

# Religious criticism in the TV series South Park

Facharbeit von Frank Rosenbauer

Hey hey,

Als ich 2008 mein Facharbeitsthema wählen sollte, war mir klar, dass sie irgendeine Fernsehserie behandeln sollte. South Park bot sich natürlich an, weil es viel satirisch-kritischen Inhalt hat und es mir die Möglichkeit bot, eine die einzige Facharbeit im Jahrgang zu schreiben, die mit Fluchwörtern angereichert ist. Das Thema Religion wurde spontan gewählt, da der Lehrerin „Social criticism“ zu allgemein war. Dass mir das Thema Spaß gemacht hat, sieht man daran, dass ich die vorgeschriebenen 10-20 Seiten weit überschritten habe. Bekommen hab ich dafür übrigens 13 Punkte (also 1-).

Noch ein paar Anmerkungen:

- Die Arbeit ist auf dem Stand von Januar 2009, als die 12. Staffel die aktuellste war.
- Ich hab die endgültige Fassung nicht mehr gefunden und eine ältere noch mal überarbeiten müssen (Fußnoten setzen, manche Quellen neu suchen), weshalb das hier nicht den formellen Regeln entspricht. Kommt also um Gottes Willen nicht auf die Idee es als Vorlage für Facharbeiten zu benutzen! Fragt euren Lehrer oder bezahlt ein paar Mexikaner um sie für euch zu schreiben!
- Falls sich tatsächlich jemand die Mühe macht, die Fußnoten zu lesen könnte das hilfreich sein: „confer“ heißt „siehe“; „ibid“ heißt „ebenda“

Falls jemand mir was dazu sagen will: [FM\\_Rosenbauer.Spalt@web.de](mailto:FM_Rosenbauer.Spalt@web.de)

Viel Spaß beim Lesen.

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## I) Information about the series

“The following program contains coarse language and due to its content it should not be viewed by anyone” – these are some of the words that introduce every South Park episode. South Park is a simple animated TV series that has become worldwide cult until today and is well known for its superficial image of senselessness and vulgarity. Anyway, what most people ignore is that South Park applies social criticism about a diversity of topics on a high standard. Some experts even credit it with philosophical value<sup>1</sup>.

### 1.1 History<sup>2</sup>

The history of South Park begins in 1992. Its creators, Trey Parker and Matt Stone met in a film class at the University of Colorado, where they created "Jesus vs. Frosty", a short animation movie, that strongly resembles the later series in terms of animation style, humor and characters.

Three years later this 4min clip was discovered by Brian Graden<sup>3</sup>, who asked Parker and Stone to create another film for him to use it as a video Christmas card. The result "Jesus vs. Santa" was spread widely and soon grew in popularity. In 1997, a contract with cable TV station Comedy Central was made to produce the first season of "South Park" that premiered at August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1997. Not even two years later, the cinema movie "South Park: Bigger, Longer, Uncut"<sup>4</sup> was completed.

In the current year of 2009, 12 seasons containing 181 episodes<sup>5</sup> have been produced with 3 more seasons being officially planned.

### 1.2 Setting<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William W. Young III., "Flatulence and Philosophy - A Lot of Hot Air, or the Corruption of Youth?" in *South Park and Philosophy – You know, I learned something today*, p. 5-16

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_park](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_park), if not declared otherwise

<sup>3</sup> Executive of American TV network FOX

<sup>4</sup> Gross: ca. 83.000.000\$ (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=southpark.htm>, ] one Academy Award nomination, six other movie awards won (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0158983/awards> ]

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.southparkstudios.com/guide/>

<sup>6</sup> Information written without specific sources, if not declared otherwise

The series is set in the fictional South Park, Colorado. The town is depicted as a typical provincial small town, with inhabitants that all know each other and a mayor that is always concerned about the harmonic image of her city. The inhabitants are a mixture of stereotype hillbillies and modern Americans. While they often are extremely conservative and reluctant towards changes and innovations, they follow many current trends in other cases. Both the town and the townsmen<sup>1</sup> are used to reflect the American society and illustrate the authors' views on it.

### 1.3 Characters<sup>7</sup>

Practically all of the episodes center around four 8 year old (9 years in the later episodes) boys from South Park.

**Stan Marsh and Kyle Brovowski** are two best friends playing the role of two normal boys who try to understand the world that they live in. They often seem to be the only ones who think about matters and dare to question them, in opposite to the other kids and adults who, when Stan and Kyle try to prove them wrong just ignore them or tell them "[not to] be a smartass"<sup>8</sup>. Kyle comes from the only Jewish family in town, which has been a subject in several episodes.

**Eric Cartman** is the anti-hero of the boys. Very spoiled by his mother, he mostly thinks of no one but himself. His views and motivations are racist, anti-Semitic, egocentric and sociopathic and manipulative, his idol is Adolf Hitler. Due to his mentality the other boys always emphasize that, although he is in their clique they actually hate Eric, especially Kyle whom he mocks regularly because he is Jewish. In an essay<sup>9</sup> William W. Young III.<sup>10</sup> describes Eric as the counterpart to Stan and Kyle, who is unable to think from another persons point of view or question things, comparing him to Adolf Eichmann<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> confer 6

<sup>8</sup> From the episode "Cherokee Hair Tampons."

