

“Bart Sells His Soul”: Using The Simpsons to Teach Social Construction and the Sociology of Religion

Abstract

This paper presents a pedagogical intervention for teaching the sociology of religion using "Bart Sells His Soul" (The Simpsons, Season 7, Episode 4) as an entry point for abstract concepts. Drawing on Bernstein's pedagogic device, I argue the activity functions as recontextualization, relocating esoteric discourse—Durkheim's sacred/profane distinction, the Thomas Theorem, and the three major paradigms—into the low-stakes world of popular culture. The episode's treatment of an intangible soul as having tangible effects makes social construction visible. Across two institutional contexts, I have refined the activity with pre-viewing questions, guided debriefing, and small-group work. The activity succeeds through pedagogical displacement: locating sacred concepts within a fictional text allows students to exercise their sociological imagination without defensiveness. I offer a reflective analysis of challenges—student quietness, cultural gaps, and institutional context—and strategies to address them, demonstrating how popular culture bridges students' knowledge and sociological analysis.

Keywords: Sociology of religion, pedagogical intervention, social construction, The Simpsons, popular culture

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Introduction

For many undergraduate students, the chapter on religion in introductory sociology textbooks presents a unique intellectual hurdle. While students often arrive in the classroom with personal experiences of, or strong opinions about, religious institutions, they frequently struggle to engage with religion as a sociological phenomenon. Core disciplinary concepts such as the social construction of belief, Émile Durkheim's sacred/profane dichotomy, and the application of the three major theoretical lenses (structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and social conflict theory) can feel abstract and disconnected from their lived experience. Instructors are thus faced with a perennial challenge: how to render these foundational ideas visible and analytically useful without reducing them to mere definitions to be memorized.

This paper presents a pedagogical intervention designed to address this challenge by bringing a familiar, seemingly "silly" cultural text into the sociology classroom via the "Bart Sells His Soul" episode from the long-running animated series *The Simpsons*. In the episode, the protagonist, Bart Simpson, sells his soul to his friend Milhouse for five dollars, only to discover that the absence of something he previously considered "not real" has tangible, unsettling consequences. The episode's central premise, that an intangible entity like a soul might have measurable social effects, makes the process of social construction uniquely visible and debatable for students. By treating the soul as a social fact whose existence is confirmed not by theology but by its consequences (following W.I. Thomas's dictum), the episode provides a low-stakes, accessible entry point for wrestling with high-level sociological concepts.

In the following pages, I will describe the implementation of a classroom activity centered on "Bart Sells His Soul" across two distinct institutional settings in the Midwest of the United States: a four-year R2 university and a two-year community college. First, I will briefly review the literature on using popular culture to teach sociological theory, situating this activity within established pedagogical practices. Next, I will outline the activity itself, detailing how guided discussion of

the episode is used to introduce Durkheim's sacred/profane distinction, W.I. Thomas's definition of the situation, and the application of the structural-functional, symbolic interactionist, and social conflict perspectives. Finally, I offer a reflective analysis of what I have learned from facilitating this activity over multiple semesters, including common challenges and strategies for addressing them. As Whitlock's (2024) work on inquiry-based strategies with *The Simpsons* demonstrates, a humorous, accessible text can serve as a powerful bridge between students' existing cultural knowledge and the analytical framework of the discipline.

Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes scholarship across three interconnected areas: the use of media in sociology pedagogy, the specific application of *The Simpsons* as a teaching tool, and the theoretical frameworks for teaching religion and social construction. Together, these bodies of work establish the foundation for using a single episode of a satirical animated series to teach abstract sociological concepts about religion.

Teaching Sociology Through Media

Sociology educators have long recognized the pedagogical value of popular media for making abstract concepts tangible. Radu (2024) argues that reality television provides a rich canvas for illustrating structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. By examining how individuals navigate social norms on screen, students develop what Mills (1959) termed the *sociological imagination*, or the ability to connect personal troubles to public issues. Radu's analysis is particularly relevant to the present activity because it demonstrates how media texts can function simultaneously as cultural artifacts and as pedagogical tools for teaching multiple theoretical paradigms within a single class session.

Yuksel (2024) provides a comprehensive review of the nexus between cinema and sociology pedagogy, synthesizing decades of scholarship on using film in sociology

classrooms. Drawing on Demerath's foundational works, Yuksel argues that movies contribute to sociological analysis, assist in interpreting cultural formation, and the social construction of reality. This connection between media and the social construction of reality is central to the present activity, as students observe how an intangible concept (the soul) is treated as a tangible object within the diegetic world of Springfield.

