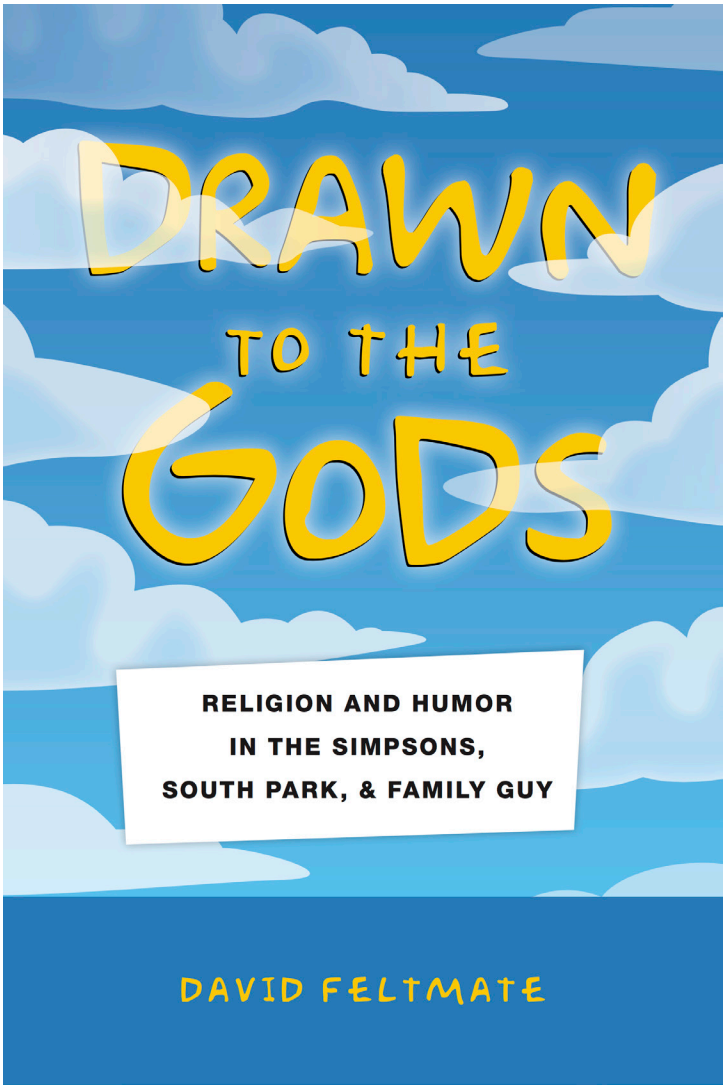


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Religion

Contents:

- Chapter Summaries with Discussion Questions and Recommended Episodes
- Questions for Reflection
- Supplementary Assignments

"Without a doubt, I will use this delightful, well-researched, well-crafted monograph in my media, religion, and popular culture courses. David Feltmate's book is fun, but it is serious fun. He maps out how humor and satire, as delivered through media platforms, teach audiences how to think about religion in an American cultural context. In so doing, he makes a compelling case for why we need to take humor seriously, and why the vital realm of popular culture is not simply important but indeed central to our research in the study of religion."

—Sarah McFarland Taylor, Professor of Religion, Media and Culture, Northwestern University

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# DRAWN TO THE GODS

***Religion and Humor in The Simpsons, South Park, and Family Guy***

## Instructor's Guide

**Dives into a new world of religious satire illuminated through the layers of religion and humor that make up the *The Simpsons, South Park,* and *Family Guy.***

Drawing on the worldviews put forth by three wildly popular animated shows – *The Simpsons, South Park,* and *Family Guy*– David Feltmate demonstrates how ideas about religion's proper place in American society are communicated through comedy. The book includes discussion of a wide range of American religions, including Protestant and Catholic Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Native American Religions, New Religious Movements, "Spirituality," Hinduism, and Atheism. Along the way, readers are shown that jokes about religion are influential tools for teaching viewers how to interpret and judge religious people and institutions.

Feltmate develops a picture of how each show understands and communicates what constitutes good religious practice as well as which traditions they seek to exclude on the basis of race and ethnicity, stupidity, or danger. From Homer Simpson's spiritual journey during a chili-pepper induced hallucination to *South Park*'s boxing match between Jesus and Satan to Peter Griffin's worship of the Fonz, each show uses humor to convey a broader commentary about the role of religion in public life. Through this examination, an understanding of what it means to each program to be a good religious American becomes clear.