<sup>9</sup> confer 1

<sup>10</sup> Assistant Professor of Humanities at Endicott College in Beverly, MA

<sup>11</sup> Nazi official who played an important role in planning the Jewish Holocaust, dealt with in the book "*Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*", where he is described as a unreflective person, unable to think for himself

"Like Eichmann, Cartman is probably evil, because when it comes to 'authorita,' he lacks reflection and critical analysis. [...] His evil is an imitation of the evil characters of our culture, as pre-packaged as his afternoon snacks. Cartman consumes evil and imitates it as blindly and thoughtless as Eichmann."<sup>12</sup>

**Kenny McCormick** is the forth of the boys and comes from a very poor family. He always wears a hood over his head, through which only a mumble can be heard when he talks. This is often used by the authors to express offensive language without being censored. Kenny is known to have almost no reluctance in doing things that are dangerous or disgusting for others. Most notable about him is that he dies in almost all of the earlier episodes.

**Chef** is the chef of the school cafeteria and a close friend of the boys. He often has the role of the only reasonable adult in South Park and is the only one to understand the doubts of the boys, when all the others won't listen. He disappears during the 9th season<sup>13</sup>.

**Jesus** is the son of God and founder of the Christian religion. He lives in South Park and has a talk show in the public-access channel. In the 6th season he dies during an attempt to save Santa Clause whose slay was shot down over Iraq<sup>14</sup> but eventually returns during season 11<sup>15</sup>.

#### 1.4 Humor as a vital element of the series<sup>16</sup>

In spite of all the serious topics and criticism, the fact that South Park is a comedy series is impossible to overlook. Humor plays an important role in the series, since it is what makes the series attractive to the audience and thereby helps submitting the message to the public.

The typical South Park humor is often politically incorrect (e.g. exaggeration of racial stereotypes like the black kid Token Black who is able to play bass guitar just because of his race<sup>17</sup>, or Jewish Kyle carrying a sack of gold around his neck<sup>18</sup>), offensive (use of curse words and off-color humor) and controversial (humoristic treatment of taboo subjects like euthanasia<sup>19</sup>, abortion<sup>20</sup> or AIDS<sup>21</sup>), what created

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<sup>12</sup> confer 1, page 9

<sup>13</sup> confer chapter 4.2

<sup>14</sup> "Red Sleigh Down"

<sup>15</sup> "Fantastic Easter Special"

the widely spread bad image of being tasteless and unintelligent. Nevertheless humoristic devices like irony and exaggeration are implied to emphasize the authors' point.

### 1.5 Episode structure<sup>22</sup>

A South Park episode with critical content can typically be divided into three parts. At the beginning there is an occurrence in South Park (or bigger dimensions) that is connected with the subject (e.g. the dawn of Millennium that leads to Jesus planning his comeback<sup>23</sup>). The topic is often very up-to-date, like in the episode "About last Night" that dealt with the Presidential election 2008 and aired 23 hours after the final result had been announced. The four Boys (or some of them) then start dealing with it, either being involved themselves or watching all the adults getting involved. In the middle part someone starts questioning the new trend and tries to fathom it or the reason why it is so popular. The end mostly re-veals a big surprise about the dealt topic that often is very absurd or unexpected (e.g. alleged Russian terrorists turn out to be soldiers of fortune hired by the Queen of England in "The Snuke") but mostly preceding the end of the subject (at least for the community of South Park) and a concluding moral message that is expressed.

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16 confer 6

17 "Christian Rock Hard"

18 "Two Days before the Day After Tomorrow"

19 "Death"

20 "Kenny Dies"

21 "Tonsil Trouble"

22 confer 6

23 "Are you there God? It's me, Jesus"

## II) Religious criticism<sup>24</sup>

Religious criticism might be the most promising way to start a discussion, or to offend anyone. That is because for many people, religion is the most important thing in their lives and they do not want anybody to question it.

### 2.1 Subjects

Religious criticism is typically understood as the criticism of a certain religion. Especially today, in a time where many people proudly call themselves atheists, this is an everyday topic. Exemplary points for this kind of criticism are that no religion can be proofed scientifically, long wars and conflicts have their origin in religion and many religious rules are contrary to modern values.

What is ignored often is that religious criticism is not only the criticism of religion, it can also be in the name of a religion, like the pope criticising the loss of values and faith in society or any religious group criticising another one.

There also is a mixture between the two described forms: The criticism of religious groups in the name of religion, e.g. a church for losing its original aim or believers for misinterpreting their religion.

### 2.2 Expressing religious criticism

For a long time in history, people were reluctant to expressing religious criticism if it was about major religions, since they could have been punished severely for it. Starting in the antique Greece and peaking in the Middle Ages the ruling forces mostly had no tolerance for religious views that deviated from their own. In those days, sceptics who dared to express criticism about the official religion had to do so in a secret environment.

With the movement of enlightenment it became popular in question established values and authorities, including Christianity, of course. However, it still took a long time until questioning or criticizing religion was accepted as a part of

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<sup>24</sup> confer 6

free speech. This is why today practically nobody has to stay secret or fear legal punishment when criticising religion or subjects related to it. Still, there are restrictions for religious criticism in most countries, since there are laws that forbid "injuring" people's religious feelings by e.g. mocking them. Where objective criticism ends and violation starts stays a question of construction, so it is difficult to draw a line here.