Mitchell, Lulham, Pervan, and Arpke-Wales (2025) offer a compelling framework for understanding why playful media can enhance theoretical learning, arguing that play destabilizes conventional scholarly approaches to social theorizing and fosters more creative engagement with theory. This insight directly supports the pedagogical logic of using a humorous, seemingly frivolous episode of *The Simpsons* to teach serious theoretical concepts. The silliness of Bart's sold soul becomes a pedagogical asset, lowering students' affective barriers to abstract theory and creating cognitive space for sociological reflection.

The Simpsons as Pedagogical Text

A dedicated body of scholarship has established *The Simpsons* as a legitimate and effective vehicle for teaching social theory. Woodcock (2006) provided the foundational argument that the show's creators *constructed a model of society* that can be used to illustrate key theoretical concepts. In his analysis of teaching political theory through the series, Woodcock demonstrates that Springfield functions as a fully realized social world, complete with institutions, norms, and conflicts that mirror those of real societies. This *model of society* argument is essential for the present activity, as it justifies treating the episode's treatment of souls and religion as sociologically meaningful rather than merely absurdist humor. Woodcock's subsequent work (2008) extends this analysis to religious themes, engaging with Pinsky (2001) who examines the show's treatment of faith, doubt, and religious institutions.

Nefes (2014) brought Woodcock's framework directly into sociology classrooms, demonstrating how *The Simpsons* can be used to teach C. Wright Mills's concept of the sociological imagination, specifically how students learn to distinguish personal

troubles from public issues by examining Homer Simpson's experiences. The present activity extends Nefes' approach by applying it specifically to the sociology of religion and by incorporating all three major theoretical paradigms rather than focusing exclusively on Mills.

Teaching Religion and Social Construction

The specific challenge of teaching the sociology of religion, particularly to students who may hold personal religious beliefs, has received sustained attention from scholars. Baker and Singleton (2025) examine how students in faith-based higher education navigate the integration of sociological concepts with their religious worldviews. The authors demonstrate that students do not encounter sociological concepts in a vacuum. Instead, they interpret and absorb these ideas through the lens of their existing religious, cultural, individual, and political commitments. This research underscores the importance of pedagogical approaches that invite students to examine religious phenomena sociologically without requiring them to abandon personal belief. The “Bart Sells His Soul” activity achieves this by focusing the social treatment of souls rather than their theological status, allowing students of all belief backgrounds to participate in the analysis.

Cardoso and Uberti (2025) offer a provocative framework for understanding why seemingly trivial cultural texts can carry significant pedagogical weight. Using *Legally Blonde* as their case study, they demonstrate that even the most unlikely cultural products can serve as meaningful vehicles for teaching socio-anthropological concepts. Their *power of futility* thesis (that texts dismissed as frivolous often contain rich sociological material) directly supports using a cartoon sitcom to teach Durkheim's sacred/profane distinction. Cardoso and Uberti ground their analysis in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*, the canonical text that underpins any discussion of how social actors create and maintain shared meanings.

Theoretical Frameworks for the Present Activity

The present activity synthesizes these three scholarly streams. From the media pedagogy literature, it adopts the premise that popular culture can effectively illustrate abstract theory (Radu 2024; Yuksel 2024) and that playful approaches enhance theoretical engagement (Mitchell et al. 2025). From *The Simpsons* scholarship, it builds on Woodcock's (2006) model of society framework and Nefes' (2014) application to sociological concepts. From the religion pedagogy literature, it incorporates strategies for teaching and social construction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) in ways that respect students' diverse beliefs (Baker and Singleton, 2025) and that recognize the pedagogical potential of texts and media typically dismissed as trivial (Cardoso and Uberti, 2025).

Bernstein's Framework: Pedagogic Recontextualization and the Pedagogic Device

Basil Bernstein's theory of the pedagogic device provides a powerful lens for understanding the transformation of academic knowledge into teachable classroom content. Bernstein's central argument is that official or expert knowledge does not move directly from the field of its production (e.g., university research) to the field of its reproduction (the classroom). Instead, it undergoes a process of recontextualization, whereby knowledge is selected, adapted, and relocated, fundamentally changing its form and meaning.

