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# The Humorous Reproduction of Religious Prejudice: “Cults” and Religious Humour in *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *King of the Hill*<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract: Through an examination of how generic “cults” are presented in three specific episodes of The Simpsons, South Park, and King of the Hill, this article illustrates how humorous prejudice is reproduced through popular entertainment. It argues that a generic “cult” stereotype has developed over time in mass media and is reproduced in these programs for comedic effect. After demonstrating how specific correlations between historic fears about specific groups have found their way into these programs, it concludes with a discussion of the political significance of these programs’ satire.*

**Keywords:** religion, popular culture, television, humour, *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *King of the Hill*, cults, new religious movements, mass media

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New religious movements (NRMs) (often pejoratively labelled “cults”) have long been feared and persecuted before becoming part of America’s accepted religions—if they ever find such tolerance. Indeed, “cults” have been understood as dangerous, deceptive, depraved, and droll. Yes, humour is one way that people come to terms with the significance of “cults” and this begs the question, if cults are supposedly so horrendous, why can we see them as humorous? Cowan demonstrates that pejorative humour in *South Park* resonates with anti-Mormon evangelicals, allowing them to claim the program as a co-conspirator in their prejudice (Cowan 2005). Similarly, Lowney and Best (1996) found that jokes circulating after the Branch Davidians’ confrontation with the BATF and FBI from February 28 to April 19, 1993, in Waco, Texas, demonstrated a moral authority whereby those who laughed at the Branch Davidians’ demise were seen as good and those who died in the conflagration were treated as deviant. Today, jokes about cults can be found online, in newspapers, and on television. This article analyzes three animated sitcom episodes, one each from *The Simpsons* (“The Joy of Sect” [S. Moore 1998]), *South Park* (“Super Best Friends” [Parker 2001]), and *King of the Hill* (“Fun with Jane and Jane” [Kuhlman 2002]) because they demonstrate how American concerns about cults, their dangers, and public morality are humorously conveyed and reinforced. These programs are important not only for their longevity (508 *The Simpsons* episodes over 23 seasons, 259 *King of the Hill* episodes spanning 13 seasons, and 230 *South Park* episodes in 16 seasons), but also because they have found their way into academic discourse about humour’s and television’s social importance.<sup>2</sup> This satire’s cultural significance is illustrated by outlining a specific cult stereotype’s history in American mass media since the 1970s, explaining how these three episodes replicate it, and analyzing the significance of the stereotype’s reproduction through humour.

## The Cult Stereotype

Springfield has been overrun by a strange and almost certainly evil sect calling themselves the Movementarians. In exchange for your home and all your money, the leader of this way out and wrong religion claims he'll take believers away on his spaceship to the planet Blisstonia. Excuse my editorial laugh: Ha, ha, ha.

—Kent Brockman, news anchor in “*The Joy of Sect*” (S. Moore 1998)

This editorial interpretation of the Movementarians—the NRM that arrives in the Simpsons’ hometown of Springfield in “*The Joy of Sect*”—echoes any number of television news broadcasts negatively portraying NRMs, reflecting deeply rooted prejudices against new religious movements in the United States. In a special issue of *Review of Religious Research* dedicated to mass media and unconventional religion, Wright writes, “It would seem that, in most cases, the only story sufficiently ‘newsworthy’ about these religious groups must involve some diabolical plot to subvert the innocent, engineered of course by a crazed maniacal ‘cult’ leader who secretly schemes to amass limitless power” (1997, 110–1). Nine years earlier, van Driel and Richardson were able to identify the most common negative motifs used in cult reporting between 1972 and 1984: confining members or depriving them of personal freedoms; charismatic leadership; extreme authoritarianism and discipline; behavioural control using psychological manipulation or brainwashing; a preoccupation with the leaders’ wealth and luxury; the group’s portrayal of the outside world as evil and something to be feared; and apocalyptic beliefs (1988). This list contains the essential elements of a stereotype that is used as what Berger and Luckmann call “recipe knowledge” (“knowledge limited to pragmatic competence in routine performances” [1966, 42]) for explaining NRMs to media consumers who have little, if any, contact with these religious groups (see also Beckford 1994; Bromley 1994; Cowan and Hadden 2004; McCloud 2004; Neal 2011; Robbins and Anthony 1994).

The cult stereotype did not arise from nothing. There have always been religious groups that have drawn the ire and suspicion of their more prominent neighbours. Indeed, today’s established and respected religions were once stigmatized. For example, the label “cult” has been applied to the Methodist and Catholic churches in other times. Throughout American history, marginal religious groups have been effectively attacked and stigmatized as cults, generating considerable fear and inspiring social retaliation. Jenkins’s work references numerous newspaper stories and interested critics of non-mainstream religions that were highly critical of the claims that practitioners of such religious behaviours as spiritualism offered. As long there have been new religions, there have been critics (Jenkins 2000). Furthermore, as Cowan has shown, there is a tradition of counter-cult activity among Christians who sought to prove that cults were theologically incorrect and dangerous in their errors (2003).<sup>3</sup> While the United States has a history of fostering new religions, these groups are typically small, and if they attract attention it is often accompanied by vitriol, harassment, false accusations, and attempts to end the groups through theological and state means (Jenkins 2000; cf. R. L. Moore 1986).

