

## Chapter 15

# Blessed Art Thou: Religion

**F**orget South Park Republicans. Are South Park atheists the next new spinoff group from the show? Unlikely.

God is not dead in *South Park*, but organized religion certainly is. The majority of religious-themed shows on television, such as *Saved by an Angel* and *Seventh Heaven*, are reverential; not so *South Park*. Maligning the sacred is a centuries old sport. Bakhtin found that the sacred was central to carnival laughter:

. . . there was the “feast of fools” (*festa stultorum*) and the “feast of the ass”; there was a special free “Easter laughter (*risus paschalis*),” consecrated by tradition. Moreover, nearly every Church feast had its comic folk aspect, which was also traditionally recognized. Such, for instance, were the parish feasts, usually marked by fairs and varied open-air amusements, with the participation of giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals. A carnival atmosphere reigned on days when mysteries and sorties were produced . . . certain carnival forms parody the Church’s cult.<sup>1</sup>

Even the more somble “miracle and morality plays acquired . . . a carnivalesque nature.”<sup>2</sup> Given the power of local clergyman, it is no wonder they were ridiculed, defecated upon, and laughed at during the revelries. Friar Tuck is a benign hangover from the days of the libidinous monk. One of the central figures in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* is Friar John, the lusty, imbibing, irreverent monk who can swap genital metaphor for genital metaphor and tells of using sacred scriptures to wipe his ass:

“One day,” said Friar John, “when I was at Seuilly, I wiped my bum with a page of one of these wretched Clementines that John Guimard, our bursar, had thrown out into the cloister meadow, and may all

the devils take me if I wasn't seized with such horrible cracks and piles that the poor door to my back passage was quite unhinged."

Friar John is a travesty of the low clergy—he reworks sacred texts as obscene ones. And while Father Maxi might not be as crude as Friar John, he is as ridiculed. As Rabelais himself was a Catholic monk, he wrote about what he knew. No fewer than eighteen *South Park* episodes have religious concerns as their central narrative device, making it one of the most “religion-fixated shows on the small screen.”<sup>3</sup>

The focus of *South Park*'s interrogation is the unquestioning acceptance of bizarre religious tenets—whether transubstantiation or the science fiction meanderings of Scientology. It's no coincidence that question marks punctuate religious episode titles. But their interrogation involves more than a religion's beliefs; central to the expositions are the role of the churches as financial corporations, brainwashing institutions, and outdated secret societies. By being equally skeptical about Judaism, Scientology, Mormonism, and Christianity, *South Park* even-handedly positions widely disparate religions on the same level playing field. The religious episodes have attracted criticism, but that's hardly surprising; approximately twenty years earlier Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979) also attracted widespread condemnation.

*South Park* is a two-religion town. The creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone confess a fascination with Roman Catholic doctrine and rely on staff member Anne Garifino to explain the complexities of Catholicism: the concepts of Limbo, confession, and transubstantiation.

### Jesus in *South Park*

Throughout the ages, Jesus has been re-worked as a popular culture icon. In the mid-nineteenth century, he was the masculine Jesus who cleansed the temple and single-handedly took on the Roman Empire—the warrior Jesus. Nineteenth century writers such as Charles Kingsley thought England needed healthy Christian empire builders and promoted a philosophy of “muscular Christianity.” Fast-forward one hundred years and, in the 1960s, hippie Jesus, with his narratives of love and peace, appeared in the rock operas *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Although Jesus started in muscular mode as a crusader against Santa in *The Spirit of Christmas*, it's hippie-humanist Jesus who offers rich opportunities to explore Christianity and Christian values.

As Morgan Spurlock showed in *Super Size Me* (2004), younger children can identify Ronald McDonald more often than they can Jesus. No wonder Father Maxi points to Jesus, “Look, it's that guy from the public access show” (“Damien”). *South Park* Jesus tries to be relevant and reaches the community through television and telephone:

JESUS: Hello, caller, you're on the air.

ROBERT: Yeah, is, is this Jesus?

JESUS: Yes, my son.