This transformation is governed by what Bernstein (2000) termed the *pedagogic device*, a set of three hierarchically linked rules. First, distributive rules: these regulate what counts as legitimate, *thinkable* knowledge in a society, separating esoteric, academic knowledge from mundane, everyday knowledge. Second, recontextualizing rules: these are the core of the transformation process. They regulate how knowledge from the field of production is appropriated and relocated to become pedagogic discourse. This process involves passing knowledge through *ideological screens* that fundamentally alter its character. Third, evaluative rules: These regulate how the recontextualized

knowledge is assessed and transmitted in the classroom, providing a symbolic ruler for the students' consciousness.

Within the pedagogic device, Bernstein distinguishes between instructional discourse (the specialized content knowledge, skills, and their relationship to each other) and regulative discourse (the moral discourse that creates order, relations, character, and identity). Crucially, Bernstein argues that the instructional discourse is always *embedded within* the regulative discourse. This embedding means that what and how we teach is never neutral; it is always shaped by implicit or explicit rules about social order, behavior, and what constitutes a *good* student.

Bernstein (1990) also introduced the concepts of classification and framing to analyze the structure of educational knowledge. Classification refers to the strength of boundaries between contents or subjects (strong classification means clear well-insulated subjects; weak classification means blurred boundaries). Framing refers to the degree of control teachers and students have over the selection, organization, pacing, and evaluation of knowledge. Strong framing means that the teacher has explicit control; weak framing grants more apparent control to students.

The Activity as a Case Study in Recontextualization

The “Bart Sells His Soul” activity represents a deliberate act of pedagogic recontextualization. As the teacher, I act as a *recontextualizing agent*, taking the esoteric discourse of sociological theory—Durkheim’s sacred/profane distinction, the Thomas theorem, and the three sociological paradigms—and relocating it into the familiar, low-stakes world of a popular culture text. The instructional discourse of sociology is embedded within the regulative discourse of analyzing a cartoon. By framing the activity as an analysis of Bart Simpson’s experience rather than a direct examination of students’ personal beliefs, the regulative discourse creates a safe space for intellectual exploration.

Furthermore, the gap identified in the recontextualization process—the *space* where teachers exert professional judgment—is clearly visible in the activity’s design.

The choice to use *The Simpsons*, the specific selection of “Bart Sells his Soul” episode, and the decision to use small-group work are all pedagogical judgments made in the recontextualizing field. The activity is a case study in how a teacher can consciously and strategically navigate the process of transformation to make powerful academic knowledge accessible and engaging.

The Activity

In this section, I provide a detailed roadmap for implementing the “Bart Sells His Soul” activity, which I have developed and refined across multiple semesters at a four-year university and a community college. The activity is designed to fit within a standard American college class session, which typically runs 50 or 75 minutes.

Course Context

The activity is situated in SOC 100: Exploring Society at a 4-year R2 university and SOCI 111: Introduction to Sociology at a 2-year community college, essentially existing in two distinct higher education settings. Both are lecture courses with 5 to 35 students per section each term. The activity is situated in the religion unit, which falls around the eleventh week of the semester for the 16-week courses and around week 7 for the 8-week courses. By this point, students have already been introduced to the three core theoretical paradigms (structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and social conflict theory) and the concept of social construction, although their grasp of these abstract ideas is often still developing.

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this activity, students will be able to:

- ✓ Define the concept of “social construction” by explaining how an intangible idea (a soul) is treated as a tangible object within the episode.
- ✓ Identify and differentiate between structural-functional, symbolic-interaction, and social-conflict interpretations of a single social phenomenon (religion).

- ✓ Apply Durkheim's concept of the sacred and profane to everyday objects and interactions.
- ✓ Explain the Thomas Theorem and how it applies to society.

Pre-Film Setup (2-3 minutes)

Class begins with a PowerPoint slide displaying four simple, disarming questions:

- ✓ Do you have a soul?
- ✓ Where is it located?
- ✓ What is it made of?
- ✓ How much is it worth?

Students are asked to silently consider these questions for about a minute. I verbally ask the class, "If you don't believe in souls, how does the broader society answer these questions?" in order to engage students who do not believe in a soul to consider the social scripts surrounding souls. After a moment, I facilitate a brief, low-stakes discussion. Making sure that students are not called upon or called out for their beliefs. I do not have the students write their answers down for submission. The goal is not to debate theology but to surface assumptions. I remind students that sociologists do not study religion to find out which one is "true" but to learn how religion exists within society. This quick discussion primes them to think sociologically rather than theologically.

