

# Religious Representations in Popular Culture: Jesus of South Park

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## Abstract

*The paper focuses on identifying how Jesus is represented in the Comedy Central adult-oriented animated show South Park, an iconic popular culture product considered both the heir to The Simpsons and its superior in terms of social and cultural satire. We arrive at the core of the paper after revealing the subsequent strata of religion and popular culture, religion and television and religion and animated shows. Looking at the 21 seasons of the show, we selected the episodes in which Jesus appears and then proceeded by using content analysis to identify South Park-specific categories and themes regarding the representations of Jesus.*

## Keywords

*Religious representations, adult animated series, Jesus, South Park, popular culture.*

## Résumé

*L'article se concentre sur l'identification de la façon dont Jésus est représenté dans South Park, la série d'animation pour adultes transmise par Comedy Central, un produit emblématique de la culture populaire considéré à la fois l'héritier des Simpsons et son supérieur en termes de satire sociale et culturelle. Nous arrivons au cœur du papier après avoir révélé les strates subséquentes de la religion et de la culture populaire, de la religion et de la télévision, de la religion et des séries d'animation. En regardant les 21 saisons, nous avons sélectionné les épisodes dans lesquels Jésus apparaît et avons ensuite procédé en utilisant l'analyse de contenu pour identifier les catégories et les thèmes spécifiques à South Park concernant les représentations de Jésus.*

## Mots-clés

*Représentations religieuses, série d'animation pour adultes, Jésus, culture populaire.*

## Introduction

This paper resides at the intersection of two fields of study, religion and popular culture, each component coherent and well established in their own right, but tentative as a “nascent discipline” (Lyden, 2015, p. 7).

Media studies brought religion into the spotlight when television started to add dimensions to it: family shows, standard imagery, traditional Christmas specials, stereotypical representations started to be joined in the ‘90s and ‘00s by shows Baby-Boomers and GenX-ers created in a humanist spirit, dominated by social satire and a pluralist perspective on religion and spirituality. This emerging duality can be examined through Newcomb’s television functions, which are informed by Weber’s canonical distinction of religious leadership (Siegler, 2015, pp. 42-43): if we look at television as contemporary religious authority, we can see two types of authority, namely “priestly” and “prophetic”, each translating into functions of television. When acting in its priestly function, television is a keeper of the status-quo, culturally conservative and repetitive, mirroring a priest’s role “to comfort, to ritualize life, mark occasion, and reinforce membership in a community”, thus providing a comforting experience – this function perfectly describes television and religion in the ‘80s. In contrast, the prophetic function will critique these exact values; Newcomb starts from Weber’s distinction that “the priest lays claim to authority by virtue of his service in a sacred tradition, while the prophet’s claim is based on personal revelation and charisma” (Weber, 1965, p. 46).

The prophetic function is in line with a particular academic approach stating that television is or should be a vehicle for social change, the attitude associated with this stance being “critical, non-conformist, [...] trying to alter and transform customary ideas and perceptions” (Wach, 1944, p. 349). This function of television resonates with the generation that started to produce popular culture content in the ‘90s, leaving behind the soothing priestly function:

“Rather than praising their common media identification, GenX-ers share ironic distance from the shows, toys and emblems of their youth. What excuses their current fascination with their own past childhoods is the clever spin they can put on it through alienation, recontextualization or satire” (Rushkoff, 1996, p. 106).

The prophetic function hails a counterculture that gained momentum and recognition in the ‘00s and ‘10s, animated series aimed at mature audiences surprisingly leading the way. Siegler enriched this dual approach of television functions with a third one, “*rabbinic*, wherein television serves as a catalyst for religious debate and religious change in the context of lived religion” (Siegler, 2015, p. 43). This function perfectly resonates with a new generation of cultural consumers, Gen Y (also known as Millennials), who approaches organized religion with scepticism and is considered less religious than older generations (Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2010), even less spiritual (Twenge, Exline, Grubbs, Sastry, & Campbell, 2015).

Animated sitcoms are a vivid example of the prophetic function of American television when it comes to religion. Christmas specials, traditional sitcoms, family oriented shows reinforced the priestly function in that it conveyed time-honoured religious representations, stereotypes and imagery: focus on Christianity, minimal to no representations of other religions except stereotypical depictions (e.g.: Jews responsible for Christ’s crucifixion), canonical representations of religious figures. The ‘90s started to chip away at the supremacy of these shows when animated sitcoms aimed at adults began to appear and win prime-time space and recognition; their perspective on religion was a game changer because, as television made its way towards the ‘00, the prophetic function (seen in the satiric and *question the norm* approach) gained terrain.

“Surprisingly enough, the most innovative use of religion in prime time is now found not in family oriented shows but in series for *mature audiences*. The same circumstances that introduced *adult* language, explicit sexuality, and controversial subject matter to prime-time television have [...] brought religion along as well.” (Thompson, 2005, p. 50)

Shows like *The Flintstones* or *The Jetsons*, explicitly aimed at children, had no multiple levels of meaning and were not interested in religion; ultimately, they did not respond to new sensibilities and cultural demand, so they remained fairly anchored in the world of childhood. The new wave of animated sitcoms had a different approach: multiple levels of meaning were a must, comedy took the form of parody and/or satire, and religion was among the social issues the shows addressed. Where the line was drawn when it came to religion varied from show to show, but many of the most successful shows in the genre approached the topic of religion and religious representations on various occasions and from different perspectives: *The Simpsons*, *Futurama*, *King of the Hill*, *South Park*, *Family Guy* and, more recently, *Ugly Americans* and *Rick and Morty*. However, there are certain common elements, like the position on God and agency: “Popular American comedy generally rejects the vertical dimension of the Gospel metanarrative, which represents God as the ultimate agent in human affairs. Mass-mediated comedy instead offers America a horizontal view of *salvation* that focuses on human agency as the means to a better world.” (Schultze, 2005) Compared to previous shows, the adult-oriented sitcoms might therefore seem blasphemous and, indeed, many popular culture books have chapters analysing that particular type of interpretation/reception: *Family Guy and God: Should Believers Take Offense?* (VanArragon, 2007), *Blasphemous Humour in South Park* (Murtaugh, 2007), *They Satirized My Prophet ... Those Bastards! South Park and Blasphemy* (Koepsell, 2007), *Is Nothing Sacred?: Religious Parody in South Park* (Daas, 2012). There is a paradox concerning religion and animated adult-oriented shows: on the one hand, the way the shows represent religion (we are not differentiating at this point between the systems of belief and the institutions created around the systems) is often critical and, as such, might be considered negative. But at the same time the shows facilitate

a discussion about religion and enable dialog. As for religion and popular culture as a discipline, its development in the last decades is informed, to an important degree, by the rise of adult-oriented animated shows as a stand-alone television genre.

In our case, the show is an animated series with an adult audience that reached an unprecedented level of satire, on the one hand, and controversy-driven popularity on the other. *South Park* appeared in an important year for television and popular culture: 1997 was when *Titanic* and *Men in Black* filled movie theatres, *Beavis and Butt-Head* said goodbye to MTV (ironically, as they paved the way for *South Park*, alongside shows like *The Simpsons*, *The Ren and Stimpy Show*), *Buffy* started to slay vampires and *Married with Children* ended its 10 year run as America's dysfunctional family (that slot would be filled in just 2 years by *Family Guy*). *South Park* arrived at the right moment (adult oriented cartoons were making a comeback, the Internet started to show its potential and Comedy Central was looking for a signature show) and offered the right type of cultural mix: unapologetic satire, *anything goes* approach and clever writing, "[taking] animation one step backwards aesthetically and five steps forward intellectually" (Johnson-Woods, 2007, p. xi).

The universe of the research is therefore represented by *South Park*, an animated show that became a popular culture phenomenon. It was started by Matt Stone and Trey Parker in 1997 at the request of Comedy Central and it played a central role in the success of the TV station. *South Park* is still running, 2018 being the year of its 22<sup>nd</sup> season. For the first 7 seasons it oscillated between 13 and 18 episodes per season, settling on a standard 14 episodes during seasons 8-16 and switching to 10 episodes since season 17. The runtime for each episode is around 22 minutes; usually *South Park* does standalone episodes, with occasional two-part episodes (*Cartoon Wars I&II*, *Imaginationland I&II*, *200&201* etc.). Throughout its 20 year run the show was nominated 93 times; it won 5 Emmys (2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2013) for *Outstanding Animated Program* (*South Park – Awards*, n.d.). In addition, the song *Blame Canada* from the 1999 feature film *South Park: Longer, Bigger and Uncut* was nominated for an Oscar (The 72<sup>nd</sup> Academy Awards – 2000, n.d.); it lost to Phil Collins and the singer, as well as the song, became the subject of one of the episodes.