ROBERT: This, this is Robert from Torrey Pines. I called last week asking for advice on my ex-wife.

JESUS: Of course, Robert. How are things now?

ROBERT: Well, every, everything's much better, Jesus. She hasn't mouthed off since. I just wanted to thank you for the advice. Oh, and for, for dying for my sins, that was really nice of you.

JESUS: Blessed art thou, Robert. Next caller, you're on the air. (“Big Gay Al's”)

Robert of Torrey Pines might be talking to the Son of God, but he's not fazed. To Robert, Jesus is just another talk-show host. Robert's attitude reflects the town's laid-back attitude—they get more excited when J-Lo visits. It's not that people don't understand Jesus's worth; Robert even goes so far as to thank Jesus for dying for his sins, albeit as an afterthought. It's just that in a media-saturated world it takes more than the Son of God to keep viewers tuned in.

Jesus cannot provide answers to the complex questions of contemporary society. He won't answer Stan's question about euthanasia (“Death”), and Stan's question about homosexuality remains unanswered because the show has to break for *Marty's Movie Reviews* (“Big Gay Al”). Cartman is happy that *Marty's Movie Reviews* interrupted Stan's lame question; grappling with complex social questions bores Cartman. He would much rather watch something entertaining, even a show that sounds as weak as *Marty's Movie Reviews*. Entertainment is god these days, and the celebrities who entertain are the contemporary deities. So when Jesus takes on David Blaine, he fails miserably. The audience is bored because Jesus's miracles are outdated. His loaves and fishes miracles cannot compete with David Blaine's show-biz magic. Illusion has replaced reality; everything is all shadow and no substance.

Jesus is one of the good guys. He is a gentle, caring, and nice person. He has problems with an overenthusiastic producer, he worries about fighting Satan, and he has a slightly troubled relationship with his father. He suffers much at the hands of doubting South Parkers. Although he is part of the community, he stands apart from it. Visually, the *South Park* Jesus reflects traditional representations—shoulder-length hair, a beard, white robes, and, of course, the halo. His soft-spoken voice and gentle demeanor mark him as different from the other townfolk. By presenting Jesus as a humane and caring person, the creators strip him of his awesome divinity but not of his celebrity status.

His gentility is misinterpreted in a culture where might is right. When he cannot defeat Blaine, he calls on his Super Best Friends, Muhammad, Krishna, Joseph Smith, and Lao Tse, the religious equivalent of the Justice League of America. Jesus then becomes merely another figure in the pantheon of religious leaders; therefore, Christianity is presented as another religious option rather than the one true belief. By presenting Jesus as a representative of one of many spiritual ideologies, *South Park* repositions Christianity; it is no longer the central religious doctrine.

Most importantly, Jesus is distanced from Catholicism. Jesus is never seen in the church and rarely, if ever, converses with Father Maxi. He is not South Park's spiritual advisor; Father Maxi is. This deliberately separates the political organization of the Roman Catholic Church from its Christian roots. Jesus also doesn't espouse a belief in Hell or the tortures of eternal damnation: "God doesn't want you to spend all your time being afraid of Hell, or praising His name. God wants you to spend your time helping others, and living a good, happy life. That's how you live for Him" ("Probably"). Jesus provides a much-beloved counter to Father Maxi's fiery preaching.

### Catholic Church

While Jesus preaches kindness and love of your fellow man, his Catholic representative, Father Maxi, hails from the hellfire-and-damnation school of theology:

PRIEST MAXI  
[loud and threatening voice]: Today, we're going to talk about Hell. Hell is not a very nice place. Burning, searing, flames. Screaming, torture. For eternity. Once you are in Hell, you cannot escape. You live forever in horrible pain, in burning agony. All sinners are there in misery, dying over and over and over. If you be cast

down into this black bog of stench, then woe is thou, for Satan has made it the most miserable place in the universe! And he will be your ruler! Your ruler of pain and agony! . . . A place of everlasting agony and pain! Hell awaits all sinners and all who do not accept Christ! Children in this town have not been attending Sunday school after Mass! And adults have not been coming to Confession! If this does not change, I promise you, you will be going to the black pit of Satan's world! That is all. Peace be with you. ("Do the Handicapped")

The "peace be with you" ending underscores the hypocrisy of a religion that seeks to control its believers with medieval images and superstitions. Maxi's sermon scares the boys into taking religion and the sacraments more seriously. But soon, the boys find the Catholic Church wanting.

