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Accepted NRMs

Comedy programmes rarely treat NRMs positively, but *The Simpsons*' treatment of Wicca is the exception. *The Simpsons* supports Wicca's feminist politics and creative spirituality, with the most explicit discussion coming in '[Rednecks and Broomsticks](#)' (*The Simpsons* 29 November 2009). In this episode, the Simpsons' oldest daughter, Lisa, is invited to join a coven comprised of three teenage girls. At first Lisa is sceptical because she does not believe in magic. However, when Lisa benefits from her teacher mysteriously falling ill, she decides there may be more to the religion than she first suspected. After researching the basics on 'Wiccapedia', and learning that Wiccans worship nature, Lisa decides to convert. Unfortunately, when she approaches the circle and is about to be initiated the local police arrest the girls for practicing witchcraft.

Before the trial the girls ask the goddess Lilith to show their persecutors their blindness and, subsequently, citizens start going blind. The girls are tried in court for causing the townspeople's suffering, but the judge finds them innocent. Angered, the people form a mob and take the girls outside where the mayor says they can persecute the witches under 17th century law. Just before they are to be executed, Lisa reveals the real reason behind the townspeople's suffering: Local hillbillies poured moonshine into the town's water supply, causing temporary blindness. The crowd disperses, and Lisa's mother, Marge, tells the Wiccans she thinks they are interesting before ending Lisa's membership in the coven.

Other episodes include throw-away jokes that frame Wicca positively. In '[Catch 'em if You Can](#)' (*The Simpsons* 25 April 2004), Lisa's brother Bart claims she has cursed him with her witch's spell. She responds, "It's called Wicca and it's empowering!" Furthermore, in '[Treehouse of Horror XIX](#)', Bart's friend Milhouse compliments Lisa on her witch costume, prompting her to reply, "I'm not a witch. I'm a Wiccan. Why is it that when a woman is confident they call her a witch?" (*The Simpsons* 2 November 2008).

These positive portrayals are based on Wicca's reputation as an open and welcoming feminist religion. *The Simpsons* generally favours religious traditions which uphold American individualism and liberal values ([Dalton et al. 2001](#); [Henry 2008](#)), and creator Matt Groening has said that his goal is 'to entertain and subvert' ([Griffiths 2000](#)). Wicca's feminist associations makes it an ideal religion for *The Simpsons* to portray positively because it can be used to support their political position, implicitly attacking other religions that have been criticized for not allowing women's full participation (e.g. Christianity) ([Adler 2006](#), pp. 178–239; [Salomonsen 2001](#); [Starhawk 1999](#); cf. [Bado-Fralick 2005](#)). That '[Rednecks and Broomsticks](#)' also includes jokes satirizing witches' treatment throughout American history indicates a greater acceptance of contemporary witchcraft and its practitioners at their critics' expense. While Wiccans have to contend with accusations they are Satanists ([Barner-Barry 2005](#); [Pike 2001](#), pp. 87–122), *The Simpsons* defends them as nature loving, pro-woman, and empowering. Their portrayal in '[Rednecks and Broomsticks](#)' (*The Simpsons* 29 November 2009) introduces such rituals as the esbat (a rite for the new moon) and entering the circle for initiation (see [Bado-Fralick 2005](#)). These depictions legitimate Wicca, even as the show adds ironic touches such as having music for Lisa's woodland initiation ceremony playing on a stereo-docked 'MyPod', and the witches sneaking away in 'a manner most Wiccan' by contacting a parent for a drive via cellular phone. These gentle jabs at Wiccan nature worship make Wicca appear both different and familiar, with benign intentions. This is rare among comedic portrayals of NRMs.