The programs investigated here all contain stereotypes that became codified around assaults upon different religions that arose after the 1950s and became especially prominent from the 1970s through the 1990s. McCloud argues that while the concept of an exotic religious fringe existed prior to the 1970s, the contemporary concept of cult took shape during that decade and “by the late 1970s the connections between cults, brainwashing, and fraudulence had become naturalized. In other words, these associations became unquestioned truths—not just in magazine articles, but for many Americans” (2004, 128). That is, the stereotypical characteristics van Driel and Richardson identified had become recipe knowledge for interpreting

NRMs and implicated numerous groups. By 1993's Branch Davidian standoff with the BATF and FBI, it was clear that journalistic reporting on cults contained an ideology that resonated favourably with the American public (Cowan and Hadden 2004; McCloud 2004; Wessinger 2000). These ideological narratives dialectically received legitimation from and endorsed the political actions of the secular anti-cult movement (ACM) which provided journalists with expert advice.

The ACM's roots developed during the late 1960s and formalized in the 1970s as family members tried to convince their loved ones to leave the new religions, which were appearing across the United States, while warning others of the dangers these groups posed. The first ACM group, FREECOG (Free the Children of God), was founded in 1971, and other groups arose across the country, forming networks in quick order. During the "cult wars" throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the ACM worked doggedly to advance its theory of conversion to NRMs by brainwashing and the dangers NRMs presented. Assuming that NRMs caused people to "snap" and become charismatic leaders' servants, journalists Conway and Siegelman gave an early account of what would later be known as brainwashing (1978). James and Marcia Rudin of the American Jewish Committee wrote that using highly successful techniques to manipulate thoughts and behaviours of new members were characteristic of new religions (1980). Psychologist Margaret Singer argued that cultists kept recruits unaware of their surroundings, controlling the situation so neophytes felt helpless; cultists replaced the convert's old worldview with a new one that focused on the group's charismatic leader, and constructed a closed system where criticizing the leader was unacceptable (1995, 63). Singer (1995, 11) and Conway and Siegelman argued that these groups' main purposes were recruitment and fundraising (1978, 46). Linking violence to the charismatic bond, Singer and the Rudins argue that devotion to a charismatic leader led to the infamous 918 murders/suicides at the Peoples Temple's settlement in Jonestown, Guyana, on November 18, 1978 (Singer 1995; Rudin and Rudin 1980; cf. Chidester 1988; Hall [1987]2004). Singer, along with other anti-cultists such as deprogrammers Ted "Black Lightning" Patrick and Rick Ross, the Cult Awareness Network, and the American Family Foundation (later International Cultic Studies Association) were all prominent suppliers of information and acted as expert resources during the major cult controversies of the 1980s and 1990s (Shupe and Bromley 1980, 1985; Shupe and Darnell 2006).

When we compare the ACM's focus on fundraising, mind control, and charismatic leadership, which eventually leads to violence, with the characteristics of mass media's framework for reporting on NRMs, we see a direct correlation between anti-cult ideologies and media accounts of NRMs' beliefs and practices. This ideological spectrum legitimates certain religions as "authentic," "real," and/or "valid." How a religion is classified along certain cultural standards that editors, reporters, and audiences take for granted determines how it will be reported to the general populace and NRMs are disadvantaged from the start as stigma frames the public's initial exposure to them.

NRMs face another serious problem in terms of their "newsworthiness." Because NRMs are small and marginal, newsmakers tend to treat them as significant only in "crisis events" which are meaningful because they demand responses from a society's authoritative institutions whose legitimacy is challenged (Shupe and Hadden 1995). Hence, as Possamai and Lee (2004) assert, this tends to involve criminalizing narratives of NRM activity. Cowan and Hadden present a four-stage value-added model of NRM newsworthiness consisting of event negativity, the event's resonance with a target audience, the rarity of the event for that audience, and how clearly and simply the event can be portrayed (2004, 69–77). By reducing complexity and relying on abnormal behaviour to frame their stories, news reporters have built a stereotype of cults that feeds into the ACM's agenda and legitimates established authority structures.

Richardson and van Dreil argue that this is dangerous because while these stories sell newspapers, they also discredit the idea of newsmakers as “fair and balanced” and harm civil liberties (1997). In reducing all NRMs to the status of cult, mass media has helped marginalize these groups.