In the first instance, the dogma of the Catholic Church doesn't make sense. Its teachings are confusing and illogical; especially in the modern world, where science and logic are god. When Sister Anne tries to explain transubstantiation, the boys are disbelieving:

SISTER ANNE: Now, let me explain how Communion works. The priest will give you this round cracker, and he will say, "The Body of Christ," and then you eat it.

CARTMAN: Jesus was made of crackers?

SISTER ANNE: No.

STAN: But crackers are his body.

SISTER ANNE: Yes. . . . In the Book of Mark, Jesus distributed bread and said, "eat this, for it is my body."

CARTMAN: So w-we won't go to Hell as long as we eat crackers.

SISTER ANNE: Nononono!

BUTTERS: Uhwel, uh-what are we eatin' then?

SISTER ANNE: The Body of Christ! [*confused faces all around*]

STAN: No-no-no, I get it. Jesus wanted us to eat him, but he didn't want us to be cannibals, so he turned himself into crackers, and then told people to eat him.

SISTER ANNE: No!

STAN: No??

BUTTERS: Huh-I can't whistle if I eat too many crackers.

SISTER ANNE: Look, all you have to know is that when the priest gives you the cracker, you eat it! Okay?!

KENNY, STAN,

CARTMAN: O-kay.

SISTER ANNE: And then, you will drink a very small amount of wine, for that is the Blood of Christ.

CARTMAN: Aw, come on now, this is just getting silly! ("Do the Handicapped")

It is not difficult to see why the boys are skeptical—after all, the idea of transubstantiation is bizarre. Wafers and wine are not metaphorical representations of Jesus' body and blood but, according to dogma, are transformed *into* his body and blood during Mass. This belief is central to Catholicism and to understanding the importance of the Mass. By describing the Communion wafer as a cracker, the joke is on the Catholic Church.

But before the boys can receive Communion, they must first confess their sins because, even if they have led a blameless life, everyone is born with original sin. The problem of original sin and the innocents has long been an issue of contention in the Catholic Church. It is a cruel creed that condemns handicapped Timmy to Hell because he can't confess. The boys' dissatisfaction with the church is compounded by Father Maxi's attitude. As their spiritual advisor, he fails to evidence any compassion. He is stern and unflinching in consigning Timmy to Hell. When Kyle asks if Jews will go to Hell, Maxi is adamant: "Well, young man, you can rest assured that according to Matthew 25, when you die you will stand before God and he will say, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' Yes! As a Jew, your home will be the lake of fire" ("Do the Handicapped").

Sister Anne is the more humane voice of the Catholic Church, and she tries to soften Maxi's interpretation:

SISTER ANNE: Father, I don't know if I agree fully with what you're saying. I think that as long as Jewish people are good, they will get into heaven.

PRIEST MAXI: Sister, the Jews crucified our Savior. I mean, if you don't go to Hell for crucifying the Savior, then what the hell do you go to Hell for?! ("Do the Handicapped")

While the philosophy of Communion is strange, it does not hold the fears of Confession. Of course, Cartman has the most amusing confessional scene:

CARTMAN: No, but I'm not finished yet. I took the sandwich that the priest was eating, took the piece of ham out of it, put it between my butt cheeks, and then put the sandwich back and watched him eat it.

PRIEST MAXI: I . . . see.

CARTMAN: Yeah, and then this other time, I went pee-pee in the holy water thing, and the priest blessed himself on the forehead with it every day for about a week. And then this one time, I was at the park, and the priest was out walking his dog and I went number two on the sidewalk and then told Officer Barbrady that it was the priest's dog. And so the priest got fined like a hundred dollars for not cleaning it up. And then this one time, I put superglue all over the priest's bottle of—"Do the Handicapped")

Father Maxi grabs Cartman by the throat. Cartman is now convinced he's felt the hands of an angry god and warns the others: "We all have to start taking this very seriously."