Annoying NRMs

While some NRMs are accepted for their political positions, others are presented as obnoxious and strange, but otherwise benign. *The Simpsons*' treatment of two Christian sectarian movements, The

Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS, the Mormons) and the Jehovah's Witnesses, illustrates this point.¹ As nineteenth-century NRMs, they may not immediately come to mind as 'new' religions, but they do bear the mantle of being misunderstood and stigmatized for their vigorous missionary efforts. *The Simpsons* has used this common feature occasionally for humorous effect. In '[Marge Gets a Job](#)', Marge admits, "my life is pretty boring. Last week some Jehovah's Witnesses came to the door and I wouldn't let them leave. They snuck away when I went in the kitchen to get more lemonade" (*The Simpsons* 5 November 1992). This is an ironic twist on the common perception of Jehovah's Witnesses as obnoxious and overzealous in their missionizing, a sentiment that is made apparent in '[Maximum Homerdrive](#)' (*The Simpsons* 28 March 1999). While Marge and Lisa wait for somebody to come and ring their new doorbell, they notice two Jehovah's Witnesses walking up their driveway. Just as they are about to ring the doorbell they stop and talk to each other:

Noreen

Wait Marlin. You know, I just had a thought. Maybe we're bothering people by trying to change their religion. What if we don't have all the answers?

Marlin

You're right Noreen. Let's go get real jobs.

They then discard their tracts while Marge sighs, 'I would have feigned interest'. This joke assumes that viewers are familiar with Jehovah's Witnesses, and their efforts are seen as obnoxious and unwanted. However, there is no suggestion that the Witnesses are trying to circumvent social norms or deviously force social change. They only exist as time-wasting nuisances. This places them below Wicca, but appreciatively above other groups.

The Simpsons treats Mormons similarly. In '[Treehouse of Horror IX](#)' (*The Simpsons* 25 October 1998), family father Homer Simpson opens the door to the two aliens who appear in the Halloween specials, Kang and Kodos. Rolling his eyes he groans, 'Oh great, Mormons!' Referring to Mormons' missionary efforts, where young adults leave home and spend 2 years abroad spreading their faith, this joke assumes LDS missionaries annoy people as much as Witnesses do.

However, unlike the Jehovah's Witnesses, *The Simpsons* attacks LDS beliefs as strange. Referring to the practice of polygamy which the church officially denounced in 1890, a Springfield judge calls bigamy 'Mormon hold'em' in '[Brawl in the Family](#)' (*The Simpsons* 6 January 2002). Furthermore, in '[Little Big Girl](#)' (*The Simpsons* 11 February 2007), when Bart wants to marry his girlfriend, the clerk at the marriage office tells him, "There's a state where the marriage laws are a little looser, [*whispers*] Utah." Bart then exclaims, "Utah? Home of America's most powerful weirdoes?" Later, Bart arrives at a marriage chapel in Utah where the minister asks him how many women he will be marrying. When Bart says only one, the minister asks, 'What are you, gay?' In the same episode Homer argues against going to Utah because he loves 'booze, caffeine, and monogamy'. Here, polygamy, which the LDS (but not fundamentalist LDS sects) has denounced, is taken as the religion's central practice, perpetrating the stereotype of Mormons as sexual deviants. This is possible because Mormonism's history with polygamy is well known, while other elements of LDS thought and life are not, with their abstinence from stimulants taken as a notable exception. This treatment is relatively benign because, while *The Simpsons* makes polygamy jokes, Mormonism's legitimacy is not seriously denigrated—Groening's goal of subversion is certainly not achieved. For that, we turn to the third category and *South Park*'s treatment of the LDS.

Studying NRMs involves encountering some of religious history's most fascinating and vitriolic material. The field's primary sources have always been diverse and are ever growing. From the publications of NRMs and their detractors (see, e.g. [Cowan 2003](#); [Daschke & Ashcraft 2005](#); [Shupe & Bromley 1985](#); [Shupe & Darnell 2006](#)), to news media's coverage of significant events such as the Peoples Temple's mass murders/suicides in Jonestown, Guyana and the Branch Davidians' standoff with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (see, e.g. [Cowan & Hadden 2004](#); [McCloud 2004](#); [Wright](#)

1997), scholars have embraced numerous sources to understand NRMs' social significance. One understudied data source is popular culture such as films, entertainment television, comic strips, and jokes (although see, e.g. [Cowan 2005, 2008](#); [Fry 2008](#); [Lowney & Best 1996](#)). This is not to say that scholars have purposefully avoided these sources, but that they have focused their attention elsewhere. That said, animated sitcoms are underutilized sources for studying NRMs and their social significance.