*Drawn to the Gods* is a book that both fans and scholars will enjoy as they expose the significance of religious satire in these iconic television programs.

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# INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION (PAGES 1-31)

*Drawn to the Gods* starts by asking three questions that guide the research: (1) *What do you have to believe about different groups classified as "religions" and the role of "religion" in society to find jokes in the three sitcoms humorous?* (2) *What do the patterns in these programs tell us about the popular construction of "religion's" significance in America?* and (3) *What can a critical as-sessment of religion in the public sphere through popular culture tell us about American civil life?* It then goes on to introduce the three programs, the sociological theoretical frameworks that inform the book (the sociologies of religion, knowledge, culture, and humor), the theory of religious satire informing the analysis in the following pages, an overview of the content analysis methods used therein, and an overview of the subsequent chapters.

The introduction serves as a theoretical and methodological foundation for the rest of the book by:

- Introducing television studies and the three programs, their main characters, and brief summaries of their history
- Defining religion and explaining why religious diversity is an important social and political topic
- Introducing the sociological framework of religion based in the work of Peter Berger and Emile Durkheim used in this book
- Demonstrating that the sociology of religion is helpfully intertwined with the sociologies of knowledge and culture when trying to understand popular culture representations of religious groups and diversity
- Providing a framework in the sociology of humor and humor theory in general
- Showing how we can come to analyze religious satire building upon the previous materials
- Explaining the content analysis methodology used in the book

The introduction also places the book within the broader studies of religion and popular culture, religion and mass media, religious diversity in North America, and the sociology of religion. No other book in the study of religion today combines these fields and the study of religious satire.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Before you get started reading about why Feltmate thinks religious diversity is an important subject, what do you think? Do you it is an important topic to discuss? Why or why not?

2. Is studying the way that religion is portrayed in these three programs a good use of your time? What justifications does Feltmate give for studying these shows? Do you agree with his reasons or do you think there are other arguments for or against studying religion in television shows that are more compelling?

3. Feltmate gives his definition of religion on page 11. What are the consequences of defining religion and how do you expect Feltmate's definition will influence his argument? What might he miss that could have been included had he chosen a different definition?

4. Feltmate builds his argument on key terms from Peter Berger and Emile Durkheim, but there is a fuzziness to his conceptualization of religion. On one hand, he sees it in William James' terms as an "unseen order" and the concepts of plausibility structure, social stock of knowledge, and sacredness can extend to areas we do not normally consider religious such as politics and television shows. On the other hand, he also talks specifically about groups considered religious such as Christians and Buddhists. Is this fuzziness helpful or do you think we would be better served using a more or less restricted definition of religion?

5. What do you think makes something funny? What are your standards for judging something as humorous? How do your ideas line up with Feltmate's ideas about humor and satire and what do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of each position?

6. Do you agree with Feltmate that religious satire can do the work of sacralizing a viewpoint? What questions do you want to keep in mind as you continue reading?

7. Is Feltmate's use of Stuart Hall's methodological approach to content analysis appropriate in this case? Do you think other ways of extracting data from the different programs would have been more useful?

CHAPTER

# 01

## SACRED CENTERS (PAGES 33-67)

This chapter explores the lenses through which different religious traditions and behaviors are seen as good from the perspective of each show. It argues that through analyzing episodes which present certain religions positively we can learn the values that each program holds sacred. First, a deinstitutionalized spiritual seeking is examined in *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* as a positive force. Second, the threat consumerism poses for spirituality is analyzed and three responses to it are discussed: Conversion to another religion, assaulting consumerism, and embracing consumer spirituality. The three programs adopt each response in different ways. Third, atheism and agnosticism are explored as positive religious practices, especially when they embrace scientific findings against religious explanations for why the world works. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the importance of individual creativity in *South Park*'s religious world.

*Illustrations (all illustrations are from the author's private collection):*

- Homer walks with God in heaven at the end of "Homer the Heretic"
- Peter preaches in front of the Fonz suspended as if he were crucified
- Brian on *Real Time with Bill Maher*
- Homer and Lisa in "Karma-ceuticals"
- "The Council of Nine in Imaginationland Part II." Jesus and Wonder Woman have their backs to the viewers.

