

Book Review

David Feltmate. 2007. *Drawn to the Gods: Religion and Humor in the Simpsons, South Park, and Family Guy.* New York: New York University Press. Xii, 282 pages. ISBN: 9781479822188.

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Like Hercules trying to clean King Augeas' smelly stables, David Feltmate opens the floodgates to deal with the satirical humor of three animated sitcoms. Anyone who subjects himself to countless hours of watching 552 episodes of *The Simpsons*, 257 episodes of *South Park*, and 249 episodes *Family Guy* must be a millennial, a masochist, or a superhuman. Feltmate may be all three. Yet, I must confess, by the end of his herculean labors dealing with and soaking in all kinds of scatological, ribald, and irreverent material, he brings order, good sense, and delight to this messy job.

In *Drawn to the Gods*, this sincere sociologist brings all the tools of his trade to trace the nature, functions, and effects of *religious* satire as it leaks out (or is dumped out) of these three remarkably successful comedy shows. One can easily discern Feltmate's basic assumptions: popular culture teaches us about religion; satire is a rhetorical form that reflects social, political *and* religious biases; cartoon images have consequences; these programs reduce religious diversity into controversial arguments, and, as Stephen Prothero cogently contends, audiences are notoriously ignorant about religion, both their own and that of others.

Feltmate seeks to answer three questions that help construct his theory of religious satire. First, what do we need to know to understand the humor in jokes about religion in the three sitcoms? Second, what can we discern regarding religion's significance? And third, what might a critical assessment of their portrayal of religion tell us about American civil life? These questions lead to his overarching argument, namely that religious satire is a vehicle for shaping the popular perceptions of spectators in interpreting and judging religious people and institutions.

He defines his key categories of "religion," "culture" and "a theory for how religion and culture are sources for making humor." Using William James' concept of an "unseen order," upon which "our ultimate good" relies, Feltmate is able to locate the construction of a sacred foundation for all

human activity. Religions thus become “plausibility structures” (p. 18) which help each of us make sense of the world and sites of the sacred, around which we orient our lives.

Borrowing Robert Bellah’s contribution of “Civil Religion,” he shows how culture is infused with sacredness, so much so that the status of a freedom of speech emerges as a religious doctrine, especially for comedians. As writers appropriate culturally recognized bits for their humor, their audiences become infected with what Feltmate calls an “ignorant familiarity” (p. 214), a superficial belief that one understands something by means of a short-handed reference. Thus, a satiric attack on religion based on the lack of knowledge of viewers can lead to the de-legitimizing of a religious belief, symbol, or practice.

The least lucid theoretical construct is his “new theory of religious satire” (p. 17) where, ecstatic with the glossolalia of sociology, he acknowledges his dependence upon

Berger and Luckmann’s concepts of legitimations, sedimentation, social stock of knowledge, plausibility structure, and institutionalization; the Durkheimian theory of sacralization; the sociology of culture’s insights into moral boundaries and cultural objects; and cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall’s methodological insight that the style of presentation is a key to a cultural product’s epistemological origins. (p. 17)

To use an old wheeze, either “say what?” or “that’s what she said” might be appropriate. Here the work reeks of the dust of an academic dissertation, seemingly written by someone with the name of *Pulverulentus Siccus*. But perhaps Feltmate is punking us here, with an inside jest to a former advisor.

Nevertheless, this jargon is an exception to some very clear and compelling writing. He goes on to demonstrate how the satirist attacks the plausibility structure by showing incongruity, showing how jokes can legitimize or delegitimize social and moral positions or how jokes function as “social thermometers that measure, record, and indicate what is going on.” This is good stuff.

All of this is to set up how Feltmate’s critical analysis exposes how each of these three sitcoms not only indicate the religious climate of a culture, but how they also craft and manipulate public knowledge about religion from their own perspectives. The author aims at displaying their “unseen order” (i.e. worldview, core of beliefs, basic cognitive orientation, or for any stray German reader, its *Weltanschauung*), and, in this reviewer’s opinion, he succeeds, and with rhetorical flourish. He argues, quite convincingly, that these three sitcoms are not only thermometers, but seek to promote their own agendas, and that close textual readings are crucial not only to get the jokes, but to see what they are really saying. They preach as much as entertain.