Drawing upon examples from *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy*, this article illustrates a spectrum of opinions about different NRMs in American culture. While each programme has its own perspective, an evaluative spectrum emerges when we look at examples from all three programmes. Some groups are treated more positively than others, suggesting that not all NRMs are equal in these comedies' eyes.

Misguided NRMs

South Park's episode '[All About Mormons](#)' (*South Park* 19 November 2003) tells the story of the LDS' origins after a Mormon family, the Harrisons, moves to South Park and one of the boys, Gary, befriends Stan Marsh, one of the programme's main characters. [Cowan \(2005\)](#) analyzes this episode in greater detail, but the salient points about *South Park*'s presentation are that they tell Joseph Smith's story about discovering the golden plates containing what would later become *The Book of Mormon*, how he translated them with the seer stones in a hat while Martin Harris recorded what Smith read, and how nobody else ever saw the plates. Smith's story is told so that it is presented as fallacious. After hearing how Lucy Harris, Martin Harris' wife, hid the first translations from the plate of Lehi, and that Smith had to translate from the plate of Nephi, Stan is outraged. While the Harrisons insist that the story is all a matter of faith, Stan objects, saying it is a matter of logic:

If you're going to say things that have been proven wrong, like that the first man and woman lived in Missouri, and that Native Americans came from Jerusalem, then you better have something to back it up. All you've got are a bunch of stories about some ass-wipe who read plates nobody ever saw out of a hat, and then couldn't do it again when the translations were hidden. (*South Park* 19 November 2003)

As [Cowan \(2005\)](#) illustrates, this challenge to Smith's prophetic legitimacy facilitates the LDS' critics using the episode to support their anti-Mormonism. For them, as for *South Park*'s creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the church's foundational narrative is a lie. Smith made the whole thing up. Choosing to believe in *The Book of Mormon* and the social structures which have been built upon Smith's prophecies is an exercise in wilful ignorance. For this reason we can say that this attack on the LDS' foundation presents the religion as misguided.

While *South Park*'s portrayal presents the Mormons as theologically misguided, they are otherwise benign. The Harrisons are depicted as ideal neighbours. Stan and his father Randy are attracted to them because they are so close and happy. They enjoy each other's company and never fight, unlike the other families in *South Park* which are constantly disrupted by domestic tensions. Indeed, the episode's moral message is not Stan's argument for logical critique, but Gary's monologue at the episode's conclusion:

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 got a lot of growing up to do, buddy. (*South Park* 19 November 2003)

Gary's speech offers the Mormons a moral escape. While he concedes that perhaps the religion's theological foundations lack logical support, what matters is that his life is good because he is a Mormon. The religion has strong ethical motivations for its practitioners—stronger than anything South Park's residents have. Furthermore, he is not judgmental, accepting Stan's differences in belief while still befriending him. Hence, *South Park*'s treatment of the Mormons presents the LDS as misguided. The religion may be a pack of lies, but those lies lead to something that is worth having in the world. Parker has said that Mormons are so nice that if any religion is going to rule the world, it should be them, saying, "Even if it's all bullshit, that's ok" ([Gillespie & Walker 2006, p. 3](#)).

Untrustworthy NRMs

If the Mormons' misguided religion is valuable because it leads to ethical behaviour, then there are other NRMs which are presented as both misguided and untrustworthy. For *South Park* the most untrustworthy NRM is Scientology, which it famously lampooned in '[Trapped in the Closet](#)' (*South Park* 16 November 2005). In *The Simpsons*, the Freemasons receive similar treatment in '[Homer the Great](#)' (*The Simpsons* 8 January 1995).

