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RELIGION

Both religion and humor have some holistic tendencies. Religion's ideal is to have an impact on many if not all aspects of human life, especially those that are important for the self. Humor intends to play with all domains of human activity and life in general; and is stronger when it plays with important human concerns. In this article, the complex relations between religion and humor will be described. These include how religion sees humor, how humor works within religion, and how humor uses religion as a target. Finally, recent psychological studies have shed some light on the complex links between (a) religion or individual differences in religiosity and (b) humor or individual differences in sense of humor.

Religion's Attitudes on Humor

Religious attitudes toward humor vary greatly across religions and cultures, as well as across different historical periods within the same culture or religion. This can be concluded from historical, anthropological, sociological, and religious studies. Interesting differences seem to exist, for instance, between monotheistic religions and other religions, between Western and Eastern cultures, or between traditional and contemporary Christianity. Globally, the latter poles of each of the above are perceived to be more tolerant of, and open to, humor and laughter, and to place a higher value on them or some of their aspects. The former poles are perceived to be more suspicious of some or many aspects of humor, and especially laughter, that could be qualified as immoral or contrary to spiritual ideals.

The variation in religious attitudes toward humor and laughter seems to follow variations in the way culture, and consequently religion, considers--values or devalues—body and bodily expressions, eroticism and sexuality, and emotions and their expression. It also seems to parallel the differences between (a) unstructured and fragmented religious beliefs, practices, and divinities and (b) structured and integrative religions disposing of personal, moralizing, and exclusivist Gods. (Note that, intriguingly, the latter religions have historically succeeded over others).

Contemporary theological and philosophical thinking within religions that have historically been suspicious of humor and laughter (typically, but not only, Christianity) finds

today several spiritual qualities within them. Both religion and humor constitute ways of transcending the self, searching for alternative meanings of things, and questioning the “superficial” everyday reality. Humor can contribute to self-criticism, reflexivity, creative doubt, intellectual and spiritual maturity, and wisdom. It also has a psychological strengthening value, thus contributing to joy and well-being, which today are valued within modern religious and non-religious spiritualities. In some new religious movements and expressions (including fundamentalist ones), similar to some Eastern religions and ancient Greek religion, one can also find ritualized expressions of humor and practice of “spiritual”, even “holy laughter”.

Such positive attitudes remain though at the margin of the global expression of religiousness across cultures, societies, and historical periods. Indeed, even today, the majority of world believers within established religions (more than 70% of the world population) belong to religions that have expressed, or still express, ambivalence, serious concerns about, and criticism of, several aspects of the comic; or at least prudent tolerance rather than enthusiastic endorsement. This is the case typically of Christianity and Islam, but, to some extent, also Buddhism and Hinduism. Partial suspicion of humor does not constitute an exception across religions, but rather the rule.

Cross-cultural psychological research suggests that, beyond important cultural variability, human psychological functioning also presents some universals. This is also the case with the psychology of humor (some universal psychological characteristics, predictors, and consequences) as well as with the psychology of religion (characteristics, predictors, and consequences). If one combines this kind of empirical psychological knowledge with religious and philosophical considerations of humor marked by prudence and suspicion, an almost fundamental distrust, if not partial incompatibility, between humor and religion emerges.

Humor entails a play on meaning, openness to the possibility of a meaningless world, introduction of disorder, and the transgression of societal norms. It implies surprise, loss of control, openness to novelty and ambiguity, and disengagement with regard to truth, morality, and affection. Religion, on the other hand, despite sharing with humor a willingness for an alternative perception of reality, emphasizes the meaningfulness of the world, order and structure in life and closure in cognition, need for control, discomfort with ambiguity and novelty, as well as engagement with regard to truth, morality, and interpersonal relations. Note that the historical religious mistrust of immoderate laughter was justified because such laughter was perceived as

constituting a failure of the ideal of self-mastery. Consequently, the religious condemnation of many kinds of humor as immoral, i.e. sexual, sick, earthy, aggressive, and disparaging of others humor, eliminates most of humor's essential components.

In fact, from a rigid moralistic perspective, humor threatens and possibly violates all five major foundations of morality across cultures: care (disparaging and hostile humor), fairness/reciprocity (humor betrays truth and the common rules of human communication), loyalty and respect for authority (rebellious humor), and purity/divinity (disgusting, sexual, and blasphemous humor).