A necessary and revealing aside occurs here: I must pause before we start the episode so I can explain what *pogs* are, as the episode uses them as a plot device—cheap cardboard circles about the size of milk caps with images of pop culture graphics that were a playground fad in the 1990s—this is an outdated reference for traditional college students. Explaining that pogs were a fleeting fad from the 1990s inadvertently reinforces the episode's theme of ephemeral value and social construction. (I also then refer back to pogs when teaching students about fads and fashion in a later chapter).

I then briefly introduce the episode's premise: Bart is about to experience the shifting from the profane to the sacred. I instruct students to watch with the sociological lenses in mind, though we do not yet review the specific debrief questions.

Students have already attended the lecture on religion and have learned the terminology of the sociology of religion from the textbooks. I write the words "profane" and "sacred" and the three lenses on the board, so they remain on the students' minds as the episode plays.

Viewing the Episode (22 minutes)

I show the episode in its entirety. "Bart Sells His Soul" (Season 7, Episode 4) runs 22 minutes, an ideal length that leaves approximately 20–23 minutes for structured debriefing and discussion (or 50–53 minutes in a 75-minute course). The main storyline follows Bart selling his soul to Milhouse, while a secondary plot involves Moe refurbishing his bar into a family restaurant. Although the Moe subplot could theoretically be cut to save time, doing so would shorten the episode by only a few minutes, and one of its scenes advances a key plot point. I therefore show the full episode.

Structured Debrief and Application (25 minutes)

Part 1: Guided Class Discussion (5-7 minutes)

Immediately following the episode, I project a series of questions via PowerPoint designed to guide students from concrete plot points towards sociological abstraction. The discussion is kept fast paced to maintain engagement, especially with quiet first-year students who are not sociology majors. I guide the students from the simple answers they provide as intro students to the deeper, latent sociological meanings.

What are the first signs that something is different for Bart?

I ask students to identify the first signs that something is different for Bart: his pets acting defensive, automatic doors failing to open for him, inability to fog a glass with his breath, losing his sense of humor, and his mother sensing something is "missing." These details are intentionally absurd (do we really believe souls open automatic doors?) but within the episode's logic, they function as real evidence that Bart has changed. This

contradiction is the point. It illustrates the Thomas Theorem: if Bart (and those around him) define these signs as real, they are real in their consequences. The silliness of the signs does not diminish their power within the story.

Can animals tell if people have souls?

The question invites students to consider social scripts—the unspoken rules and shared understandings that guide interpretation. The common saying, "If my dog doesn't trust you, then I don't trust you," reflects a folk wisdom that animals perceive something beyond human detection. By asking whether something can sense a soul, students begin to see how the concept of a soul is embedded in broader cultural agreements about intuition, danger, and the special status of animals. The question doesn't require a definitive answer; it simply reveals the social scripts we carry.

Is Bart really changing?

To explore this, I direct attention to his interaction with Ralph in the police car, specifically Bart's "serpent/goat" eyes and hissing. This moment opens a door to discuss religious symbolism, most obviously the serpent in the Garden of Eden. But it also illustrates Durkheim's sacred/profane dichotomy. Bart, having sold something sacred, is now visually marked as profane, even demonic. The episode visually codes his transformation through symbols the audience instinctively reads as "wrong," showing how deeply the sacred/profane boundary is embedded in cultural imagery.

Can things cross the line from profane to sacred and back to profane?

The question directly reinforces Durkheim's foundational concept using the episode's central tension. Bart begins treating his paper soul as profane, only to experience its transformation into something sacred as others treat him differently and he feels its absence. To ground this further, I offer a contemporary example: a wedding ring. In the store, it is an ordinary object—profane. Exchanged in a wedding

ceremony, it becomes sacred, symbolizing commitment and love. After a divorce, when people remove their ring or sell their ring, it becomes profane again. This example, like Bart's soul, illustrates that sacredness is not intrinsic but assigned through social definition. Durkheim's insight comes alive: the line between sacred and profane is real in its consequences but socially drawn.

Where does Bart put his “soul” when he gets it back? Why?

