
New Religious Movements in the Town of South Park: Separating the Mainstream from the Marginal

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Abstract: Adult animated television shows such as South Park may come across as crude, juvenile humour, but they also reveal mainstream society's disposition in regards to different social institutions. Building on the understanding that such programs offer viewers a sense of the "cultural climate," this essay examines two South Park episodes—"712" and "912"—that parodied Mormons and Scientologists, respectively, in order to understand how these religions are depicted and interrogate what separates the marginal from the mainstream. In recognition of Mormonism's comparatively positive portrayal, this essay suggests that the group may no longer be profitably studied alongside other new religious movements such as Scientology.

Keywords: animation, mainstream, marginal religions, Mormonism, new religious movements, Scientology, South Park

Although often accused of using crude humour to get cheap laughs, adult animated comedies such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park* can offer insights into contemporary society. [Feltmate \(2017\)](#) argues that animated comedies "give us a sense of the cultural climate," telling us "who is dominant, stupid, and canny in society" (20). Through off-hand jokes or eloquent speeches, these programs identify, reinforce, and satirize prejudices in society.

The *South Park* co-creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker have a long history of mocking religion. This paper examines two episodes, "All About Mormons" (712) and "Trapped in the Closet" (912), which poked fun at Mormons and Scientologists, respectively.¹ Using *South Park* as a gauge of cultural standing, these episodes make it possible to evaluate how mainstream or marginal certain groups are, and to understand why they are seen as such. I suggest that Mormons are valued in the *South Park* universe for having redeeming behaviour such as kindness, honesty, and compassion, even if they might be a little strange. In contrast, Scientologists embody negative behaviour such as greed, deceit, and hostility to the mainstream world. The episodes also value Mormonism's freedom from institutional constraints, in contrast to Scientology's authoritarian leadership. This shift in popular culture representations reflects Mormons being perceived as more closely aligned with other Christian denominations than with NRMs.

Methodology

This paper is based on qualitative content analysis of each episode, and contextualized by research on Mormonism, Scientology, and new religious movements (NRMs) more broadly.² In addition to a close reading of each episode, this paper is supplemented by what [Hall](#)

(1975) calls a “long preliminary soak” in the cultural text of the broader *South Park* universe (15). Both episodes (712 and 912) were viewed on DVD, and transcribed by the author.³ Transcripts were analyzed with specific attention to how each religion was depicted and positioned in reference to the “mainstream” of *South Park*.⁴ Following Feltmate (2017), “this is not a work of content analysis that finds the substantive interpretation of religion . . . in the quantity of the references” but rather it does so by analyzing how references build upon the presumptions that viewers bring, and in turn reinforce particular perceptions of these groups (27).

South Park and Religion

Several books examine how *South Park* tackles issues of philosophy, politics, and religion (Arp 2007; [Arp and Decker 2013](#); [Cogan 2012](#); [Gournelos 2009](#); [Stratynner and Keller 2009](#); [Weinstock 2008](#)). The show represents an important resource to examine the portrayal of religion, due to its long history (23 seasons since 1997), critical accolades (winning five Emmys and a Peabody Award), and commercial success.⁵ [Pinsky \(2005\)](#) calls *South Park* “one of the most religion-fixated shows on the small screen.” According to [Feltmate’s \(2017\)](#) count, 200 of *South Park*’s 257 episodes contain a clear reference to religion, with 41 classified as “religion episodes” (26–27).⁶

A number of authors specifically discuss the episodes explored here, but each is limited by their broad approach. [Jacoby’s \(2007\)](#) essay on “the ethics of belief” discusses 712 as a means of explaining “the burden of proof.” [Curtis and Erion \(2007\)](#) examine 912 in a discussion of satire and free speech. [Cogan \(2012\)](#) uses 912 as a jumping-off point to explain parody and copyright laws.

[Koepsell’s \(2007\)](#) essay on blasphemy and satire in the show compares 712 and 912 directly, noting that similar devices are used to mock each tradition’s beliefs. [Johnson \(2013\)](#) brings the two episodes together in his chapter examining how science and religion intersect, arguing that it is easier to believe that a prophet is lying than to give credence to stories of golden plates or intergalactic overlords (60).

What I believe is lacking in these examples is an examination of religion in *South Park* that is rooted in a detailed analysis of specific episodes. In his book on *South Park* and cultural studies, [Gournelos \(2009\)](#) observes that for many, “the show is a tool through which . . . [scholars] enter into discussions of canonical philosophy rather than a source of discussion in and of itself” (15). Scholars offer introductory essays on broad topics, pulling scenes from various episodes as illustrative points.

[Laycock \(2013\)](#) and [Feltmate \(2011, 2012\)](#), for example, who each tighten the scope of analysis specifically to NRMs, discuss a variety of groups, episodes, or other programs such as *The Simpsons*. This leads to a broader discussion of NRMs rather than a concentrated analysis of Mormonism, Scientology, or any other specific group. Although important insights emerge from their work, this paper is intended as a microscopic approach to two specific episodes and traditions. [Scott’s \(2011\)](#) examination of religiosity in *South Park* concludes by calling for further analysis of how specific denominations are treated (162). I take up his call, replacing “denominations” with analysis of different traditions entirely.

Although there are other episodes where reference is made to Mormonism or Scientology, 712 and 912 are significant, as each group is an episode’s central focus. Also, unlike the fictional “Blaintologists”⁷ (in the episode “Super Best Friends”) or the “Super Adventure Club” (“The Return of Chef”), both groups are identified by name. These episodes offer useful insights due to the direct nature and depth of their references.

Comparisons between Mormonism and Scientology are common (this paper being yet another example). In his discussion of religion and modernization, Stark (1984) notes that both groups succeed in more secularized nations (25). Feltmate (2011, 2017), Johnson-Woods (2007), and Koepsell (2007, 2013) all compare the two directly when discussing *South Park* and religion. In a 2010 stand-up special, David Cross draws the comparison that “Mormonism was the Scientology of its day.” In a recent think piece, Rajan (2018) compares the stigma against Mormonism in Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign to that against a hypothetical Scientologist nominee. These examples highlight a tendency in scholarship and popular culture to conflate the groups as similar, in terms of both internal characteristics and public perception.

This paper builds on Feltmate’s (2017) book discussing adult animated shows and religion. He notes that due to the behaviour of members, “Mormons are welcomed in *South Park*, but Scientologists are not” (211). Although Mormons are mocked, their ultimate redemption (and the lack thereof for Scientologists) suggests that Mormons are no longer inherently comparable to other NRMs. If *South Park* is read as a measuring device, revealing the cultural climate, it appears that Mormons have moved further towards the mainstream than is recognized when scholars categorize the group under the label of NRM.

Feltmate (2017) places Mormonism in a chapter on “cults” rather than in either of two chapters on American Christianity. Wiles (2015) notes that of the many “world religions” textbooks that even discuss Mormonism, most do so in sections devoted to NRMs (12). Even in an article entitled “Meet the Mormons: From the Margin to the Mainstream,” Schmalz (2007) mentions that Mormonism enters his teaching through courses about NRMs (16). Stark’s (2003) discussion of why new religions succeed or fail uses the group as an example of a *successful* NRM, but one wonders if the label has seen its utility outworn in describing Mormonism.