Humor *in* Religion

Although religions have often been suspicious of humor, and have condemned excessive laughter, they are also expressions of human activity and creativity. Consequently, humor is present in various manifestations of religious creativity and in people's and key religious figures' spiritual lives. Humor within religion thus plays the same psychological, sociological, and anthropological functions that it plays in the lives of individuals and groups in general. However, given the specifications of the religious context, religious humor is characterized by several particularities that are worthy of being noted.

First, humor exists at the margins of core religious activities and expressions. One can find humor in decorative artistic expressions, for instance at the margins of illustrations in medieval religious manuscripts, at very secondary places in religious architecture and religious iconography, or in the margins of religious sermons. The main goal of religious art is to transmit normative religious teachings and to provide spiritual opportunities for the experience of the sublime and the emotion of awe when in contact with a transcendent reality. These are not the primary goals of humor, although humor may be helpful here by offering some rest and reprieve when individuals are engaged in religious and spiritual life. (This was, indeed, what caused Thomas Aquinas to perceive moderate humor and laughter to be legitimate, seeing as how the latter allowed for some relaxation in the middle of the spiritual fight).

Second, an intriguing question is what kind of humor, if any, exists in key religious figures' lives and writings, especially in the lives of the founders of the dominant world religions and in major foundational religious texts such as the Bible or the Quran. For centuries, main religious texts and figures have been perceived in a highly idealized manner, as sources of ultimate meaning, moral behavior, and spiritual modeling. More recently, scholars in religious

studies, especially those in biblical studies, but also historians and other social scientists, have started to detect humor in religious texts and historical figures, or at least to re-interpret some elements as possibly suggesting the presence of humor. Also, anthologies of the humor of saints and important religious figures (e.g., modern Popes) have begun to be published.

Compared to other religions, the investigation of humor in Christianity has been intense. A strong emphasis has been placed on the study of humor in the Bible (Old and New Testament), with particular attention to Jesus' humor. An inspection of this work confirms that humor is marginal in these texts—this is not surprising, given the very nature of the Bible compared to other kinds of literature-- but also that two kinds of humor are predominant. The first is didactic, pedagogical humor that aims to underline spiritual teachings and norms of religious beliefs and behavior. When criticizing various beliefs and behaviors as morally and religiously inappropriate, biblical humor is usually ironic. Moral irony is in fact the predominant type of humor in the major religious texts, and hyperbole is often used to accentuate the effect. The second major kind of biblical humor is social, allowing for social inclusion into the normative religious ingroup and exclusion of various outgroups, i.e. other religions, nonbelievers, or other ethnic groups. This is especially the case in the Old Testament where God often shows humor that disparages his enemies. Apart from moralizing humor and irony and disparaging outgroup humor, it is hard to find in key religious texts and figures--at least as far as the major world religions of today are concerned—the typical kinds, topics, and targets of humor that have made humans laugh heartily for thousands of years, i.e. absurd, sexual, scatological, morbid, and aggressive/insulting humor.

Note also that, in a very marginal manner, one can also find religious burlesque-like expressions, be it through exceptional rituals (for instance, carnival feasts, often connected to the Easter calendar) or exceptional religious figures who, against the conventional social order, endorsed a particularly joyful, clownish, or foolish and rebellious way of life such as the saint Philippe Neri in Catholicism or the Fools for Christ in the Orthodox Church.

Third, religious humor also exists through a substantial corpus of religious jokes that have been orally transmitted among people for years and have only recently been increasingly codified through published volumes. There is also humor in religious cartoons, or in political cartoons that heavily rely on religious themes, often during religious holidays. Of course, many everyday jokes may include some religious elements. However, strictly speaking, religious jokes are those whose religious elements (e.g., “the minister, the priest, and the rabbi”) cannot be replaced by other,

secular equivalent elements (e.g., “the German, the French, and the Jew”) and whose understanding presupposes some minimal knowledge of the religious culture; otherwise they would just not be funny. Recent analyses of hundreds of these jokes from Christian contexts suggest that religious jokes often play on the typical religious and spiritual oppositions of sacred/profane, moral/sinful, life/death, spiritual-eternal/worldly-material, and divine/human, and are most often targeted at religious professionals (clergy and monks) and, to some extent, religious practitioners, rather than the divine itself. In one of these studies that compared church puns with secular puns in the US, the authors, based on typical criteria from humor theory, found that the church puns were not plainly humorous, possibly because these churches may still tend to avoid humor.