*Recommended Episodes:*

- *The Simpsons* – "Homer the Heretic" (Season 4)
- *South Park* – "Go God Go" and "Go God Go XII" (Season 10) and the Imaginationland Trilogy (Season 11)
- *Family Guy* – "Not All Dogs Go to Heaven" (Season 7)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Feltmate uses a Durkheimian approach that sees sacred things as "set apart and forbidden," yet the programs never explicitly say what is set apart about the values he finds in their presentation of spirituality, atheism and agnosticism, and creativity. Do you think he makes a compelling case for finding each program's core values through the episodes he examines? Could you make the case for other values being central to each program? If so, how would that change Feltmate's argument?

2. What do you think constitutes spirituality? How does your understanding of spirituality match what Feltmate finds in the episodes from the three programs? Why would Feltmate choose to go with this approach to spirituality and do you think it is warranted from the data he presents?

3. What are the positives and negatives of religion's presence in the consumer market? Which of the three approaches Feltmate discusses do you think is closest to your personal perspective? Why do you think this way and what are the consequences of your thought?

4. Are atheism and agnosticism religious ways of being in the world? Are the findings of modern science essential to maintaining these worldviews? Which of the three programs presents a perspective closest to your personal approach to science and sacredness and what does that tell you about yourself?

5. Feltmate argues that individual creativity is a sacred value at *South Park*'s core. Do you think that this claim is warranted? Is this a value you would normally think of as "religious?" How does considering this question help you to think about how worldviews are built on ideas that people hold sacred and does it change your view of what can be considered religious behavior?

CHAPTER

# 02

## THE DIFFERENCE RACE MAKES: NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIONS, HINDUISM, AND JUDAISM (PAGES 68-105)

Race is the first criteria that marginalizes certain religions in the different programs. This chapter argues that while the three programs do not necessarily view these religions as bad, they are marked as separate and different because of their racialized representations. Starting with Native American religions, Feltmate argues that they are marginalized because their religious traditions are treated as easily appropriated consumer products and not representations of the religious behaviors of actual tribes. Hinduism follows as a good religion that is practiced by the positively portrayed Apu Nahasapeemapetilon from *The Simpsons,* but this tradition is still seen as exotic and a religion of immigrants, not a tradition which the white American characters at the show's core can draw from. Finally, Judaism is explored in its positive and negative connotations throughout the three programs. Jewish customs as ethno-religious practices are noted, as are the ways that Jewish characters are made to navigate anti-Semitism in *Family Guy* and *South Park*.

*Illustrations (all illustrations are from the author's private collection):*

- Homer meets his spirit guide
- Homer offers Ganesha a peanut in the employee lounge
- Peter presents himself as Jewish in "Family Goy"

*Recommended Episodes:*

- *The Simpsons* – "El Viaje Misterioso de Nuestro Jomer" (Season 8), "Like Father, Like Clown" (Season 3), and "The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemapetilons" (Season 9)
- *South Park* – "The Passion of the Jew" (Season 6)
- *Family Guy* – "Family Goy" (Season 8), "The Son Also Draws" (Season 1), and "When You Wish Upon a Weinstein" (Season 3)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you think Feltmate's choice to examine these three religious traditions through the lenses of race and ethnicity is the right decision? What other ways could he have explored and compared these traditions?
2. How does humor in these episodes both draw attention to and facilitate racial exclusion?
3. Are race and ethnicity really grounds for exclusion in these programs or are they a way of presenting a more multicultural picture of religion in the United States of America?
4. What do you think of *The Simpsons*' and *Family Guy*'s portrayals of Native American religions? Why do you think that these ideas were used for humorous purposes? Do you think that Feltmate's arguments about the harm these presentations cause is justified?
5. How does learning about Hinduism through *The Simpsons* teach us about this tradition in the United States? Can you think of other ways that they could have approached the topic humorously and presented a different view of the tradition?
6. Does examining Judaism in light of racial and ethnic concerns in the United States make sense? Should we see the presentations in the different episodes Feltmate discusses in a different light?
7. Why is anti-Semitism a foundation for mass-marketed humor? How do the programs navigate the difficult relationship between entertainment and hate speech? Do you think that this kind of speech should be allowed on television or should it be censored? What are the consequences of your thoughts?