At the 2010 American Academy of Religion meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, Laycock argued that these fears were not only circulated through news media, but also other popular media such as novels, film, and television have used the cult stereotype for narrative purposes and are not beholden to the same standards of honesty and integrity people expect from journalistic sources (Laycock 2010; see also Feltmate 2011; Neal 2011). That said, van Driel and Richardson’s components of a cult stereotype—confining members or depriving them of personal freedoms; charismatic leadership; extreme authoritarianism and discipline; behavioural control using psychological manipulation or brainwashing; a preoccupation with the leaders’ wealth and luxury; the group’s portrayal of the outside world as evil and something to be feared; and apocalyptic beliefs—provide a model that can be effectively used to analyze the stereotype’s usage in comedy programs as well as news media (1988, 177). Through an analysis of the three episodes we can see how they rely upon cultural intertextuality (“a set of conventions . . . that are available for filmmakers [and television producers] to exploit as a kind of cultural shorthand to make specific points in their work” [Cowan 2008, 11]) to make their cases. Before we can do that, however, we need to briefly summarize each episode.

### **(Very) Brief Episode Summaries**

“The Joy of Sect” (S. Moore 1998) starts with Homer Simpson and his son, Bart, walking through the local airport where different religious groups promote themselves. After passing a member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON, “Hare Krishna”) and a Christian, they meet the Movementarians, whose offer of a free weekend at their agricultural compound entices Homer. While attending the weekend, he is shown a recruitment film, exposed to public ridicule, fed low-protein gruel, resists a “droning, repetitive chant” of “The Leader is good, The Leader is great; we surrender our will as of this date,” and is eventually won over by a revised version of the *Batman* theme song. He then gives the Movementarians the deed to the Simpson house and moves his entire family to the agricultural compound where they pick lima beans in the fields and attend a mass marriage ceremony. Bart is brainwashed at the compound and everybody wears the same style of robes, demonstrating their loss of individuality. Eventually, Homer’s wife, Marge, escapes and gets the local minister, Reverend Lovejoy, the school groundskeeper, Willie, and the Simpsons’ evangelical neighbour, Ned Flanders, to help her kidnap her family and deprogram them. This works on the children, but before Homer can be converted, the Movementarians’ lawyers break into Flanders’s house and extract Homer to the Movementarian compound. There, Homer throws open the doors to the “forbidden barn,” revealing a spaceship, which takes off. Everybody thinks they are doomed until the spaceship falls apart, revealing the Movementarians’ Leader on a helicopter bicycle with bags of money attached to it. He crashes into a nearby farm and the people return home dejected to gather in front of that other bastion of brainwashing—FOX television (*The Simpsons* home network).

“Super Best Friends” (Parker 2001) starts with magician David Blaine arriving in South Park where he performs magic tricks on the street corner. Wowing the audience with his abilities, his followers—the Blainetologists—start distributing pamphlets inviting people to the centre for magic where they are taught about David Blaine as “a scholar, a visionary, a leader” and refer to his magic tricks as “miracles.” Instead of teaching people magic, recruits

are told that they are unhappy and that their parents and friends have programmed them to feel isolated. Only by reading from David Blaine's book *Teachings* will they find happiness. This resonates with *South Park*'s main characters—Stan, Kyle, and Cartman—and they join Blainetology by attending “magic camp” for \$69.95. The boys then have their heads shaved, dress the same, and are sent out to recruit new people to come see David Blaine. Stan starts suspecting something is wrong, but is pressured to stay. He sneaks out at night, but Kyle stays behind and their friendship falls apart over the new religion. Stan then goes to see Jesus for help and Christianity's founding figure agrees to assist him. Blaine's miracles, however, are more enticing than Jesus' and people start joining Blainetology. The religion grows so fast that soon the government will have to grant it tax-exempt status. When it turns out that they will not receive 501(c)(3) status, Blaine sends his followers to Washington, DC, to drown themselves in the Reflecting Pool. It is only when Jesus bands together with Lao Tzu, the Buddha, Joseph Smith, Krishna, Muhammad, Moses, and Seaman (the Super Best Friends) that he can fight Blaine's magic. Blaine brings the Lincoln Memorial to life and it starts terrorizing Washington, DC, until the Super Best Friends create a giant John Wilkes Booth. Once the terror has been subdued, Blaine escapes and his remaining followers return to their old lives after Stan tells them that any religion requiring people to pay money is wrong.

“Fun with Jane and Jane” (Kuhlman 2002) focuses on Peggy Hill and her niece, Luanne, as they join the sorority “Omega House.” After being refused membership in another sorority, a young woman who introduces herself as Jane finds Luanne drinking alone on campus and invites her to join the Omegas. When Luanne goes to join the sorority, Jane is kidnapped by deprogrammers who call her Lisa, framing the sorority as a cult for the rest of the episode. Once inside, the pledges are all instructed to call themselves Jane. Their birth names were given by their parents and taking on this new name is a way to break free from those old, controlling bonds. As soon as a pledge starts calling herself Jane, the rest of the group surrounds her and hugs her, telling her she is loved. Luanne does not understand this and is treated as deviant for it; eventually she is thrown in a closet for her independence, which the Omega leader says makes her harder to love. At meals, the Omegas only eat rice, and pledges are told that their bodily functions (sleeping, eating, using the bathroom) are impositions from their old lives. Now Omega House leaders will tell them when they are hungry, tired, or need to use the washroom, and this is presented as freedom. Omega House members are being trained to go to their ranch where they will make jams and jellies, which the group sells to make money. Eventually Hank Hill takes Luanne away, but Peggy brings her back to the sorority because she doesn't understand the group's nature. Once Peggy is within the Omega house, she is flattered by the Omegas as a person of high intellect. They also try to turn her against the men in her life and when that does not work, they mention her mother. Peggy's negative relationship with her mom causes her to join the group, and they immediately surround her, telling her they love her. When Hank tells his friends about Peggy and Luanne joining Omega House, he is informed that it is a cult. He runs to the Omega house to save the women in his life, starting a barbecue nearby. The smell of roasting meat breaks the starving women out of their stupor and they leave the group.