*South Park* enjoys an enormous success for an animated show that is vastly critiqued for how it approaches various topics, as well as for their selection; but it is exactly this critique that attracted interest, first from GenXers and then, to some extent, from Millennials. Another major component of its success is the constant presence of popular culture elements in each episode; the animated sitcom mixed the so called *toilet humour*, bizarre scenarios and unrefined animation with unapologetically savage social satire and taboo topics. What sets apart *South Park* from other adult oriented animated shows is the fact that it does not stop at making fun of society, but instead makes breaking every rule of political correctness a *modus operandi*, adopting "a carnivalesque style in its depiction of the contemporary world" (Johnson-Woods, 2007, p. 75). This approach is one that the show's creators have openly talked about in interviews; their "It's got to all be OK or none of it is" (Parker & Stone, 2006) principle has informed their most controversial episodes, which are in no short supply, some of the most scandalous focusing on religion and religious representations.

The main characters in *South Park* are four young boys (4<sup>th</sup> grade, elementary school) named Stan, Kyle, Cartman and Kenny, who almost every episode play the town's saviours or conscience, proving to be wiser than the adults. Many times they have to fix what their parents did wrong or to guide the community in making important decisions. They have to save either the town or their way of life. The world in which they live is imperfect and it seems that they are the only ones seeing that the emperor is naked. In *South Park*, the kids are a scary combination of modern day attitudes towards childhood and pre-medieval understanding of children as small adults (Ariès, 1975); so, even if they are presented as children from a visual standpoint, the four boys often have an adult behaviour, compensating for the irresponsible one displayed by their parents. In addition to their parents and dysfunctional school, the boys are faced with decisions and topics that are outside the realm of childhood, even on TV: euthanasia, homosexuality, genetic experiments, war, the visual representation of Mohammed etc. – this is used as a mechanism through which hypocrisy and other social shortcomings are exposed and critiqued.

The characters these four kids interact with can be fit into the following categories: parents, adult town

citizens, children from their school (class mates and older students), staff from their school, celebrities coming from various fields (with a focus on entertainment), Canadians/other foreign nationals and fantasy/religious characters to name the main ones.

Among the religious characters, Jesus Christ, one of the main figures of Christianity, is the most frequently present in *South Park*. This does not mean that other religions and religious figures do not appear in the show, but Jesus has a quantitatively superior presence. Nevertheless, there is little analysis in the *South Park*/popular culture/religious studies literature addressing the topic of Jesus of *South Park*. In Toni Johnson-Woods' 2007 *Blame Canada: South Park and Popular Culture*, Jesus has a 2 page section in the chapter dedicated to religion, *Blessed Art Thou* (Johnson-Woods, 2007, pg. 228-230); the focus is represented by his interactions and a short review of the traits that come across from these interactions. In the 2007 volume edited by Robert Arp, *South Park and Philosophy: You Know, I Learned Something Today*, Jesus is a one-paragraph pretext to talk about blasphemous humour (Murtaugh, 2007), blasphemy (Koepsell, 2007), religious pluralism (Dueck, 2007) and Satan (Jacquette, 2007); a similar approach and underwhelming analysis of Jesus can be found in the 2008 volume edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *Taking South Park Seriously*, specifically in two chapters, *South Park Heretics: Confronting Orthodoxy through Theater of the Absurd* (Fallows, 2008) and (DeLashmutt & Hancock, 2008). Similarly, Jesus is briefly mentioned in chapters in other collective works: *South Park and Philosophy: Bigger, Longer, and more Penetrating* (Hanley, 2007), *The deep end of South Park: critical essays on television's shocking cartoon series* (Stratyner & Keller, 2009), *Deconstructing South Park: critical examinations of animated transgression* (Cogan, 2012), *The Ultimate South Park and Philosophy: Respect My Philosophah!* (Arp & Decker, 2013). This non-central position of Jesus in the relevant literature might indicate that this main figure of Christianity does not hold a central role in the show when religion is discussed and it will certainly be an aspect included in our analysis. Nonetheless, it is interesting to mention that, following the evolution of the importance given to religion in the books dedicated to *South Park*, it is only in the most recent ones that the topic has its own dedicated parts, not just chapters, with *The Ultimate South Park and Philosophy: Respect My Philosophah!*

giving two parts out of six to the analysis of the role of religion: *Part II – South Park and ... Religion* and *Part III – South Park versus ... Religion*. This is certainly a recognition of the major role played by religion in the show and is an indicator of the growing internal coherence and relevance of popular culture and religion as a discipline.

The present research aims to be complementary to the existing literature and offer a more developed analysis of how Jesus is presented and represented in *South Park*. *Representation* will be used in Stuart Hall's understanding of the concept, "connecting meaning and language to culture" (Hall, 1997, p. 15).

### Method

This paper sets out to explore the representations of Jesus in adult-oriented cartoons, namely in *South Park*, an animated series often considered the modern day heir to *The Simpsons*, particularly "in terms of its prophetic critique of religion" (Siegler, 2015, p. 49). If the representations of Jesus play a role in this Weberian understanding of prophetic critique remains to be seen and addressed in the paper.

Throughout the discussion we will "use the term *representation* to refer to the processes by which meanings are produced and exchanged through shared sign systems. These sign systems are what we refer to as texts, but a text could be a book, film, TV program, song, dance, or ritual." (Takacs, 2015, p. 67) The focus will be rather on construction than on reception, although the latter will inform the analysis.

Aiming at a thorough coverage of the instances in which Jesus appeared in the show, we took into consideration all the episodes from the 21 seasons spanning from 1997 to 2017, which amounts to 287 episodes. We also took into consideration (as special episodes) the 2 short animations that preceded the series (*The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Frosty* and *The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Santa*), as they inform the subsequent configuration of the show; from the *South Park* universe we also included the 1999 feature film *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut*, taking the total to 290. We did not include the 3 short countdown skits Stone and Parker produced for Comedy Central (*1998 New Year's Countdown*, *1999 New Year's Countdown*, *2000 New Year's Countdown*), nor the 7 short skits the creators did for various occasions (*Dead Friend Sketch*, *The Gauntlet*, *Jay Leno* etc.), as they were not aired for *South Park's*

regular viewers and are relatively unknown. For each of the 290 episodes, the *South Park* Wikia (South Park Archives, n.d.) provides the full script and we took into consideration only 28, those in which Jesus appears. From each script we manually selected text/lines delivered by Jesus, to Jesus or about Jesus. In managing the text, we did not take into consideration the expletives “Oh My God” and “Jesus”/”Jesus Christ”, as their frequent use depletes them of meaning. In analysing and drawing conclusions about the representation(s) of Jesus in *South Park* we took into consideration self-image, hetero-image and the creators’ perspective.

Having selected the corpus, we applied content analysis, using two coding sheets. The first coding sheet registered quantitative aspects (physical and syntactical units): number of times (in how many episodes) Jesus appeared in each season (frequency), number of lines per episode (centrality/marginality, exposure). The second coding sheet registered qualitative aspects (categories and subcategories) and was devised through open coding by immersion into the selected text, generating both descriptive and interpretative codes: type of character (central, antagonist, part of a team), relation to the main characters (supporter, antagonist, no rapport), status (hero, superhero, show host, Son of God, social actor/activist, soldier, public figure fallen from

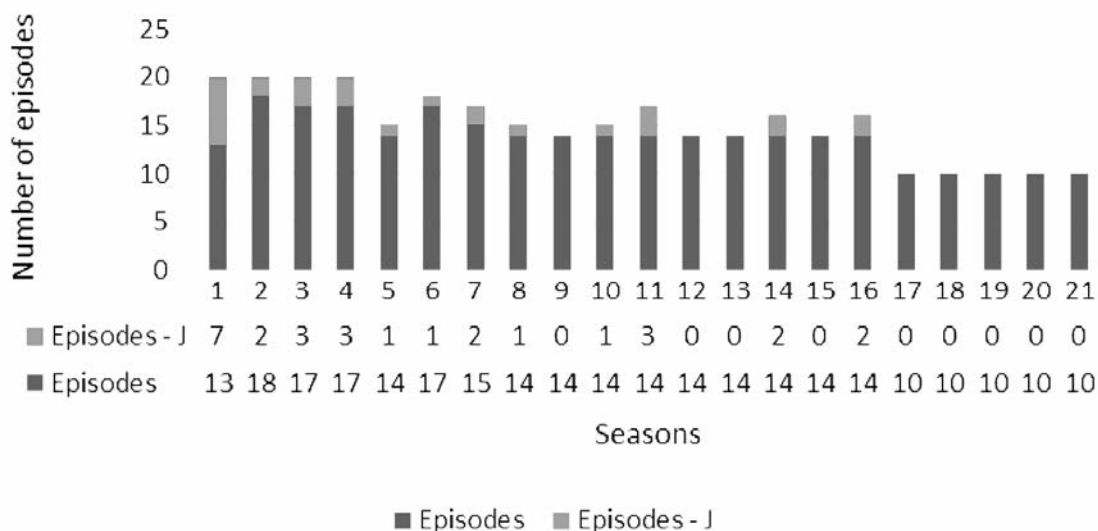
grace, celebrity), religious role (representative of Christianity, saviour, Son of God, fighter against Satan, punisher), role (fighter, educator, manager, counsellor), capacity (human/mortal, divine/immortal), messages, taglines and catch-phrases, relationship with God, relationship with the church, relationship with other religious/fantastic characters, relationship with humans, stance on religion, stance on holidays, visual markers. These categories are predominantly traditional categories of religious representation and the representation of Jesus.