The motivation for comparing Mormons and Scientologists in *South Park* (rather than, for example, Mormons and Catholics) is the continued practice among scholars of categorizing both groups as NRMs, and thereby conflating them as similar. *South Park* treats the two groups as distinct traditions, rather than amalgamations of certain traits, thus challenging the tendency to categorize many diverse traditions under a single label. Some stereotypes are used to depict each group, but the creators also outline their distinctive beliefs and histories. Their distinct representations (and Mormonism’s favourable portrayal) suggests that “NRM” is not as useful a category as it is made out to be.

Religious Humor and Social Regulation

For those unfamiliar with the program, *South Park* revolves around four boys (Stan Marsh, Kyle Broflovski, Kenny McCormick, and Eric Cartman) and their small Colorado town. In his essay on the sociology of humor, Zijderveld (1983) argues that “children are the most uninhibited and therefore ‘honest’ and ‘reliable’ couriers of jokes” (47). Bruce’s (2001) examination of the Road Runner as cultural critique argues that cartoons (which he calls a “children’s medium”) “can do forbidden and disruptive things because unlike ‘adult’ media they are not taken seriously” (231). *South Park* combines children and animation to critique contemporary society.

South Park has been called an “equal opportunity offender,” meaning that it makes all groups the subject of ridicule (Feltmate 2017, 8). All offenses, however, are not created equal, and being the butt of a joke can have drastically different effects depending on context. Cowan (2005) notes that the Christian countercult celebrated 712 as an attack on their religious rivals, but argues that this was a re-purposing of the episode’s intended message (7).

Both episodes make religious groups the punchline, but to different degrees. There is even disagreement over which group was treated “better,” with [Johnson-Woods \(2007\)](#) and [Koepsell \(2007\)](#) respectively seeing Mormons or Scientologists getting short shrift.⁸ This discrepancy necessitates a closer examination, in part to assess which group is more marginal, but more importantly, to investigate what *South Park* considers grounds for marginalization.

The program’s depiction of religion has been well documented by scholars ([Cowan 2005](#); [DeLashmutt and Hancock 2008](#); [Feltmate 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2017](#); [Gournelos 2009](#); [Johnson-Woods 2007](#); [Laycock 2013](#); [Lipoma 2009](#); [Scott 2011](#)). [Feltmate \(2017\)](#) argues that religion in *South Park* is accepted and even valued when “imaginative creativity is used to make the world a better and more meaningful place”; however, when imaginative creativity is “twisted for exploitative purposes . . . [religions] become problems that need to be satirized” (66). [Scott \(2011\)](#) argues that *South Park*’s portrayal of religion is “consistent with postmodern religious culture, that is, one that resists institutional religion while encouraging personal spiritual religious practice” (153). [DeLashmutt and Hancock \(2008\)](#) similarly argue that “authentic religion is not about institutions or hierarchies, but about stories and practices that guide” the lives of individuals (184). [Koepsell \(2013\)](#) adds that the creators “mock not the belief but the believer, and credit the believer where their lives reflect good, ethical, practice” (107).

Equally important is one’s ability to accept criticism. [Lipoma \(2009\)](#) explains that to the creators, “as long as others’ beliefs don’t interfere with our right to refute (or even laugh at) them, the *seeking itself* connects us even to those espousing outlandish beliefs” (22). Comparing the depictions of Mormons and Scientologists reinforces the point that *behaviours* rather than *beliefs* are the main subject of critique.

These episodes serve the purpose of boundary maintenance ([Cowan 2005, 12](#)). Boundary maintenance is often facilitated through “the fool,” which [Klapp \(1949\)](#) describes as a “social type.” *South Park* is ultimately a comedy, and the show’s goal is to make people laugh. [Feltmate \(2012\)](#) argues that by pointing out incongruity in others’ beliefs (and reinforcing the superiority of mainstream beliefs), laughter relieves the tension arising “from our fear that cults lurk within our midst” (211). Through ridicule, *South Park* separates Mormons and Scientologists from mainstream ideals.

To be sure, the show ridicules *mainstream* religions as well. In various episodes, Jesus’ miracles are shown as less impressive than David Blaine’s illusions (“Super Best Friends”; [Parker and Stone 2001](#)) and Cartman demonstrates how easy it is to exploit Christians (“Christian Rock Hard”; [Parker and Stone 2003a](#)). In most cases, religions are depicted as having irrational beliefs, as when the boys conclude from their communion lesson that “Jesus was crackers” ([Parker and Stone 2000a](#)). At times, specific institutions are critiqued, either for perpetuating irrational beliefs or for complicity in promoting/hiding immoral behaviour. The Catholic Church is often singled out as a specific body for ridicule, as [Feltmate \(2013a\)](#) examines in great detail.

Boundary maintenance in 712 and 912 functions less to critique two specific belief systems than to comment on the *behaviours* encouraged by certain groups. A group that is separated as “different” is not necessarily made out to be evil. Further, boundary maintenance is not static. Both groups are depicted as laughable, but Mormonism demonstrates that one can overcome this initial assessment and be redeemed through certain actions.

Off-screen, Mormonism has consciously transformed in order to blend into mainstream America while Scientology has not, which is reflected in how characters behave on screen. These differences shape each group’s depiction. Mormons in the show reflect good, ethical, behaviour, which affords them the last laugh. Scientology is taken to task for its secrecy, litigious tendencies and opposition to criticism.

The “Cult Stereotype” in Popular Media

As a pop culture product, *South Park* relies on what Berger and Luckmann (1966) refer to as “recipe knowledge,” or “the sum total of ‘what everybody knows’ about a social world, an assemblage of maxims, morals, proverbial nuggets of wisdom” (83). Fine and de Soucey (2005) note that joking is referential, meaning that creators and audiences need shared references (3–4). In presenting recipe knowledge to a wide audience, *South Park* relies on what Feltmate (2010) calls “ignorant familiarity.” People do not know very much about any particular religion, but have an overall familiarity with the range of traditions that they may encounter (57). Audiences will likely not have read *The Book of Mormon* or *Dianetics*, but will know enough about each group to understand jokes at its expense. In these episodes, recipe knowledge includes awareness of leaders (Joseph Smith or L. Ron Hubbard); practices (Family Home Evening or auditing); and traits (happy families or the religion of celebrities).

Stereotypes play out within a fictional context, but have the ability to affect a group’s off-screen perception. Ford (2000) found that “exposure to sexist humor increased approval or tolerance of an instance of sex discrimination,” adding that “[d]isparagement of social groups through humor . . . expands the bounds of socially appropriate behavior” (1106). Murtagh’s essay on *South Park*’s “blasphemous humor” (2013) adds that denigration of religions through humour can “lead people to be less tolerant” when dealing with certain groups (113). Morreall (2009), referring to racist and sexist jokes, argues that “humor’s play frame allows prejudicial ideas to be slipped into people’s heads without being evaluated,” allowing the very creation of stereotypes (107).