'[Trapped in the Closet](#)' raised a number of protests from celebrity Scientologists. Tom Cruise threatened not to promote *Mission Impossible III* for Paramount Pictures, which is owned by Viacom, proprietors of *South Park*'s home network Comedy Central. Furthermore, long-time cast member Isaac Hayes quit, claiming religious prejudice. In this episode, Stan attends a Scientology session where he is given a free personality test and told he is depressed. He returns the next day to receive auditing from the group and learns about founder L. Ron Hubbard's discovery of body thetans.² When Stan starts his audit counselling he registers the highest scores in the Church of Scientology's history. From these results the Scientologists discern that he is Hubbard's reincarnation and recruit him to write new scriptures for the group.

To facilitate Stan's writing, Scientology's president tells him the group's creation stories from the Operating Theaten Level III documents. These highly guarded Scientology documents explain how the galactic overlord Xenu solved his overpopulation problem 75 billion years ago by freezing aliens, dropping them into the volcanoes of Hawaii, and detonating them with H-bombs. He then trapped the alien souls and had them brainwashed before being released to wander the earth. At the dawn of humanity the alien souls attached themselves to our ancestors, becoming the thetans which are the cause of everything negative in our lives. While *South Park* reiterates this story, they caption it with "This is What Scientologists Actually Believe" (*South Park* 16 November 2005; see also [Rothstein 2009](#)).

Yet, the beliefs are not the most important thing for *South Park*. Instead, when Stan starts writing new doctrines he develops a controversial one: Scientologists no longer have to pay for services. Scientology's president is furious and he tells Stan that Scientology is a global scam that will make both of them rich if Stan maintains the charade of being Hubbard's reincarnation. Stan cannot, he denounces Scientology, and all the Scientologists threaten to sue him for insulting their religion (for more on Scientology see [Lewis 2009](#); [Melton 2000](#); [Wallis 1977](#)). This reflects Parker and Stone's general disdain for Scientology, with Parker later saying that Scientologists are 'all fucked up' ([Gillespie & Walker 2006, p. 4](#)).

Scientology's untrustworthiness lies in its charging people for what *South Park* considers lies. Its *religiousness* is questioned because of the costs involved in progressing through the ranks. This is not an original critique (see, e.g. [Behar 1991](#); [Miller 1987](#)), but it is effective. Intellectuals in the anti-cult movement (see [Shupe & Bromley 1985](#); [Shupe & Darnell 2006](#)) have accused NRM leaders of defrauding members for years, the assumption being that converts are too stupid or brainwashed to realize they were being defrauded. Hubbard's greed has led to the popular assumption that

Scientology is irreversibly corrupted by his chicanery. This makes Scientologists untrustworthy in popular perception, giving *South Park* fruitful material for its satire.

Similarly, *The Simpsons* attacks Freemasonry in '[Homer the Great](#)' (*The Simpsons* 8 January 1995). In this episode Homer joins 'The Stonecutters', an 'ancient mystical society' which controls business and government. After undergoing initiation rituals in which he is pushed off a step while blindfolded, paddled by other members, and swears an oath, Homer is welcomed into the society and everybody spends their time getting drunk and using their connections to manipulate society to their benefit. Ultimately, Homer becomes the group's leader and tries to take them in an ethical direction. Instead of getting drunk and being corrupt, he has the Stonecutters help ordinary citizens by running a day care and painting over graffiti. The Stonecutters revolt and leave to form a new ancient mystical society: No Homers.