### Findings

Out of the 287 episodes, Jesus appears in 28 in various forms and for different amounts of time, with no identifiable pattern. To these 28 appearances we can add those in *The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Frosty*, *The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Santa* and *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut*, taking the total to 31 out of 290; so Jesus appears in roughly 10% of the *South Park* episodes. It is important at this stage to point out the season-by-season evolution in the number of appearances, as season 16 (released in 2012) is the last one in which Jesus appears.

The number of episodes per season in which Jesus appears has always varied in the *South Park* series; the character had an initial constant and substantial

Evolution of the number of episodes per season in which Jesus appears



presence, but it slowly declining, up to the point of completely disappearing, in more recent seasons. This evolution is generated by two factors:

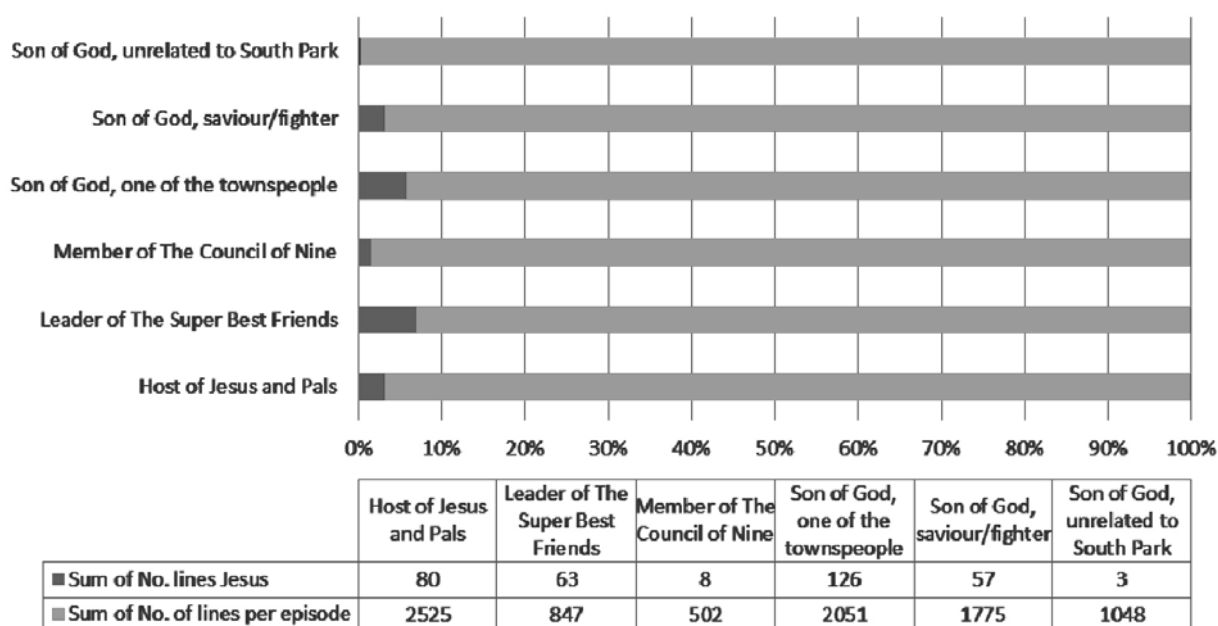
1. the transformation of the US social and cultural landscape, which the show followed by changing its focus to reflect current, hot topics or fads in seasons 17-21: governmental monitoring of private data, paroxysmal consumerism, MMORPGs, gluten-free food, transgender people and toilet legislation, drones, virtual reality, vlogging, body positive campaigns, gentrification, political correctness, sexuality and abuse, trolling and, of course, the 2016 presidential elections and its results, integrated in a narrative arc across multiple episodes;

2. the frequent use of Jesus throughout the show, up to the point where his backstory did not inform the plot anymore, but was a mere canvas on which the creators projected current events and issues; Jesus' last appearance is in season 16 (2012), in the *A Scause for Applause* episode, which deals with Lance Armstrong's demise from the world of cycling and the loss of the 7 Tour de France yellow jerseys he had won by using performance enhancing drugs (Macur, 2012) – in the episode Jesus is accused of using drugs during the crucifixion, not suffering through the ordeal and, thus, falsifying one of the central elements of Christian belief, that he suffered for humanity.

After coding, we integrated the initial categories (religious role, status, relationship to the church etc.) into the resulting *South Park*-specific (supra-) categories, reflecting the position and descriptive representations of Jesus in regard to the show, to the town and to the people living there. Each episode in which Jesus appeared or was mentioned was attached with a code referencing the dominant *South Park*-specific category: **Host of Jesus and Pals** (7 episodes), **Member of The Council of Nine** (2 episodes), **Leader of The Super Best Friends** (3 episodes), **Son of God, one of the townspeople** (11 episodes), **Son of God, saviour/fighter** (4 episodes), **Son of God, unrelated to South Park** (4 episodes).

We will analyse each representation in the following pages, also pointing out how marginal or central the character of Jesus is in each category by using a coding sheet in which we gathered data about the number of lines Jesus delivers in each episode and how they measure against the average number of lines delivered by a character in each episode. A qualitative approach will be used as control for the quantitative analysis, as in some cases not saying anything does not mean marginality: in one of the animated shorts, *The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Frosty*, Jesus says nothing, but, by battling and defeating the snowman, thus saving the boys, he is central to the story.

**Verbal presence of Jesus (lines delivered)  
in episodes grouped according to South Park-specific categories**



### Son of God, unrelated to South Park

As a general rule, Jesus is an intrinsic part of the universe that is the town of South Park. However, there are exceptions and when these exceptions happen, we see Jesus instrumentalized in order to create new cultural products that are informed by his backstory or to reinforce stereotypes in relation to other religions. In two episodes he is a movie character, with one or two lines intended for the viewers in South Park (the town), as he interacts with other characters in the movie, but does not carry a dialogue with them.

In *The Passion of the Jew* he is the titular character in the Mel Gibson movie, which the boys watch; we see him in a scene where he is whipped before crucifixion. The movie elicits very different reactions from the four boys, capturing its mixed reception: Kyle, who is Jewish, is overwhelmed by guilt and seeks a way to atone for what he perceives as a wrongdoing by his people; Stan and Kenny focus on the movie, not Jesus's ordeal, as do most viewers ("I think if more people saw *The Passion* they'd have faith in Jesus. / Yeah, it really guilt-trips you into believing."), but are not impressed and ask for a refund first from the movie-theatre ("We go to church to learn that stuff! We go to movies to be entertained! We weren't entertained, and we want our money back!"), then the church and, in the end, from Mel Gibson; last, but not least, Eric starts a neo-Nazi movement under the disguise of a movie fan club in order to exterminate the Jews in South Park.

At the other end of the spectrum, Jesus is a character in an Al-Qaeda propaganda movie depicting the shortcomings and decadence of US culture and, as a basic representation of this, everyone craps on everyone in the movie, including Jesus on then-president George W. Bush. The movie appears in one of the most intertextual episodes of the show, *Cartoon Wars*, and is a retaliation to the fact that another well-known animated series, *Family Guy*, intended and managed to show an image (censored) of Mohammed in one of their episodes, despite Eric Cartman and Bart Simpson joining forces to stop them. The episode reflected the public discussion on religion, censorship and the creative process, with the creators of the show fighting to air the episode uncensored, despite receiving death threats. The image was eventually censored and it seemed prudent at the time, but rather random in the bigger picture because Mohammed had already appeared in a *South Park* episode about five years earlier as part of *The Super Best Friends*. However, the reaction is not exactly random and reflects the rapid and radical transformation of the way Islam was viewed and what the reactions were on both sides: there were no substantial reactions before or after the *Super Best Friends* episode, which aired in July 2001, before the 9/11 attacks, but the situation and reactions radically changed in the case of the 2006 episode, showing the tensed and toxic cultural climate, the rise of Islamophobia in the US and of international terrorism originating in Islamic countries.

Episode	Season Episode	No. lines Jesus	No. of characters in episode	No. of lines per episode	Average no. of lines per character	Jesus line % out of average	South Park-specific category
The Passion of the Jew	S8E3	2	20	267	13	15%	Son of God, unrelated to South Park
Cartoon Wars II	S10E4	1	27	236	9	11%	Son of God, unrelated to South Park
It's Christmas in Canada	S7E15	0	22	295	13	0%	Son of God, unrelated to South Park
Christian Rock Hard	S7E9	0	21	250	12	0%	Son of God, unrelated to South Park

Whenever Jesus is not connected to South Park, he plays a character marginal to the story, though in most cases his presence is essential and the storyline could not advance in absentia. The *Christian Rock Hard* episode is particularly interesting for the way in which it depicts the "Devotional Jesus" (Higton, 2003, p. 243): on the one hand, he is viewed as the essence of Christianity, but on the other hand, his name is

the perfect tool in the hands of someone who wants to make money by exploiting Christian popular music and Christian devotional merchandise. In order to win a bet, Cartman starts a Christian rock band, plagiarizes all the songs by substituting the words "baby" or "darling" with the word "Jesus" and has a massive success: "Think about it! It's the easiest crappiest music in the world, right? If we just play songs about

how much we love Jesus, all the Christians will buy our crap!” The episode perfectly encapsulates the power of the name “Jesus” in Christianity and the falsification of belief by using it.

