throughout these episodes, the way in which *South Park* critiques religions differs greatly, as do the religions that they poke fun at. Drawing examples from every episode across 18 seasons would be tedious and rather time-consuming, so the above list of episodes will be used as representative examples of *South Park*'s style of systematic criticism.

There is perhaps no religion from which *South Park*'s creators have derived more commercial success by mocking than Mormonism. The first *South Park* depiction of Mormonism occurs in Season Seven, Episode Twelve, entitled "All about Mormons." The episode depicts the Harrison family, a Mormon family from Utah, moving into protagonist Stan Marsh's neighborhood. Stan now has a new classmate, Gary Harrison, who is depicted as the perfect child. He gets high grades, is tolerant of others, and really has no ulterior motives other than making friends. Stan is taken aback by this kid, who invites Stan to dinner at his house. Stan's mind is exposed to this strange new world of Mormonism, and soon his whole family decides to become Mormon. However, the more that Stan hears about his new religion, the more he starts to question it. He soon decides that there's no way he could believe what these people think, although he admires their loving, family-oriented lifestyle.

"All About Mormons" is important because the writers do an interesting job of introducing the religion. It seems at first too good to be true for Stan. As he is told stories about the founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, a cheerful 18th century tune plays in the background while the images depict the events for the viewer. It is important to note that Parker and Stone write a lot of *South Park*'s music, and during this tune, the only words they use to fill the music in-between phrases is "Dumb, dumb-dumb-dumb dumb." When someone finally questions Joseph Smith's story, the words change to "Smart, smart-smart-smart smart." This offers a blatant insight into what Trey Parker and Matt Stone have to say about Mormonism, and could indicate that they feel it is necessary for people to question their beliefs every now and then.

This episode also speaks volumes about the questionable legitimacy of the Mormon religion in the United States, which began right in the heart of America in the

mid-1800s. Since its inception, the Mormon religion has been critiqued by many, mostly other Christians, who claim that Joseph Smith is the biggest con man in the history of American religion. Many people question the possibility of anyone believing the claims of the *Book of Mormon*, citing the popular belief that “[Smith’s] church had no theology but only a phony book filled with rubbish that had to be ‘exposed,’ ‘unveiled,’ and ‘unmasked.’ The followers Smith attracted were victims of ‘delusion,’ their obsession either the result or the cause of insanity” (Moore 751). These sentiments were felt by millions of Americans long before *South Park* thought to make their own episode reflecting these very same beliefs.

The religion that receives undoubtedly the most flak, joke-for-joke, from *South Park* is Catholicism. This religion has faced many trials in the United States since the first Catholics arrived, ranging from racist intolerance to being tarred and feathered in the streets; since then, the Catholic religion has seen a great increase in its membership and its prominence on the public stage. For example, in 1961, it was very big news that John F. Kennedy was the first elected Catholic President, but today such an occurrence would seem commonplace. Most, if not all of the Catholic figures depicted in *South Park* are hypocritical, ill-informed, and highly insensitive to others. The first that comes to mind is Priest Maxi, who, in the episode “Spontaneous Combustion,” rallies the church in a prayer to God that begs for a Denver Broncos victory. Jesus, whose most prominent roles occur early in the first few seasons of *South Park*, has his own talk show that listeners can call and ask him anything, but he struggles for a viewership in the episode “The Mexican Staring Frog of Southern Sri Lanka.”

All of these examples are proof of the trend that the writers of *South Park* are beginning to highlight about those who claim to be Christian in America: not many of

them are informed about their basic doctrines and they seek out their savior less and less, which quite literally goes on in “The Mexican Staring Frog of Southern Sri Lanka.” These are pointing towards a greater trend, the slow devolution away from Catholicism. Where as Catholicism saw great growth in the United States around the 1950s, when its values aligned with traditional American thinking, recent developments, such as cases of sexual misconduct within the clergy, have acted as a sort of catalyst for the growing dissent among Catholics. In a book chronicling the history of Catholicism Leslie Tentler writes that “adult Catholics increasingly think for themselves and teach their children to do the same” (200). Since these beliefs such as abstinence before marriage and shunning of birth control no longer seem as practical, the Catholic Church begins to seem rather outdated in modern society. *South Park* does a wonderful job displaying these changing beliefs and current trends in a comical, yet sometimes alarming manner.

In 1952, science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard conceived of a new religion, Scientology, based on what he believed to be validated research. By 1955, he had built “Project Celebrity,” for which he sent his followers to Hollywood to convert prominent actors, who would then spread the word about his religion. Somehow, the campaign was successful enough to attract huge names, such as Gloria Swanson and Dave Brubeck; more recent celebrities who have joined the religion include John Travolta and Tom Cruise. Since its development, the Church of Scientology has grown richer and richer off of law suits spanning the past four decades, which cover topics ranging from freedom of religion disputes with the IRS over tax exemptions, intellectual property cases, and most recently a lawsuit against HBO documentary director Alex Gibney who displayed the beliefs of the Church in a distasteful manner with the April 2015 movie “Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief” (Kent).

In November 2005, the writers of *South Park* targeted the religion and the growing number of celebrities converting to this religion with an episode titled “Trapped in the Closet.” They aimed to challenge the church in the hope that they too would be sued, but the Scientologists never followed up; they simply fought Comedy Central itself to remove the episode, and were successful until mid-2006 when it was re-aired in late Pacific Coast time slots (Tapper and Morris, Johansson).