In the wake of the altar boy scandals, the creators have Father Maxi propose a weekend boat cruise as part of the Young Men's Catholic Retreat. Given Maxi's curious sexual history<sup>4</sup> and the latest headlines, the concerned parents decide to introduce a counselor to probe the boys about Father Maxi:

COUNSELOR: Okaaay, what words would you use to describe your priest?

BUTTERS: Compassionate.

COUNSELOR: Okay. And did Father Maxi, at any time, ever try to put something in your butt? [*pause, the boys look stunned*]

CARTMAN: I-in our butt?

COUNSELOR: You don't need to be ashamed or embarrassed. Just, did he ever try to put anything in your butt?

STAN: Like . . . money? What?

BUTTERS: You mean, like a goldfish? ("Red-Hot Catholic Love")

The counselor's searching questions do not reveal sexual abuse and only manage to bewilder the boys. Meanwhile, their parents, dismayed by the scandals, reject God and start an Atheists' Club. During these meetings, they repeat platitudes against religion:

I for one can't believe I used to live my life by what a very old and very fictional book used to say . . . what do a bunch of stories about people in robes slaughtering goats have to do with today's world . . .

We're worried we might have a hard time raising our son atheist . . . it could end up being very difficult raising an atheist child in such a Christian society. I feel that everywhere my poor son goes he's being persecuted for his beliefs.

I don't want him saying "under God" every day at school. That could really damage him.

We can't let the religious right corrupt our kids. ("Red-Hot Catholic Love")

During their self-congratulatory statements, crap literally comes out of their mouths, providing a visual representation of the verbal metaphor.

In a typical *South Park* turnaround, Father Maxi becomes the hero of this episode. He visits the Vatican to exhort the religious leaders about their outdated beliefs. They refuse to listen to him, and Father Maxi undergoes a computer adventure; again, the carnivalesque is invoked, and he retrieves ancient documents that he destroys in frustration. The Vatican crumbles while Maxi exhorts the Cardinals:

All that's dead are your stupid laws and rules! You've forgotten what being a Catholic is all about. . . . You see, these are just stories [Bible]. Stories that are meant to help people in the right direction. Love your neighbor. Be a good person. . . . And when you start turning the stories into literal translations of hierarchies and power, well . . . Well, you end up with this [the ruins of the Vatican]. People are losing faith because they don't see how what you've turned the religion into applies to them! They've lost touch with any idea of any kind of religion, and when they have no mythology to try and live their lives by, well, they just start spewing a bunch of crap out of their mouths! . . . I'm proud to be a Catholic. But I'm a Catholic in the real world. In today's world! It's time for you all to do that, too. It is time . . . for change.

A lowly priest challenges the Church's authority, and, in doing so, he destroys the Church as institution.

Needless to say, all of this is done with lashings of lower body humor. The Galgamek's *vagina dentata*, the priests' pedophilia, and, of course, the aesthetists' crapping. Later, in "Bloody Mary," the lower body is further indulged when a statue of the Virgin Mary bleeds from its ass and onto the Pope's face. The Catholic Church offers little help in coping with contemporary life; for compassion or spirituality, for comfort and advice, people in *South Park* go to Chef, Jesus, or God (in that order).