In the *It's Christmas in Canada* episode, Jesus does not appear, but he is mentioned by Eric Cartman when talking to Kyle, who is Jewish: “I’m just saying, maybe Jesus is having a little revenge, that’s all.” and “It wasn’t enough for you people to kill Jesus, now you have to kill Christmas too, huh?!” Cartman usually uses offensive stereotypes when referring to the relationship between Christians and Jews, but what we see here is a good example of how the creators treat humour differently: Jesus or Mohammed are mocked particularly through storylines, while Jews – Kyle and his family, in this case – are mocked directly, to their faces.

### Son of God, one of the townspeople

After arriving in South Park to fight Santa Claus over the meaning of Christmas, Jesus never left, becoming an integral part of the community. Over the span of 21 years (and seasons), the Son of God managed to develop quite a tumultuous relationship with the townspeople, while being simultaneously one of them and one of the pillars of Christianity.

We can identify three levels of this representation, as it is the dominant one (from a quantitative point of view) and can generate comparisons and patterns. The levels will be defined by both the impact and the centrality/marginality of Jesus in the storyline of the episodes included in this category: marginal, relevant and essential.

At the marginal level we see Jesus carry on his everyday life as if he were an ordinary inhabitant of

South Park: in *Chickenlover* he is not even credited and appears for 2-3 seconds, driving the parade car from which officer Barbrady (local policeman) waves at the crowd gathered to celebrate him; in *Cartman's Mom is a Dirty Slut* he is engaged in a mundane activity, having a drink at the local bar with father Maxi; in *Mecha-Streisand* he has a line, but it is a *person-in-the-crowd* line, not a *Jesus-the-son-of-God* line: when Robert Smith, member of the rock band The Cure, saves South Park from the Barbra Streisand turned robot Mecha-Streisand, Jesus proclaims him “Our Saviour!”, as the voice of the crowd.

At the next level or representation within this *South Park*-specific category, the *Son of God* component comes to the forefront, replacing the *one of the townspeople* component, dominant at the first level. We can observe Jesus taking on a role more relevant to the story, irreplaceable, in contrast to the marginal level, where any other inhabitant of the town could have taken his place with no major consequences. At this second level, Jesus is the only one who can perform the specific actions, although his role is not the focus of the narrative; however, he is involved in the plotline because he lives in the town of South Park and the situations are, to a certain degree, personal: in *Probably*, he shuts down Cartman’s church for children and punishes him, in *A Very Crappy Christmas* he is a character in the re-enactment of the initial *South Park* short film, recreated by the boys, in which he battles Santa, while in *Butterballs* he bullies a movie producer by threatening him with hell in order to defend Stan.

The third level deals with consequential religious and cultural themes, with the character of Jesus driving the plot or playing an essential role in a substantial section of the episode. Mentioned

Episode	Season Episode	No. lines Jesus	No. of characters in episode	No. of lines per episode	Average no. of lines per character	Jesus line % out of average	South Park-specific category
Mecha-Streisand	S01E12	1	21	331	16	6%	Son of God, one of the townspeople
Cartman's Mom is a Dirty Slut	S01E13	0	25	334	13	0%	Son of God, one of the townspeople
Chickenlover	S02E03	0	19	317	17	0%	Son of God, one of the townspeople
Mr. Hankey's Christmas Classics	S03E15	22	26	300	12	191%	Son of God, one of the townspeople
Are You There God? It's Me, Jesus	S03E16	35	27	284	11	333%	Son of God, one of the townspeople
Probably	S04E10	4	25	361	14	28%	Son of God, one of the townspeople
A Very Crappy Christmas	S04S17	2	27	335	12	16%	Son of God, one of the townspeople
Fantastic Easter Special	S11E05	17	21	239	11	149%	Son of God, one of the townspeople
Butterballs	S16E05	2	28	211	8	27%	Son of God, one of the townspeople
A Scause For Applause	S16E13	25	28	216	8	324%	Son of God, one of the townspeople
The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Santa	SCJS	19	7	105	15	127%	Son of God, one of the townspeople



throughout the paper, *The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Santa* short is the *South Park* equivalent of the Second Coming of Christ; Jesus descends on Earth to regain possession over what the spirit of Christmas means and choses the mountain town of South Park, Colorado, an event with major implications as to how *South Park* could be viewed from a religious perspective: if we see the arrival of Jesus as the Second Coming (which is viable, according to the timeline of the *South Park* universe) and by Second Coming we understand the arrival of the Kingdom of Christ and the fulfilment of other Christian eschatological prophecies (the Rapture, Millennialism, the Last Judgement etc.), then, arguably, *South Park* is a large scale representation of this religious moment. Millennialism, the Christian apocalyptic prophecy claiming that there will be 1000 years of a Paradise-like reign of God on Earth before the Last Judgement, is at the core of one of the most Jesus-centric episodes in *South Park*, namely *Are You There God? It's Me, Jesus* (S03E16). The episode was aired on December 29<sup>th</sup>, 1999 and connected Millennialism to the new millennium. It references the 1970 Judy Blume book, *Are you there, God? It's me, Margaret*, and it deals with Jesus attempting to make a celebrity style comeback as the Son of God under the pressure of the crowd ("Jesus: Oh. Well. Yea. Believe in me and ye shall find peace. / Mr. Garrison: Yeah yeah yeah, we've heard that crap for about 2000 years now! We wanna hear somethin' new! It's the year 2000, for Christ's sake!") and his own desire for religious relevance ("Jesus: Are you there, God? It's me, Jesus. I feel like I've got a real shot at a comeback, God. For whatever reason, people are starting to follow me again. I'm 2000 years old, but I feel like I'm 28 again! I think I'm going to win everybody back, because I just made a few phone calls, and I'm going to put on the most amazing New Year's spectacle this world has ever seen!"). Similar to Margaret's family dynamic in the book, Jesus is caught between an adoring following that conditions its devotion on Jesus convincing God to make an appearance at the passing of the millennium and his father, who is seemingly unwilling to help him in his religious quest for religious popularity. In the end, Jesus reflects on the relationship with God and reaches the conclusion that by not interfering, his father helped him grow: "If God just fixed everything for us, then there'd be

no point in our existence. [...] I get it now, Father. I had to learn all this on my own. I was overcome with my new popularity and, and I let pride get in the way of good judgment." The citizens of *South Park* receive what they asked: after Jesus has his epiphany, God descends on Earth; however, the visual representation has no connection with the Christian imagery: in *South Park*, God looks like "some kind of short-legged squirrel, elephant, cat, hippopotamus hybrid with a snake tongue" (episode script), to the stupefied surprise of those in attendance.

Other episodes that qualify for this level are *A Scause for Applause* (S16E13), *Fantastic Easter Special* (S11E05) and *Mr. Hankey's Christmas Classics* (S03E15), the latter having a popular culture driven content, as Jesus and Santa sing a medley of religious and non-religious Christmas songs. The first two episodes deal with complex religious issues like: the falsification of the Gospel by the Church, the questioning of internal logic in religion and the role of Jesus, the discussion about authentic intent and morality, the self-congratulatory, applause seeking support of causes, the hypocrisy of conditioned belief and the readiness to sacrifice religious values for personal gain.

From driving a parade car to admitting to the use of drugs in order to diminish pain during crucifixion (last appearance in the show until the time of writing the paper), Jesus is an intriguing combination of the Son of Man and the Son of God. He gracefully moves across the levels of his humanity and divine nature, often bringing the vulnerability and insecurity of being a simple citizen and leading an ordinary life into his reasoning and actions as Jesus.

### Son of God, saviour/fighter

This *South Park*-specific category is central to how Jesus is represented in the series. Out of 31 appearances, Jesus is essential or central to the story in 11 episodes and 3 of them fall in this category. It is important to mention that, even though he delivers no lines in *The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Frosty*, his role in this first ever animated short of *South Park* is essential. Furthermore, there are four more episodes that could be taken into consideration, but were included in other categories due to prominence: the *Super Best Friends* episode (*Leader of the Super Best Friends* category), the *Imaginationland II* and *III* episodes (*Member of the Council of Nine* category)

and *The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Santa* short (*Son of God*, one of the townspeople category – although the fight is the obvious takeaway, the episode is consequential particularly because of the arrival of Jesus in the town of South Park).

opposite of his warrior days in *The Spirit of Christmas*: he acknowledges that he must fight in order to save the town and the world, but he is not in any physical shape, is afraid of the fight and falls prey to self-doubt. His despair increases when he consults

Episode	Season Episode	No. lines Jesus	No. of characters in episode	No. of lines per episode	Average no. of lines per character	Jesus line % out of average	South Park-specific category
Damien	S1E10	40	25	325	13	308%	Son of God, saviour/fighter
Red Sleigh Down	S6E17	17	21	271	13	132%	Son of God, saviour/fighter
The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Frosty	SCJF	0	6	58	10	0%	Son of God, saviour/fighter
South Park: Longer, Bigger and Uncut	SPLBU	0	95	1121	12	0%	Son of God, saviour/fighter

This representation of Jesus changes the perspective on what it means to be saved by him and particularly on how the saving occurs. While biblical Jesus saves humanity in a religious sense, *South Park*'s Jesus adds a physical component and engages in actual fights. Throughout the show he carries out or hints at many battles, each with a unique configuration.