Like the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, the Freemasons are not new. Some may even question whether they are a fraternal society or a religious movement, but the religious nature of their rituals and their mythology linking back to Hiram, the architect they claim built Solomon's temple, leaves us with enough material to analyze them as religious. Certainly the history of anti-Masonic prejudice and public suspicions of Masonic control over the United States' government has been couched in religious concerns and ideas about what is normative ([Barkun 2003](#); [Dumenil 1984](#)). Masons have been treated as untrustworthy since the early 19th century and *The Simpsons* takes fragments of popular conspiracies to make its jokes work. This does not, however, subvert common perceptions. Rather, it reinforces them. While the majority of Americans know Freemasons exist, their rituals are foreign and misunderstood. When we also consider popular prejudices against them based on misunderstanding and supposed government ties, we can see why they are untrustworthy and start crossing over into the next category: Dangerous groups.

Dangerous NRMs

Significant popular fears regarding NRMs come from assumptions about brainwashing and violence. That is, NRMs are not only out to defraud people, they also steal their identity and ability to think freely through devious psychological methods commonly known as brainwashing ([Singer & Lalich 1995](#); cf. [Barker 1984](#)). Also, after the tragic mass murders/suicides of Peoples Temple members at Jonestown in 1978, anti-cult activists started arguing that charismatic leaders were not just stealing people's free thoughts and property, but would also lead them to unspeakable acts of violence against themselves or others ([Barker 1986](#)). This narrative influenced the FBI's decisions at Waco in 1993, leading to the conflagration that killed 74 people ([Hall 1995](#)). Brainwashers and violent NRMs have also been used for comic effect in animated comedies.

In *The Simpsons*, the quintessential cult stereotype, 'The Movementarians', are introduced in the episode '[The Joy of Sect](#)' (*The Simpsons* 8 February 1998). Although non-violent, they are an amalgamation of UFO groups, Rajneeshism, client cults such as Erhard Seminar Training (EST), and the Unification Church (the 'Moonies'). The Movementarians come to the Simpsons' hometown of Springfield and invite people to their compound for a free weekend retreat. Homer decides to attend, and while there he watches a film about how the Movementarians' 'perfect leader' (who resembles Hubbard) is building a spaceship to take his followers to the planet 'Blisstonia'. Although Homer's attention wanders during the film, the Movementarians try and convert him by exposing him to 'the circle of judgment', where his friends and neighbours verbally harass him. When this fails, the Movementarians try lowering his resolve with low protein gruel, but only a revised version of the *Batman* theme song makes Homer love the leader. Once he has converted, Homer signs over the deed to his house and takes his family to live at the Movementarian compound where they all dress alike, harvest lima beans, and Bart is brainwashed. Only Marge resists the group, escapes, and tries to deprogram Homer and the children. She is successful, and ultimately the leader tries to

escape in his spaceship, but it falls apart. The leader, with the townspeople's money, crashes into a nearby farm where he is unmasked as a fraud.

Unlike Scientologists in *South Park* who do not brainwash people (they only lie, cheat, and steal), the Movementarians are classified as a dangerous group because they take away people's wills in addition to their money. The difference lies in the way a person's agency is understood. *South Park* portrays Scientologists and Mormons as wilfully stupid. However, they are (ostensibly) free to choose Scientology, LDS, or some other religion. The Movementarians, via brainwashing, take that choice away from people. The anti-cult movement made the same accusations of such groups as The Family International (The Children of God), the Unification Church, and Peoples Temple. American culture prizes self-reliance and individual agency, and taking that away from somebody is treated in *The Simpsons* and other mass media as a serious crime against a person's humanity and marks a group, and especially its leader, as a threat to society. Here, Groening's stated goal of subversion is reversed as the Movementarians are treated in a way that is complicit with the historical depictions of NRMs in mass media.