### Alternative Christianity

Disgusted with the Catholic Church and Father Maxi's hypocrisy, Cartman starts his own religion. Soon he is on a soapbox preaching his brand of hell, fire, and damnation. Cartman enacts another type of religious leader, the Pentecostal, revivalist preacher—most widely recognized today as the television evangelist. He has Elmer Gantry's charisma, Pat Robertson's business acumen, and Jimmy Swaggart's evangelical zeal. He gives a performance of persuasive rhetoric, dramatic monologues, and theatrical gestures. He holds his Bible aloft and intones:

CARTMAN: Many of you knew Kenny McCormick. He was a playful, school-going eight-year-old. And then yesterday, he was [*prostrates himself*] smacked down by the Lord-uh! God bitch-slapped him right to the fiery depths of Hell. So when will *you* go?! Tomorrow?! Ten years?! Does it mattah?! No! Because unless you give this life to the Lord, that life belongs to Satan-a! But we cannot worship God in that church where that priest of sin resides, so we will build a new church-a. With crystal walls, a ceiling 80 feet high, and a slide that connects this part hmya to this part hmya. Who will help us? ("Probably")

He affects an evangelist patois and adds a syllable at the ends-a of certain-a words-a. He also has the whole hypocrisy thing going, too. When his mother tries to tempt the boys away from religion with food and toys, Cartman refutes her temptations . . . between bites of powdered doughnut pancake surprise.

Cartman conducts his services in his version of Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral. He includes a healing ceremony, which parodies (or replicates?) the evangelic ritual. He smacks people on the head and "cures" Kyle of his "Jewness," a girl of her "ugliness," and Timmy of his "affliction"—that is, until he falls down. All of the cures are clearly a sham, but his child-only congregation believes because they want to believe. He then receives a message "directly from God-uh! God is telling me that . . . each and every one of you is to walk up to the stage, and give me one dollar!" ("Probably"). Donations are now linked to salvation; just like the money changers in the temple buying plenary indulgences. Cartman mines Christianity three seasons later, with his Faith +1 band. Christianity, as Cartman knows, always offers the potential for profit.

### Judaism

While the dogma, politics, and personnel of Roman Catholicism are foregrounded, the Jewish religion is inferred. We do not know the name of the rabbi and rarely see the synagogue. Most of the signifiers of "Jewishness" come from Cartman's stereotyping. Visually, Jewishness is defined by Gerald's skullcap and Sheila's Jewish-mother performance and cousin Kyle's whiney Jew.

The most information about Jewish doctrine (as opposed to Jewish culture) is in "Jewbilee," where the different sects, "Orthodox Jews, Hasidic Jews, Northern Italy Cave Jews," gather. Elders from each sect argue; they gang up on the new radical anti-Semitic sect that follows the teaching of Haman.

Throughout the episode, Kenny plays the viewer's cipher; through his non-Jewish eyes we witness the silliness of Judaism—the campfire adoration, the soap offerings, and the carrot cake. But Moses is much more impressive than God. He is a gigantic orange and yellow five-sided geometrical figure with eyes, nose, and mouth, very different from the animal-like god of Catholicism (“Are You There God?”).

After seeing *The Passion of The Christ*, Kyle questions the role of the Jews in Christ's death and approaches Father Maxi. An unusually understanding Father Maxi explains the historical roots of the passion play and its role as an anti-Semitic performance piece (“Passion of The Jew”). Armed with Father Maxi's advice about atonement, Kyle addresses a Jewish congregation and suggests that it is time for the Jewish community to apologize for the death of Jesus. The congregation is appalled. At the standoff outside the Bijou Theater, Jews and Christians face each other; the burning question, should the Jewish community apologize, is averted by the arrival of Mel Gibson. His daffy behavior is reason enough for them to question his sanity and, by association, his film. Stan delivers the ultimate religious lesson: “[Y]ou should follow what Jesus taught instead of how he got killed. Focusing on how he got killed is what people did in the Dark Ages and it ends up with really bad results” (“Passion of The Jew”).