In *The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Frosty* episode, the boys are attacked by a killer snowman and summon the Son of God from the local nativity scene to help them. Jesus appears out of the manger, flying; his image is a reflection of Jesus from the medieval paintings: the body is the size of that of a child, but his appearance is mature (long hair, beard). He briefly fights Frosty and defeats him by using his halo as a lethal boomerang, in a literal instrumentalization of religious symbols. In *The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Santa* episode, we see a different picture: an aggressive, retribution seeking Jesus arrives in South Park to battle Santa and bring the people the true meaning of Christmas, dominated by the “Kringle”, as he calls him. After both Jesus and Santa try to emotionally blackmail the children into helping them defeat the other, the children convince them that they can coexist and reach the conclusion that Christmas is not about Jesus or giving, but about presents; they negate the pre-eminence of the religious and altruist narratives, opting for the consumerist one, reflected in the extreme shopping practice of Americans during Christmas.

The *Damien* episode is a *South Park*-style, twisted retelling of the fight between Good and Evil, Light and Darkness, God/Jesus and Satan (his son, Damien, comes to South Park and becomes classmates with Stan, Eric, Cartman and Kenny). Jesus is the complete

a bookie and finds out that everyone in town, except one person, bet against him. Jesus is discouraged and is not really fighting, until Kyle reminds him that there is still one person who believes in him; Jesus throws a punch that barely registers with Satan, but the latter falls to the ground and accept defeat, revealing that he was the one to bet on Jesus in a grander scheme to get all the bet money from the people in town, despite the fact that Jesus repeatedly told them not to bet on Satan. In the end, the people of South Park lost their souls to the Darkness, but were saved by Jesus through a literal fight.

In *South Park: Longer, Bigger and Uncut*, Jesus appears briefly while marching as part of the US army on its way to invade Canada. He wears a robe, but with camouflage print, holds an automatic gun and does not have a casket on his head, because of his halo. His appearance is an Easter-egg (cinematic device comparing the viewers' search for hidden images, messages and symbols with the Easter egg hunt traditional in some Western countries) and often goes unnoticed. In the *Red Sleigh Down* episode, Jesus is not in the army, but he enters his most bizarre fight yet, joining the boys to save Santa from the Iraqis. He acts like a member of a military intervention team, using weapons, fighting Iraqi soldiers and killing them in close battle. He manages to save Santa, but is killed in the process.

The representation of Jesus as the religious saviour of humanity is really just the tip of the iceberg in *South Park*. The battle configurations he enters speak volumes about the richness of representation, albeit it pushes Christianity further away from the centrality it enjoys in media and entertainment: when fighting alongside the Super Best Friends, a coalition of religious figures from around the globe, Jesus enters

a narrative of religious pluralism; when he battles the evil fruits of human imagination, his presence in the Council of Nine (the only religious one) stands for the fact that religion is a positive result of human imagination, but an invention nonetheless. Jesus is the successful instrument through which *South Park* expand the definition of what religion is, integrating contemporary doubt, authentic belief and Pascal's Wager. Kyle's monologue in *Imaginationland* perfectly encapsulates the real-imaginary issue and how it is treated in the show:

"Um... because I think... they are real. It's all real. Think about it. Haven't Luke Skywalker and Santa Claus affected your lives more than most real people in this room? I mean, whether Jesus is real or not, he... he's had a bigger impact on the world than any of us have. [...] They might be imaginary, but they're more important than most of us here."

Kyle's monologue and the many representations of Jesus in *South Park* point to one of the reasons Christian religious groups have protested the show: it discusses Christianity and it develops the representations of Jesus not from a "religious exclusivism" perspective, but from a "religious pluralism" or "religious inclusivism" (Dueck, 2007, p. 225) one. While there is certainly legitimacy in protesting such a crude show, the reasons do not lie only in its offensive nature (something that unites various religious groups against *South Park*), but rather in its subversive approach to the social and cultural centrality and dominance of Christianity.

### **Host of *Jesus and Pals***

In *South Park*, Jesus has a professional occupation: he is the presenter of the *Jesus and Pals* TV show, aired on the local Public Access Network. The *and Pals* refers to viewers who call in and ask Jesus for advice; in addition, he occasionally has guests on set, switching between formats: in season 1 he has only callers, while in season 2 the show has guests and even a live audience.

Jesus does not excel at his job, but means well and genuinely tries to give sound, moral advice, informed by his divine origin: "Yea, many of you are seeking answers, and I am the way for you, my children. Let's open the phone lines back up for some questions... Hello caller, you're on the air." (S01E04), "Yea, the way is paved with gold for ye who seek truth"

(S01E05), "Tell little Gregory that cheating is lying and lying is wrong, no matter what the circumstance." (S01E06) These are common sense, non-controversial answers, but when he is asked questions about hot issues, he prefers not to enter an argument ("Stan: Jesus, is, is it okay to kill somebody if they ask you to, because they're in a lot of pain, you know, like, assisted suicide, is that okay? / Jesus: My son ... I'm not touching that with a sixty foot pole." – S01E06) or he is interrupted by the radio station ("Stan: Uh, hi, Jesus. I, I have a dog, and he's a- he's a homosexual. / Jesus: My son, a lot of people have wondered what my stance on homosexuality is. So I'd like to state once and for all, my true opinion. You see- ... / TV Announcer: That's all the time we've left for Jesus and Pals" – S01E04). Hosting the show brought Jesus some level of notoriety as a TV personality, but he is mostly known as a religious figure: when the boys call or visit his show, they are looking for his divine advice; at the end of some calls he receives thanks for sacrificing himself on the cross ("I just wanted to thank you for the advice. Oh, and for, for dying for my sins, that was really nice of you." – S01E04); the audience members are shocked to hear him swear after getting annoyed at them and losing his temper. However, when he arrives at the weigh-in before the fight with Satan, father Maxi is the only one recognizing him as "that guy from the public access show" (S01E10) and not as Jesus; this is a relevant indicator of the relationship between him and the Church.

The relationship of Jesus with the Church is unexpected, as his religious experiences occur mostly outside the realm of organized religion: in 31 episodes he says the word "church" once, in *Fantastic Easter Special*, the episode that registers his only interaction with representatives of the Church (with the exception of father Maxi); in the same episode, the leader of the US Catholic Church tries to kill Jesus and, upon failing, jails him and declares himself the new pope. Throughout the whole series, Jesus enters a Church only twice, to heal sick people and to shut down Cartman's oppressive cult-like religion, telling those in attendance that "God doesn't want you to spend all your time being afraid of hell, or praising His name. God wants you to spend your time helping others, and living a good, happy life. That's how you live for Him." (S04E10).

This representation of Jesus is not central to his development throughout the show, but it is distinctive,

Episode	Season Episode	No. lines Jesus	No. of characters in episode	No. of lines per episode	Average no. of lines per character	Jesus line % out of average	South Park-specific category
The Mexican Staring Frog of Southern Sri Lanka	S2E6	47	16	374	23	201%	Host of Jesus and Pals
Death	S1E6	12	24	384	16	75%	Host of Jesus and Pals
Big Gay Al's Big Gay Boat Ride	S1E4	6	25	397	16	38%	Host of Jesus and Pals
Fat camp	S4E15	6	21	342	16	37%	Host of Jesus and Pals
An Elephant Makes Love to a Pig	S1E5	4	24	334	14	29%	Host of Jesus and Pals
Spontaneous Combustion	S3E14	4	22	369	17	24%	Host of Jesus and Pals
Mr. Hankey, the Christmas Poo	S1E9	1	20	325	16	6%	Host of Jesus and Pals

original and describes a different approach to religious interaction: “Television converts religion into entertainment, as television is essentially an entertainment medium” (Ferre, 2003, p. 87); thus, religion is consumed as entertainment and reaches the community faster, easier and in a format that can be (culturally) consumed.