Family Guy's 'Chitty, Chitty, Death Bang' (*Family Guy* 18 April 1999) relies on the violence motif for its humour. Parodying the 1997 Heaven's Gate mass suicides, *Family Guy* introduces us to the 'Heaven's Helpers Youth Cult'. Meg Griffin, the main family's outcast teenage daughter, attends a party hosted by this group consisting of teenagers who all wear the same blue jump suit, share the same blank stare, and live in a mansion with their white haired leader (modelled on Heaven's Gate leader Marshall Herf Applewhite). The boys are castrated and there is a clock which is counting down the 'Time Until Transformation', but otherwise none of the group's beliefs are known. While it is true that some Heaven's Gate members voluntarily castrated themselves, this hardly encompasses the breadth of the group's beliefs (see [Balch 1995](#); [Balch & Taylor 1977, 2002](#)). However, rather than trying to unravel or parody the beliefs of this complicated group and explain their mass suicide in a way that reflects their heartfelt belief that they were transcending their bodies to the level beyond human, *Family Guy* uses a generic reason for Meg joining the group (and by extension, anybody who affiliates with an NRM)—they feel like outcasts:

Leader

Do you have a mind that seeks enlightenment and a heart that seeks purity?

Meg

Well, not really.

Leader

OK. Are you a confused adolescent desperately seeking acceptance from an undifferentiated ego mass that demands conformity?

Meg

Wow, that sort of sounds more like me.

Leader

Great! Well then all you need is a dark blue jogging suit. ('[Chitty, Chitty, Death Bang](#)') The members then prepare a poisonous cocktail and consume it before the leader returns with Meg's jumpsuit. When he sees them dead, he groans, 'Oh for the love of God! Haven't any of you ever been in a cult before?' He then goes off to find Meg who has gone home with her father because if he were to 'achieve transcendence' alone he would appear crazy.

Family Guy uses the 'evil cult leader who brainwashes his followers into killing themselves' motif for its humour. The teenagers in the group are stupid enough to mix a poisonous cocktail and then drink it, while the leader is aware that he is leading his followers to their deaths. This theme was used to explain how the Heaven's Gate members could commit suicide, but a closer examination of the group's doctrines sees a 20-year history of trying to master the body and find ways to transcend the flesh. While extreme, ending this life to transcend to the next level was plausible to the group's members. Ridiculing the group after their suicides reinforces the assumption that these people were crazy or brainwashed, and were, therefore, legitimate victims (for more on NRMs and violence see [Wessinger 2000](#)).

Why This Spectrum Matters

While this spectrum likely comes as little surprise to NRM scholars—different NRMs have faced varying levels of acceptance and discrimination throughout history ([Jenkins 2000](#))—the medium which transmits the message is increasingly important. When scholars talk about NRMs and mass media (e.g. [Cowan & Hadden 2004](#); [Wright 1997](#)) they mean NRMs and the news. Entertainment media is rarely considered, which suggests that the news matters more than entertainment. Yet, these programmes are widely syndicated, with *The Simpsons* alone being shown in over one hundred countries. A standard cable package allows nightly access to these programmes, and often there are multiple episodes shown across different networks. All this is to say that the programmes are easily accessible, frequently repeated, and lucrative products. While the nightly news runs in cycles, and NRM controversies come and go, programmes such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy* maintain this spectrum of NRMs' relevance through innocuous repetition.

These programmes demonstrate an implicit range of accepted behaviours among American trend-setters. There is a growing body of literature dedicated to the three programmes (see, e.g. [Alberti 2004](#); [Arp 2007](#); [Delaney 2008](#); [Heit 2008](#); [Johnson-Woods 2007](#); [Pinsky 2007](#); [Wisniewski 2007](#)), but while religion is broadly discussed, NRMs are rarely the topic of discussion. Sociologist Tim Delaney uses the Movementarians to support the idea that 'cults' brainwash people and that 'cultists are not nice people' ([2008, p. 215](#)). Philosopher Henry Jacoby claims that while Scientologists believe their leaders, Scientology's creation story 'is nonsense that should be rejected by any sane person' ([2007, p. 58](#)). This ignores the long process of socialization required to achieve OTIII standing and oversimplifies the relationship Scientologists have with their religion's 'tech'. Journalist Mark Pinsky's book *The Gospel According to The Simpsons* is now in a second edition and has been used in classrooms and church bible studies. Yet he does not mention NRMs at all except to say that '[The Joy of Sect](#)' is, "yet another attack on the mainline worship experience, except that the seductive nature of many cults is that they offer much more of an emotional connection than traditional Judeo-Christian denominations—even if it is counterfeit and manipulative" ([2007, p. 81](#)).