CHAPTER

# 03

## AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY, PART 1: BACKWARDS NEIGHBORS (PAGES 106-144)

Chapter three starts examining how the three programs determine if different religious groups are dangerous. Building upon sociologist Christie Davies' concept of jokes that are directed at ethnic groups considered stupid for their inability to adjust to the modern world, Feltmate examines the way that major ideas from American Christian traditions are satirized in *The Simpsons, South Park*, and *Family Guy*. First, God's portrayal in *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* is examined in light of Christian traditions of treating God as both vengeful and benevolent. Second, Jesus' portrayal in *South Park* and *Family Guy* is examined in light of the tension between Jesus' humanity and divinity. Third, the Bible's status as a source of moral authority in American culture is satirized in *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*. Fourth, Feltmate analyzes Reverend Timothy Lovejoy from *The Simpsons* as a satire of liberal Protestant Clergy. Chapter three ends with an examination of Ned Flanders as a caricature of fundamentalist evangelical Christians who are good people, but pose a threat to *The Simpsons*' unseen order when they take their beliefs public. Throughout the chapter Feltmate argues that these examples show how Christianity is seen as something stupid in the eyes of all three programs and that these beliefs in Christian unseen orders set the stage for how Christians can become socially dangerous actors as seen in chapter four.

*Illustrations (all illustrations are from the author's private collection):*

- God aims a sniper rifle at Meg's head
- Jesus and Satan square off in *South Park's* "Damien"
- Lovejoy preaches in his generic clerical garb in "Homer the Heretic"
- Ned's isolation in his moment of need in "Hurricane Neddy"

*Recommended Episodes:*

- *The Simpsons*: "Hurricane Neddy" (Season 8), "In Marge We Trust" (Season 8), "Pray Anything" (Season 13), "Simpsons Bible Stories" (Season 10)
- *South Park*: "Damien" (Season 1)
- *Family Guy*: "I Dream of Jesus" (Season 7)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Feltmate starts by arguing that there is no such thing as American Christianity, only American Christianities. What does this statement mean for the study of how a generic Christianity is presented in each program and why should viewers be aware of this distinction?

2. Analyzing the United States' majority religious tradition through the lens of stupidity is something that could be considered offensive. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of Feltmate's taking a controversial analytical stance in his approach to this topic? Would you have taken a different one? Why or why not?

3. Feltmate argues that "God-talk flavors the national discourse." Do you agree? What is your take on "God-talk" in the public sphere? Which positions discussed in this chapter are you most likely to agree with and how does that affect your understanding of God and the people who claim to speak for him/her/it?

4. Millions of Americans believe that Jesus is the son of God who personally died for their sins and their salvation. Yet, Feltmate argues that *South Park* and *Family Guy* emphasize Jesus' humanity as a way of criticizing Christians and their beliefs. How do you think media producers should represent Jesus and what does that tell you about your views of religious discourse in mass media? Why should others adopt your position?

5. The Bible has been treated as a source of moral authority throughout American history, but should it be? Why or why not? How do the critiques in *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* influence your thinking on this issue?

6. How should we look at the influence of Christianity in people's personal lives? When is Christianity a good thing and when is it negative? How does examining Rev. Lovejoy and Ned Flanders' lives give us insight into the complexities of being a Christian in contemporary America? How do you evaluate the moral standing of the Christians around you?

CHAPTER

# 04

## AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY, PART 2: AMERICAN CHRISTIANITIES AS DANGEROUS THREATS (PAGES 145-180)

Chapter 4 examines how each program criticizes American Christians as dangerous threats to the rest of society. Starting with missionaries and the drive to bring the gospel to other people, Christians are chastised for trying to change other people's religion without meeting their physical needs. The theme of exploitative and manipulative missionaries is then examined within American popular culture through revival preaching and its portrayal as a means to extort money from the gullible. Third, the chapter examines how the programs argue for money's corruption of Christianity in Christian popular music, theme parks, and purity ring culture which are all seen as ways for Christians to get rich while promoting hypocritical worldviews. Fourth, conservative Christians' sexual ethics are satirized through an examination of purity ring cultures, restoration therapy, and the Catholic sexual abuse scandal. Finally, the threat of media censorship from religious organizations themselves is discussed through a fight between the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and *South Park.*

*Illustrations (all illustrations are from the author's private collection):*

- The Virgin Mary "Shits blood on the Pope" in South Park's "Bloody Mary"
- A missionary explains that "reading Bible plus accepting Jesus equals food" in South Park's "Starvin' Marvin' in Space"
- Brother Faith works the crowd in "Faith Off"
- The "inspirational" cover of Faith+1's new album in South Park's "Christian Rock Hard"
- Maxi preaches in the Vatican's ruins in South Park's "Red Hot Catholic Love"