Most of the times, the show is used as a plot device, as a catalyst or as a space for transition from one idea to another, primarily concerning the four boys. However, there is one episode in which Jesus as TV show host is central to the plot: *The Mexican Staring Frog of Southern Sri Lanka* (S02E06). When a local hunting show starts picking up audience points, the producer of his show pressures Jesus into a different approach to hosting and a new format, reminiscent of *The Jerry Springer Show*, in order to help the ratings; Jesus is increasingly uncomfortable with the changes but, despite repeatedly suggesting to return to the old show, he goes along with the producer. The boys and the host of the other show are invited on set for a special edition, but while they are taping they also reveal that the interactions are exaggerated on purpose, at the recommendation of the producer. The studio audience members are upset because the show is staged and decide to leave. Jesus is relieved that it is all over and gets back to his old show, regretting the turn of events and punishing his producer by sending her to Satan, in hell; there is no reference as to how she gets there and this can prove disturbing, because she would have had to die (to be killed) in order to go to hell. The episode itself brings insights into the psyche of *South Park* Jesus: he is a calm person, cares about the well-being of humanity (he punishes only people who treat others badly), is not competitive and does not care about reaching celebrity status, which is where he and his producer part ways. “In our competition for ratings we lost sight of why we got into show business in the first place. [...] the pursuit of truth, but—Well, anyway,

I can’t wait to get back to my old show without all the glitz and the ratings and producers”. The episode brings forward products of American popular culture such as the tabloid talk show and the associated merchandising, but the spotlight is on the moral compromise of religious shows that seek success at any cost and the incompatibility between sensationalist television and a behaviour informed by a religious set of values. This issue has been addressed various times in *South Park*, particularly in relation to televangelists and a commercially aggressive approach to religious TV programming.

### Leader of the Super Best Friends

The contemporary US representation of Jesus is that he is central, dominant of any configuration he is in; however, this power position, sometimes aggressively central, is often associated with institutionalized religion seeking validation, not with the original teachings of piety, love and acceptance. The “ecumenical syncretism” (Pinsky, 2007, p. 268) professed and practiced by Jesus in the Super Best Friends episodes is a throwback to the original Christian values.

The Super Best Friends are a group of central religious figures, each representing a world religion, whose configuration and dynamic mimic those of the DC Justice League of America. When Stan first arrives at the headquarters of the team, he is introduced to each member and their superpowers, with a commentary about their relationship and objective: “we are super best friends, with the desire to fight for justice” (Mohammad). Besides Jesus, whose superpower is mastery of carpentry, the other members are: “Buddha, with the powers of invisibility; Mohammad, the Muslim prophet with the powers of flame; Krishna, the Hindu deity; Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet; Lao Tse, the founder of Taoism; and Seaman, with the ability to breathe

underwater and link mentally with fish.” (*Super Best Friends* – S05E03)

Two aspects arise from this list: there is no reason for Seaman except for comic relief (his team mates call him Semen, much to his despair), but his presence brings the whole construct closer to comic books and popular culture; they are showing Mohammad in this 2001 episode, an action that five years later would cause considerable tension and would lead to one of the few acts of censorship in the existence of the show, in the *Cartoon Wars II* episode (S10E04). “Caricaturizing specific beliefs and using them as plot devices helps to hide religious representation in plain sight” (Powell, 2011, p. 1). Such an approach can explain the initial acceptance of the depiction of Mohammad as a superhero, even though after 2006 he was retroactively censored from some of his Super Best Friends appearances.

Stan perfectly expresses the wondrous nature of this alliance: “So you mean to tell me that even though people fight and argue over different religions, you guys are all actually friends?”

not to organized religion” (Pinsky, 2007, p. 296). This attitude is shared by Jesus throughout the series, in an approach that can be considered more humanist that Christian and that can explain the plethora of non-canonical representations.

The first episode in which the Super Best Friends appear deals with the defeat of cults, as Jesus considers them “dangerous”. David Blaine is presented as a new, exciting and powerful magician, who performs miracle-like acts; he has a following and the intent to apply for tax-exemption status, as religion. Jesus tries to stop him, but he cannot win the battle alone: enter the religious dream team, whose members initially look like a caricature, not a consistent representation of their respective religions, but we need to take into account the fact that “despite the intricate complexity of any religious system, what makes it onto television is a caricature of the real thing” (Powell, 2011, p. 17). Using their combined power they manage to defeat David Blaine and save the day. Their teamwork is needed once again in episodes 200 and 201, when Barbra Streisand

Episode	Season Episode	No. lines Jesus	No. of characters in episode	No. of lines per episode	Average no. of lines per character	Jesus line % out of average	South Park-specific category
Super Best Friends	S5E3	39	28	333	12	328%	Leader of The Super Best Friends
201	S14E6	20	37	240	6	308%	Leader of The Super Best Friends
200	S14E5	4	46	274	6	67%	Leader of The Super Best Friends

There aren’t many Super Best Friends episodes and, in that regard, we may consider this category marginal. But its importance surpasses by far the quantitative dimension through the ideas that the existence of such a team conveys, particularly in a tumultuous global reality:

- Religious tolerance does not lead to the demise of one’s own religious experience,
- Working alongside a person of a different religion is possible,
- Religious collaboration strengthens relationships.

We are not stating that these are universal truths and apply in all situations, but in a show that mocks religion in some of the crudest ways in entertainment, the existence of the Super Best Friends can be seen as an acceptance, on the side of the creators, of the fact that religion might play a unifying, not a dividing role for humanity. However, it is a subtle rejection of organized religion, similar to other animated shows: “The Simpsons [...] is sympathetic to sincere faith, if

(as Mecha-Streisand) kidnaps Mohammad and threatens South Park. They manage to save their friend and defeat the threat by working together, showing that religious pluralism can work if there is respect, acceptance and non-hegemonic collaboration between the parts.

### Member of The Council of Nine

The Council of Nine is the governing body of Imaginationland, the land of human imagination inhabited by all the creations of the human mind. It is divided by a wall in two sections, one for the good creations, and one for the evil ones. The first one is ruled by the Council, whose competence is the following: Gandalf the Grey (*Lord of the Rings*), Glinda the Good Witch (*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*), Morpheus (*The Matrix*), Zeus (Greek God of Sky and Thunder), Luke Skywalker (*Star Wars*), Popeye (*Popeye the Sailor*), Jesus (Son of God, Christianity),

Wonder Woman (DC Universe), and Aslan the Lion (*The Chronicles of Narnia*).

*Imaginationland* is the only trilogy in *South Park* and the Council of Nine appears in two out of the three episodes. They lead the defence against the evil creations, who have managed to break the wall with the aid of terrorists, and have to also manage the human threat: the Pentagon had been trying to find the secret passage to Imaginationland for years and, because the boys had been there, they can now have access; but because the evil creations are loose and pose a threat to humanity, they plan to send a nuclear bomb and nuke imagination. When trying to make sense of the situation, the lab technicians have a profound, albeit confused discussion about religion, fantasy, imagination and reality:

“Tech1: Imaginary things are things made up by people, like Santa and Rudolph. / Tom: Yeah, and they detract from real things, like Jesus. / Tech1: Maybe Jesus is imaginary too. / Tom: Oooh, you’d better not say that! You’ll go to hell! / Tech7: It’s possible that hell is also imaginary. / Tech2: Uh so then, we’re about to nuke hell ... that’s a good thing, right? / Personnel: Hell yeah, that’s a good thing, yeah. / Tech1: What if heaven is imaginary? We’d be nuking heaven. Tech3: Yeah, but it wouldn’t be real. / Tech2: So it’d be all right. / Cartman: Look, maybe they’re all part of the same thing. Santa and Jesus and hell and leprechauns. Maybe they’re all real in the same way, right? / Tom: Santa Claus and leprechauns are imaginary, but Jesus and hell are real! / Tech3: Well then, what about Buddha? Tom: Well of course he’s imaginary! / Tech3: Awww, see? Now you’re being intolerant, Tom. / Tech7: Am I real?”

This perspective generates a valid interrogation about the nature of religion and its connection to reality, but Kyle offers a quick and eloquent rebuttal: “whether Jesus is real or not, he... he’s had a bigger impact on the world than any of us have” and his point of view is valid for many other inhabitants of Imaginationland, no matter their origin: religious experience or popular culture.

Imaginationland Jesus is not South Park Jesus: he does not seem to recognize the boys and is only

interested in defending the castle where they retreated. Jesus is not the focus of the story, his role is no different than that of Popeye or Morpheus. Just as being part of the Super Best Friends reduces his centrality and distributes relevance among all team members, being part of the Council of Nine lowers the relevance of religion; in Imaginationland, everything is imagined, everything is equal, and everything appeared the same way: it was created by human imagination. However, as we see from Kyle’s speech (it reflects the stance of the creators of the show), it is not important if religion is created or not, what matters is its contribution to making the world a better place.

**Three major themes (representations of Jesus)** emerged from the *South Park*-specific categories and from the qualitative and quantitative analysis: **Jesus as Greek God, Jesus as Palimpsest and Politically Incorrect Jesus.**

### Jesus as Greek God

Visually, Jesus is nothing like a Greek god; he is far from physical perfection and from any apparel that would improve his appearance. It is safe to say that Jesus in *South Park* is consistent with the traditional European Christian imagery associated with him: he is white, has long hair and a beard, wears a long white tunic, which he sometimes ties along the waist with a brown rope, and wears sandals. There is an element specific to his *South Park* image, the fact that he wears a red sash across his chest when he is part of *The Super Best Friends* or *The Council of Nine*.

