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God’s Comics: Religious Humour in Contemporary Evangelical Christian and Mormon Comedy

By Elisha McIntyre

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
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2014
Abstract

In the contemporary western world, humour has become not only a popular means of entertainment but a way in which an individual or community expresses their identity and values. Often it is thought that religion and humour are incompatible. This dissertation argues that this notion is mistaken. It demonstrates that religious people embrace their sense of humour and actively produce and consciously consume comic entertainment that reflects their own experiences, including religious experiences.

However, this process is not without conflict. The inherent ambiguity of humour plays with the established norms and beliefs of any community, and when humour intersects with questions of ultimate concern such as religion, the risk of misinterpretation and offense can be high. As a result, religious humourists must constantly negotiate the relationship between their religious beliefs and their sense of humour.

This dissertation considers that negotiation through discourse analysis of religious humour found in examples of popular comedy collected from American evangelical Christian and Latter-day Saint (Mormon) communities. While humour in religious communities operates in similar ways to humour in general, this thesis argues that there are specific characteristics that indicate a unique kind of humour that may be called religious humour.

This study considers both mainstream and conservative religious humour as well as subversive reactions to that mainstream. Methodologically, this study is a multidisciplinary exploration that contributes to the disciplines of religious studies, humour studies and cultural studies. It aims to redress the gaps in religious studies about humour and in humour studies about religion. Incorporating literature from these areas as well as original data from textual analysis and field research this thesis critically analyses the experiences of believers who appreciate that their faith is not necessarily a barrier to their laughter.

KEYWORDS Religion, Humour, Religious Humour, Evangelical, Christian, Mormon, LDS, Comedy, Popular Culture, Film, Stand-up Comedy
# Contents

Acknowledgements  
A Brief Note on Terminology  
List of Figures  
**Introduction**  

**Chapter One  Identifying and Approaching Religious Humour**  
Introduction and Summary of Argument  
A Brief Note on ‘Religious’  
A Brief Note on ‘Humorous’  
Identifying Religious Content  
Identifying Religious Context  
Field Research  
Conclusion: Approaching Religious Humour  

**Chapter Two  The Field(s) (and Gaps)**  
Introduction  
Religious Studies  
  Scholarship on Islamic Humour  
Theology  
  Humour in the Bible  
  Humour in LDS Scripture  
  Humour and Ultimate Truth  
  Humour in Homiletics  
Humour Studies  
  Major Theories of Humour  
    Superiority  
    Relief  
    Incongruity  
    Social and Cultural Influences on Humour  
Conclusion
### Chapter Three  *Addressing the Challenge of Humour*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour and Offense</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “Christian” (Lack of a) Sense of Humour</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconciling Blasphemy and Belief: Appropriate Humour</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate Humour in Popular Religious Discourse</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate Humour in Field Research</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter Four  *Appropriate Humour I: Blasphemy and Beliefs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour and Blasphemy</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies of Blasphemy Management: Absence</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies of Blasphemy Management: Framing</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies of Blasphemy Management: Mode Switching</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode Switching in <em>Apostles of Comedy</em></td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies of Blasphemy Management: Butt of the Joke</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God Jokes</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus Jokes</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Avoiding Blasphemy, Promoting Belief</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter Five  *Appropriate Humour II: Dirty and Clean Humour*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty Humour</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty Humour and the Pollution of the Christian Body</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean Humour and the Shoring Up of Boundaries</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean Sex Jokes</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitute Swearing</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean Humour and Identity</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty Humour in Mainstream Comedy</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean Humour as an Identity Marker</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Six  *Appropriate Humour III: Safe and Subversive Humour*

Introduction  
Hostile Humour  
Christian and LDS Perspectives: Loving Your Neighbour  
Discomfort with Subversion  
  Safe Religious Humour: *Pastor Greg*  
  Travis T. Anderson and ‘Wholesome’ Entertainment  
Subversive and Hostile Religious Humour  
  Brad Stine: Stand-up Comedian as Cultural Critic  
  *Sunstone* Magazine: Reform Through Subversive Humour  
Conclusion  

**Conclusion**  

Bibliography  
Appendix One  
Appendix Two
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A Brief Note on Terminology

This dissertation uses the term “Mormon” to describe a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or for something pertaining to that church. Members may also be called “LDS” (as in Latter-day Saint) or sometimes simply “Saints”, and many prefer this due to the negative historical associations of the term “Mormon”. However, I use the term “Mormon” most frequently because of its general familiarity and the fact that it no longer carries the same level of negativity as it once did. Members will also frequently call themselves Mormons, and commonly use the term in their own published materials. The Church prefers to have its full title - “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” - used wherever possible. However, the full title can be cumbersome in a study of this extent, so I will refer to the Church in full in the first instance but thereafter it shall be referred to as “The LDS Church”.