Bart eats his soul. Students know why. They often answer this question by saying that the soul belongs *inside* us. Bart's act, though played for laughs, mirrors real religious practices across traditions. Bart does not simply hold his soul or put it in his pocket—he incorporates it into his body through an act that mirrors religious practices of consumption (communion, prasad, sacrament, sacrificial meals). The episode, whether intentionally or not, has reproduced a logic of sacred restoration that students recognize as correct without ever having been taught it. This reveals how deeply ritual patterns are embedded in cultural storytelling.

Does Bart change in the end?

The answer is no—he immediately rams Milton's boat in his dream that night. But if Bart hasn't changed, what *has*? The meaning of his soul has changed, first redefined by others, then for himself. This is the Thomas Theorem in its purest form: the situation (Bart's relationship to his soul) has been redefined, and that redefinition has real consequences (he feels whole again). But the consequences are not total. Bart's mischievous nature persists. The episode thus teaches that while definitions shape reality, they do not overwrite everything. Social construction operates alongside continuity.

Part 2: Small Group Application (7-10 minutes)

Students are then asked to quickly form groups of 4-5. The next slide shows a simplified version of the three theoretical lenses with prompts for each to assist in discussion:

- ✓ Structural-Functional: What function does the idea of a soul serve in Springfield?
- ✓ Symbolic-Interaction: How does the meaning of the paper (the soul) change for Bart and Milhouse?
- ✓ Social Conflict: Who has the power in the exchange between Bart and Milhouse throughout the episode?

I circulate among the groups listening for misconceptions and encouraging quieter students to share. From a Bernsteinian perspective, this small group phase represents a deliberate weakening of the framing of the activity. By reducing explicit control over the selection, organization, and pacing of the discussion, I grant students greater agency to construct their own sociological interpretation. (Bernstein 1990; Singh 2002). This shift from strong framing (lecturing) to weaker framing (facilitated discovery) is a key pedagogical strategy in the recontextualization process. The brief timeframe forces groups to focus on core ideas rather than getting lost in plot details.

Part 3: Large Group Share (5-10 minutes)

In the final minutes, if groups are struggling, or if I believe students would benefit from working alone, I use a set of more advanced theory-driven questions to push students further. These questions are designed to bridge the episode to the broader sociological literature and can be used to facilitate a final full class discussion for a longer class or a class that is more advanced (or an upper-level class).

Structural Functional:

- ✓ How does the episode resolve the disruption caused by Bart selling his soul? What does this resolution suggest about religion's role in maintaining social stability?
- ✓ How does Milhouse's purchase of Bart's soul reflect the functional exchange of values in society?

Symbolic Interaction:

- ✓ In what ways does Bart's loss of identity (e.g., not laughing at things he knows are funny) reflect the social construction of the self, as described by Mead or Cooley?

- ✓ How does the “soul” (the paper) become a symbol with shifting meaning throughout the episode?

Social Conflict:

- ✓ Could Bart’s transaction with Milhouse be seen as exploitation? Why or why not?
- ✓ How does the episode portray religion as a tool of social control? (e.g., Reverend Lovejoy’s authority over the children).

The class session concludes with a brief summary, connecting observations back to the learning objectives and previewing how these concepts will appear on the upcoming quiz.

Reflective Analysis

Teaching the sociology of religion requires overcoming a fundamental pedagogical challenge: students often meet abstract concepts with personal defensiveness. The episode invites students to observe Bart's struggle with the social construction of his soul, creating enough distance for them to engage their sociological imagination. Freed from the need to protect their own beliefs, students appear more willing to engage with the Thomas Theorem, the sacred/profane dynamic, and the application of theoretical paradigms.

How My Teaching Has Evolved

I have taught this activity over a dozen times across two institutions, and my approach has evolved. The first few times, I did not use pre-viewing questions and asked students about souls afterward. I found that using a warm-up set the tone for the episode and prepped the students to think sociologically. I have learned that students need permission to admit uncertainty about their own souls before they can analyze Bart's. I also used to lecture before the episode and did not have time for small-group discussion. I no longer do that. This evolution reflects a change in the strength of framing. By weakening the framing of the activity through small-group

work and increasing the space for student-driven discovery, the regulative discourse shifts from my explicit control to a more implicit, collaborative exploration. The small-group phase, even at just seven minutes, produces better whole-class discussion than any amount of my own lecturing. In Bernstein's terms, my role has shifted from being the primary transmitter of recontextualized knowledge to being a facilitator of the knowledge's authentic reproduction by the students. This activity has taught me that my role is not to explain the episode's sociology but to step aside so students can discover it themselves.