### **2.2.1 In the media**

The media is the most effective and most important platform for the expression of opinions. Of course this also applies to religious criticism. Print Media, Broadcasting and of course the Internet, every existing medium can be used. Especially the latter has increased in prominence since the beginning of the "Web 2.0"<sup>25</sup>- age, which allows everyone to make his personal opinion available to billions.

It is notable that religious criticism is not only a subject in educational media but also has found its way to entertainment-oriented media as e.g. "South Park" shows.

### **2.3 Techniques**

The number of criticism techniques is diverse and depends on the way how the subject is dealt with. Questions about religion are often treated highly scientific and philosophical in which case the criticism is mostly based on explanation and argumentation, In more familiar treatments several devices like symbolism and exaggeration are used to help putting over the particular message.

Of course there is more than just telling or writing about it. Especially devotees of the "new Atheism" movement often spare no efforts to convince people of their views. Bobby Henderson for example created the pseudo-religion "Pastafari" around the "Flying Spaghetti Monster"<sup>26</sup> that has achieved worldwide cult-status in attempt to parody major world religions which is regarded as a masterwork of

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<sup>25</sup> The concept of every internet-user being able to get own content online.

religious criticism by many.

### III) Episodes that criticize religious groups

"I think we've always had religion in the show because it's just funny. I mean, there's just a lot of funny stuff. We've done stuff that's really anti-religion in some ways. But it's such an easy joke to go, "Look how stupid that is," and then stop right there. Religion's just much more fascinating than that to us. So from the very beginning, we always thought it was funny just to flip it on its ear and show how screwed up it is, but also how great it is. People couldn't tell if we were kidding." - Matt Stone<sup>27</sup>

#### 3.1 "All about Mormons?" – Mormonism, religious intolerance

"I've been fascinated with the Mormons for a long time. They are the nicest people in the world. If a religion's going to take over the world, and the one that really believes "just be super nice to everyone" takes over, that's all right with me." - Trey Parker<sup>28</sup>

##### 3.1.1 Plot

The episode starts with a new family moving to South Park. Trying to build up a friendship with their son Gary, Stan visits him and his family and is stunned by the differences to his family. The Harrisons spent a lot of time playing games, making music or doing other activities together. Stan, whose family does not spend a lot of time together, aside from eating dinner or watching TV, finds out that the Harrisons are a Mormon family, which is why they value family togetherness so much. When Stan tells his family about his experiences with a Mormon family and that he liked it, his father fears that his son might be "brainwashed" by them and also visits the Harrisons. Anyway the father's intentions to beat up Gary's father fail, when he finds himself confronted with the kindness and harmonic family life of the Harrisons. Also impressed by their lifestyle, he decides for his family to be Mor-mons too. Now Gary tells Stan about the story of Joseph Smith<sup>29</sup>, the Mormon prophet, which is now told in several sequences as a kind of a second plot.

It takes place in the 19th century, when Smith encounters Angels in a wood who show him the hiding place of the Golden Plates. Smith tells everyone about it, but says that he is the only one who is able to read it with the help of seer stones<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.reason.com/news/show/116787.html>

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> Founder and prophet of Mormonism (source: <http://www.mormonismus-online.de/index.php?inc=josmith-mainframe.htm>)

<sup>30</sup> Stones that are said to have magical and visionary powers (source: <http://www.mormonismus-online.de/index.php?inc=js->

Furthermore, he claims the Plates need to be in the dark so he can read the spiritual light, so he puts them into his hat from where he dictates them to Martin Harris<sup>31</sup>. When Harris tells his wife about it, she has doubts about Smith's story and thinks he made it up. To prove her wrong, Martin Harris hides the scripts and asks Smith to translate them again. If the new text was exactly the same, it would be proven that Smith told the truth. However, when asked to dictate again, Smith states that God was so angry about the pages being lost, that he will never let Smith translate from the plate again. Instead Smith will have to translate from another plate, which basically has the same content, but another wording. The scripts become the Book of Mormons.<sup>32</sup>

When Stan hears this story, he concludes that the story of John Smith is completely implausible and that he can not be a friend of Gary anymore, since he cannot understand his beliefs. At the end of the episode Gary tells Stan, that Mormonism might be based on a false and ridiculous story, but still he thanks his good life to it and it is intolerant of Stan the avoid him because of his beliefs.

### 3.1.2 Criticism

Like many South Park episodes "All about Mormons" deals with different sides of the subject.

At first the story of John Smith is shown to be a myth, that is so crazy and unbelievable that believing it requires a huge amount of naivety or ignorance. Parts of it, like the one saying that there were actual Golden Plates with inscriptions, but Smith claims to be the only one who is able to read them don't leave much doubts that he made up the whole Book of Mormons. Some other parts of the Mormon religion, like the belief that Adam and Eve lived in Missouri and Native Americans come from Jerusalem are dealt with the same way.

Still, at the end it is actually Stan who questions the story, who is criticised for not tolerating the religion. He is so disturbed by the fact that Gary is member of a religion that is - in Stan's eyes - unreasonable, that he cannot be friends with him

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okkultismus.htm)

<sup>31</sup> One of the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon (source: [http://www.mormonismus-online.de/index.php?inc=body\\_ubersetzung.htm](http://www.mormonismus-online.de/index.php?inc=body_ubersetzung.htm))

<sup>32</sup> Central document of Mormonism

although religion should not be the base or reason of a friendship. He also acts insensitive by trying to convince Gary of the senselessness of his religion - although believing in it obviously brought him a good life.