In academic and popular literature on these programmes, NRMs are treated as if they are homogeneous, insignificant, and dangerous. Often, they are also treated as stupid. This does not reflect the programmes themselves, which present a spectrum of acceptable practices among marginal religions. They are implicitly teaching ethical standards for evaluating others' behaviour. While the programmes' creators may be lampooning religious behaviours they consider stupid or dangerous, they are also saying that some behaviours are stupider or more dangerous than others. Awareness of this spectrum allows us to track which NRMs are being socially accepted and which ones are marginalized. Popular comedy gives us a window into this development, although it is by no means the only one.

That the spectrum is transmitted through humour is also important. Religion and humour is an understudied field (although, see [Berger 1997](#); [Gilhus 1997](#); [Hyers 1969, 1989, 1996](#); [Morreall 1999, 2008](#)), but it lets us access widely held sentiments and understand how they are popularly encoded. Sociologist Christie Davies argues that jokes are "not social thermostats regulating and shaping human behaviour, but they are social thermometers that measure, record, and indicate what is going on" ([1990, p. 9](#)). As the spectrum of NRMs' depictions in popular animated comedies

demonstrates, attitudes towards different groups reflect underlying biases about proper ethical activities in American culture. Furthermore, with the exception of *The Simpsons'* treatment of Wicca, NRMs are frequently depicted through their best known stereotypes in an uncritical fashion, building upon prevailing cultural attitudes and remaining largely uncontroversial—despite the fact that some creators of these programmes tend to see their depictions as provocative (e.g. Parker and Stone against Scientology). While this spectrum reflects only the underlying sentiments of three programmes, and does not capture the broad range of interpretation viewers can apply to these jokes (see [Hoover 2006](#)), it enables us to ask larger significant questions about media and the replication of prejudices against NRMs. Why do censors consider these stereotypes acceptable content for publically consumed media? Why do these depictions elicit so little popular comment while depictions of other religions, such as Catholicism and Islam, draw significant attention from those religious groups and other media? Why do people find these jokes humorous? The last question lets us access one of the most significant problems of NRMs and mass media. It highlights the dearth of knowledge about specific groups beyond their most controversial beliefs and actions, emphasizing the fact that these characteristics are used to marginalize and isolate these groups as deviant. Ultimately, this is a problem faced by groups that both benefit and suffer from the continued promulgation of ignorance when it comes to understanding them. At all stages this spectrum is subject to the problems of public ignorance and the fact that most people do not bother to learn much about NRMs. Humorous commentary reduces, essentializes, and marginalizes groups according to popular ignorance. It builds upon pre-existing frameworks that viewers already possess for understanding NRMs, but rarely challenges them, which means viewers need not change to live their everyday lives. This spectrum demonstrates how the negative assessments of NRMs, which have led to these groups' repeated persecution, survive and thrive in popular media with less criticism than scholars give to news media. For this reason, NRM scholars would benefit from adding entertainment media and the analytical methods developed for studying it to their academic toolkits. It broadens our perspectives, deepens our understanding of NRMs' cultural significance, and can contribute to existing theories about NRMs and their public importance.

Footnotes

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For general introductions to these two religions see [Ostling and Ostling \(1999\)](#) and [Davies \(2003\)](#) on the LDS and [Beckford \(1975\)](#), [Howden \(2002\)](#), and [Penton \(1997\)](#) on the Jehovah's Witnesses.

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South Park asserts that Scientology claims thetans are the cause of all human suffering, a position with which Scientologists would disagree—it is negative experiences stored in the reactive mind that cause the thetan to forget its true nature (see [Church of Scientology International 1998, p. 16](#)).

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