When I show the episode, I watch my students rather than the screen. I note what they react to since classes respond to various moments in the episode differently. It is important to bring these moments into how I guide the discussions if possible. I have noticed a similar pattern over the years: students who were silent during the pre-viewing questions about their own souls become animated when analyzing Bart's. Students who rolled their eyes when I asked them where their soul is located have an 'ah-ha' moment about why I had them watch a cartoon when they do not believe in souls to begin with.

Institutional Contexts and Student Engagement

Implementing this activity across a four-year R2 university and a two-year community college has revealed both shared patterns and context-specific adaptations. Class size is the most consequential structural difference: university sections of 25–35 students in 50-minute periods require more structured small-group work to ensure participation, while community college sections of 5–15 students in 75-minute periods allow for extended whole-class dialogue. I adjust the allocation of time accordingly, reducing the small-group phase in smaller sections and expanding whole-group debriefing.

Student engagement, however, is remarkably consistent across both settings. In both institutions, students remain visibly attentive during the episode, typically setting aside phones and laptops—a level of focus not always present during lecture

segments. Students in both contexts frequently ask for the episode number to share with friends and family, suggesting that the activity generates engagement that extends beyond the classroom.

The primary pedagogical difference I have observed is pacing and the nature of student questions. At the R2 university, where students are more likely to have encountered sociology through prior coursework or Advanced Placement classes, I can move more quickly through the theoretical debrief. At the community college, where students often arrive with less formal exposure to the discipline, I sometimes need to spend additional time establishing the sociological approach to religion. In my experience, community college students more frequently raise questions about how sociological analysis relates to personal faith, and I have learned to clarify that understanding a theory does not require agreeing with it. This framing helps students engage with the material without feeling that their beliefs are being challenged.

Crucially, I have not observed systematic differences in interpretive sophistication between the two settings. Community college students, many of whom balance coursework with employment and family responsibilities, often bring rich experiential knowledge to sociological analysis. This observation has reinforced my view that the activity's core mechanism—pedagogical displacement through popular culture—functions effectively across diverse institutional contexts, provided instructors remain attentive to their students' specific needs and adapt facilitation accordingly.

Why the Activity Works: Pedagogical Displacement

In my observation, the episode's success lies in its ability to make the abstract tangible through what I call *pedagogical displacement*. By locating sacred concepts within a fictional, humorous, and widely recognized cultural text, the activity creates cognitive and emotional distance. Students who might otherwise meet discussions of religion with defensiveness or disengagement are instead invited to analyze Bart's experience as a case study. They observe social construction happening to someone else (a cartoon child), and in doing so, they lower their guard. This displacement

activates what Mills (1959) termed the sociological imagination: students begin to see the relationship between individual experience (Bart's sudden unease) and broader social forces (the collective agreement that a soul should matter).

This interpretation aligns with Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop's (2003) work on critical pedagogical moments in teaching difficult content. They note that students often resist sociological analyses of topics they perceive as personal or sacred. The *Simpsons* activity circumvents this resistance by relocating the sacred into a low-stakes fictional world. Similarly, the activity operationalizes Pescosolido's (1990) argument that popular culture can serve as a "bridge" between students' lived experience and sociological theory. The episode does not ask students to question their own beliefs; it asks them to explain Bart's.

Transferability

Based on my experience, the "Bart Sells His Soul" activity is highly adaptable across multiple dimensions.

Class Size: I have facilitated this activity in courses ranging from 5 to 35 students. In smaller classes, discussion can be more intimate and exploratory; students can unpack each scene in depth. In larger classes, the episode functions as a shared reference point for whole-group discussion or small-group breakouts. The episode's familiarity means even quiet students often have something to say.

Class Length: My courses meet for 50 minutes (a standard US class period), which allows time to watch the episode (approx. 22 minutes) and discuss. Instructors with longer periods could lecture about religion first to set up the sociological terminology (I do this in a previous class period), extend the class discussion, or add an interactive activity such as having students write short analyses in class or apply additional theoretical lenses.

Course Level: While designed for introductory courses, this activity could be adapted for upper-level theory courses by deepening the analysis. Advanced students might compare the episode's treatment of the soul to Durkheim's (1912) analysis of

the sacred and profane or use it to critique the limits of functionalist versus conflict approaches.