By conflating religions with particular behaviours, *South Park* cements powerful and lasting images. Common stereotypes about NRMs include brainwashing, violence, sexual deviance, and the suspicion that they represent a threat to society (Dawson 2006). Examining religion in *The Simpsons*, Dalton, Mazur, and Siems (2011) invoke Geertz’s “intrinsic double aspect” of cultural products, asking whether the show *reflects* or *shapes* our attitudes towards religions (240). The use of stereotypes against NRMs in popular media is an element of what Laycock (2013) calls deviance amplification (85).⁹ This involves selecting examples of deviant behaviour and presenting (or distorting) them in such a manner that “a handful of peripheral cases [are] representative of a larger social problem” (84). Through this process, “individuals report strongly negative attitudes about a particular religious group, despite having never encountered a member” (85).

Wright (1997) argues that the media largely function to “galvanize antipathy” towards NRMs, with superficial negative depictions dominating airtime (105). In *South Park*, however, stereotypes work in two ways. Mormons are depicted as wholesome, loving, and open to criticism, while Scientologists are made out to be secretive, nefarious, and litigious.

The Religions’ Respective Backgrounds

Although the show trusts audiences to have an “ignorant familiarity” with each group, references are better contextualized by understanding each group’s history.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The Latter-day Saints (LDS) Church dates back to the 1820s and its prophet, Joseph Smith (1805–44). Smith claimed to have a series of revelations—being visited by the angel Moroni, God, and Jesus. He was told of golden plates buried in upstate New York (eventually translated into *The Book of Mormon*) and was instructed to form a new Church.

From its founding, followers were persecuted by outsiders. Mormons were pushed further West, moving from Ohio to Missouri to Illinois. Following Smith's assassination at the hands of a mob, the group migrated across the continent, settling in the Salt Lake Valley. In the early Utah period, Mormons were isolated, but as the United States expanded west, they came into increasing conflict with outsiders. Pressure from the federal government led to the repeal of doctrines such as plural marriage in order for Utah to be granted statehood.¹⁰

Throughout the twentieth century, Mormons have oscillated between mainstream acceptance (with the growth in popularity of Mormon celebrities such as the Osmonds) and conflict/tension (peaking during controversial episodes such as Mormon opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972 or support of California's Proposition 8 in 2008).¹¹ Despite decades of tension, many heralded Romney's 2012 Presidential campaign as a sign that Mormons were officially mainstream (see, for example, [Beam 2012](#); [Stolberg 2012](#); [Young 2012](#); [Zoll 2012](#)).

The Church of Scientology

Scientology dates back to the 1950s and its founder, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–86). Hubbard's book, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*, presented a theory of the mind and a series of therapeutic techniques.¹² Offering a summary, [Whitehead \(1974\)](#) explains that in order to "clear" a person of psychosomatic sicknesses, they have to undergo a process of auditing, which involves examining past "engramic incidents" (575). Those who adopted Hubbard's theories required a framework for their practices, leading to the creation of training courses, the formalization of the Church of Scientology, and a shift from describing itself as a therapeutic technique to describing itself as a formal religion ([Melton 2000](#), 9).

Persecution of Scientology centres on its dismissal as a "real" religion. Early congregations were granted tax-exempt status, but the IRS withdrew this in 1958. Thus, [Melton \(2000\)](#) explains, began "a string of appeals, investigations, and litigation" (13). In the 1960s, Scientology spread from America to Europe, with churches established in places such as France, Denmark, Sweden, and Germany (22). Scientology saw success in terms of growth, but a concomitant series of legal battles in new locales, where it was often labelled a "dangerous cult" ([Palmer 2009](#), 298). Persecution has come from the anti-cult movement, ex-members, state governments, and the field of psychiatry (43–50). Although its US tax-exempt status was reinstated, members have faced discrimination in terms of hiring or freedom of movement in places such as Germany, the United Kingdom, and France.¹³ Critics continue to question Scientology's status as a legitimate religion. [Groh \(2012\)](#) reports that 70% of Americans say it is not a "true religion."

The Episodes in Question

Episode 712—All About Mormons

This episode alternates between two narratives: the Harrison family's arrival in South Park, and Joseph Smith's discovery of *The Book of Mormon*. Stan tries to beat up Gary Harrison, but the new kid surprisingly accepts his "initiation rite" and invites Stan over for dinner.¹⁴ Stan provides an opportunity to describe Mormonism to outsiders. Thus begins the tale of Smith's revelations, which in typical *South Park* fashion receives musical accompaniment.

The retelling begins: "Joseph Smith was called a prophet, dum-dum-dum-dum-dum; He started the Mormon religion, dum-dum-dum-dum-dum."¹⁵ Smith announces that God sent an angel advising him where to find golden tablets.¹⁶ Stan returns home and asks his parents why they never told him about Smith.¹⁷ Randy (Stan's father), upset by these new beliefs, leaves to go "kick Mr. Harrison's ass."

Randy's confrontation fails as he is overwhelmed by the Harrisons' kindness. Mr. Harrison explains, "the last thing we want is for people to think we're pushing our religion. We know there's a lot of beliefs out there . . . ours just works for us." Randy learns that Smith went to Martin Harris for money and assistance to publish the new scripture. Smith sticks his head in a top hat and translates the plates while Harris transcribes.¹⁸

Randy tells the Harrisons' that Stan still has doubts. Mr. Harrison says this is because he has not heard the *final* part of the story. Harris shows the translations to his wife, Lucy, who asks: "how do you know he isn't just . . . *pretending*?" She hides the pages, challenging Smith to re-translate. Smith tells Harris, "we must now translate from the plate of Nephi, so it will be the same *basic* story, but written a *little* differently."

Stan exclaims, "Mormons actually *know* this story and still believe Joseph Smith was a prophet?!" The eldest son explains: "it's all a matter of faith." Stan retorts, "no, it's a matter of logic. If you're gonna say things that have been proven wrong, like that the first man and woman lived in Missouri and that Native Americans came from Jerusalem, then you better have something to back it up."

When Gary next sees Stan, he explains, "maybe us Mormons do believe in crazy stories that make absolutely no sense . . . The truth is, I don't care if Joseph Smith made it all up, because what the church teaches now is loving your family, being nice, and helping people . . . even though people in *this* town might think that's stupid, I still choose to believe in it. All I ever did was try to be your friend Stan, but . . . you couldn't look past my religion and just be my friend back. You got a lot of growing up to do buddy. Suck my balls." The episode closes with Cartman exclaiming, "Damn, that kid is cool, huh?"

Episode 912—Trapped in the Closet¹⁹

Stan walks by two Scientology representatives who ask if he wants a free personality test.²⁰ They ask him a number of nebulous questions, including "Do you ever make remarks, which you later regret?" and "Does life sometimes feel vague and confusing to you?" Answering yes, Stan is informed that he is "totally depressed," and a perfect candidate for Scientology (provided he pays for further steps).

The next day, a representative explores Stan's negative experiences, using an E-meter to measure his Thetan levels.²¹ Stan's results are sent to "the President" in Los Angeles, who reveals that Stan's Thetan levels are as high as Hubbard's. He declares Stan to be Hubbard's reincarnation.

In South Park, Stan's house is surrounded by Scientologists. The President tells Stan a story involving Lord Xenu, a galactic federation of planets, and frozen alien souls who are taken to a brainwashing facility, get released, and attach themselves to humans. Animations of this story are accompanied by the subtitle "THIS IS WHAT SCIENTOLOGISTS ACTUALLY BELIEVE." Trapped alien souls, the President explains, are the causes of all our fears, confusions, and problems.

