

THE REPRESENTATION OF JESUS CHRIST IN SECULAR POPULAR CULTURE: THE CASE OF *THE SIMPSONS*

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The paper analyzes the representation of Jesus Christ in the animated television series The Simpsons, created by authors with predominantly atheist backgrounds. It identifies dominant forms of representation, including Jesus as a moral figure, a cultural symbol, and a subject of humor and satire. The paper shows that Jesus is predominantly portrayed positively, while criticism is directed mainly at organized religion. The paper highlights how contemporary media reinterpret religious figures and contribute to their transformation within modern society.

The animated television series The Simpsons represents one of the most influential products of contemporary popular culture. Since its debut in 1989, the series has repeatedly engaged with themes of religion, morality, and belief, often through satire and humor. Religious motifs are a recurring element of the narrative, and characters such as Ned Flanders serve as representations of religious devotion in contrast to more secular perspectives.

Within this context, the figure of Jesus Christ occupies a unique position. Traditionally understood as a central figure of Christianity, Jesus is in modern media increasingly subject to reinterpretation. Rather than being portrayed exclusively within a theological framework, he appears as a cultural symbol, a moral reference, or even a humorous element.

This transformation can be understood within the broader process of the mediatization of religion, where media reshape religious meanings and symbols [1, p. 12]. Media representations often detach religious figures from their original doctrinal context and reframe them within everyday cultural narratives [2].

The aim of this paper is to analyze how Jesus Christ is represented in The Simpsons and to identify the dominant types of representation. The central research question is: What forms of representation of Jesus Christ appear in the series, and what functions do they serve?

The analysis is based on a qualitative approach combined with elements of content analysis. A dataset of occurrences of Jesus Christ in The Simpsons was compiled, including episodes, visual appearances, and references. The dataset distinguishes between different types of representation and includes variables such as context, function, and character portrayal. For the purposes of this study, the

data were categorized into three main types of representation: 1) Jesus as an active character, 2) Jesus as a cultural or visual symbol, 3) Jesus as an element of humor or satire. Additionally, the analysis focused on the character traits attributed to Jesus (positive, neutral, or negative) and the function of his appearance within the narrative (moral, humorous, critical, or decorative).

The analysis shows that the most common form of representation of Jesus Christ in *The Simpsons* is his use as a cultural symbol or a humorous element, while his direct appearance as an active character is significantly less frequent.

In terms of character portrayal, Jesus is predominantly depicted positively. He is typically presented as calm, tolerant, and understanding. Negative or critical portrayals are rare and tend to occur primarily within explicitly satirical contexts.

From a functional perspective, the representation of Jesus most frequently serves a humorous or satirical purpose. His image is often incorporated into jokes, visual gags, or pop-cultural references. Less frequently, Jesus fulfills an explicitly moral or religious function within the narrative. In some cases, he appears merely as a decorative or symbolic element without a deeper narrative role.

The findings suggest that *The Simpsons* do not primarily target Jesus Christ as an object of criticism. On the contrary, his portrayal remains largely positive and consistent with the image of a moral ideal characterized by tolerance and compassion. At the same time, the series frequently uses religious themes to critique organized religion and its representatives [3, p. 8]. This corresponds to broader observations that contemporary spirituality often shifts away from institutional religion toward individualized forms of belief [4, p. 45]. Characters such as Ned Flanders embody a form of rigid religiosity, which is often contrasted with the more universal and humanistic portrayal of Jesus.

Another important aspect is the process of secularization. Modern societies increasingly relativize religious meanings and reinterpret them within new cultural contexts [5, p. 3]. In this framework, Jesus is frequently transformed into a cultural symbol adapted to the logic of popular culture, where it can serve as a humorous reference, a commercial element, or a symbolic motif. This transformation reflects a broader shift in contemporary society, where religious figures are no longer confined to theological discourse but become part of a shared cultural vocabulary.

The series thus reflects a secular perspective that does not reject the figure of Jesus but transforms its meaning. In this sense, *The Simpsons* demonstrate how contemporary media contribute to the ongoing redefinition of religious symbols in modern society.

References

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