Biblical themes (in particular, Adam and Eve’s story; and Saint-Peter’s gatekeeper role in heaven), as well as stereotypes of other religious denominations or specific religious subgroups (e.g., jokes on Catholics and Protestants or Catholic jokes on Jesuits) rather than other religions, are two dominant sources of religious Christian humor. Note that a core characteristic of religious humor is to reinforce norms rather than to question or demolish them, or to question some religious practices in the name of higher spiritual ideals.

Inter-religious humor, i.e. humor on and between religious groups, can be intimately related to inter-ethnic humor. Humor on Jews often combines religious and ethnic/cultural sources and components. Also, typical jokes making fun of canny versus stupid groups usually apply to ethnic groups that have historically been, respectively, predominantly Protestant versus Catholic. Weber’s sociological theory of the Protestant ethic of capitalism seems thus to translate into jokes about excessively competitive, individualistic, and achievement- and financial gain-oriented Protestants.

Humor *on* Religion

Laughing at religion, often but not necessarily from an outsider’s perspective, has also been pervasive possibly since the very existence of humor and religion. Religion has historically been (a) an important societal source of power and force of establishment and maintenance of social hierarchies; (b) a major provider of ideas, norms, and practices aimed to control sexuality; and (c) one of the rare ideological systems that encompasses into one integrative set the beliefs, emotions, behaviors, and groups which allow humans to deal with deep existential needs and ultimate concerns. For all of these reasons, religion, together with secular authorities of political,

moral, and ideological power, has been a main target of humor. Humor is indeed uncomfortable with totalizing systems, ideas, and feelings; or better, humor is nourished by these systems, in that it needs to criticize them.

The history of satire on religion has followed the cultural history of the interplay between powerful religions, individual religious doubting, and social anti-religious sentiment. It has also paralleled the history of the conflict between protection of the sacred from profanation and defense of the individuals' right to express their ideas, including those for or against religion. Overall, it seems that there are three major types of religious satire. One type focuses on ironic criticism of religious professionals (see the many sexual jokes on clergy and monks) and norms and practices of religious institutions and religious devotes. This type may be aggressive at moments of high antireligious and anticlerical hostility (see the wave of antireligious cartoons following the French revolution). However, religious satire is also present among sympathizers who question current religious elements possibly in the name of higher spiritual or moral values (see, for instance, the humor on religion in *The Simpsons*). The third, more radical in content, but yet today more discrete in extent and form, criticizes or ridicules the divine itself. This type of humor is typically perceived as blasphemy by believers.

Note that the argumentation often used in the humorous, ironic, or sarcastic criticism of religion is of the same nature as the three major sources of religious doubting and "apostasy". Among doubters or atheists, several religious aspects, or even the very central elements of religious faith are criticized for being morally unacceptable (some religious norms may be in conflict with universal moral values), intellectually irrational (religious beliefs are, by definition, unverifiable and may appear implausible), or socially irrelevant (religious practices often present some discrepancy with an evolving society). The alternative contemporary form of humor on religion is a soft one, not strictly anti-religious: it mocks religious themes and symbols not because the target is religion per se, but because religious parody is an efficient strategy for memorizing the advertisement of secular products.

Recently, in secularized Western countries, emphasis has been placed on the subtle distinction between (a) religious ideas and sacred figures and symbols which should no longer be legally protected, thus being possible subjects of ridicule, and (b) religious individuals and groups which should not be targets of prejudice for their beliefs, practices, and affiliation. Therefore, in most of these societies there is no longer a law against blasphemy, whereas this is still the case in

traditional and collectivistic countries. At the same time, in the former societies, clearer and stronger legal protection has been put in place against inter-religious and inter-convictional (between believers and non-believers) prejudice, compared to the latter countries.

However, the strong connection between religion and ethnicity/culture, and thus between inter-religious and inter-ethnic prejudice, has made extremely difficult the effort to distinguish in some cases between (a) satire of religious ideas and symbols, (b) inter-religious prejudice, and (c) inter-ethnic prejudice. The Danish “Muhammad cartoons affair” in the mid 2000s and other, subsequent anti-Islam satiric expressions in the West are typical examples. In fact, two symmetric suspicions exist in the public domain. On the one hand, anti-Muslim satire may use freedom of (anti-)religious expression to propagate ethnic prejudice. On the other hand, violent protestations by Muslim individuals and communities may use the banishment of religious and ethnic prejudice as a way to legitimize their unwillingness to allow Islam to be criticized by others, especially outsiders.