In the episode, protagonist Stan Marsh attempts to find a new set of beliefs that are “free and fun.” Upon searching, he comes across the religion of Scientology. As recorded by the scientologists, his extremely high Thetan levels make him the likely reincarnate of L. Ron Hubbard himself. When word spreads, Stan finds that there is a massive crowd of famous actors waiting outside his house to meet him. Among them is Tom Cruise, John Travolta, and Stan’s school lunch worker, Chef. When Tom Cruise asks Stan (whom Cruise believes to be the reincarnation of Hubbard) if he likes his acting, Stan replies that he’s “not as good as the guy who played Napoleon Dynamite.” The episode also features a cartoon depiction of the story of Scientology, which has a caption under the scene that reads: “This is what Scientologists actually believe.” Finally, Stan confronts his followers and comes to the realization that he is not actually the next Hubbard. In fact, according to Stan, “Scientology is really just one big global scam.”

While this episode is not too big of a deal when compared to the other sinister programming that the *South Park* minds have come up with, it received a mountain of backlash from one unexpected person: Isaac Hayes. Tom Cruise, for obvious reasons, threatened to stop promoting his *Mission Impossible III* movie, which is produced by Viacom, the owner of Comedy Central (Gillespie). But Isaac Hayes, the beloved soul

musician and voice of Jerome “Chef” McElroy, felt that “a line had been crossed, stating, “There is a place in this world for satire, but there is a time when satire ends and intolerance and bigotry towards religious beliefs begins” As a result of this episode, Hayes left the show (“Isaac Hayes Leaves” 34). The episode clearly sparked a hot debate about the ethics of satire, but Hayes and Cruise seem to be in the minority as people who want to take up action, which is evidenced by the Church of Scientology’s decision not to sue the makers of the show. The episode is still shown on re-runs, but is much harder to find on the internet than others, even in segments.

Another episode, or rather two, that sparked controversy among the religious community were the “Cartoon Wars: Part 1 and Part 2,” which dealt with the prophet Muhammad of Islam, and which are good examples of how censorship has evolved in America. Parker and Stone, who knew that it was considered a great sin in Islam to show an image of Muhammad, had already done so in Season 5 with their episode “Super Best Friends” in which Muhammad teamed up with Jesus, Lao Tzu, Moses, and other prominent religious figures to take down the tyrannical magician David Blaine. Blaine’s magic was captivating people and turning them into “Blainologists,” a clear stand-in for Scientology, as Trey Parker would later reveal. When these episodes were released, a group of Muslims named Revolution Muslim warned the writers that depicting Muhammad in such a way would likely have a drastically more negative impact than intended (Itzkoff). In response to this, Comedy Central altered the episode.

The real inspiration for Parker and Stone’s “Cartoon Wars” episodes came as Parker was watching TV with his wife and saw that Muslim groups were outraged that a cartoon had depicted Muhammad. Trey Parker’s initial thought was “They finally just saw [Super Best Friends], and they’re all pissed off” (Gillespie). Parker

was later surprised to find out that the actual reason for the rioting was a reaction to Danish newspaper's cartoon that satirized the prophet. Immediately, Parker and Stone knew what their next episode of *South Park* would be about (Gillespie).

The "Cartoon Wars" episodes are about a fictional episode of *Family Guy*, which is said to feature a depiction of Muhammad. Immediately, the country is up in arms in fear of retaliation from angry Muslims. Luckily, in these episodes *Family Guy's* broadcast network, Fox, chose to censor the image of Muhammad at the last minute, but they announce that it is a two-part episode and Muhammad will be featured next week. Eric Cartman, another of *South Park's* main characters, attempts to go to California to speak with the makers of *Family Guy* in the hope that the episode will be pulled. Kyle Broflovski also goes to California, but his goal is to let the episode air to protect the Freedom of Speech. Ultimately, the *Family Guy* episode is aired, but this time, Comedy Central doesn't show the scene of Muhammad, and instead puts up a title card that explains what is supposed to be happening.

Though Comedy Central allowed Muhammad to be shown in the 2001 episode "Super Best Friends," it seemed that, in 2006, it would be unwise to show him again. At the end of the episode, Comedy Central placed a large black box with the word "censored" in white in place of Muhammad, and any time his name was mentioned it was bleeped. When these episodes were released, Comedy Central retroactively removed "Super Best Friends" from all possible streaming websites. Comedy Central's actions were upsetting to the makers of *South Park*, who are heavy advocates for Free Speech, and who had meant for the fictional discussions with the Fox executive about free speech to reflect Parker and Stone's interactions with Comedy Central.

The religious critiques offered by *South Park* are important in evaluating today's society under the scope of an increasingly cynical population. Additionally, their religious messages have an even more important application in today's society because around the world there are people dying over their differing religious ideologies. The strength of each argument offered by *South Park* is inextricably tied to the two masterminds behind the show: Trey Parker and Matt Stone. These two college-educated filmmakers are even more closely tied to the characters they've created than they have led on. For example, Stan Marsh, the son of Colorado geologist/insurance-saleswoman pair Randy and Sharon Marsh, bears a striking resemblance to Trey Parker, whose parents share the same first names, occupations, and place of residence with their cartoon counterparts. South Park is not a real town, but is said to be located in Park County, Colorado, which is where the writers are from. Furthermore, Matt Stone is depicted symbolically as Stan's best friend and Jewish sidekick, Kyle Broflovsky.

When these details about the creators and their work become apparent, *South Park* becomes less of the raunchy, insensitive antithesis of highbrow entertainment and becomes more of a well-researched critique of American religion. The show has pushed countless boundaries in its eighteen years on the air, especially when it comes to the beliefs of Americans. These all reflect a decline in traditional religion in America. Perhaps *South Park* is just their way of searching for something to believe in while simultaneously ripping logical holes in the beliefs of others.

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