The President asks Stan to continue writing the story, and is thrilled with Stan's additions until he adds, "I wrote that all Scientologists should no longer have to pay money . . . I realized that to really be a church, we can't charge people." The President exclaims "What are you, stupid?" adding "Those people out there buy that crap but I thought you were smart." He explains that Scientology is a money-making scam, and a reincarnated founder gives new teachings legitimacy. Stan relents, and promises to finish writing.

Reading his new teachings to the crowd, Stan suddenly announces, "I'm not the reincarnation of L. Ron Hubbard and Scientology is just a big fat global scam." Expecting thanks, the crowd instead threatens to sue him. Stan challenges the angry mob: "I'm not scared of you!"

Sue me!” At this point, the credits roll, and every position, such as Director or Voices, is listed as either John or Jane Smith.

Separating Mainstream from Marginal

Both groups are ridiculed, but as mentioned, Mormons come across more favourably. Critiques are leveled much more assertively at Scientology, and there are a number of areas in which Scientology is attacked while Mormonism escapes unscathed.

Belief Structures

South Park uses comedy to suggest that each group’s beliefs should be considered ridiculous. Jokes about religious beliefs, [Feltmate \(2013b\)](#) explains, helps “transform them from sacred institutions into human constructions” (543). This robs a religion (and its followers) of respectability.

Each section of Joseph Smith’s story is accompanied by the “dumb-dumb-dumb” refrain. The townsfolk’s commentary (“Well yeah, sure, why would he make that up?”) highlights the gullibility of early converts. Lucy Harris (whose challenge to Smith receives the accompaniment: “Lucy Harris: smart-smart-smart-smart-smart-smart-smart-smart . . . Martin Harris: dumb-da-dumb”) stands in for a modern, skeptical audience ([Parker and Stone 2003b](#)).

Scientology’s founding story is drawn to emphasize its science-fiction elements rather than its religious precepts. The subtitle on screen makes explicit the assertion that these beliefs are absurd. Although the creators present reasonably accurate representations of beliefs, comedic devices rob them of respectability.

Oddly Upbeat Followers

Both groups are mocked for members’ upbeat behaviour, reflecting a common charge against NRMs. [Barker \(1984\)](#) discusses “love bombing,” a recruitment tactic that the Unification Church is accused of using. It involves members acting extremely nice to potential newcomers in hopes that they will join. The question for outsiders becomes, is happiness just an act to lure converts?

The Harrisons are always laughing and thrilled to see Stan. Stan sees them enjoying Family Home Evening, a tradition that Randy attempts to introduce to the Marsh household. Randy points to their happiness and cohesion as reasons that he wanted to convert. Stan yells at the Harrisons in frustration: “You just weasel people into your way of thinking by acting like the happiest family in the world . . . [and] blindside dumb people like my dad.” When the Harrisons leave the Marsh house and the door slams in their faces, the father sighs, and then asks, “who’s up for a water balloon fight?” ([Parker and Stone 2003b](#)). Even behind closed doors, they remain upbeat.

Representatives at the Scientology centre treat each other and potential members as long-time friends, but this does not last. Once Stan suggests that members should not have to pay, the President calls him stupid. When Stan calls Scientology a scam, the crowd threatens to sue him. An upbeat attitude is abandoned when they are challenged. *South Park* suggests that Mormons are genuinely positive, but for Scientologists, it is a façade.

Cult as Negative Designation

[Van Driel and Richardson \(1988\)](#) outline a number of characteristics used to describe NRMs in print media, including charismatic leadership, psychological manipulation, authoritarianism,

preoccupation with wealth, and fear/hatred of the outside world (177). Lewis (2003) calls the cult stereotype an “ideological resource,” which can be used to delegitimize groups, conflating them with a package of stereotypes, including brainwashing, sexual impropriety and economic exploitation (206). Even being labelled a “cult” places an enormous gap between such groups and “real” religions.

In 912, Stan’s friends express concerns about his new “cult.” Kyle warns, “Hubbard . . . lived on a boat with only young boys and got busted by the feds numerous times” (Parker and Stone 2005b). Kyle’s accusation suggestively ties Scientology to certain traits. “Stereotypical elements makes the illegitimacy of cults clear,” Neal (2011) writes, “they are not legitimate or typical religions, but rather fiscal and sexual scams” (87). Referring to young boys and raids by the feds, Kyle implies that Scientology is one or both.

In 712, Randy remarks, “You gotta put these cult people in their place or else they never stop” (Parker and Stone 2003b). However, the “cult” label is never repeated after Randy actually meets the Harrisons. Smith asking Martin Harris for money suggests that Mormonism may have *begun* as a fiscal scam, but this accusation is fleeting, thereby avoiding potential ammunition for critique.

Asked in an interview to summarize 912, Parker explains, “so now [Stan’s] actually not just in the cult; he’s leading the cult” (Gillespie and Walker 2006). In interviews regarding Mormons, Parker and Stone speak glowingly about the group.²² On-screen and off, the creators selectively level the “cult” accusation against Scientology.

Revealed Beliefs

Scientology is significantly distinguished from Mormonism by the guarded nature of its beliefs, highlighting key off-screen differences. The Harrisons openly share the story of Smith’s discovery, confront parts of the story that appear baffling to outsiders, and are continually willing to answer questions. The LDS Church has adopted a doors-open policy since the mid-twentieth century. The Church’s beliefs and scriptures are available on its Web site.²³ Mormonism has some practices that remain secret (such as temple ordinances, which take place for the initiated behind closed doors), but these rituals make up a fraction of Mormonism’s belief structure.²⁴ Regarding its attitude towards revealing beliefs, Mauss (1994) argues that the Church is primarily concerned that its “image should be clear, distinctive, and well represented” (199). The Church opted for transparency in hopes that understanding would lead to acceptance.

In 912, Stan must pay \$240 for auditing after his free personality test. Only Stan is told the story of Xenu; even his parents are asked to leave the room. When Stan’s friends ask to learn the “secret truth,” he responds, “I can’t tell you unless you pay for a few years of audit counselling” (Parker and Stone 2005b). Before announcing Stan’s new “teachings,” the President explains that the rest will be available for a nominal fee. The viewer is continually informed that members need to be part of the church for a long time (and pay large sums of money)²⁵ before hearing the complete story.²⁶

Scientology’s beliefs are only revealed as believers move along the Bridge to Total Freedom, based on the argument from leaders that one can only properly understand teachings when they are revealed gradually (Rothstein 2009, 369). This approach negatively affects Scientology’s perception. “Once a group engages in secrecy,” Feltmate (2010) comments, “everything it says is suspect. Separating fact from fiction is difficult because true statements can be dismissed as a way of protecting secrets” (168).

Westbrook (2018) discusses a “bunker mentality” among Scientologists that causes insularity and aversion to social engagement (381). Doherty (2014) notes that while Hubbard was

initially happy to court publicity, he “quickly soured to the media” in the mid-1960s and announced that the group would be quick to sue for slander at the slightest provocation (40). [Urban \(2006\)](#) argues that a “preoccupation with secrecy” is connected to the tradition’s roots in Cold War America (363). Although Mormonism changed its approach to revealing beliefs, Scientology remains firmly committed to the outlook of its early history.²⁷ *South Park* embraces Mormonism’s openness and critiques Scientology’s secrecy.