Teaching Other Concepts: The episode's richness extends beyond the religion unit. In my own teaching, I have considered how it might be used to teach:

- ✓ *Socialization:* How does Bart learn what a soul should mean?
- ✓ *Deviance:* Is Bart's sale of his soul a deviant act? How do others react?
- ✓ *Emotion work:* How does Bart manage his growing unease?
- ✓ *Exchange theory:* What kind of exchange is happening between Bart and Milhouse?

The core mechanism of using popular culture to create analytical distance could also be applied to other sensitive topics. An instructor teaching race or social class might use a fictional film or television episode to help students examine structural inequalities before turning the lens on their own contexts.

Challenges and Limitations

No pedagogical tool works flawlessly, and this activity presents several challenges worth noting. What follows is an honest accounting of these challenges, organized by theme, along with the strategies I have developed to address them.

Student Quietness

As with many undergraduate courses, particularly those filled with non-majors, some students are reluctant to speak. *The Simpsons* activity helps, but it does not solve the problem entirely. I have found that starting with low-stakes questions ("What did you think of the episode?" "What are your first thoughts?" "Did anything surprise you?"), warms up the class before moving to more analytical questions. Small-group discussions before whole-group sharing also increases participation.

Cultural and Generational Gaps

One unexpected but instructive challenge emerged around a single prop: pogs. In the episode, Milhouse trades Bart's soul for pogs, 1990s collectible game pieces.

For students in the 2020s, pogs are entirely foreign. I now spend a few minutes explaining what pogs were and why Milhouse's enthusiasm for ALF pogs would have made sense to 1990s audiences. This explanation actually becomes a teachable moment: it illustrates how cultural objects carry meaning only within specific sociohistorical contexts, a mini-lesson in social construction itself. Instructors using this episode today should anticipate this gap and prepare a brief explanation before the showing of the episode.

Student Defensiveness

While the activity lowers affective barriers, it does not eliminate them entirely. A small number of students may remain resistant to analyzing religion sociologically. For these students, I emphasize that sociology seeks to understand how religion functions socially, not to evaluate the truth of any belief. I have never had a student openly state that they will not participate in the activity. *The Simpsons* framework helps here too: I have asked quiet, closed off students, "We are not analyzing your beliefs; we are analyzing Bart's. What do you see happening for him?" to prompt discussion, in case they had started to take the activity personally.

Institutional Context

My experience at a midwestern community college and university suggests the activity translates well across contexts, but instructors in other regions or with different student populations should remain attentive to how their students respond. A student in one institutional setting may engage differently than a student at another. The activity's strength is that it meets students where they are by asking them to analyze a piece of popular media, not themselves.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that popular culture can function as a bridge between students' personal worldviews and the sociological perspective. In my experience

across multiple semesters at two different institutions, the "Bart Sells His Soul" activity works because it transforms the abstract into the observable. By locating sacred concepts within a fictional, humorous text, the activity creates cognitive distance—what I have called *pedagogical displacement*—that allows students to exercise their sociological imagination in a space where they feel safe. This *pedagogical displacement* is, in fact, a precise example of Bernstein's (1990) pedagogic recontextualization in practice. As an agent of recontextualization, I have taken the esoteric discourse of sociological theory and embedded it within the accessible regulative discourse of analyzing a cartoon. The instructional discourse of Durkheim and the Thomas theorem is rendered *thinkable* by being relocated into the familiar world of Springfield. This deliberate act of recontextualization reduces defensiveness and helps students engage with core concepts, including social construction, the sacred/profane dichotomy, and the three major theoretical lenses.

The implications for teaching extend beyond the religion unit. The same mechanism, using animated popular culture to create analytical distance, could help students engage with other sensitive topics, from race and social class to gender and sexuality. Moreover, the activity's adaptability across class sizes, course lengths, and institutional contexts means that instructors can tailor it to their specific settings with minimal modification.

Bernstein's framework reveals that this activity is not merely a clever pedagogical trick but a theoretically grounded act of empowerment. By making the rules of sociological analysis explicit and creating a safe space for intellectual risk-taking, this activity embodies the emancipatory potential of pedagogic recontextualization: it makes the powerful, esoteric discourse of sociology of religion accessible to all students, regardless of their prior relationship to the subject matter. Teaching the sociology of religion will always carry the risk of student resistance. But by meeting students where they are, through a show many of them grew up watching, with characters they already know, we can invite them to think sociologically about

even their most deeply held beliefs. If Bart Simpson can question the reality of his soul, perhaps our students can question the social forces that shape their own.

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