### A Different Kind of God

In a world of cruel deaths, unexplained misery, and horrific violence, *South Park* asks: Can there truly be a God if such evil exists? South Parkers battle with the age-old philosophical dilemma of the problem of evil, and each has a slightly different version of God. Father Maxi describes his warped-sense-of-humor god:

It is sometimes hard, in times like these, to understand God's way. Why would he allow nine innocent people to be run down in the prime of their lives by a senior citizen who, perhaps, shouldn't be driving? It is then that we must understand God's sense of humor is very different from our own. He does not laugh at the simple “man walks into a bar” joke. No, God needs complex irony and subtle farcical twists that seem macabre to you and me. All that we can hope for is that God got his good laugh and a tragedy such as this will never happen again. (“Grey Dawn”)

Chef explains his pissed-off god:

CHEF: Stan, sometimes God takes those closest to us, because it makes him feel better about himself. He is a very vengeful God, Stan. He's all pissed off about something we did thou-

sands of years ago. He just can't get over it, so he doesn't care who he takes. Children, puppies, it don't matter to him, so long as it makes us sad. Do you understand?

STAN: But then, why does God give us anything to start with?

CHEF: Well, look at it this way: if you want to make a baby cry, first you give it a lollipop. Then you take it away. If you never give it a lollipop to begin with, then it would have nothin' to cry about. That's like God, who gives us life and love and help just so that he can tear it all away and make us cry, so he can drink the sweet milk of our tears. You see, it's our tears, Stan, that gives God his great power. (“Kenny Dies”)

Jimmy's parents think that God is a cruel teacher, that he is a revengeful God:

RYAN: Uh, Jimmy, we've told you before. God made you the way he did for a reason!

JIMMY: Right. Because you and Mom used to make fun of crippled kids in high school.

RYAN: That's right. You were sent here through the vengeful and angry hand of God to teach your mother and I a lesson. And that's a big responsibility, son. (“Krazy Kripples”)

When Jehovah gives Kyle an infected hemorrhoid and Cartman \$1 million, to Kyle, no justice means no God.

Despite the town's disdain for God, they still want him to appear on the eve of the millennium. In this carnivalesque-inverted world, God is not the anthropomorphic Christian God; he is a snaggle-toothed, hippopotamus-like creature. Neither is he all knowing; instead, he is gullible and accepts Saddam Hussein's denial that he has a chemical weapons plant. Hussein thinks God is “a stupid asshole” (“Ladder to Heaven”). Hussein is the epitome of pure evil, not Satan.

Satan is impressive. He is a red, huge, barrel-chested satyr with yellow horns and eyes and pointy white bottom teeth; his hooved feet are a nice touch. Satan lives in the River Styx Condominiums in a blue oasis of townhouses. He collects Hummels and lives with his lover, Chris. Chris is understanding and patient; in fact, Chris is so nice that he could be a Mormon. One can only assume he's in Hell because he's gay. Satan finds Chris's Sensitive New Age Guy persona grating; he misses his bad-boy ex-lover Saddam Hussein. Actually, he's cowed by Hussein. Like Jesus, Satan's relationships and personal problems make him human—no longer the demonic Prince of Darkness, he's no more frightening than Jesus.

## All About Mormons and Scientologists

When Satan visits Heaven, he is met by a crowd of cheery people. They welcome Satan, offer him cookies and punch, and invite him to join their charades and sing-a-long. Needless to say, he rejects the invitation. All the people in Heaven are dressed in white, short-sleeved shirts, black pants, and clip-on ties; their uniform dress sends visual cues that they are a unified group. One of them wears a bicycle helmet. They are now identifiable as Mormons—the man with the bicycle helmet is a missionary. Mormons consider Satan a “nice fellow.” Yes, the Mormons are the only people allowed into *South Park* Heaven. The newbies in Hell soon learn that their religions have failed them:

MAN 4: Hey, wait a minute, I shouldn't be here. I was a totally strict and devout Protestant! I thought we went to heaven!

HELL DIRECTOR: Yes, well, I'm afraid you were wrong.

SOLDIER: I was a practicing Jehovah's Witness.

HELL DIRECTOR: You picked the wrong religion as well.

MAN 5: Well, who was right? Who gets into Heaven?

HELL DIRECTOR: I'm afraid it was the Mooormons. Yes, the Mooormons were the correct answer.

CROWD: Awww. (“Probably”)

Throughout the series, the Mormons are depicted as happy, kind, and thoughtful; they are thoroughly nice people who live their value system.

