

What Parker and Stone were really out to "get" was Broadway. They wanted to create a great musical, which is no surprise to anyone who has watched their TV show and movies for the past decade or so. Parker and Stone squeeze in show stoppers and musical numbers at the drop of a hat in their TV series and the film *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* ranks as one of the best movie musicals of the 1990s. So they created a musical that has hilarious jabs but also features genuine characters with real emotions. A spoof of faith might have been funny but it wouldn't have any emotional punch; you wouldn't really care what happened to some Mormon missionaries in Uganda if the show didn't care either.

SPOILER ALERT: If you're planning to see the show and don't want to know anything about it, don't read on. But if you've seen it or even just listened to the cast album, you probably know 90% of the plot already. Use your best judgment so I don't spoil any fun for you. I'll give you another warning when I reference a twist from the finale.

Still, it wasn't until I started thinking about the way the show tells its story that I realized how *The Book Of Mormon* pulled off the feat of keeping both atheists and people of faith in the same room, smiling and laughing. In short, they did it by putting the most scandalous language in the mouths of unbelievers who need to be saved. Plus, they let a plucky Mormon hero proudly assert some of the more eye-browing raising minutia of that religion with a Julie Andrews-like confidence! If this show were a spoof, it wouldn't be the success that it is. But it's not a spoof. These are real characters with real beliefs. And that's why *The Book Of Mormon* is really good.

Imagine how a Mormon feels. If you've seen *The Book Of Mormon*, you've already heard some of the most exaggerated or arcane elements of their faith -- in other words, you've been pre-scandalized. Instead of Elders having to bring up the underwear and the one-time ban on black priests (into the 1970s!) and the idea of God living out there in the universe near a planet called Kolob and Jews coming to America before Columbus, LDSers can just let *you* ask if that's true and then give the more nuanced, accurate description of what they believe. No wonder the Church has put posters up in Times Square. This show might just help recruitment. Let's get specific.

"Hasa Diga Eebowai" is the first truly vulgar show in the show. It's a satire on "Hakuna Matata" from *The Lion King*. The title translates as "F\*\*\* you, God!" and is sung by Ugandans who lament war lords, endemic poverty, a crippling rate of AIDS and other miseries that make Job's life seem like a walk in the park. Our heros Elder Price (the marvelous, should-have-won-the-Tony Andrew Rannells) and Elder Cunningham (the funny sidekick Josh Gads) are shocked of course. But railing against the Almighty isn't unheard of, even in the Bible (see Job, for example, not to mention the argumentative Moses). And who can argue with the truth that someone born in a war-torn land ravaged by a plague might in fact be a little bitter?

Finally, this song is sung by Ugandans who in religious terms haven't been saved yet. In fact, it is Africans throughout who speak the most vulgar, shocking lines. With *South Park's* usual daring, they walk a fine line between a satire of our culture's attitude towards Africans and just a plain old stereotype. But for someone of faith, these people are cursing and raping babies and railing against God precisely because they need the succor and support of the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

But what about "Turn It Off?" In this show-stopper for Tony-nominated supporting actor Rory O'Malley), Elder McKinley), some missionaries share their approach to confusing thoughts or bad feelings. When your dad beats your mom and mocks you for crying, when you decide to get in line at the Apple store instead of seeing your dying sister, when you have gay thoughts for your best friend, "Turn it off!" Non-believers hear hypocrisy and an absurdly simplistic solution to difficult issues: "Turn it off/ Like a light switch/ Just go flick/ It's our nifty little Mormon trick."

But people of faith (not just Mormons) have no problem with self-denial. It's not hypocrisy to stop thinking bad or tempting or confusing thoughts -- it's a darn good idea. And you're less likely to have those bad thoughts if you avoid pornography or even just secular TV shows that are sexed up (like *Gossip Girl*) and so on. So turn them off, too! It's not an official approach by any faith, but numerous fundamentalist faiths acknowledge that some men are gay and want them to simply tamp down those bad feelings and marry a woman anyway, because with prayer and the proper spouse and God's love you can be alright. (Not true, by the way.) It's presented in a silly, flippant manner, but "turn it off" is exactly what people of numerous faiths try to do every day.