To put it in a nutshell the authors' message is that the base of the Mormon religion is completely noncredible, which yet does not matter because it helps the people believing in it to have a good life. Also doubts about a person's religion should not be a factor for whether you like him or not.

### **3.1.3 Criticism techniques**

The technique mainly applied in this episode is simple explanation or demonstration. The founding story of Mormonism is depicted to accord to the Mormon belief, although a narrating song was added, with a typical "dam-dam-dam" singing that later turns out to be "dumb, dumb, dumb", commenting the story. Stan also speaks his mind about it:

"... it's a matter of logic! If you're gonna 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'd better have something to back it up. All you've got are a bunch of stories about some asswipe [Joseph Smith] who read plates nobody ever saw out of a hat, and then couldn't do it again when the translations were hidden!"

In the criticism of Stan's intolerance, it is also simple explanation that is supposed to convince the viewer, when Gary ticks off Stan:

"Look, maybe 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 up, because what the church teaches now is loving your family, being nice and helping people. And even though 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."

### **3.1.4 Assessment**

The history of the Book of Mormons is commented to be nonsense several times, (e.g. by the chant accompanying the story of John Smith and in Stan's mentioned monolog), but not alienated. Most viewers will agree with the authors, since the story has so little credibility that not much commenting is necessary.

The final monologue of Gary merely explains the authors' point of view with simple logic and comprehensible arguments, like that friendship should not depend on religion. However, some people may consider religious beliefs as a too important part of a person's personality to accept anything that they cannot relate to, which is why parts of the audience might not be satisfied with Gary's argumentation. In the end it somehow stays a matter of opinion.

### 3.2 "Are you there God? It's me Jesus" – Christianity

"And so, as we see, South Park has been littered, not with just offense and mere critique, but also with what, in earlier times, would have been considered punishable blasphemy." - David R. Koepsell.<sup>33</sup>

#### 3.2.1 Plot

The story begins shortly before New Year's Eve 1999. Many people in South Park gather around Jesus' house expecting that "something big" will happen in the new millennium, like a physical appearance of God. Jesus sees his chance to start a "comeback" if he manages to provide a good show to them. Anyway, his prayers to his father to show up on New Year's Eve seem to remain unheard, so he hires rock singer Rod Stewart to give a concert at the Rio Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas as compensation.

Meanwhile, Cartman and Kenny suffer from a stomach flu that causes them to bleed from their anus, which they mistake for menstruation and therefore the beginning of their puberty. Cartman thinks that now, he and Kenny are much too mature for Stan and Kyle.. Feeling left out, Kyle also says that he is getting his period, leaving Stan as the only "kid". Stan prays to God for getting his period, but of course does not get it wherefore he feels treated unfair.

At New Year's Eve in many people have come to Las Vegas and expect the arrival of God, in spite of Jesus' annunciation of Rod Stewart. When they find out that it actually is a Rod Stewart concert they get angry and attempt to crucify Jesus

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<sup>33</sup> David R. Koepsell, "They Saitrized my prophet...Those Bastards!" in: *South Park and Philosophy – You know, I learned something today*, p. 131-140

a second time. Jesus prays to his father and again begs him to appear but does not get any response.

Shortly before the mop gets Jesus, Stan asks him why his prayers were not fulfilled. Jesus explains that God can not answer all prayers, because there would not be any point of living if all problems were solved by him. After saying that he notices that he was also trying to shift his issues to God and it was wrong of him to count on his help.

In this moment a flash of light comes down from the sky. God appears and turns out to look like a bizarre mixture of a cat and a hippo with a snake tongue. He allows humanity to pose one question that he will answer. While most people try to find an appropriate question Stan puts himself forward and asks why he will not get his period. God answers his question and disappears again, leaving a perplexed crowd behind.

### **3.2.2 Criticism**

The criticism is aimed at religious people who try nothing but praying to solve problems. Those people pass all their challenges on to higher forces instead of trying to solve them on their own.

The authors' point is that having trouble and solving it is an important and unavoidable part of living. If everything that is inconvenient was settled by God, life would not make much sense because there would not be much content.

### **3.2.3 Criticism techniques**

The episode works with examples and eventually with an explaining statement by Jesus. The examples are Stan and Jesus, both trying to claim the help of God. Jesus wants God to appear on earth to make the people believe in him again and Stan wants to menstruate and get into puberty.

Stan's case supports the authors' message not to shift problems to God (or other supernatural forces) because his wish is not possible for a boy. When he is asked by Stan about God not reacting Jesus tells him about praying and God,

whereby he contradicts his own prior behavior:

"Well, God can't just answer every prayer and suddenly give you everything you want. That takes all the living out of life. [...] If God answered all our prayers, there'd be nothing left for us to do ourselves. Life is about problems, and over-coming those problems. [becomes reflective] A-and growing and learning from obstacles. If God just fixed everything for us, then there'd be no point in our existence. [realizes something] That's why he wouldn't show up to my New Year's party."

Jesus' speech explains Stone's and Parker's point of view.

### 3.2.4 Assessment

About the examples of Jesus and Stan, there is to say that both examples have their qualities that complete each other.

