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TELEVISION; Holy Satire! Faith-Based Mockery

By DAN CRANE

"THE Crusades took place during the Dark Ages, which was a very pious and righteous time during our history," explains a teacher on a recent episode of the religious family satire "Moral Orel." "Then the Renaissance came along and ruined everything when artists started taking the clothes off all their paintings."

Now in its second season, "Moral Orel" is a 15-minute stop-motion animated show that is shown Sunday nights at 12:15 a.m. on the Adult Swim block of the Cartoon Network. The network, a unit of Turner Broadcasting, recently renewed the series for a third season; a DVD of the first 15 episodes, "Moral Orel: The Unholy Version," was released last month.

As its time slot indicates, the show is not meant for children. It tells the story of a blissfully pious boy, Orel Puppington, whose absurdly literal interpretations of church sermons lead him to unholy acts like smoking crack or impregnating numerous women. In one episode, convinced that the dead are wasting God's greatest gift, life, Orel performs necromancy rituals in the local cemetery; within minutes the neighborhood is overrun with zombies.

Aesthetically "Moral Orel" recalls "Davey and Goliath," the children's show produced by the Lutheran Church in the 1960s. Still, Dino Stamatopoulos, the show's creator, is wary of the comparison.

"Some people say it's a parody, and then they're like, 'Where's the dog?,' and to me it's its own show," he said. "There's no getting around that it's religious, but the word parody to a comedian is a dirty word, because one has to know what the show is parodying to like it."

Mr. Stamatopoulos said that the show grew out of a concept for a send-up of a "Leave It to Beaver"-style 1950s family comedy that would star Iggy Pop. Eventually, that idea evolved into a cartoon. The stop-motion animation style was selected, and Mr. Stamatopoulos was partnered with ShadowMachine Films, the animators for another Adult Swim show, "Robot Chicken."

"Moral Orel" takes place in Moralton, Statesota, a town built around a church led by the bitter Reverend Putty, whose coffee mug reads, "I hate my boss." In an episode titled "God's Image," Orel -- taking to heart Reverend Putty's proclamation that "some people look more like God than others" -- thinks he's pleasing the Lord by leading an effort to segregate the town. The plan literally backfires, resulting in most of Moralton up in flames. "This time," Orel's father tells him, "righteous was wrongteous."

In the hypocritically devout world of "Moral Orel," everyone botches the Bible, from Miss Censordall, the book-burning librarian, to protestors at a diner who carry signs reading "God Hates Fats." To Mr. Stamatopoulos, Moraltonians just reflect evangelical culture. "I've had friends tell me they knew people exactly like these characters," said Mr. Stamatopoulos, whose writing credits include "Mr. Show" and "Late Night With Conan O'Brien." "But I don't even think I go far enough."

Dan Isett, director of corporate and government affairs at the Parents Television Council, a nonprofit media advocacy group, disagreed. "You can't very well argue that it's merely satirical when the content is what it is," he said. "It's heavy-handed propaganda and mocking of people of religious faith."

Aside from a couple of negative reviews on conservative blogs, there has been little outrage from

viewers, perhaps due to the intentionally quiet introduction of the series. "We didn't do quite the same push as we do for some of our other shows," said Nick Weidenfeld, who heads development at Adult Swim, "because we wanted it to build its audience before groups like the religious right could freak out about it."

Working on the show has caused problems for Jay Johnston and Scott Adsit, both of whom write and direct and provide voices for many of its characters. Mr. Johnston upset a few relatives at a family reunion when he screened episodes of "Orel," and Mr. Adsit encountered family protests as well. "My sister's a devout Christian," said Mr. Adsit, who also plays Pete Hornberger on NBC's "30 Rock."

Mr. Adsit showed his sister, Andrea, early episodes and "she just didn't like it," he said. "She didn't think it was funny, and thought it was insulting and that I was making fun of her, which I'm not. We're making fun of hypocrites."

To keep the peace Mr. Adsit quit "Moral Orel." But shortly thereafter he was surprised to find that his sister had revised her opinion. "She said, 'I watched the first two episodes of the second season and thought they were really smart and funny.'" He promptly rejoined the show.

"In the end it's just comedy," Mr. Weidenfeld said. "It's an incredibly tightly written show, with probably the strongest narrative structure of anything we have on the network."

Alex Bulkley, co-owner of ShadowMachine, described "Moral Orel" as "blasphemous on every level" but contended that "it's one of those great shows that makes people think." The fact that it's on Adult Swim, he suggested, "allows us to laugh about something that most people are really afraid to talk about."