The only thing strange about the Mormons is their dogma. In “All About Mormons,” the Harrisons re-tell the Joseph Smith story. Though intrigued at first, Stan rejects Smith's increasingly weird story. Stan is the mouthpiece of nonbelievers; he invokes a crisis of faith and faith is, of course, central. No matter how ridiculous the Joseph Smith story is, however, the Harrisons' family spirit supersedes their “whacky” religion. Gary responds to Stan's cynicism:

Look, maybe us Mormons do believe in crazy stories that make absolutely no sense, and maybe Joseph Smith did make it all up, but I have a great life and a great family, and I have the *Book of Mormon* to thank for that. The truth is, I don't care if Joseph Smith made it all up, because what the church teaches now is loving your family, being nice and helping people. And even though people in *this* town might think that's stupid, I still choose to believe in it. All I ever did was try to be your friend, Stan, but you're so high and mighty you couldn't look past my religion and just be my friend back. You've got a lot of growing up to do, buddy. Suck my balls.

Succinctly, Gary extols the virtues of his religion. Ultimately, it is not the Mormons' history that gets them into Heaven, it is their hands-on application of their beliefs that wins God's approval.

Joseph Smith's story is positively sane compared to L. Ron Hubbard's. After recruiting Stan and performing quasi-scientific tests, the Scientologists are convinced that Stan is the reincarnation of their leader, L. Ron Hubbard. The elders want Stan to continue their scriptures where Hubbard stopped, and so they explain the roots of their religion to him:

It all began 75 million years ago. Back then, there was a galactic federation of planets which was ruled over by the evil Lord Xenu. Xenu thought his galaxy was overpopulated, and so he rounded up countless aliens from all different planets, and then had those aliens frozen. The frozen alien bodies were loaded onto Xenu's galactic cruisers. . . . The cruisers then took the frozen alien bodies to our planet, to Earth, and dumped them into the volcanoes of Hawaii. The aliens were no longer frozen; they were dead. The *souls* of those aliens, however, lived on, and all *floated up* towards the sky. But the evil Lord Xenu had prepared for this. Xenu didn't *want* their souls to return! And so he built giant soul-catchers in the sky! The souls were taken to a huge soul brainwashing facility, which Xenu had *also* built on Earth. There the souls were forced to watch days of brainwashing material, which tricked them into believing a false reality. Xenu then released the alien souls, which roamed the earth aimlessly in a fog of confusion. At the dawn of man, the souls finally found bodies which they can grab onto. They attached themselves to all mankind, which still to this day causes all our fears, our confusions, and our problems. L. Ron Hubbard did an amazing thing telling the world this incredible truth. Now all we're asking you to do . . . [hands Stan a pen and some paper] is pick up where he left off. (“Trapped in the Closet”)

Throughout the narrative, “Scientologists actually believe this” appears at the bottom of on the screen.

But this is no benign Mormon group; Scientologists have a history of protecting their institution by suing anyone who questions its tenets. The crowd rejects Stan's assertion that “Scientology is just a big fat global scam” and threatens to sue him. Stan, obviously the mouthpiece of the creators, dares them to sue him.

After the show, Scientologists were outraged, and Isaac Hayes (who did not appear in the episode) showed his displeasure by leaving *South Park*. How could *South Park* leave it at that? So they retaliated with an episode about the brainwashing activities of a “fruity club,” and Kyle gives a fitting eulogy:

We're all here today because Chef has been such an important part of our lives. A lot of us don't agree with the choices Chef has made in the past few days. Some of us . . . feel hurt . . . and confused that he seemed to turn his

back on us. But we can't let the events of the last week take away the memories of how much Chef made us smile. *I'm gonna remember Chef as the jolly old guy who always broke into song. I'm gonna remember Chef . . . as the guy who gave us advice to live by. So, you see, we shouldn't be mad at Chef for leaving us. We should be mad at that little fruity club for scrambling his brains.* ("Return of Chef")

### Christian Charity

Christian charity is portrayed through the figure of the starving Ethiopian, Starvin' Marvin. Appropriately, the two Marvin episodes are Thanksgiving ones; the USA's celebration of plenty provides the perfect vehicle to examine how the Christian South Parkers treat the less fortunate. In the first episode, the boys donate to Feed the Children Foundation—not out of Christian charity, but because they want the sports watch ("Starvin' Marvin"). Charity is giving money, not caring, explains Principal Victoria. It's even better if the money you give is not your own, but your parents'.