The example of Jesus helps the viewer to get into the subject. He sort of identifies with Jesus and poses the question "Why can God not help him?" for himself, since it seems like a natural thing for God to help his son. It makes the audience wait for the answer that is given later. The other example of Stan praying for his period is already part of this answer. The people seeing it will most probably not ask why his prayers are not answered, knowing that males are not supposed to menstruate and assuming that a minor problem of an eight year-old, caused by group pressure is nothing that should bother the force that created the universe (although, under the presumption that God is almighty and omnipresent, you can argue about the last one). This way, the viewer is prepared for the cognition the show is trying to impart, that a God or other force that makes every wish come true is not a good concept.

However, what Jesus says gives a comprehensible solution to a common problem among religious people, especially Christians, although it can be expanded to other religions that include higher powers. People pray for help of those powers but do not always get it, because solving their problems on one's own is an important subject of a person's life.

It is unclear whether they intended or not, but with the theory of God leaving the problems to the people for giving them a reason to live, South Park might have found an adequate answer to the problem of theodicy<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> A popular problem in Christian theology: The compatibility of an omniscient, omnipotent and all-bountiful God with earthly suffering.

### 3.3 “Red Hot Catholic Love” – Catholicism, Atheism

“Out of all the ridiculous religion stories — which are greatly, wonderfully ridiculous — the silliest one I’ve ever heard is, ‘Yeah, there’s this big, giant universe and it’s expanding and it’s all going to collapse on itself and we’re all just here, just ‘cuz. Just ‘cuz. That to me, is the most ridiculous explanation ever” - Trey Parker<sup>35</sup>

#### 3.3.1 Plot

The parents of South Park are worried due to reported cases of children molested by Catholic priests. Although there is no sign of local Priest Maxi harassing any children, they do not trust the Catholic Church anymore and decide to be Atheists altogether. The priest calls in a meeting with other priests from the area, who state to have lost a huge part of their communities, too, because of the child abuse issue. However, Priest Maxi is shocked when he finds out that the other priests do not see the problem in church members having sex with children, but in children telling the public about it. All the priests seem to have molested young boys from their community themselves and regard it as “part of the Catholic priest's way of life”. He decides to go to the Vatican for a solution.

Meanwhile, trying to win a bet, Cartman finds out that shoving food up one’s anus will make him defecate out of his mouth, an idea that is soon taken over by people all over the country. A scientist on television claims that it even is healthier than normal eating, although he adds that he has no evidence for that.

Having arrived in Vatican-City, Priest Maxi talks in a big cathedral in front of cardinals from all around the world and one group of bizarre looking extraterrestrials, called “Gelgameks” who also seem to be Christian. He finds out, that the cardinals have the same concerns as the priests at his meeting. They consider child abuse to be nothing wrong for clerics but are afraid they might be forced to stop doing it because the public became aware of it. Their argument is that the (fictional) “Holy Document of Vatican Law” does not prohibit it. Priest Maxi suggests changing it to forbid child molestation and allow the priests to marry women. Anyway, he gets told that the Holy Document can not be changed since nobody knows where it is.

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<sup>35</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/Entertainment/Story?id=2479197&page=1>

Priest Maxi still wants to try finding it, which he eventually does after an adventurous journey.

In South Park the parents have founded the "South Park Atheists Club" where they discuss the advantages of being an atheist and complain about their kids being forced into Christianity by a religious society. They also have begun eating through their anus and defecating out of their mouths.

Priest Maxi returns to the dome and presents the Holy Document, thinking he can finally change it. The pope though, who had been calm and seemingly absent until then decides that the "highest source" should be asked before - "Queen Spider" - a giant spider.

Instead of explaining the case to Queen Spider, Priest Maxi gets mad about the high church members: "You people have completely lost touch with the outside world! You sit in this big room with your Gelgameks and your Queen Spider, and none of it applies to what being a Catholic is all about!" He rips the Holy Document apart causing the Vatican buildings to collapse, killing many cardinals.

The atheist parents of South Park at first are happy about the Vatican being destroyed, but then see on TV how Priest Maxi tells the cardinals that it was not him who destroyed Catholicism. He says it was the church itself with its stiff rules and laws and that the religion is actually a good thing. The people of South Park then decide to be Catholic again - and to eat through their mouth.

### **3.3.2 Criticism**

Similar to "All about Mormons" this episode treats two sides of the subject.

The first main point of criticism is the head of Catholic church, consisting of old quixotic men who do not know much about everyday life. They focus on old rules and take the bible literally, instead of recognizing the stories' nature as symbolic guidelines. This causes many Catholics to turn away from their religion, although it basically is more reasonable than they think.

It is those Catholics who are criticised as a second main point for letting the issue about the antiquated Vatican traditions scare them away. They should turn away from the Vatican, not Catholicism.

### 3.3.3 Criticism techniques

This is one of rather few episodes that does not mainly limit its techniques to explanation and examples. "Red Hot Catholic Love" makes strong use of symbolism and also exaggeration.

The representation that practically every clergyman has sex with children without even thinking that it is wrong of course falls under the latter. It is supposed to emphasize that something is terribly wrong with the Catholic church nowadays.

The Gelgameks and Queen Spider are symbols used to precipitate this issue. The Gelgameks are a strange race of aliens who seem to strongly differ from humans (Gelgamek-Cardinal: "The Gelgamek vagina is three feet wide and filled with razor-sharp teeth.") who have a problem with Priest Maxi's suggest of clergymen marrying women, because it is dangerous. The Priest replies that "what works on planet Gelgamek isn't necessarily goin' ta work for the rest of us here, on Earth. [...] That's the problem we're having here." This is supposed to say that a central administration for all Catholics in the world (or universe) is nonsense, since there are many different cultures and kinds of people that need to be dealt with individually. The Queen Spider stands for outdated but changeless established rules and rituals that do not have any justification in today's world.