Matt Groening's ground-breaking show *The Simpsons* stirred some controversy when it was first aired, but was soon embraced as a darling of various religious segments, including evangelicals as the Christian satire magazine *Wittenberg Door* dealt with "The Theology of Homer Simpson," and *Christianity Today* showcased Ned Flanders on a 2001 cover as the most visible evangelical figure of contemporary society.

The more scatological and edgy *South Park* debuted out of the Rabelaisian vulgarity of Trey Parker and Matt Stone, to cross the line numerous times in raising provocative topical issues, from Roman Catholic sex scandals to a history of Mormonism.

Finally, Seth McFarlane's *Family Guy*, with its cutaway cartoon gags with numerous cultural allusions and self-referential comedy, evolved from an adult oriented mess of parodic jokes into some racially and religiously hostile episodes. Yet it maintains its status as a cult favorite in attacking every sacred cow possible from its blatant atheistic bias.

Feltmate's work is replete with vivid (and quite funny) synopses of pertinent episodes and with naughty bits that work as corroborating evidence for his theses. Some are blasphemous and offensive; some are mischievous; and many are simply guilty pleasures. What the evidence suggests for Feltmate is that the unseen scripts for *The Simpsons* privilege individual spiritual journeys shaped by liberal common sense as seen in episodes like "Homer the Heretic" and "She of Little Faith." A form of secular humanism underlies *South Park*, with its "advertised" equal opportunity ridicule of all religions. *Family Guy*, with its unapologetic scientific atheism, promotes personal development along rational lines in contrast to what it portrays as delusional religious traditions. For example, the atheist dog Brian tells Meg that if God made her in His image, would He have really given her a flat chest and big ass and put her in a house where no one cared about her. The big bang of creation is enacted when God ignites a fart. *Family Guy's* stereotypical caricatures are grounded in Feltmate's "ignorant familiarity."

Feltmate demonstrates that while *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* evaluate religious traditions with the rod of scientific rationality, *South Park* offers a more nuanced, sophisticated, and creative critique (with some wild images such as atheists spewing literal "crap out of their mouths"), but where the truths of religion may exist only in a social reality.

In his careful and thorough analysis of diverse religious traditions, Feltmate dissects with precision. He demonstrates how the shows both expose fraudulent practices such as consumerist spirituality, but also subvert communal aspects of faith traditions in favor of individual spiritual quests.

I have only a few quibbles: first, he neglects the grand literary and artistic tradition of religious satire. Another recent work from his own NYU Press, *God Mocks* (however suspect), had catalogued a variety of motley satirical discourse that stretches from the Hebrew prophets through visual artists like Hogarth to the *Onion* and Stephen Colbert. As one cynical Hebrew critic noted, there is nothing new under the sun, and much of the madcap laughter Feltmate investigates finds a tradition in works like Thomas Rowlandson's satirical print, "A Man of Feeling." Yet while sociology frequently forgets history, it should not be measured to fit a reviewer's Procrustean bed. *This* book is about contemporary television satire and it covers it with a lucid and stellar focus.

A second curious theological bit that doesn't seem to register is that when the sitcoms show the incongruity between ideal Christian theology and actual Christian behavior, such discrepancy is not really scandalous. Actually, such inconsistency confirms orthodox Christian doctrine. Even the zealous apostle Paul confessed to not living the way he knew he should live. For Feltmate, humor functions as a "strategic cloak for what can sometimes be the dirty, vicious, and slanderous enterprise of publicly criticizing religion" (p. 31). However, the Bible itself exposes such incongruous contradictions, and with a modicum of grace, reveals itself to be a compendium of Divine comedy.

Feltmate has given us a wonderfully insightful and persuasive work that reflects the quip of King Lear's fool that jesters often do prophets prove. What is important is that one understand the message of the prophet and Feltmate reveals the underlying messages of this carnival of animated fools. In a very prophetic sense, he displays the consequences of the old sly Hebrew proverb of the man who shoots arrows and firebrands and then says, "Was I not joking?" Even jokes have consequences for civic life.