Two seasons later, Ethiopians are still suffering famine and privation, and the "help" America sends is misguided. The culturally insensitive Sister Hollis bribes the Ethiopians with food: "reading Bible plus accepting Jesus equals food" ("Starvin' Marvin in Space"). The missionaries just do not get the nature of real charity: heathens are given Christian names and taught "God's language," English. Marvin leaves Sister Hollis's classroom in disgust; he's been to America and he's seen the American life of plenty. She admonishes him: "Where are you going? Back to your life of sin? Don't you understand that unless you find Christ, you and all your people are doomed to eternal hellfire?" She doesn't understand that Marvin's Earth is Hell. His country is flat, dry, hot, and denuded of trees; there is no food.

Ironically, the Ethiopians' solution is otherworldly, but not in the way Christianity would have us believe. The inhabitants of Planet Marklar haven't heard of God or Jesus, but they demonstrate Christian spirit when they agree to take in the Ethiopians. Their dismissal of the Christian missionaries is a poignant mixture of disinterest and politeness:

HOLLIS: Alien friend, we are here to spread the word of Jesus. He died for your sins.

MARKLAR: Who? Marklar? . . .

MARKLAR: You marklars must leave. [*points to missionaries, Sister Hollis*]

HOLLIS: But you will all burn forever in eternal hellfire.

MARKLAR: Yes, that's nice. Thank you for stopping by.

There seems no answer to the Ethiopian problem on this planet. It is only in another galaxy that people are caring enough to truly help.

### Conclusion

For a show that has children blaspheming, graphic sexual overtones, and lots of inappropriate behavior, *South Park* spends a lot of time in its churches. Through religion, the creators examine what contemporary society offers in the way of spirituality. 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.

*South Park* seeks out the hypocritical and examines various belief systems for logic. The show also considers how people perform their religions because for many, religion is ultimately a performance. If we window-shop religions via *South Park*, Mormonism triumphs because it seems to be the only religion that is a lifestyle.

The series' scathing attacks on the Catholic Church are another reworking of the carnivalesque. During medieval festivals, sinners in priestly vestments preached nonsensical or blasphemous sermons. Carnival is a reminder that the pope's shit stinks, too. And nonbelievers literally and figuratively crap out of their mouths. Stan tells viewers:

You don't need David Blaine to tell you how to live. See, 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 requires you to pay money in order to move up and learn its tenets is wrong. See, all religions have something valuable to teach, but, just like the Super Best Friends learned, it requires a little bit of them all. ("Super Best Friends")

Throughout the seasons, *South Park* episodes ridicule, mock, explore, and explode religious dogmas.

CARTMAN: Many of you knew Kenny McCormick—yesterday God bitch-slapped him right to the fiery depths of Hell. (“Probably”)

CARTMAN: Right here we have a little girl who is very, very ugly! Do you believe he is gonna cure your face of the uglies?!

UGLY GIRL: Yes!!

CARTMAN: He is gonna take that ugly face and make you reasonable to look at! [smacks her on the face] Bah! (“Probably”)

KYLE: Hey, Jesus, if you win the fight, can you turn Kenny back to normal?

JESUS: What the hell do you mean, “if I win the fight?”

CARTMAN: Don’t mind him Jesus, [whispered] he’s Jewish.

JESUS: Oh. (“Damien”)

## Notes

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 5–6.

2. *Ibid.*, 15.

3. Mark I. Pinsky, “Jesus Lives in South Park,” [www.beliefnet.com/story/174/story\\_17498.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/174/story_17498.html), accessed October 23 2006.

4. In “Cripple Fight,” Maxi refers to his homosexual past.