The policy of paying to learn is another source of criticism. Critics charge that Scientology only began to self-identify as a religion to allow Hubbard to protect the money received for services ([Melton 2000](#), 55). [Cowan and Bromley \(2015\)](#) add that Scientology’s policy of paying to advance through “levels” means that to many, “it just doesn’t look like a religion” (34). In 912, a representative tells Stan that Scientology is more “an alternative to psychology” than a religion, and quickly changes the topic when Stan points out a “Church of Scientology” poster on the wall ([Parker and Stone 2005b](#)). Even among on-screen members, its status as a “real religion” is ambiguous.

Why beliefs are revealed in the episodes is another important difference. The Harrisons only share their faith in response to the Marshes’ curiosity. When Randy asks the Harrisons not to discuss religion with Stan, they apologetically and happily oblige. Scientologists, on the other hand, are waiting on a sidewalk to administer personality tests. They guilt Stan into learning (and paying) more by convincing him that he is depressed. Given the stereotype of Mormon missionaries, it is noteworthy that Scientologists are shown as the group that “pushes” their faith, while Mormons are simply there to answer questions. The creators side-step a potential criticism of Mormons, but offer it as a reproach against Scientology.

Response to Criticism

Another key difference is how each group reacts to criticism. When Stan tells Tom Cruise he is only an “okay” actor, Cruise declares himself “a failure in the eyes of the prophet,” and storms into the closet ([Parker and Stone 2005b](#)). The President, assembled crowd, and Cruise all announce their plans to sue Stan for “mocking” their faith. At the slightest hint of criticism, Scientologists buckle.

[Melton \(2000\)](#) explains that Scientology has been embroiled in a number of highly publicized court cases, adding that this has created “an image as an extremely litigious organization” (37). “It has been said,” [Richardson \(2009\)](#) adds, “that Scientology uses legal action as a weapon against those with whom it has disagreements” (283). When Scientology’s US tax-exempt status was reinstated, it was a result of over 2,000 lawsuits against the IRS, which members agreed to drop if they received that status ([Cogan 2012](#), 64).

A sizable portion of these lawsuits were not initiated by the Church, but by individuals ([Melton 2000](#), 37). This suggests not only a litigious organization, but members who see themselves within what [Cowan \(2009\)](#) calls a mythistory of persecution and harassment (68). The church has also been accused of using “extralegal actions” against critics, including intimidation, threats, and illegal background checks ([Doherty 2014](#), 40). With a final joke in the closing credits, the creators essentially say to Scientologists, “we know you have a history of lawsuits against critics, but we are not scared of you.” In fact, this reputation is a major *reason* for mockery.²⁸

In 712, the creators outline how they feel one *should* respond to criticism. Upon hearing Stan’s skepticism, the Harrisons exclaim, “it’s great you have your own beliefs!” They accept that their beliefs seem ridiculous, acknowledging, “ours just works for us” ([Parker and Stone 2003b](#)). After facing Stan’s criticism, Gary is awarded the privilege of the closing monologue.

In his examination of Mormon-produced films, Givens (2007) argues that Mormons “show a healthy capacity for self-mockery” (273).²⁹ Mormons not only face criticism, but do it with a smile. *South Park* rewards their being able to “take the joke.”

Theological Accommodations

A noteworthy omission from *South Park*’s depiction of Mormonism is any reference to the practice of plural marriage (discontinued by the LDS Church in 1890 but still practiced by what are termed “Mormon fundamentalists”). The episode depicts the early years of Smith’s prophethood and a modern Mormon family, thereby avoiding any references to polygamy.

This omission is important, considering the show’s use of recipe knowledge. TV shows such as *Big Love* or *Sister Wives* demonstrate that polygamy constitutes ignorant familiarity with Mormonism for audiences.³⁰ That 712 avoids the topic demonstrates that in some circles, Mormons have shed this stereotype. This is significant considered alongside Kyle’s charge that Hubbard lived on a boat with young boys. One group’s sexually deviant past has been ignored, while another’s remains ammunition for critique.

Shedding the practice of plural marriage was a call for Mormons to assimilate into mainstream culture. Leone (1979) argues that Mormonism’s outlook shifted beginning in the late nineteenth century. “As an institution, it had to realize,” he writes, “that it could not be American on its own terms, but only on America’s” (27). Expanding on the process of accommodation, Mauss (1989) explains that Mormons “gave up polygamy, theocracy, and collectivist economic experiments . . . In return, Utah achieved statehood, less harassment, and more toleration” (33).³¹

Karen D. Austin (2010), writing about Mormons on reality TV, argues that Mormons succeed “when they give up those parts of their identity that are judgmental, self-righteous and sexually repressive—but hold onto the parts that are strong willed, close knit, and mutually supportive” (194–95). Mormonism may have stereotypical “cult” elements in its past, but at least to *South Park*’s creators, these elements have been left behind. As Gary points out, Mormonism’s history matters less than what his faith teaches him: love your family, be nice, and help people. Based on Mormonism’s willingness to accommodate to these mainstream ideals, *South Park* avoids negative stereotypes. None of the Mormons shown are polygamist missionaries, but every Scientologist is angry and quick to sue.

The avoidance of Mormon stereotypes ties into another significant difference between each group. Although the Harrisons self-identify as “Mormons,” the institutional Church to which they belong remains ambiguous. Scientologists, in contrast, are all directly affiliated with the Church of Scientology.³² Mormons are associated with personal spirituality (free from institutional constraints), while Scientologists are strongly identified with a hierarchical organization. This is yet another way in which the creators align Mormonism with mainstream ideals of religion, while casting aspersions on Scientology.

The Broader *South Park* Universe

The other times that *South Park* featured these religions reinforce the idea that Mormons are worthy of acceptance, but that Scientologists are “litigious jerks” and rightfully the subject of ridicule.

Mormons in South Park

At various points in the program, Mormons are shown to be the only religion that “got it right” and are admitted into South Park’s version of Heaven.³³ This tongue-in-cheek

acknowledgement of the validity of Mormon beliefs also implicitly validates the positive behaviours of members.

The episode “Super Best Friends” features a “religious Justice League,” called upon to fight David Blaine and his new “cult.” The group consists of Jesus, Moses, Muhammad, Buddha, Laozi, Krishna, and Joseph Smith.³⁴ The inclusion of Smith among more recognized prophets acknowledges Mormonism as one of the world’s “real” religions. Smith being called upon to help stop a dangerous cult reinforces Mormonism’s status as acceptable, in contrast to NRMs.

Scientists in South Park

Stan’s closing speech about “Blaintologists” shares similarities with his speech in 912 by attacking Scientology’s pay-for-service policy. Stan warns the crowd, “Cults are dangerous because they promise you hope, happiness, and maybe even an afterlife. But in return, they demand you pay money. Any religion that demands you pay money in order to move up and learn its tenets is wrong” (Parker and Stone 2001).