### **Cultural Intertextuality and the Cult Stereotype**

Each of these episodes makes quick references—both visually and verbally—to famous NRMs and reinforces these associations with negative sentiments embedded in the cult stereotype. Working through van Driel and Richardson's characteristics and showing how a few examples

from each episode connect with specific NRMs' infamous elements helps us understand how and why the stereotype is satirically useful.

First there is confining members or depriving them of personal feelings, which is closely related to the third characteristic, extreme authoritarianism and discipline. We can easily see this in each episode. In "The Joy of Sect"'s recruitment film scene, people are pressured to stay by having a spotlight shine on them if they get up to leave. A voice over a loudspeaker reassures them that they are welcome to go at any time, but they have to tell everybody else why they are leaving. Being singled out causes the characters to stay seated throughout the six-hour film (S. Moore 1998). Similarly, in "Super Best Friends," when Stan tries to leave the group, one of the Blainetologists blocks his exit and tries to convince Stan that he does not want to leave. Using a creepy, "mystical"-sounding voice, the man suggests that he and Stan go somewhere else to talk, at which point Stan decides to stay, waiting until night to leave. The Blainetologists and Movementarians also dress identically and the Blainetologists go even further by shaving their heads (Parker 2001). "Fun with Jane and Jane" is especially explicit about how members are kept under control. Regulating bodily functions, depriving them of any food except rice (similar to how the Movementarians use low-protein gruel [see S. Moore 1998]), and locking Luanne in a closet and yelling at her are all negative reinforcements. Furthermore, the Omega House property has a fence with an electronic keypad on it to keep outsiders away and new recruits in. Meanwhile, Omega House members use positive reinforcement when the girls give up their names and start calling themselves Jane, adopting the group's identity over their own (Kuhlman 2002).

The actions these fictitious groups undertake are directly linked to fearful stories, which have circulated since the 1970s, about specific groups. The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (The Unification Church, "The Moonies"), The Children of God (now The Family International), ISKCON, and other groups have been accused of forcefully detaining recruits and using brainwashing. Stories persist about how these groups would trick people into coming to a meeting and, once there, would deprive them of sleep and nourishment, using psychological manipulation such as "love-bombing"—a practice whereby Unificationists would inundate a potential convert with positive reinforcement—to bring unsuspecting victims into the fold. This practice is referenced in "Fun with Jane and Jane," when one of the recruits takes on the name Jane for the first time. All the other members gather around her, hug her, and repeat, "We love you Jane" (Kuhlman 2002). The implication in both "Fun With Jane and Jane" and in popular accounts of love-bombing is that the love-bombers are liars. However, as Elien Barker discusses in *Making of a Moonie*, the complexity involved in convincing people to join through demonstrating affection—which is often genuine on the part of Unificationists and which they believe is in the potential convert's best interests—is a relationship that navigates a person's predisposition toward the group's ideas, their social circumstances apart from and within the group, their relationships with the people who are trying to convert them, and their experiences throughout the conversion process (Barker 1984, 173–88). The oversimplification depicted in "Fun With Jane and Jane" is a reduction for comedic purposes, which reinforces the negative assumption that groups such as the Unification Church have the power to deceive a potential convert through love-bombing and that recruits are so emotionally distraught that this affection will permanently change them for the worse.

Adopting distinctive dress and clothing styles also falls under the heading of changing people's personalities. This is by no means the sole purview of NRMs, but the famous physical changes that came from joining a group such as Scientology's Sea Org, which includes wearing a naval uniform, or the saffron robes and shaved heads of ISKCON members, were visually

shocking. Going against American cultural norms, those relative few who undertook these physical transformations stood out in many citizens' minds, and they started worrying that their children or relatives could be next. That all three sitcom groups—the Movementarians, the Blainetologists, and Omega House—wear distinctive uniforms references this pattern of subsuming individual identity, showing that this visual cue quickly references the fear that by joining a group, people give up what is distinctive about them (see also Neal 2011, 88–9).

Van Driel and Richardson's second characteristic is charismatic leadership, which is closely related to the fifth characteristic, a focus on the leader's wealth and luxury. All three groups are led by a charismatic figure. "The Leader" of the Movementarians is constantly in the background of "The Joy of Sect," appearing at the end when he is exposed as a fraud (S. Moore 1998). It is not insignificant that The Leader is a caricature of L. Ron Hubbard, who has been accused of fraudulently creating Scientology for financial gain, while Scientologists treat him as a great adventurer, scholar, religious visionary, and humanitarian (Behar 1991; Miller 1987). *South Park* explicitly references this public discussion about Hubbard when the Blainetologists call David Blaine a miracle worker, scholar, visionary, and prophet (Parker 2001). Viewers may not be familiar with any of Hubbard's writings, but there is an ongoing cultural discussion about whether or not he is a religious prophet and—by extension—whether the religion he founded is legitimate. The original Jane who leads Omega House is only depicted in a picture and we learn very little about her (Kuhlman 2002).