Priest Maxi additionally explains this problem to his speech after the Vatican is destroyed. He also explains the real sense of Catholicism that all the other people in the episode ignored before:

" You've forgotten what being a Catholic is all about. [raises a Bible] This... book. You see, these are just stories. Stories that are meant to help people in the right direction. Love your neighbor. Be a good person. That's it! And when you start turning the stories into literal translations of hierarchies and power, well... Well, you end up with this. [shows off the ruins, and then the Queen Spider, then the Gelgameks] People are losing faith because they don't see how what you've turned the religion into applies to them!"

To clarify the authors' opinion about the elitist behaviour of the atheists the most obvious symbol was applied: people defecating out of their mouth between their sentences which is obviously mocking the things they say about atheists being superior to religious people. In a way the whole eating trend also seems to

symbolise the whole Atheism movement. Although it is absurd and obviously inconvenient, all people seem to prefer it to traditional eating, just because some experts claim that it is superior to it without any evidence (TV expert: "...and I base that on absolutely nothing"). This is clearly a parallel to how the authors see atheism and this is why they, as soon as they start being Catholic again, decide to eat normally again. The later part of Priest Maxi's final speech also deals with this subject and refers the symbol: "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!"

Another explanation is delivered by Randy Marsh, one of the people from the Atheist Club after he heard the priest's speech. "He's right, Sharon. We don't have to believe every word of the Bible. They're just stories to help us to live by. We shouldn't toss away the lessons of the Bible just because some assholes in Italy screwed it up."

### **3.3.4 Assessment**

The priests' behaviour from the beginning (except Priest Maxi) might be a little confusing for the audience at first, since it seems to be an attempt to discredit Catholicism in common. Anyway, most viewers will notice the exaggeration behind this and find out in the later parts, that actually Priest Maxi is the voice of Catholicism.

The symbols of the Queen Spider and the Gelgameks help to make an important point very clear: The Vatican, and thereby the administration of the whole Catholic church has become something that has very little to do with normal life and that a normal person cannot possibly understand.

The atheists defecating out of their mouth is an even clearer and - not to forget entertaining - way of criticism. Still it is explained once more by Priest Maxi, who sums up the messages without any symbols or similar devices at the end. The explanation of Mr Marsh is even shorter and clearer and manages to shorten the whole point of the authors to a few sentences.

### 3.4 “Trapped in the closet” – Scientology, comparable sects

“The show is saying that there is a middle ground, that most of us actually live in this middle ground, and that all you extremists are the ones who have the microphones because you’re the most interesting to listen to, but actually this group isn’t evil, that group isn’t evil, and there’s something to be worked out here.

Except when it comes to Scientologists. They’re all fucked up.” - Trey Parker<sup>36</sup>

#### 3.4.1 Plot

Stan is offered a "personality test" by two scientology employees. Since it is free and promised to be fun he agrees and follows them to the scientology center of South Park. He is treated friendly, shown around and told about Dianetics by L. Ron Hubbard, being the base of Scientology and that many celebrities like Tom Cruise and John Travolta are among Scientology members. When Stan expresses doubts because he is catholic, the worker, who introduced himself as Brian, states that Scientology is not a religious group and that Stan can be Catholic and a Scientology member. Stan asks why it is called "The church of Scientology" if it is not a religious group, but Brian just changes the subject.

The two start doing the test which consists simple questions, e.g. “Do you ever make remarks... which you later regret?” or “does life sometimes feel vague and confusing to you?”. Stan answers all the questions with “Yes”. After the test Brian tells Stan that the test showed that Stan is "one messed-up kid" but joining Scientology could cure that - for the prize of 240\$. The boy is made very insecure by that and eventually decides to use the money from his savings to visit his first auditing at the Scientology center, since his parents refused to give him any. Michelle, another worker at the center tells him more about the belief of Scientology, that people’s negative feelings are caused by "body thetans" and auditings with an "E-meter" are supposed to free a person from them. When they start the auditing, the scale on the E-meter reaches 9.15, which obviously surprises Michelle strongly. It appears that no Scientologist before Stan reached a level of 9 - except the founder L. Ron Hubbard. The head of Scientology is informed quickly and tells his fellow members that Stan must be the reincarnation of L. Ron Hubbard.

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<sup>36</sup> confer 27

The next night, hundreds of Scientology members (including John Travolta) gather around Stan's house and the president of Scientology and his allegiance and ask him to be their new leader. Stan's parents are uncertain, but eventually allow it. When he wants to go to bed, Stan finds Scientologist actor Tom Cruise in his room who wants his new leader to evaluate him. Stan's answer though disappoints him causing him to lock himself in Stan's closet. Responding to that, many people, the media and even the police start beleaguering the Marshs' house and try to make Tom Cruise "come out of the closet"<sup>37</sup> - without success. John Travolta and R. Kelly later attempt to get him out but eventually join him in the closet.

The next day, the president meets Stan to tell him the "great secret doctrine" of Scientology, which is supposed to reveal a secret about the human life.