*Recommended Episodes:*

- *The Simpsons* – "Faith Off" (Season 11), "I'm Going to Praiseland" (Season 12), "Missionary: Impossible" (Season 11)
- *South Park* – "Cartman Sucks" (Season 11), "Christian Rock Hard" (Season 7), "Red Hot Catholic Love" (Season 6), "The Ring" (Season 13), "Starvin' Marvin in Space" (Season 3), "Bloody Mary" (Season 9)
- *Family Guy* – "The Father, the Son, and the Holy Fonz" (Season 4), "Holy Crap" (Season 1), "Prick Up Your Ears" (Season 5)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. For many Christians, carrying out the great commission is an important part of how they live their faith. Is sharing their faith dangerous for other people? Why or why not?

2. Billions of dollars are spent each year on Christian missionary efforts. How do you evaluate if this money is well spent? How do the programs suggest you should evaluate missions work? Is it wrong to attach aid to accepting an ideological position?

3. Revivalism has a long history in the United States, but is it as dangerous as *The Simpsons* and *South Park* suggests? When are preachers dangerous and when might they be a good thing?

4. Is Christian popular culture dangerous and diluting of a faith that could otherwise be a good thing? What are your standards for evaluating this danger and dilution? Is there a way of finding "pure" religious life separate from the world in which people live?

5. Religious sexual ethics are controversial topics in the contemporary United States. Should conservative Christian sexual ethics around topics like teen sexuality and homosexuality be treated as dangerous or not? What do you think of the interpretations offered by *The Simpsons*, *South Park,* and *Family Guy*? Are their arguments reasonable or are there other, better ways of presenting a discussion of Christian sexual ethics?

6. Is censorship a bad thing? Should religious groups be free from displays that they consider harmful or wrong? What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of religious censorship and what should be the standards for censorship in your society?

CHAPTER

# 05

## STIGMA, STUPIDITY, AND EXCLUSION: CULTS AND MUSLIMS (PAGES 181-212)

In chapter five, Feltmate explores the ways that new religious movements (NRMs) and Muslims are stereotyped as dangerous through widely circulating tropes. NRMs are frequently condensed into a generic cult stereotype, while Muslims are often reduced to a generic Middle-Eastern terrorist caricature. How each program uses these generic details to create humor tells us a lot about how they think we should view people in these different religions. NRMs are presented on a continuum from accepted NRMs (e.g., Wicca), to annoying (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses), misguided (e.g., the Latter-Day Saints), untrustworthy (e.g., Scientology), and dangerous (e.g., Heaven's Gate). How each group is ranked follows the patterns established in the earlier chapters for evaluating different religious traditions. Muslims are portrayed against the Muslim terrorist stereotype and how individual episodes are resolved tells us about how each program views Islam's place in the spectrum of acceptable American religions. The chapter ends by noting that neither NRMs nor Islam have a recurring character representing their facets and this enables the programs to introduce generic characters for the purposes of critique without having to explore the tradition more vividly.

*Illustrations (all illustrations are from the author's private collection):*

- Scene from the Xenu myth in *South Park*'s "Trapped in the Closet"
- Mass suicide in *South Park*'s "Super Best Friends"
- Peter befriends Mahmoud at The Chaste Camel in *Family Guy's* "Turban Cowboy"

*Recommended Episodes:*

- *The Simpsons* – "The Joy of Sect" (Season 9), "MyPods and Boomsticks" (Season 20)
- *South Park* – "All About Mormons" (Season 7), "The Snuke" (Season 11), "Super Best Friends" (Season 5), "Trapped in the Closet" (Season 9)
- *Family Guy* – "Chitty Chitty Death Bang" (Season 1), "Turban Cowboy" (Season 11)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you know anybody who has joined a new religious movement (you or somebody you know may have called it a cult) or a Muslim? What is your impression of them and the religion of which they are a part? If you do not know anybody who practices Islam or one of the traditions that gets put into the NRM category, what do you know about these traditions and how do you know it?

2. What do you think makes a religion dangerous? Why? What should be done about dangerous religions?

3. Feltmate argues that *The Simpsons*, *South Park,* and *Family Guy* present NRMs on a continuum. Do you agree with his placement? Would you have put any groups into different categories? Why or why not?

4. Feltmate argues in this chapter that Muslims should not be presented through the lens of the Muslim stereotype. Why not? Do you agree with him? What other ways could Muslims be presented in humorous television programs and what do you think would be the outcomes of using alternative ways to portray Islam?