Scientology also receives criticism in “The Return of Chef.” This episode revolves around the long-time character Chef (voiced by Isaac Hayes) becoming part of the “Super Adventure Club,” which secretly promotes child molestation.³⁵ The boys attempt to rescue Chef, but they are too late and he has been brainwashed. In a eulogy, Stan declares, “We shouldn’t be mad at Chef for leaving us. We should be mad at that fruity little club for scrambling his brains” (Parker and Stone 2006). Scientology is once again accused of molesting boys, and now brainwashing as well.³⁶

This episode has important off-screen referents. Following the release of 912, Hayes (a member of Scientology) left *South Park*, citing its “intolerance and bigotry towards religious beliefs” (BBC News 2006).³⁷ Commenting on Hayes’s decision, Stone simultaneously critiques Scientology more broadly: “In 10 years and over 150 episodes of *South Park*, Isaac never had a problem with the show making fun of Christians, Muslim, Mormons or Jews . . . He got a sudden case of religious sensitivity when it was his religion featured on the show” (BBC News 2006). Scientologists are again derided for not being able to handle ridicule.

South Park on Broadway

No discussion of Parker, Stone, and Mormons would be complete without a brief mention of their smash-hit Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*. Interviews with the pair offer further insight into how they view Mormons.

In a 2013 interview, Stone comments, “The church’s position on our *Book of Mormon* is exactly the way I would want a church to react to a . . . major piece of pop culture criticism” (BBC Two 2013). When asked if the pair expected this warm reception, Parker responds, “There were some people going ‘oh man, what do you think the Mormons are gonna do?’ We were like, ‘nothing, they’re gonna be cool about it’” (ABC News Australia 2017). ABC also interviewed Chris Stuart (Public Affairs Director for the Church in Victoria) regarding his reaction to the play’s Australian opening. Stuart comments, “Whilst it’s not the ideal launching point for us . . . it is a great opportunity for us to be a part of the conversation” (ABC News Australia 2017). The creators embrace Mormonism for welcoming opportunities for dialogue.

Mainstream Mormons

South Park may just be an animated, profanity-filled show, but it is an important reflection of mainstream ideals. The show outlines which groups are marginal, but more importantly,

explains why they are positioned as such. It is people's behaviour, rather than their religious beliefs, that *South Park* sees as paramount in separating marginal from mainstream. [Feltmate \(2017\)](#) argues, "Ignorant familiarity about cults in the modern era does not emphasize their theological differences with mainstream religions so much as it stresses dangerous social behaviors" (183). Scientology is mocked for not only holding absurd beliefs, but hiding these beliefs, charging money to learn them, and engaging in illicit activities. Additionally, the group continuously threatens legal action against critics.

Mormons are given credit for being able to face scrutiny and are welcomed into the mainstream. Cartman spends the episode bullying Gary, but by adopting mainstream behaviours of the town (directing profanity at Stan), Gary becomes cool. Discussing Gary's closing speech in an interview, Parker states, "If a religion's going to take over the world, and the one that really believes 'just be super nice to everyone' takes over, that's all right with me" ([Gillespie and Walker 2006](#)). Positive behaviour earns respect.

A variety of factors have yielded results in Mormons becoming mainstream. [Mauss \(1994\)](#) notes that individual Mormons' upward socioeconomic mobility placed the institutional church on "virtual parity with such high-status denominations as the Episcopalian and Presbyterian" (22). [Mauss \(1989\)](#) also points to Mormonism's mainstream approval garnered through the Tabernacle Choir, advertising campaigns, TV specials, and church publications highlighting individual Mormon success in government, business, athletics, music, and entertainment (34). If economic success or visibility were all that it took to be mainstream, however, Scientology's many celebrity members should help its overall perception. [Haws \(2013\)](#) adds a wrinkle to this formula. The LDS Church's Public Affairs department underwent a strategic shift in the mid-1990s to open dialogues with outsiders and explain Mormon beliefs, which has been a key factor in Mormonism's mainstream transition (8).

Mormonism is not *entirely* mainstream, as 712 makes clear. Various characters remark on the Harrisons' strangeness. Mormons seek to maintain a degree of "separate" or "peculiar" status ([Givens 2007](#), xvi). The challenge for Mormons, [Haws \(2013\)](#) explains, is how to "navigate the American mainstream as a 'peculiar' but not 'pariah' people" (5). [Mauss \(1994\)](#) identifies elements that he calls "folk Mormonism" that allow Mormons to balance assimilation with commitment to their faith. These include activities such as Family Home Evening, a uniquely Mormon practice that strongly mirrors mainstream ideals—that is, family bonds (71). The Harrisons embody difference through an upbeat attitude and Family Home Evening, but they have abandoned other "peculiar" antisocial tendencies from Mormonism's past.

Regarding outsider perceptions of Mormons, [Haws \(2013\)](#) observes that in the twenty-first century, "while opinions of the LDS institution tended toward the negative, opinions of LDS individuals had been consistently more positive" (236). This trend reflects broader observations about how religion is viewed in mainstream society. Personal spirituality is valued, while institutions are resisted. In *South Park*, Mormons benefit from being portrayed as a free-thinking family rather than a collection of members whose actions mirror their autocratic leaders.

Due to the positive values embodied by *individual* Mormons, the image of the group stands in line with mainstream ideals. Both groups have beliefs that are easy fodder for mockery, but positive values engender respect for Mormons, and elicit a comparatively positive depiction. Scientology's beliefs are seen as promoting secrecy, aversion to dialogue, and suing critics.

Reconsidering the Mormonism–Scientology Comparison

In his essay evaluating the usefulness of the term in describing Mormonism, [Wiles \(2015\)](#) argues that the NRM category is "one into which the world religions discourse can place groups

that are properly religious, yet do not have the approval of the dominant nodes of power" (18). J.Z. Smith (2004) reinforces the term's power politics, observing that although "New Religions" is the second-largest category in the *Dictionary of Religion* (after Christianity), more than a third of entries include groups that are Christian, but are left out of "Christianity's more centrist list of entries" (172). Smith and Wiles suggest that the category is less a chronological indicator than a marker of social approval. Although scholars continue to label Mormonism as a NRM, the group *has* gained the approval of some "nodes of power," and fits into *South Park*'s centrist list of "Super Best Friends."

These episodes show that the faith is no longer inherently comparable to Scientology. Media stereotypes of NRMs (greedy/dishonest leaders, brainwashing, and moral deviance) are absent in *South Park*'s depiction of Mormons. Only the first trait is potentially relevant, and then only to the depiction of Joseph Smith. Scientology, conversely, is accused of all three. *South Park* applies many of van Driel and Richardson's (1988) characteristics to Scientology (charismatic leadership, psychological manipulation, preoccupation with wealth, hostility to the outside world), but few, if any, to Mormonism.

If NRM stereotypes are no longer relevant to popular portrayals of Mormonism, then perhaps the label is no longer useful in the group's scholarly study. The main basis on which *South Park* mocks Mormons is their positive attitude and "irrational" foundational narrative. In this way, they are not all that different from *South Park*'s Priest Maxi or Springfield's Ned Flanders. Priest Maxi exists within *South Park*'s vision of a morally bankrupt Catholic Church (and in episodes such as "Do the Handicapped Go to Hell?" is guilty of indiscretions himself),³⁸ but there are times when he is a crusader on the side of good. In "Red Hot Catholic Love" he is the sole voice of reason among Catholic leadership, fighting *against* the perpetuation of sexual abuse. In a passage of which Gary Harrison would surely approve, he explains, "Stories . . . are meant to help guide people in the right direction, love your neighbor, be a good person. That's it. And when you start turning the stories into literal translations of hierarchies and power, well, you end up with this" (Parker and Stone 2002). Positive behaviours are valued and institutions critiqued.