So where is the “Greek” in Jesus? In the way he interacts with humanity, in this case the people of South Park. Greek gods, the likes of Zeus, Athena, Apollo, Aphrodite and many others, were not distant, unreachable gods: they mingled among humans, talked with them, had children, partied, had petty arguments, fought alongside or against humans, all without losing their divine status. Jesus is like a Greek god in that regard, but he bats for Team Christianity in general and for Team South Park in particular. This

Episode	Season Episode	No. lines Jesus	No. of characters in episode	No. of lines per episode	Average no. of lines per character	Jesus line % out of average	South Park-specific category
Imaginationland, Episode III	S11E12	7	29	257	9	79%	Member of The Council of Nine
Imaginationland, Episode II	S11E11	1	30	245	8	12%	Member of The Council of Nine

representation is not marginal and can be found throughout the show:

- In the second short animation, *The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Santa*, Jesus descends on South Park to battle Santa Clause, but what we see when the first season starts is that Jesus never left after the fight and became one of the townspeople. Granted, the Greek gods never owned a house like Jesus does in South Park, but it is a good premise for the future interactions with the townspeople and perfectly in sync with the *South Park* fish-out-of-water approach to depicting Jesus. We must also point out that Jesus decides to regain dominion over Christmas by beating up Santa Clause and, while fighting him, he asks the boys to help him and, in order to convince them, he emotionally blackmails them: “God is watching you, boys. You know who to help. [...] I died for your sins, boys. Don’t forget that.” Jesus is aggressive and manipulative, two traits in contradiction with the Christian values, but perfectly in line with the definition of morals practised by Olympians.

- In *Are you there, God? It’s me, Jesus* episode, Jesus realizes that he has a chance to make a comeback after his declining popularity in the last decades and asks his father for an appearance at the change of the millennium. This gain with the help of a parent deity is also present in Greek mythology.

- As a member of The Council of Nine, Jesus battles evil fantastic imaginary characters in episodes *Imaginationland II* and *Imaginationland III*. While the battle between good and evil is universal, the multitude of characters fighting on both sides is reminiscent of mythological battles like the Trojan War, that would divide deities and would see them fighting on opposite sides.

- On a lighter note, Jesus takes part in celebrations (Officer Barbrady’s parade in *Chickenlover*), drinks and has romantic escapades (in the *Cartman’s mom is a dirty slut* episode, Jesus is in the town bar, having a drink with father Maxi and is mute when asked if he had an affair with Cartman’s mother). While he is not Cartman’s father, the situation does have a “Zeus is your father” feeling about it.

- One of the most disturbing parallels with the Greek gods refers to the utter disregard for human casualties of battle. While this is not a recurring element in *South Park* and Jesus does care about human life at discursive and behavioural levels, there are several instances in which his aggressive actions do not take into consideration the implications or he

does not seem to be interested in them: when battling Santa, their fight generates collateral victims: the kids that were visiting Santa Claus and, as usual, Kenny. Neither Jesus, nor Santa seem to register or react to their deaths. In another episode, *Red Sleigh Down*, Jesus takes part in a covert military operation and kills Iraqi soldiers in order to save Santa Claus. In *A Scause for Applause* Jesus gives a TV interview about helping local farmers against the military, but he is more focused on the interview than on the fact that the military is killing the farmers behind him, during the actual interview. Similarly, Greek Mythology is full of such attitudes and actions, valuing self-gratification and ignoring actual human suffering or loss: from Titan eating his children and Hera throwing the baby Hephaistos off a mountain because he was ugly to Hades kidnapping his bride, tricking her to return to him in the underworld or Athena turning Arachne into a spider out of revenge, to name just a few.

Jesus moves outside the lines of traditional Christian god-like behaviour in *South Park*. Not only does he not consistently behave like Jesus of the Bible, but he also behaves like many other gods and many other humans, an indicator that in the *South Park* universe, he does not hold the central spot, nor is he the standard for morality and godly behaviour.

### Jesus as Palimpsest

Jesus is one of the most consistent religious figures in history, both morally and from a behavioural point of view. So much so that he is considered the reference point for decision making when in doubt: “What would Jesus Do?” is a popular culture phenomenon and speaks volumes about the reliability of Jesus as moral compass. But this is not *South Park*’s Jesus. When watching the show there are elements that point to continuity of representation (he looks the same, he is recognized as the Son of God), but each episode brings a new dimension of representation and, as episodes amass, contradictions appear, either between episodes or between the actions and morals depicted in the show and the canonical Jesus. After 21 seasons and 31 appearances, the only two constants are the visual and the origin elements: how he looks and the fact that he is the Son of God in Christianity; all other traits vary from episode to episode, moulded to fit the narrative. The creators themselves are aware of this pattern:

“That’s where we kind of agree with some of the people who’ve criticized our show. [...] Because it really is open season on Jesus. We can do whatever we want to Jesus, and we have. We’ve had him say bad words. We’ve had him shoot a gun. We’ve had him kill people.” (Parker & Stone, 2006)

So a third constant appears: the lack of continuity in how Jesus is presented in each episode; what he does and what he says is coherent within the episode, but when compared to his status of Son of God or with his previous actions, we have multiple representations, previously analysed in this paper: (1) the Son of God who is a TV personality, (2) the Son of God who is a soldier in the US Army or who fights and kills terrorists, (3) the Son of God who leads a coalition of religious figures in a Justice League scenario, (4) the Son of God who drinks, uses performance enhancing drugs and is addicted to internet porn or (5) the Son of God who represents religion in a council that governs the land of human imagination.

There is no religious representation that can explain this type of evolution, but defining Jesus of *South Park* is not an endeavour that takes place solely in the realm of religion. However, religion and popular culture, through the lens of hypertextuality (Genette, 1997, p. 5), offer the right key for interpretation and the coherent angle from which to look at and understand this new representation: Jesus is a palimpsest. Each episode projects an identity onto Jesus and, before the next episode or the next narrative arc, the creators of the show erase this layer, leaving two constants in place (appearance and origin), joined, sometimes, by small residual elements of the episode-specific identity. When the new episode ends, the process is repeated and so Jesus of *South Park* becomes a palimpsest of cultural and religious representations.

One of the popular culture elements that get erased, movies and TV show formats, arrive in various episodes through hypertextuality, which is not only old text within a new text, but refers to the adaptation of the original text in order to be better integrated into its new structure. *South Park* does this brilliantly and in the Jesus episodes we see excellent examples of integration through the construction of parallel narratives: the *Jesus and Pals* show briefly transforms into a version of *The Jerry Springer Show* (*The Mexican Staring Frog of Southern Sri Lanka* – S02E06); the Super Best Friends are a religious

version of the Justice League from the DC Universe (*Super Best Friends* – S05E03); the *Mr. Hankey’s Christmas Classics* episode (S03E15) borrows heavily from the Christmas specials format; the *Are You There God? It’s Me, Jesus* episode (S03E16) is a *South Park* reinterpretation of the book *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*; the fight between Satan and Jesus follows the specific steps of boxing matches (*Damien* – S01E10); *Red Sleigh Down* (S06E17) incorporated elements from the movie *Black Hawk Down*; *Fantastic Easter Special* (S11E05) is the parody of the Dan Brown books on religious conspiracies; Christian rock music is satirized in *Christian Rock Hard* (S07E09). With the exception of the Super Best Friends reappearing in two more episodes and the resurrection of Jesus after his death in Iraq and the Vatican, all other popular culture products do not reappear and are not referenced again in other episodes.

The palimpsest approach is the reason why the *South Park*-specific categories have a dual perspective on how Jesus is represented: as Son of God (constant) and another identity (variable). Therefore, we will see Jesus, in consecutive chronological order: fight a snowman and Santa Clause, host his TV show, *Jesus and Pals*, fight Satan in a boxing match for dominance over humankind, have drinks with father Maxi in the local tavern, return to hosting his show, sing a duet with Santa, join the US army, shut down Cartman’s church, battle David Blaine and Blaintologists, perform miracles in a church, save Santa from the Iraqis and get killed by them, appear in a Mel Gibson Hollywood movie, appear in an Al-Qaeda propaganda movie, defend the land of human imagination, lead a team of religious figures acting as superheroes, bully a movie producer, fall in disgrace after people find out he used performance enhancing drugs during the crucifixion.

This list deviates from canonical religion in general and Christianity in particular, but is informed by the TV tradition of animated series, who used the absurd and the rejection of norm: in *The Ren and Stimpy Show* a reboot of an element could take place from one scene to another, not even from an episode to another: Ren and Stimpy would be shown talking, but in the next frame they would carry on the same conversation, but in a completely different location.

In a certain way, the representation of Jesus as palimpsest overlaps with “the Sensational Jesus”, one of the main representations in modern English



popular culture, alongside “the Radical Jesus”, “the Proselytizing Jesus” and “the Devotional Jesus” (Higton, 2003, pg. 240-244); but while the sensationalist representations of Jesus seek to strip away the canonical image, to present him as an invention of the religious institutions or to present alternative realities for the origin of Jesus, *South Park* fully recognizes his divine nature and the claim to a central role in Christianity. The objective for the treatment of Jesus in the show is not to negate him as Son of God, but to construct social satire in regard to various aspects of modern day Christianity.