Psychological Studies

A series of recent psychological studies has investigated the complex links between religion and humor. More precisely, these studies investigated three kinds of questions. The first is whether religiosity, i.e. individual differences on how religious or non-religious a person is, or specific forms of religiosity (for instance, orthodox and fundamentalist versus open-minded faith) indicates any specifics on a person’s sense of humor: global sense of humor, use of humor as a coping mechanism, humor creation, and appreciation of humor in general or specific humor styles in particular. The second question is whether religious stimulation, i.e. activation of religious ideas, symbols, and emotional experiences has any impact on humor. The third question is whether the experience of humor and amusement has any influence on a person’s attitudes toward religion and spirituality.

When focusing on self-evaluations, it appears that religious people do not tend to perceive themselves as having low sense of humor. If anything, self-reported spirituality is often accompanied by positive attitudes toward humor and its appreciation as a virtue. However, when the emphasis on the questionnaire is not on humor or religion per se (either of which could accentuate some social desirability), religious people and those who use religion to cope with stress and adversity actually report low use of humor as a means to cope, i.e. as a way to face stress and adversity. More importantly, when the evaluations come from others (e.g., spouses), it

appears that religious people tend to be perceived by their spouses as generally using less humor, and using less negative, i.e. hostile and earthy humor in particular.

When it comes to alternative measures of humor, such as the appreciation of jokes provided to participants or the spontaneous creation of humor in the laboratory, the existing studies show first that religious people tend not to spontaneously create humor when they are requested to provide their written responses in hypothetical situations inducing stress. They also tend to not find funny the jokes that reflect sick humor, i.e. those that are morbid, disgusting, and disparaging of people with handicap; and orthodox religious people dislike incongruity in humor, be it resolved or not. On the contrary, being relativistic and ready to question one's own attitudes toward religion predicts an appreciation of nonsense, absurd jokes and high levels of spontaneous creation of humor in response to hypothetical daily hassles.

In another laboratory study, exposure to a video clip presenting various religious ideas, images, and feelings led to the inhibition of participants' tendency to spontaneously use humor as a way to cope with hypothetical daily hassles. In yet another study, implicit activation ("priming") of religious ideas decreased participants', especially religious practitioners', ratings of the funniness of cartoons provided in the study.

Examining the opposite causal direction, i.e. from humor to religion, a series of laboratory studies investigated the consequences of inducing different positive emotions on participants' attitudes toward religion and spirituality. Positive emotions such as awe, elevation, and admiration, also called self-transcendent emotions, but not humor-related amusement (all emotions were induced either through video clips or through recall of personal experiences) increased participants' positive attitudes towards spirituality and related feelings and behavioral intentions.

In these psychological studies, the conflict, or at least, discomfort, between humor and religion was thus consistently attested through self-reports, peer-reports, and behavioral measures of appreciation and creation of humor. The effect is clearer when it comes to morally questionable forms of humor, but it sometimes extends to the social, common form of humor as well as to its common use as a coping mechanism. Not surprisingly, therefore, in another study measuring stereotypes (what group A thinks about group B) and meta-stereotypes (what group A believes group B thinks about group A) between believers and non-believers, it turned out that

the two groups share the perception of high versus low humor as being associated with, respectively, non-believers and believers.

These series of psychological studies were mainly carried out in Western, relatively secularized countries (Belgium, New Zealand, and the USA) with a Christian, often Catholic, background. It is of great interest to examine in future research whether these results generalize to other religions and non-Western cultural contexts. The possibility is not excluded that in some other religious groups, especially those where religion is not used primarily as a way to gain self-control, humor usage may be, on average, higher than among people of Catholic or more generally Christian traditions. However, as there exists some universality in the psychological characteristics of humor as well as in the psychological characteristics of religion, it is reasonable to suspect that the studies described above reflect something deeper, and possibly universal, regarding inherent discrepancies between religion and humor. Both religion and humor are a means for reframing and transcending everyday life experience. However, humor does so by diminishing things seen to be important in the visible reality, whereas religion does so by idealizing the importance of things that are part of an invisible reality.

In conclusion, religion and humor are neither good friends nor eternal enemies. Their ties are reminiscent of the ambivalent relations developed by competitive neighbors who have been constrained to live together.

Vassilis Saroglou

Centre for Psychology of Religion, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium

See also: Biblical, Buddhism, Clergy, Confucianism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Taoism

Further Readings

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