Then there's "Making Things Up Again." This is a song where Elder Cunningham -- in a desperate appeal to keep the Ugandans from getting bored and to steer them away from a threat to rape babies, which some think will cure them of AIDS -- starts to toss ewoks and hobbits and the plot of *The Matrix* into the

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Scarlett Johansson Contacts FBI About Hacked Nude Images teachings of the Church. In its effectiveness and adaptation by the locals (who in fact ultimately consider the teachings of Elder Cunningham to constitute the fourth book of the Bible, after the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Book Of Mormon), this song makes crystal clear that it's just made-up nonsense, much as some people believe the Book Of Mormon and indeed all organized religion to be made up nonsense. If anything should anger people of faith, it's probably here. But remember again who is singing and who is accepting this. Elder Cunningham has proven he knows almost nothing about his own faith, so it's hardly a rejection of the teachings of the Church when someone who has never learned them makes stuff up. Indeed, even people of every faith who do sincerely believe are often ill-informed about their own religion.

The story of the founding of the Church and its early days is utterly goofed upon in "Joseph Smith American Moses." But again, this song is performed by Ugandans who have been "instructed" in their faith by Elder Cunningham, who admits he knows almost nothing about it. On another level, missionary work by many faiths in the past often included putting religious beliefs into certain terms or stories which locals could identify with. The idea was that once very basic ideas had been put across, you could slowly instruct them more fully in the particulars of the faith. So though Elder Cunningham's mishmash of pop culture would never pass muster, the basic idea isn't so far-fetched. Neither was his desire to stop one man from raping a baby as a cure for AIDS. A good missionary would have been able to explain why God objected without making up passages from the Book of Mormon or somehow claiming Joseph Smith had sex with a magic frog to cure his case of AIDS. Perhaps they would have related a story of Moses and the plagues or some miracle cure to get the same idea across. But the intent and very broad approach isn't so nutty. It's just a lot funnier when put into vulgar terms and set to catchy music.

Finally, there's "I Believe," Elder Price's proud announcement of faith. In an homage to "I Have Confidence" from *The Sound Of Music*, Elder Price finds the courage to help out Elder Cunningham and win over a war lord to the Church, all while declaiming many of the most controversial, seemingly goofy (or as Church members would insist, often exaggerated) articles of their religion.

Surely *this* song will offend Mormons. As my friend at the show pointed out, their beliefs are virtually punch lines throughout the song. "I believe that ancient Jews built boats and sailed to America." "I believe that the current President of the Church, Thomas Monson, speaks directly to God." "I believe that in 1978 God changed his mind about black people." "I believe that the Garden of Eden was in Jackson County, Missouri." People laugh and laugh throughout this song. Don't Mormons find that embarrassing? Nope, in fact they probably find it liberating. As one online commenter said, it will probably be sung at a Mormon talent show before you know it. Yes, those are things they believe, albeit not voiced the way they would or with the accuracy they deserve. Hearing it belted out on stage in the hottest show on Broadway by a character who's had his doubts but resolved them and wants to help others is not exactly a difficult moment to accept.

Even the chorus sounds differently to people of faith and atheists. When atheists hear, "I am a Mormon. And a Mormon just believes," they giggle. They hear the idiocy of religion presented in as blunt a manner as possible. You just...believe? How stupid is that? Where are the facts? Doesn't that make people of



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faith look simple-minded and dumb? But people of faith (not just Mormons) hear that line and say, "Yep, that's faith, in a nutshell. Believing when there is no proof." The hero has doubts? So does anyone of faith who isn't feeble-minded.

About the harshest judgment this show makes about Mormons is that they're hyper-polite. If that's the stereotype they must live with, it ranks alongside the gay stereotypes of "witty, fashionable and in shape" or the Asian stereotype of "smart in science and math" as certainly annoying but not the worst thing in the world.

Still, I think anyone paying attention would know the show really doesn't pull its punches. One of the biggest laughs comes when a Ugandan says to one character that there's no such place as the fabled Salt Lake City -- "it's a metaphor!" That's fine for me as a practicing Catholic (we don't believe the Bible is literally true -- the Garden Of Eden and Noah's Ark? -- metaphors!). But it certainly won't cut muster with the fundamentalists in the crowd. Parker and Stone and Lopez clearly say that as long as you don't take this stuff too literally and use your faith to help others, it's no biggie by them. But [FINALE PLOT SPOILER] it's no accident that our heroes turn their backs on the Church at the end. The missionaries ignore orders so they can stay in Uganda and keep helping the locals in any way they can. You shouldn't have to choose between your religion and being nice to others here on earth. But if you do, it's pretty clear they think religion should lose every time. That's not the message they're shouting out from the rooftops. Everyone is welcome to the show and clearly people of faith (even fundamentalists) like a good show-stopper when they hear one. But the message is still there. Still faith overrides all obstacles. What makes *The Book Of Mormon* work for nonbelievers and believers alike is that its creators have the strongest faith of all: faith in the power of a well-crafted Broadway musical.

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