You see, Stan, there is a reason for people feeling sad and depressed. An alien reason. 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, which looked like DC-8s, except with rocket engines. The cruisers then took the frozen alien bodies to our planet, to Earth, and dumped them into the volcanoes of Hawaii. The aliens [...] were dead. The souls of those aliens, however, lived on, and all floated up towards the sky. But the evil Lord Xenu [...] built giant soul-catchers in the sky! The souls were taken to a huge soul brain-washing facility, which Xenu had ALSO built on Earth. There the souls were forced to watch days of brainwashing material [scenes from the world history and religion are shown] 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.

During the whole sequence the words "This is what Scientologists actually believe" appear on the screen.

After being told the doctrine, Stan, as the new prophet of Scientology is asked to continue the teachings of Hubbard and agrees. Despite sceptical reactions from his friends who argue that L Ron Hubbard was just a science fiction author that was wanted by the FBI several times Stan keeps writing on the doctrine in and is soon able to present some points to the President of Scientology. When it comes to one point that Scientology should not take money from its members because this is not what churches should do, the president gets upset. He tells Stan that Scientology is all about money and he was under the impression that Stan knew that since the

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<sup>37</sup> Slang term for admitting to be a homosexual.

story was so ridiculous. He breaks to him that Scientology is just a huge fraud.

Impressed by the money he could make, Stan at first wants to stick to his role, but eventually backs down when he is supposed to announce his new doctrine. He tells the people about the fraud and that, people should not believe everything when they are looking for an answer. The crowd however does not react positively but angrily that Stan "insulted" their belief. The president and Tom Cruise (who finally came out of the closet) threaten to sue Stan, who emphasizes that he is not afraid of them.

### 3.4.2 Criticism

The episode criticizes the church of Scientology in many points, starting with Stan's joining. He is allured with the offer of a free personality test, which is only out to make him uncertain about his mental condition. The workers tell him that he is unhappy and has psychological problems just because he answered a questionable test. Brian's subsequent offer to join for 240\$ wakes the impression that there is no other way to become happy again. Another questionable aspect is Brian saying that Scientology is not a religious group to eliminate Stan's reluctance, although it is called "Church of Scientology".

The main point of criticism is the doctrine of Scientology. The idea of a religion based on a what appears to be a Science Fiction novel that deals with galactic federations lead by evil Lords is ridiculed.

Furthermore, the reactions and threats of the Scientology president and the members at the end also targets on the Church of Scientology's administration using their state as a religious community to sue everybody who criticizes them or questions them publicly in a way that South Park does.

Basically, Scientology is described as a giant fraud to make profit out of the worries of naive people. As Stan expresses it in his final appearance as "the prophet":

"Look, everybody, we're all looking for answer, you know. We all want to understand who we are and where we come from, but... sometimes we want to know the answers so badly that we... believe just about anything. "

### 3.4.3 Criticism techniques

Again, the aspects that are criticized are demonstrated descriptively. At the beginning Stan takes the role of a typical new member of Scientology. The methods of the sect to make the people join and the high prize for the auditing are not commented specifically, the viewer has to understand the criticism for himself.

When the sequence about the doctrine is told there also is no obvious evaluation yet, although the sentence that is blended in is a clear signal to the reader that there must be something wrong with the story.

In opposite to the former scene, the president actually does speak from the authors' point of view when he tells Stan about the fraud, ridiculing the story he reverentially told before: "You don't actually believe this crap, do you?? Dummy! Brainwashed alien souls?? E-meters and thetan levels?? Those people out there buy that crap and I thought YOU were smart enough to see what was really going on!" He continues saying that Scientology is all about taking money from its members.

In the last part explanation is applied again to give the reason why people join Scientology.

The last words of Stan are actually the words of the Parker and Stone directed to Scientologists. When the president, Tom Cruise and others tell Stan that they will sue him, he replies: "Well go on, then! Sue me! [...] I'm not scared of you! Sue me!" This is because both Scientology and Tom Cruise are known to be likely to sue people criticising them.

### 3.4.4 Assessment

As mentioned before, the methods of Scientology to attract members are depicted without actual commentary, still it should be obvious to the viewer that the workers try to manipulate Stan. One example is the personality test that resulted in Stan being unhappy, whose questions appear meaningless and that almost everybody would have answered like Stan. Another example is Brian changing the subject when Stan asks about the phrase "Church of Scientology". One more thing

that probably sound strange to the audience is the prize of 240\$ that is charged for an auditing and later called a “nominal fee” by an employee at the Scientology center.

A comparison with an internet source<sup>38</sup> shows that the South Park version of the Xenu story deviates from the original story by L. Ron Hubbard in some details, but does not alienate the story in its entirety.

Showing it while telling the reader “This is what Scientologists actually believe” is a well chosen way to convince the reader of the absurdity of the religion since it seems more like a typical Science-Fiction novel than the great secret of human life, as what it is proclaimed.

Nevertheless, in his essay “Infidel liberation”, Richard Hanley writes that the base of Christianity, containing things like the virgin birth and a resurrecting Jesus is not more credible than the Scientology base, which reminds you that in “All about Mormons” the South Park creators are trying to teach the viewers that a religion that is based on an implausible story can still be a good religion.

So what, in Parker’s and Stone’s point of view separates Christianity and Mormonism from Scientology is that Scientology does not attempt to improve the life of its members, but manipulates them to gain money.

The last scene with the indirect, though very clear message to the Scientology community and the incident with Isaac Hayes caused by this episode draws a clear picture of how serious Parker and Stone are about dealing with this subject

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.xenu.net/archive/leaflet/>

## IV) Consequences and reception

Needless to say, a series that depicts so many things that are holy to some people - and not always in a positive way - cannot stay unrecognized by the public. South Park might be one of the most discussed TV series in the world.