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the Indian guru who practiced "crazy wisdom" and founded a community at Rajneeshpuram in Oregon, was also a controversial leader. "The Joy of Sect" explicitly references the disparity between The Leader and his followers by having him drive by in a Rolls Royce while the Movementarians toil in the fields harvesting lima beans (S. Moore 1998). This parodies Rajneesh, who was notorious for collecting Rolls Royces (he had ninety-three), while Rajneeshpuram's residents did not share this luxury (Carter 1990; Urban 2005). Even if viewers are unfamiliar with Rajneeshpuram's specific history, the image of a cult leader who has amassed wealth through duplicitous—and, therefore, illegitimate—means by exploiting his or her followers is constantly reinforced through scenes such as this one. This is how a social concept becomes sedimented, "that is, they congeal in recollection as recognizable and memorable entities" (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 67). The continued use of these tropes illustrates that the historical details that gave rise to these depictions are not as practically important for understanding cults as the sedimented sentiments reinforcing the idea that charismatic leaders who get rich from their followers are charlatans.

"Super Best Friends," like its more famous descendent "Trapped in the Closet," in which *South Park*'s Stan claimed that Scientology was a "big, fat, global scam" (Parker 2006), ends with Stan telling the despondent Blainetologists, "Cults are dangerous because they promise you hope, happiness, and maybe even an afterlife. But in return, they demand you pay money. Any religion that demands you pay money in order to move up and learn its tenets is wrong" (Parker 2001). Because Blainetology and Scientology both end in "-tology," are founded by charismatic individuals who are both portrayed in *South Park*'s universe as greedy frauds, and are both subject to speeches about how "real religions" do not take your money, we should not be surprised to see that popular satirizing of Scientology makes for an easy contribution to the sedimented stereotype, as treating Blainetology as a parody of Scientology is an easy and logical choice.

Van Driel and Richardson's fourth category is behavioural control through psychological manipulation and brainwashing, which is probably the most famous argument against the religious legitimacy of cults. Brainwashing was originally conceptualized to explain why American POWs turned on their country and promoted communist China's values during the Korean

War, but in the 1970s and 1980s it became an explanation for why people joined NRMs.<sup>4</sup> As youth left established middle-class career trajectories and joined these movements, their relatives became concerned about these groups' influence. Adults were scared when their children spent increasing amounts of time with their new religious friends and less time with family, left promising careers to preach strange gospels, and started dressing differently and living communally. Singer put forth the most developed brainwashing model from within the ACM, arguing that "cults"

1. Keep the person unaware of what is happening
2. Control their time and surroundings
3. Make the brainwashee feel powerless, fearful, and dependent upon the group
4. Suppress their old behaviour and attitudes
5. Instil new behaviours and attitudes
6. Put forth a closed system of logic without allowing any criticism of it (Singer 1995: 63).

However, as Dawson illustrates in his review of brainwashing literature, this model, which the ACM claims is incredibly successful and a reason to be wary of cults, does not represent the reality of conversion to NRMs (2006, 95–124). The most damning empirical evidence comes from Barker. She found that of all the people who visited a Unification centre (that is, they had to go to one of the Unification Church's workshops and not just to a public lecture) only 0.5 percent were likely to be active in the movement two years later, and those people were not necessarily highly committed. Furthermore, through participant observation she found that there was no evidence of restraining people, depriving them of sleep, suppressing their old personalities, making them fearful, and remaking them in the group's image. People were aware of what was going on and were genuinely interested in asking questions and considering what the group had to say. While the days were heavily scheduled, people were free to leave at any time, and the other tools that cults supposedly used to control people—depriving them of sleep and proper nutrition, attacking the sources of their identities, physically restraining them—were absent. Converts to NRMs are active participants making a choice, not unwilling victims of a diabolical menace (Barker 1984, 141–8).

However, for comedic purposes, the thought of depriving people and making them do stupid things as mindless zombies is appealing because comedians can make a lot of easy jokes based on the relationship between the diabolical brainwasher and the hapless victim. Closely tied to the third characteristic—extreme authoritarianism and discipline—each group in our episodes uses a different brainwashing technique. The Movementarians have the simplest method, the "Lil' Bastard Brainwashing Kit" which they use on Bart. But they also use positive reinforcement to manipulate people into loving the leader. We see this in a classroom scene where the normally rational and scientific Lisa Simpson challenges the Movementarians' scientific curriculum in which everything derives from The Leader. In order to get good grades, she has to come to love The Leader and her decision is easy. She accepts the Movementarians' dogma and returns to the top of the class (S. Moore 1998). The Blainetologists and members of Omega House use psychological warfare against the families and friends of new members, suggesting that all old religions, friends, and families have caused people's unhappiness (which represents the sixth characteristic, portraying the outside world as evil and something to be feared). David Blaine and Jane, conversely, understand and love these outcasts and want to take them in. The Blainetologists' use of David Blaine's book *Teachings* as a way to deeper knowledge and Omega House's love-bombing and attacking Peggy's mother are parodies of the assumptions that NRMs' recruitment methods are insidious techniques that can deprive a



person of his or her free will (Kuhlman 2002; Parker 2001). This fear persists despite the discrediting of brainwashing theories.