### Politically Incorrect Jesus

*South Park* considers that any topic is fair game and does not shy away from controversial issue, but rather revels in presenting them in ways that would offend both or all the parties involved, thus forcing everyone to evaluate their position, explore other perspectives and maybe even start dialogue. This approach stems from the creators of the show: “Part of living in the world today is you’re going to have to be offended. The right to be offended and the right to offend is why we have a First Amendment. If no speech was offensive to anybody, then you wouldn’t need to guarantee it.” (Parker & Stone, 2006) Religion is certainly a prolific terrain for controversy and the show certainly explores how far it can push the envelope; up until and including the 21<sup>st</sup> season, the only change they made under pressure was to censor the image of Mohammed in one of the episodes. Except that instance, *South Park* has made fun of all beliefs through sometimes savage satire. There is, however, a difference Parker and Stone make: they poke fun at Christianity and Judaism (their respective religions) far more than at others in terms of frequency (Mormons, Scientology and atheists each got their episode, to name the most memorable ones).

As the representative figure of his religion in *South Park*, Jesus is no stranger to the approach to political correctness practiced in the show by the creators: he has been at the receiving end probably more than any religious figure. But this is where Jesus deviates from current daily Christian practice, from how we would expect him to behave and he does it in three ways:

1. Jesus does not get offended easily when others are politically incorrect or offensive.

2. He understands the difference between constructive and destructive political correctness.

3. He does not shy away from occasional subversive behaviour that would be considered blasphemous or going against Christian values.

To be sure, Jesus should not be compared to Cartman, the embodiment of politically incorrect behaviour. The Son of God has a calm demeanour, a soft voice and is essentially a good person; out of the adults in *South Park*, Jesus and Chef, the black cook from the high school cafeteria, are probably the most level headed and least offensive. However, we sometimes find politically incorrect remarks, subtle ones most of the time, particularly in relation to his status and powers as the Son of God:

- After a caller on the TV show is surprised that he knew where he was from, Jesus is close to calling him stupid, but opts for a different, albeit passive-aggressive, approach: “Well, maybe because I’m the Son of God, brainiac, now, do you have a question?” (S01E06 – *Death*). Similarly, when he bullies a movie producer by threatening him with hell, he also asks: “Oh, what are you gonna do? cwy (sic!) now?” (S16E05 – *Butterballs*)

- When Kyle asks him to transform Kenny back to normal if he wins the fight against Satan, Jesus questions his distrust and does so by using an expletive: “... What the hell do you mean if I win the fight?” (S01E10 – *Damien*)

- Jesus is upset that, before the fight against Satan, no one bet that he would win and he accuses the townspeople of treason in the worst way he know: “You’re all a bunch of Judases!” (S01E10 – *Damien*). Granted, it is demure compared to other language in the show, but, symbolically speaking, this is the worst accusation for Jesus.

- When things get out of control on the set of his TV show, Jesus loses control and tells the audience and Stan what he really thinks, without sugar-coating it: “Shut the fuck up!” – *The audience members stop and gasp at him* – “Jesus, what is wrong with you people?! Look around you, Stanley. Look at all the pain and suffering your lie has caused.” (S02E06 – *The Mexican Staring Frog of Southern Sri Lanka*)

- He is direct and does not mince words when he disapproves of Kenny performing Jackass-style acts for money: “I can’t say I approve of this, my children. [...] Because Kenny is only doing things that anybody could do. For money. He’s a prostitute.” (S04E15 – *Fat Camp*)

- When punishing Cartman (S04E10 – *Probably*), he informs the boy that he will send him somewhere to think about his sins. When the latter asks if he is going to hell, Jesus answers: “No. Worse!” and sends Cartman to Mexico.

- The most politically incorrect representation of Jesus comes in the *Cartoon Wars II* episode (S10E04), when Jesus defecates on then-president George W. Bush and on the American Flag (this is the infamous Mohammed episode) in a propaganda Al-Qaeda movie, created as retaliation for the depiction of Mohammed in a *Family Guy* episode. Of course, it is not Jesus from *South Park* (the town), but it is the representation of Jesus from *South Park* (the series): “Look at me! I’m Jesus! Would you like me to crap on you, Mr. Bush? [*craps on Bush. More Americans walk in and start crapping*]”. By using this dual representation, Parker and Stone save the good natured, respectful Jesus from falling victim to the crude humour of the show, while simultaneously transforming him into the most offensive, politically incorrect religious figure in the show.

- When discussing with Buddha about vices, the dialogue is openly offensive and politically incorrect, reminiscent of the crude dialogue the four boys usually have. Coincidentally, this type of language is used only when discussing vices: “Jesus: Buddha, will you lay off that stuff already?! It’s gettin’ to be a problem. / Buddha: Ohhh, and you’re one to talk! With all your Internet porn! / Jesus: Watching porn isn’t like doing coke, fag!” (S14E06 – *201*) In the same episode he repeatedly pronounces the name of Sea-man, one of The Super Best Friends, like “semen”, much to the amusement of everyone, to the chagrin of his colleague and despite his pleas to stop; taking into consideration how long it lasted, this can be filed under bullying, a form of politically incorrect behaviour. The *201* episode is the coming of age in politically incorrect behaviour for Jesus; at the episode, he gives a radical solution: “That’s right. Don’t you see, gingers? If you don’t want to be made fun of anymore, all you need are guns and bombs to get people to stop.”

Perhaps the most important element in this representation of Jesus is his availability to go through various experiences that allow Parker and Stone to project onto him their politically incorrect approach. Therefore, the politically incorrect component lies not so much in the intent of the character, but in its enabling configuration.

## Conclusion

Religion is a challenging field to study, and when correlating it with popular culture, the challenge is even greater. The reverse also applies. Throw in *South Park* as case study and religious anarchy is guaranteed. How does Jesus, the humble religious figure of Christianity, fit into this potential mine field? Surprisingly well; simply put: he is right at home in *South Park*.

Over the last two decades animated shows like *The Simpsons*, *Futurama*, *South Park*, *King of the Hill* or *Family Guy* entered the interest horizon of researchers and generated valuable literature, the “... and Philosophy” being a standout in terms of quality and commercial success. In recent years religion was picked up as a prolific perspective for analysis. This is particularly relevant for *South Park*, whose use of religion in its social and cultural satire has been a source of controversy since it was first aired.

Jesus is a reference in almost every analysis of *South Park* that takes into consideration religion. The perspectives are interesting, but the focus is always on religion, while religious figures or ensembles are expedited in a paragraph or page. Although we do not claim to have exhausted all resources, after extensive research the longest material we found on Jesus had less than three pages. The paper will contribute to filling this void and is relevant to any scholar in the field of cultural studies or religious studies interested in the topic.

The papers tries to offer a comprehensive analysis of the representations of Jesus in the *South Park* universe. There are other representations of religion in the show, like the Catholic Church, priests, various religions/cults, popular religious products, but our focus was solely on Jesus and other topics were addressed only if they were relevant to our core selection of episodes containing appearances of Jesus. Using content analysis on this selection, we generated six *South Park*-specific categories (Son of God, one of the townspeople; Host of Jesus and Pals; Son of God, saviour/fighter; Son of God, unrelated to *South Park*; Leader of The Super Best Friends; Member of The Council of Nine) and 3 major themes (Jesus as Greek God, Jesus as Palimpsest and Politically Incorrect Jesus) that define the way Jesus is represented throughout the series.

Jesus of *South Park* is not the stereotypical Jesus of the Bible, but rather a caricature that is enriched with the perspectives of its creators. The objective is not to reinforce traditional representations among the viewers, but to force critical thinking and questioning of their personal set of religious values and beliefs. The show has been accused numerous times of treating religion badly and, by extension, representing Jesus appallingly. Throughout the analysis, we found this to be not exactly true. Parker and Stone's position on religion in general and on Jesus in particular seems to be, at a glance, one of rejection and indiscriminate critique; but when we go further along in the analysis, we come to the conclusion that their position is a combination of agnosticism, humanism and religious pluralism, sprinkled with inherited Christian and Jewish traditions. This combination informs the multiple representations of Jesus in *South Park*, but it is not the only construct that does that. The second one refers to the search for truth, authenticity and humility: many episodes that might be marked for being offensive actually explore uncomfortable truths, hypocritical or exploitive positions towards an issue or even the self-congratulatory pat on the back for being just a decent person. The third one deals with the ability generate good: if religion has a constructive impact on the life of those who profess it, the show leaves room for that; however, if it generates negative behaviour ranging from physical aggression to psychological abuse and censorship, then *South Park* will undoubtedly be able to construct satire on that topic. Each of these three elements influences the representations of Jesus throughout the show.

The paper can become a springboard for various other analysis: the representations of other religious figures in *South Park*, a comparison between the results from this research and the representations of Jesus in other animated adult-oriented shows, the extension of the current analysis into merchandising and/or fandom or a reception study in order to analyse how the representations are consumed by the public.

Of course, *South Park* can air a new Jesus episode at any time, it is long overdue, and at that point the analysis can restart.

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