### 4.1. Boycott and broadcast delay

Due to the offensive and explicit nature of the show, many people and organisations have tried to stop the show from being broadcast. Russian authorities are currently dealing with requests to ban the show, that has been described as “insult[ing] the feelings of religious believers and incit[ing] religious and national hatred” by an evangelical activist leader<sup>39</sup>. Similar cases occurred in Argentina and the Philippines<sup>40</sup>. The creators actually used Russia’s attempts, marketing the show as “banned by an entire nation.”<sup>41</sup>

In the USA, no episode until now was foreclosed from premiering, although Comedy Central did abstain from some reairings due to complaints or pressure from affected parties. One of those episodes was “Trapped in the closet”, whose first repeat was originally scheduled on March 15, 2006. Claims that Tom Cruise threatened to withdraw promotion for his movie Mission: Impossible III (whose production company Paramount is part of the media conglomerate Viacom like Comedy Central) were not confirmed, but alleged by several sources, like the newspaper “The Independent”<sup>42</sup>. In England, the channel Paramount Comedy 1 actually did pass on the episode because of a possible lawsuit by Cruise.<sup>43</sup>

### 4.2 Other consequences

In spite of protests and people stating to be offended by South Park, there is no record of an actual lawsuit conducted against South Park.

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<sup>39</sup> <http://blogs.wsj.com/law/2008/09/08/killing-kenny-in-russia-prosecutors-move-to-ban-south-park/>

<sup>40</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_Park\\_controversies#National\\_bans](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Park_controversies#National_bans)

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/south-park-declares-war-on-tom-cruise-470502.html>

A popular incident was the departure of rapper Isaac Hayes from the South Park cast who provided the voice of Chef till season nine. The self-confessed Scientologist left South Park because of “Trapped in the closet”, arguing:

"There is a place in this world for satire, but there is a time when satire ends and intolerance and bigotry towards religious beliefs of others begins... Religious beliefs are sacred to people, and at all times should be respected and honoured."<sup>44</sup>

In opposite of this statement it is a widely spread rumor that he was forced into leaving South Park by Church of Scientology officials. Defenders of this theory argue that Hayes did not have any problem with prior episodes that mocked religious organisations and most-probably offended religious feelings of people.

### 4.3 Reception

South Park’s effect on the public is very polarising. Many people appreciate the show’s habit to deal with taboo subjects or just like the absurd humor. Others judge it for exactly the same aspects.

Ever since its premier South Park drew heavy criticism from conservative groups and family organisations, like “Parents Televisions Council” for “consistently crossing the line”<sup>45</sup>. Some schools or similar establishments even banned South Park merchandise<sup>46</sup>. Especially religious groups have protested against several episodes and demanded their cancellation. William A. Donohue, leader of the American Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights did so concerning the episode “Bloody Mary” in which a Virgin Mary statue bleeds from its anus<sup>47</sup>. Parker’s and Stone’s reaction was a parody of Donohue in “Fantastic Easter Special”. In the episode he tries to kill Jesus and the pope in order to defend his distorted ideals. Nevertheless, there are also conservative voices who complimented South Park for e.g. its criticism of the liberal media<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trapped\\_in\\_the\\_Closet\\_\(South\\_Park\)#Tom\\_Cruise\\_parody](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trapped_in_the_Closet_(South_Park)#Tom_Cruise_parody)

<sup>44</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4804334.stm>

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.parentstv.org/ptc/cable/2008/1017.asp>

<sup>46</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_Park\\_controversies#Public\\_protests](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Park_controversies#Public_protests)

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.catholicleague.org/catalyst.php?year=2006&month=September&read=2103>

<sup>48</sup> Brian C. Anderson, *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias*

As extreme the negative reactions are, there is also a lot of positive reception. Aside from the large fan base the show has gained all around the world, it is mostly credited for making the public aware of cable channel Comedy Central. A high rating on imdb<sup>49</sup>. (9.3/10)<sup>50</sup> indicates that especially the "Internet Generation"<sup>51</sup> appreciates the show.

In its 12 years of existence South Park received eight nominations for the Emmy Award for Outstanding Animation Program and won three. Other won awards are the CableACE Award and a Peabody Award<sup>52</sup>.

The show also finds a lot of approval from journalists and experts. Books like "Taking South Park seriously" and the "South Park and Philosophy" series contain several essays analysing and evaluating its treatment of social issues. In one of them, William W. Young III. prizes South Park's courage to be offensive when ex-pressing their message, He goes as far as comparing it to Socrates<sup>53</sup>. Another one, "Prophetic Profanity"<sup>54</sup> includes the following words: "Call us hectics. but we find South Park to be among the most theologically profound television available today."

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<sup>49</sup> imdb.com – "International Movie Database" containing facts about movies, actors, etc

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0121955/>

<sup>51</sup> Term used to describe the generation born between 1978 and 2000, aka "Generation Y" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generation\\_Y](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generation_Y))

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0121955/awards>

<sup>53</sup> confer 9

<sup>54</sup> Micheal W. DeLashmutt and Brannon Hancock, "Prophetic Profanity: South Park on Religion or Thinking Theologically with Eric Cartman" in *Taking South Park Seriously*, p. 173-194

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