# CONCLUSION

## CONCLUSION (PAGES 213-221)

In the book's conclusion, Feltmate returns to the three major questions shaping the book: (1) *What do you have to believe about different groups classified as "religions" and the role of "religion" in society to find jokes in the three sitcoms humor¬ous?* (2) *What do the patterns in these programs tell us about the popular construction of "religion's" significance in America?* and (3) *What can a critical assessment of religion in the public sphere through popular culture tell us about American civil life?)*. He then argues that the three programs have a role in teaching religious literacy, but that it is incomplete and limited. The depictions in each program are necessarily loaded with moral sentiments that may or may not be representative of the ideas held by people who practice each tradition. Feltmate argues that we should strive for greater understanding so that we can deal with the problems arising from religious diversity with less harm to all parties involved. Feltmate then transitions into what satire teaches us about ourselves, noting that not everybody will view the programs the same way and that our interactions with the jokes in the different programs will reveal our own biases about different religious traditions. He specifically leaves open the question of how readers will deal with these revelations, but invites people to further clarify and acknowledge why they think and believe what they do. Finally, Feltmate argues that seeing "religious satire" as both satire of religious groups and doing religious work through satire enables us to think more clearly about popular culture's role in teaching us about religion's place in the modern world. He concludes by offering a final invitation to clarify where we got our ideas, what we actually think, and why we think it.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Throughout this book Feltmate has argued that ignorant familiarity is a framework that allows for simple depictions that transmit significant information about how to engage different religious traditions. Do you think his argument holds at the end of the book? Do you think your religious literacy is sufficient for understanding religion's role in the contemporary United States or do you need to learn more? What do you plan to do with your current state of religious literacy?

2. Is satire a good medium for dealing with religious diversity issues? Now that you have gone through the book, do you think that Feltmate's model and argument are useful to you? If so, how? If not, why not and what would be more useful?

3. Does satire do religious work? What else might do religious work and how does that affect your understanding of such endeavors?

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- What is the value of looking at different ways of presenting religion that are not considered “serious”?
- What tools will you take into the next encounter you have with satirical depictions of religion?
- What is your personal “spectrum” of religion? Which religions do you see as good or bad? What is your criteria for ranking different religions and on what grounds do you justify your selection?
- Which of the three programs do you think best represents your approach to religious diversity? Why? What does that tell you about yourself and the way you see religious groups?
- Do you think that groups that hold stupid beliefs are a problem? When might they become dangerous? What do you think is the best response to them?
- Has this book changed the way you approach religious depictions in popular culture? If so, how? If not, why not? What strategies will you take to your future media consumption based on what you read in this book?
- Has this book helped you to rethink humor and its role in your social life? If so, how? If not, why not? Do the ideas in this book inspire you to reevaluate your perspective about what is funny or not?
- What is the current state of your religious literacy? Do you think you need to take steps to improve it? If so, what are you going to do to become more religiously literate? What do you hope to accomplish by learning this material?

## SUPPLEMENTAL ASSIGNMENTS:

- Take the model of religious satire in this book and apply it to other animated sitcoms or comic strips. *Futurama and King of the Hill* are good places to start.
- Examine popular authors, documentaries, or serial programs and examine how they debate religious diversity. What standards do they use to evaluate different religious traditions? How do their perspectives match up with the three programs discussed in *Drawn to the Gods*? Which perspective most closely matches your own, why?
- Write an act for one episode of one of the three programs that deals with a contemporary issue in religious diversity. What knowledge do you draw upon when making the jokes? How do you write the jokes so that they are believable within each program's world? In what ways do you have to adjust what you think to fit the perspectives of the different characters or the program's worldview?
- Show one of the recommended episodes in class and then have students write from different perspectives, evaluating the claims made in the episode from insider and outsider perspectives. For example, show "Red Hot Catholic Love" (*South Park*, season 6) and have people respond from Catholic and atheist insider positions and from perspectives such as prosecuting attorneys in sexual abuse cases and journalists. Have students research the response to the revelations about Catholic sexual abuse in Boston and other cities when preparing for this assignment.
- Have students write their own satirical critiques of religious ideas in the style of *The Onion*. Then have them critique each other using the model of satire in *Drawn to the Gods*. Evaluate Feltmate's argument by how effectively it helps students to understand the perspectives of their classmates.