There are numerous instances in *The Simpsons* where Ned Flanders is made out to be a (dangerously/annoyingly) conservative Christian, but there are also cases where his actions (rooted in his faith), are redeeming. In "Homer Loves Flanders," Homer defends Ned against the town's critics by saying that if everybody were like Ned, "there'd be no need for heaven, we'd already be there" (Archer 1994). In episodes such as this, Feltmate (2017) notes that Christianity is embraced because "Ned is using his religion to be a good person and is not trying to force anybody else to change" (141). This statement is aptly fitting with the Harrisons' depiction in *South Park*.

In addition to a shift in pop-culture stereotypes, recent years have seen a shift of political coalitions. Smith (2014) suggests that religious conservatives "have become reconciled to accepting Mormons as political allies, and even leaders" (290). Smith notes that there is some aversion to Mormon leadership nationwide, but there is less of a mainstream-marginal divide than one along the lines of conservative-liberal (285).

In his summary of Gallup Poll data, Jones (2008) explains that 24% of Americans have a total positive view of Mormons. Although this is almost half that of Methodists (49%), it is closer to that of Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians (39% and 35% respectively) than it is to Scientologists (7% positive). In their review of Pew public opinion data, Keeter and Smith (2007) explain that 53% of Americans have a favourable view of Mormons, compared with 60% towards Evangelical Christians (with no data collected on Scientologists). Recognizing a shift in both fictional depictions and real-world opinions suggests that Mormons are no longer

valuably studied as a NRM, and are perhaps better understood as another conservative Christian denomination.

There appears to be little reason for scholars to ignore what Wiles (2015) calls “taxonomic integrity” and be confined to a label that is no longer useful in describing Mormonism (25). A lack of taxonomic precision applies not only to Mormonism’s lack of damning stereotypes, but also potentially to the way in which Scientology is treated as a distinct group with its own history and identity. Scientology is portrayed using many NRM stereotypes, but in the case of threatening lawsuits or brainwashing Chef, the creators are responding to real events. Scientology is not reduced to a NRM stereotype, but is a distinct tradition on its own. In addition to highlighting Mormonism’s mainstream shift, *South Park*’s distinct approach to both groups perhaps suggests a re-evaluation of the NRM label’s very utility.

Notes

1. Following Feltmate (2017), I use the term “creators” in acknowledgement of the fact that TV shows are the product of the collaborative efforts of numerous individuals such as writers, producers, and animators (29). Johnson-Woods (2007) notes that as many as fifteen to thirty people have a hand in creating each episode (16). Uses of the term “creators” refers to many at -times anonymous individuals who write the jokes and stories that this paper examines. Specific references to the show’s co-creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker will identify them by name.
2. Mormonism is also often identified as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or the LDS Church. With over 15 million members worldwide, the LDS Church is by far the largest and most prominent face of the organization. However, there are several hundred thousand individuals who belong to different denominations in the larger Mormon movement. Due to the fact that the episode in question uses “Mormon” in the title and the Harrisons apply this term to themselves, this paper will use the term “Mormon” and “Mormonism” to refer to members of the LDS Church.
3. Throughout this paper, I refer to “All About Mormons” simply as 712 and “Trapped in the Closet” as 912.
4. Throughout this paper, “*South Park*” refers to the television show, while “South Park” is used to refer to the titular small town that serves as the show’s backdrop.
5. Commercial success of a program can be difficult to quantify, but Johnson-Woods (2007) notes that *South Park* netted around \$100 million over five years in syndication alone, and goes on to claim that the show “made” the Comedy Central network (7–8).
6. This count is current as of the 2014–2015 season.
7. The Blaintologists, who at the command of their leader attempt to commit mass suicide in the Washington, DC reflecting pool, are an amalgam of many different cult stereotypes. From the way members shave their heads and wear similar outfits, to the group’s petitioning for charitable tax status, they combine “cult stereotypes” with details from many real-world NRMs. The -tology of Blaintology and the group’s reliance on members paying money to advance through levels are clearly direct references to Scientology. The fact that Kyle and Cartman, upon joining the group, go door-to-door wearing white shirts and name tags that read “Elder” suggests that Blaintology was an amalgam of many stereotypes that incorporated Mormonism.
8. Koepsell (2007), referring to “Trapped in the Closet,” writes, “by a long shot, this show was more kind to Scientology than was ‘All About Mormons’ to Mormonism” (138). Conversely, according to Johnson-Woods (2007), “Joseph Smith’s story is positively sane compared to L. Ron Hubbard’s” (239).
9. In his discussion of NRMs in popular culture, Laycock acknowledges that he borrows the term “deviance amplification” from the media critic Leslie Wilkins, who coined the phrase in the 1960s.
10. A more comprehensive overview of this early period of Mormon history can be found in *Building the Kingdom*, by Richard and Claudia Bushman (1999).

11. For a deeper discussion of the alternating perceptions of Mormons in mainstream America in the mid- to late twentieth century, see [Haws \(2013\)](#).
12. *Dianetics* is perhaps the most famous text associated with Scientology, but it is neither the first nor the only text. [Melton \(2000\)](#) explains that a short, privately circulated book, *The Original Thesis* was published in 1948 (8). Hubbard would continue to expand on his theories through different publications over the course of his lifetime.
13. For a deeper discussion of Scientology's legal battles in these areas, see Palmer's and Richardson's respective chapters in [Lewis \(2009\)](#).
14. All quotations in this section come from [Parker and Stone \(2003b\)](#).
15. As the story goes on, it is unclear if this should read "dum" or "dumb."
16. In the episode, Smith announces he found a box containing four gold plates with strange writing and two magical seer stones—the urim and the thummim—for translating. As with the rest of the narrative, this is a fairly detailed and faithful retelling of Mormon beliefs about the *Book of Mormon*'s discovery.
17. His parents' response, "God and Jesus don't actually speak to people," is telling. The Marsh family is Catholic and clearly does not share the Mormon belief in modern revelation. This statement reinforces the distance between Mormons and so-called "normal" Christians.
18. This scene is again a more or less faithful retelling of how Mormons believe the *Book of Mormon* was translated. The musical background and the amount of time this tableau stays on screen, however, allow the creators to subtly mock the translation process also. With a humorous vignette of a prophet with his head in a top hat, the creators are able to mock what is usually a revered prophet figure.
19. Although an anonymous family represented Mormonism, 912 mocks celebrity followers of Scientology (and the alleged homosexuality of Tom Cruise and John Travolta). Cruise and Travolta are among the many celebrity followers of Scientology. Both have received negative publicity for their involvement in the group, and both are persistently dogged by rumours that they are closeted homosexuals ([Cusack 2009](#)). *South Park* plays on these rumours throughout the episode as people try to coax Cruise and Travolta to "come out of the closet" in Stan's room. The pop-culture references are multifold, as this episode also parodies R&B singer R Kelly's thirty-three-chapter hip-hop opera "Trapped in the Closet" in which guns are frequently pointed at one character or another. R Kelly narrates parts of the episode through song, but frequently gets frustrated and starts firing a gun in the air. Since such references are beyond the scope of this paper, they will be glossed over in this summary.
20. All quotations in this section come from [Parker and Stone \(2005b\)](#).
21. The depiction of auditing through the use of an E-meter to measure Thetan levels is a fairly faithful representation of off-screen practices. Though it may be presented in a somewhat ridiculous fashion, there are real roots for the practices that *South Park* is parodying. For more information about E-meters and auditing, see the chapter on Scientology in [Cowan and Bromley \(2015\)](#).
22. For instance, Parker and Stone mention in an interview that growing up in Colorado placed them right next to "Mormon Central" ([Gillespie and Walker 2006](#)). The duo discuss not only their long history of interaction with Mormons, but more importantly their positive disposition to the group, in this and many other interviews.
23. These beliefs and the core texts can be found at www.mormon.org/belief. By following a link, a hard copy of *The Book of Mormon* can be obtained for free. Also, much like the work done by Gideons International, *The Book of Mormon* is available in bedside tables at most Marriott hotels ([Durbin 2018](#)).
24. [Leone \(1979\)](#) adds that although these rituals are secret, "their general outline is known" (33). Further, although temples are generally closed off to non-Mormons, the Church holds "open houses" where any visitor can explore the space before each new temple is officially dedicated ([Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints 2018](#)).