Van Driel and Richardson's final characteristic is the presence of apocalyptic beliefs. Related to fears of brainwashing and control over members is the fear that these members will suddenly become violent. Frequently, this is associated with millennialism—"hope for collective earthly or heavenly salvation" (Wessinger 2000, 12). Wessinger helpfully identifies two major forms of millennialism: catastrophic millennialism in which the end of the world arrives and sinners are punished while a chosen remnant remains to enjoy the new world, which will replace this one, and progressive millennialism in which humans working toward the goals that supernatural beings (i.e., gods, extraterrestrials) put before them, leading the way to a utopian tomorrow (16–17). "The Joy of Sect" (S. Moore 1998) spoofs the progressive millennialism of such UFO groups as the Unarians, whose leader, Uriel (d. 1993), predicted that thirty-three space ships would come to the Earth in 2001 and usher in a new era of human learning, or the Raëlians, who are trying to build a welcome centre in Israel for the Elohim (who are seen as benevolent extraterrestrials and not as gods) and usher in a new era of peace (Palmer 2004; Tumminia 2003; Tumminia and Kirkpatrick 1995; see also Wojcik 2003). For both groups, extraterrestrials contact us through channels whose charisma must be constantly maintained. Put differently, in order for Uriel and Raël to maintain their status as prophets, they have/had to continue giving messages and insights from the extraterrestrials. For believers, this is spiritual revelation. For outsiders, such as the creators of *The Simpsons*, this is incredulous and ridiculous.

*The Simpsons* portrays the Movementarians as working toward an interplanetary migration to Blisstonia (which is "known for its high levels of bliss"), but it inverts the common pattern within UFO religions of a prophet receiving extraterrestrial contact leading to prophecies about how to improve life on Earth. *The Simpsons'* creative team uses general beliefs about UFOs, other planets, and the idea that aliens will provide us with salvation and shifts the focus to the charismatic leader. While the Movementarians apparently have apocalyptic beliefs about a better life on the planet Blisstonia, it is The Leader who will take them there on his spaceship. The humour and criticism in this depiction is directed at The Leader and the fact that gullible people believe him. The spaceship to Blisstonia falls apart as it lifts off, revealing The Leader on a pedal-operated helicopter, blowing on a harmonica and weighed down with bags of money, illustrating that it is just a charade meant to help The Leader extort Springfielders (S. Moore 1998). This further reaffirms the cult stereotype's assumptions that charismatic leaders' wealth and luxury reflect negatively on their religions as a whole.

Progressive millennialism, however, is not what is commonly associated with apocalyptic beliefs and cults—that dubious honour belongs to catastrophic millennialism. While "Fun with Jane and Jane" mentions that the girls of Omega House want their members to spend eternity with them (Kuhlman 2002), it is in "Super Best Friends" that the fears of brainwashing and self-inflicted violence coalesce when David Blaine tells his followers to kill themselves so the group can achieve tax-exempt status (Parker 2001). Recalling the mass suicides by People's Temple, Heaven's Gate, and the Solar Temple—events that became symbolic of the dangerous extremes to which cults will go and the reason why they must be stopped—the Blainetologists' deaths in the reflecting pool are for naught. The idea that they could have everlasting happiness is exposed as delusional and the cult stereotype, which deals with the tensions violent NRMs raise by resolving the fear in terms of followers' stupidity and leaders' evil, is reinforced once again. Building on the lasting images of the Peoples Temple's members deaths at Jonestown, "Super Best Friends" does not directly reference drinking cyanide-laced Flavor Aid or the fact that some people were shot, but it does reference the Peoples Temple's overshadowing

legacy—the idea that cult members will kill themselves and others for seemingly no good reason (Parker 2001). However, as others have demonstrated, Jim Jones's growing paranoia, increasing pressure from the government and the anti-cult group Concerned Relatives, and the catalytic murder of congressman Leo Ryan and four others just hours before the mass suicide began allowed the group's apocalyptic vision—in which they were to be a communist remnant against the overly consumerist and corrupt United States—to be threatened. Instead of capitulating to the forces of evil and surrendering, they underwent a revolutionary suicide to prevent themselves from having their community destroyed (Chidester 1988; Hall [1987]2004; Hall et al. 2000; Wessinger 2000).

While this may seem crazy, that does not make it illogical. Treating mass suicide as the end result of delusional devotion to a charismatic leader loses the sacredness of the beliefs for those who die—dehumanizing them in the process. Furthermore, although the events are tragic, mocking them takes us no closer to understanding—and avoiding—future tragedies (Wessinger 2000). Unfortunately, seeking to understand and empathize with catastrophic millennial approaches does not make for good comedy or grabbing headlines. Sadly, throughout the 1990s this sedimented idea was deployed to reinforce cultural assumptions about cults in controversies ranging from the Branch Davidian conflict at Waco to the Heaven's Gate suicides by referencing events that remain poorly understood by the public at large.<sup>5</sup>

### **But Why Humour?**

I have demonstrated that the cult stereotype is useful for framing jokes because it contains familiar images and sentiments, but we still have to ask, why humour? Understanding how humour works is central to understanding how “The Joy of Sect,” “Super Best Friends,” and “Fun with Jane and Jane” effectively reinforce the cult stereotype. Throughout this article, I have maintained that the public at large is unfamiliar with cults, only knowing what has been mediated to them as strange, deviant, and dangerous. Even so, this scanty knowledge is helpfully corralled through humorous juxtapositions of assumptions about what is normal to both make people laugh and reinforce an understanding of the socioreligious world.

Humour theory is broadly based upon three different theoretical traditions: relief, superiority, and incongruity. Briefly, superiority theory posits that we laugh at a perceived fault in an opponent; incongruity theory is founded on the argument that we laugh when an event occurs that does not match our expectations; and relief theory contends that we laugh to release built-up tension. As Morreall (1983) wisely observes, all three of these theories are inadequate explanations by themselves for why we laugh. Any of them can apply to different jokes in different contexts, but taken together they form a tripartite framework for understanding the various reasons why human societies have humour. Davis captures the interrelationship of the three sources, summarizing the humour process as “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” (1993: 7). While Davis could be challenged on the assumption that every joke has a “disintegrated object” as a target, his arrangement works in this case because it emphasizes social differences and conflict being conveyed through humour (see also Berger 1997: 157–173; Davies 1990, 1998, 2002; Fine and de Soucey 2005; Kuipers 2006; Oring 2003; Zijderfeld 1983).

Laycock (2010) wondered why animated comedies dealt with the dangers of NRMs in the 1990s and into the new millennium when these depictions were declining in other popular

media. Put differently, why turn to humour to deal with their ostensible deviance? A simple correlation between the three types of humour theories could answer his question. Cults believe weird things (incongruity), we “know” they are wrong because they are fraudulent—unlike our real religions—(superiority), and by laughing we relieve the tension that arises from our fear that cults lurk within our midst, waiting to brainwash us or cause some unspeakable act of violence (relief). However, the cultural dynamics that led to portraying cults in animated sitcoms run deeper than a simple equation such as this.

Paul Lewis (2006) argues that in late modern society, humour is a way of dealing with the tensions inherent in our social structures, which have become increasingly individualized, risk-filled, and differentiated. Mapping humour on a spectrum of acceptability from the callous “sick jokes” (e.g., gallows humour, dead baby jokes) at one end and the relentlessly uplifting jokes of the healing laughter movement at the other, Lewis demonstrates the tensions encapsulated in public discussions of humour’s role in society. That is, should it be used only to uplift and help people and not disparage anybody, or is humour’s purpose to attack and destroy our ideological opponents? The problem our three episodes raise is that in the contemporary debate about the dangers cults pose, healing people involves acts of prejudicial violence against ideas that are seen as dangerous and deceptive. Using a medical analogy, the healing power of these programs’ satire is that it diagnoses a malignant illness within society, evaluates it, and then prescribes a cure—removing these groups from society through delegitimation.

If the few works that consider NRMs in these programs are any indication, the scholars writing about these programs’ importance have not critically considered the cult stereotype’s political relevance. Rather than treating NRMs as socially unpopular, but still legitimate, religions, they treat the religious ideologies of contemporary NRMs as unworthy of critical engagement. For example, sociologist Tim Delaney writes, “Religious cults . . . brainwash new members into believing the validity of the power of the new leader” (2008: 215). Delaney’s work repeats a disproven stereotype, proving that one can claim to understand cults without referencing the social scientific literature that bursts this popular bubble. Similarly, philosopher Henry Jacoby dismisses Scientology’s belief system when he writes, “Scientologists may believe their leaders, who say that there were once frozen alien bodies in the volcanoes of Hawaii. But this is nonsense that should be rejected by any sane person” (2007: 58). Scholarly and popular praise for these programs (both *The Simpsons* and *South Park* have won Peabody awards for their satire) continue the sedimentation process, creating an open space where already established prejudices against NRMs are reinforced through humour. Indeed, as psychologist Thomas E. Ford’s research on sexist humour demonstrates, denigrating humour allows people who already hold specific prejudices to feel that it is now safe to air their prejudices in the social settings in which those jokes are told. This reinforces the validity those stereotypes hold for the denigrator (Ferguson and Ford 2008; Ford 2000; Ford and Ferguson 2004; Ford et al. 2001). Put simply, these programs and the commentary on them become part of a feedback loop that reinforces cults’ popular stigmatization. This is only exacerbated by the fact that these depictions lack any “positive” references elsewhere in the programs. For example, there is no Movementarian equivalent of *The Simpsons*’ Ned Flanders whom *The Simpsons* has used to explore evangelical Christianity’s positives and negatives over the last twenty-three years (see Feltmate forthcoming). Without a complicating force, the humour in these programs serves as an uncritical reinforcement of pre-existing stereotypes.