25. Urban (2006) notes that each step along the “Bridge to Total Freedom” in Scientology comes at a higher and higher price, estimating a minimum of \$277,000 (but likely more) for the level of OT VIII (372).
26. Interestingly, the current Church of Scientology President David Miscavige’s niece, Jenna Miscavige Hill, claims to have only learned the story of Xenu from *South Park*, highlighting just how secretive the mythology of Scientology is to members (Sirius XM 2013).
27. Westbrook (2018) observes that Scientology has witnessed a recent shift in public relations strategy “in which the church is less concerned with *countering* . . . enemies than in *proselytizing* and focusing on positive contributions” (378). Although this suggests a shift towards a strategy mirroring Mormon efforts, Westbrook also draws attention to continued church attempts “to personally discredit former members” (385). A tension between media outlets that seek to *legitimize the church* and those that seek to *delegitimize opponents* appears to be an ongoing struggle within Scientology. The results in terms of improving perceptions remains to be seen.
28. In a 2012 *60 Minutes* interview, Parker and Stone demonstrate a keen awareness of Scientology’s reputation for lawsuits, which in fact contributed to the way in which Cruise becomes “trapped in the closet.” Parker explains that after being told that they could not call Tom Cruise gay, depict him as flamboyantly homosexual, or even hint that he was “like closeted gay,” they were told by their legal team that they could depict him literally inside of a closet (*60 Minutes* 2012). Even this recurring sight gag was born of awareness of the church’s litigious reputation. In the final joke, the creators turn this reputation against the Church of Scientology by challenging them outright.
29. This strategy has been important off screen for Mormons as well. During Mitt Romney’s 2008 presidential campaign, he made a joke on a radio show that touched upon the Mormon practice of polygamy. Michael Austin (2010) explains the function performed by this joke: “Romney acknowledged the stereotype, showed that he knew it to be false, and demonstrated that he was comfortable enough in that knowledge to laugh at the whole thing” (39).
30. It should be noted that in both cases, the characters depicted are non-LDS Mormons, but they perpetuate the conflation of LDS Mormons with plural marriage. Michael Austin (2010) reinforces the notion of polygamy as ignorant familiarity about Mormons by reference to a 2007 PEW survey that reported that “polygamy” or “bigamy” were the most common responses when people were asked to describe Mormons in a single word (38). The prominence of these stereotypes in the American mind makes *South Park*’s avoidance of the issue all the more noteworthy.
31. Additional changes over the years include the 1978 revelation reversing a ban on the ordination of black males.
32. This conflation is asserted in spite of the development of “Free Zone” Scientology, which involves members following the tenets of Scientology outside of the institutional Church. For more information about this developing movement within Scientology, see the “New Directions in the Study of Scientology” episode of *The Religious Studies Project* podcast (Robertson et al. 2018).
33. This is first revealed in “Probably,” when a gatekeeper of Heaven tells Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and a host of others that they did not pick the right religion and will not be allowed to enter Heaven (Parker and Stone 2000b). This recurring joke of Mormon exclusivity is brought up briefly again in “A Ladder to Heaven” (Parker and Stone 2002) before the policy is finally reversed in “Best Friends Forever” (Parker and Stone 2005a) when God changes the rules to recruit more people for his fight against Satan’s armies. These brief mentions point to the continued positive disposition of the creators towards Mormonism.
34. In addition to their eponymous episode, the Super Best Friends also appear in two episodes in the fourteenth season (200 and 201; Parker and Stone 2010a, 2010b). This two-part episode revolves around controversial depictions of the prophet Muhammad, but also illustrates that years later, Joseph Smith is still considered a legitimate and important prophet in *South Park*.
35. In case the creators did not make the connection between the fictional club and Scientology explicit enough, the explanation of the club’s beliefs is accompanied by the subtitle “This Is What Super Adventure Club Actually Believes” (Parker and Stone 2006).

36. The continued accusations against Scientology regarding the sexual abuse of minors are admittedly difficult ones to parse out. There are many nefarious activities of which Scientology is repeatedly accused by former members, including assault, threats of violence, forced labour, imprisonment, and coerced abortion (Doherty 2014, 44). Accusations of brainwashing appear prominently, as in Leah Remini's docuseries about Scientology (Wagmeister 2016). Accusations of sexual abuse against minors specifically, however, are few and far between. Save for infrequent mentions from vocal ex-members such as Tony Ortega (2017), minor abuse does not appear to be a prominent accusation against Scientology. *South Park's* continued return to this specific cult stereotype suggests an effort at deviance amplification by conflating the group with a particularly damning activity. Despite a lack of evidence, viewers are more likely to give credence to such accusations due to their ignorant familiarity with what "cults do."
37. Hayes was supposedly not the only Scientologist to voice displeasure with "Trapped in the Closet." After the episode was released, a rerun of the episode was pulled from the air, allegedly caused by complaints from Cruise (Usborne 2006). According to rumours, Cruise reached out to Paramount Pictures (a subsidiary of Viacom, owner of *South Park* and Cruise's then upcoming film, *Mission Impossible III*) to pressure the show not to air the episode again (Johnson-Woods 2007, 29). While the episode was briefly pulled from re-runs, the reports that Cruise refused to participate in the press lead-up to *Mission Impossible III* appear to be little more than rumour. Following this brief censorship, the episode was eventually aired again in re-runs (Goldman 2006). The very rumours of Cruise's involvement, however, reinforced a perception of the stereotype that *South Park* pointed out, that Scientologists are quick to resort to legal action when they feel their beliefs are mocked.
38. In this first section of a two-part episode, the boys obsess over how to get into heaven and start their own church after discovering Priest Maxi engaged in sexual intercourse in the confessional booth.

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