Humour’s ability to defuse the seriousness of a situation, relax normal critical boundaries, and allow people to approach serious concepts playfully makes these episodes important in our understanding of the cult stereotype’s continued perpetuation. By placing these criticisms in a context in which no religion is directly attacked, but numerous religions are indirectly

referenced through these fictitious religions, people can laugh at NRMs and their members in a socially sanctioned space. Disparaging the religious validity of these groups—and the rights that accompany them—has helped make these programs critical darlings, profitable, and pervasive. Through them, we can see how popular culture contributes to the ongoing culture wars about religious validity and NRMs' place in American society. The power structures the cult stereotype supports are uncritically reinforced through comedy. Closer attention should be paid to how religion is depicted in popular humour because it is a window into cultural assumptions about religion's social roles, which religions fulfil those duties, and which ones we need to be wary of, even if that warning is based on a faulty stereotype that is widely accepted and uncritically used.

## Notes

1. Funding for this research was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) through a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship held at the University of Waterloo during the 2009/2010 academic year. I would like to thank Dr. Douglas E. Cowan, Dr. Lorne L. Dawson, Dr. Scott L. Kline, Dr. S. Brent Rodriguez-Plate, and Dr. David Porreca for their assistance with earlier versions of this work, and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and criticism. An earlier version of this paper was presented as "Introducing Xenu and the Movementarians: Comedy and the Criticism of New Religious Movements." Canadian Society for the Study of Religion/La Société Canadienne pour l'étude de la Religion, Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities, Ottawa, Ontario, May 26, 2009. Please send further correspondence to dfeltmat@aum.edu.
2. Over its twenty-three seasons, *The Simpsons* has established itself as one of television's most popular and profitable programs (Grala 2007). It has also received considerable academic and journalistic interest for its relevant social satire (see, e.g., Alberti 2004; Delaney 2008; Irwin et al 2001; Keslowitz 2006; Turner 2004), with some works dedicated entirely to religion (Bowler 1996/1997; Dalton et al. 2001; Feltmate 2011; Heit 2008; T. Lewis, 2002; Pinsky 2007). While most studies focus almost exclusively on Christianity with brief mentions of other religions such as Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism (see, e.g., Dark 2002; Heit 2008; cf. Dalton et al. 2001; Delaney 2008: 189–217; T. Lewis 2002; Pinsky 2007), little attention has been paid to how *The Simpsons* uses stereotypes about cults for its humour, with only Pinsky (2007: 81) and Delaney (2008: 213–7) mentioning it. *South Park* has generated increasing intellectual interest in recent years (e.g., Arp 2007; Johnson-Woods 2007; Stratynier and Keller 2009; Weinstock 2008), and its treatment of NRMs has focussed on episodes dedicated to explicit ridicule such as its treatment of Mormons in "All About Mormons" (Parker 2003) and Scientology in "Trapped in the Closet" (Parker [as John Smith] 2006; see Cowan 2005; Johnson-Woods 2007: 238–40; Dueck 2007; Jacoby 2007). Most of these articles are not deep studies of the histories, politics, and problems surrounding the program's use of NRMs for its humour (Cowan 2005 is the exception), and instead glorify *South Park* for its controversial satire and its attack on logical fallacies in NRMs' stated beliefs—specifically Scientology's creation narrative. *King of the Hill*, despite its prolific history and reflections on gender in American life, has not generated the scholarly or popular interest its animated cousins have. There are a few articles and book chapters in print which are often accompanied by discussions of other programs (e.g., Chaney and Gallagher 2004; EnglandKennedy 2008; Palmer-Meta 2006; Thompson 2009); Pinsky (2007, 235–52) offers the only extended discussion of religion in the program.
3. I follow Cowan's (2003) distinction between a countercult and what became known as the anti-cult movement in the 1970s because the former is interested in preserving Christianity's place of privilege (and especially evangelical and fundamentalist versions of Christianity). The anti-cult movement was certainly supported by conservative Christians, but its arguments were phrased in secular terms, and it existed as a political and social movement that sought to neutralize cults for reasons other than theology.
4. On the origins of brainwashing theory, see Hunter (1951) and Lifton (1961).

5. This was also the source of humour in *Family Guy*'s "Chitty Chitty Death Bang" (Polcino 1999), which featured a parody of Heaven's Gate (with a side reference to the infamous image of Jonestown's vat of Flavor Aid) in the form of the Heaven's Helpers cult. They have not been discussed at length in the main body of the article since they are less a composite group than they are a parody of a single NRM. For further discussion of Heaven's Helpers, see Feltmate (2011: 349–350).

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