A second point is that I have chosen to use the Australian spelling of “humour” unless the word appears in a direct quotation or a title that originally used the American spelling, “humor”.

# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 2</strong></td>
<td>Cartoon, Calvin Grondahl, first published in <em>Sunstone</em> 15:3, no.83, (October 1991), p.3. Page 186.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 3</strong></td>
<td>Cartoon, Calvin Grondahl, first published in <em>Sunstone</em> 15:4, no.83 (September 1991), p.3. Page 186.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 4</strong></td>
<td>Cartoon, Pat Bagley, first published in <em>Sunstone</em> no.70 (April 1989), p.50. Page 188.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 5</strong></td>
<td>Cartoon, Jeanette Atwood, first published in <em>Sunstone</em> no. 133 (July 2004), p.3. Page 188.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 6</strong></td>
<td>Cartoon, Gwen Dutcher, first published in <em>Sunstone</em>, no.140(December 2005), p.72. Page 188.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 7</strong></td>
<td>Cartoon, Jeanette Atwood, first published in <em>Sunstone</em>, no.138 (September 2005), p.33. Page 189.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 8</strong></td>
<td>Cartoon, Jeanette Atwood, first published in <em>Sunstone</em>, no.137 (May 2005), p.3. Page 189.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 9</strong></td>
<td>Cartoon, Jeanette Atwood, first published in <em>Sunstone</em>, no.148 (December 2007), p.3. Page 190.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 10</strong></td>
<td>Cartoon, Calvin Grondahl, first published in <em>Sunstone</em>, no.130 (December 2003), p.20. Page 191.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Introduction

Who was the greatest comedian in the Bible?

Samson. He brought the house down.\(^1\)

The connection between humour and religion is clear for those who wish to see it. This dissertation is about believers who see this connection and incorporate humour into their religious lives. They view humour not as antithetical to the proper practice of their faith, but as indicative of a wider positive and joyful religious perspective that can even lead to greater fulfilment of their spirituality. This dissertation considers the ways that the communities I have selected – evangelical Christians and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as LDS or Mormons) – actively engage with humour as an integral part of their religious identity. It is about the nature of humour, its cultural construction and its relationship to explicit and implicit meaning. Humour can act as a vehicle for social and cultural values, and it does so in ways specific to humorous communication. It plays audaciously with boundaries, and this has the potential to cause both laughter and alarm. I identify that humour, when situated in a religious context, needs to be controlled through conditions formed out of the religious culture of the group. Importantly, humour is a practical experience in the lives of Christians and Mormons, they laugh at what they see and hear. Hence this dissertation is ultimately concerned with what those communities are watching and listening to, that is, what they are choosing to consume as comedy entertainment and why.

This dissertation has two goals. Firstly, it is a survey of religious humour. There is yet to be any scholarly collection of religious humour and by collating a number of examples together this study will prove a useful resource and contribute to the scant scholarship on religious humour. This also allows an overall comparison so that my conclusions based on individual cases may be shown to apply to religious humour as a wider phenomenon. Secondly, by examining material examples of religious humour, as well as what believers say about their humour practices in their own words, I analyse what these jokes about the sacred can reveal about those that are making them. A principal goal of this study is to develop a model that

helps answer the primary research question: \textit{how does religious belief inspire and/or control humour creation and appreciation}? The development of this model is guided by three research questions that have framed my approach to the material. Firstly, \textit{what are Christians and Mormons watching, reading and listening to for the purposes of humorous entertainment}? Secondly, \textit{what criteria do believers use to make their entertainment choices}? Thirdly, \textit{how does that help them to express and, importantly, reinforce, their religious beliefs and practices}?

The criteria for what constitutes religious humour is discussed throughout Chapter One. My preliminary criteria here is that to qualify as religious humour it must be made by religious people, include some sort of religious theme(s) and be intended for a religious audience. In addition, it needs to be contemporary and marketed as entertainment – so this discounts instances such as medieval Holy Fools and casual conversational humour among religious people. Throughout this study religious humour is treated as its own genre in the sense that it is a “group of acts unified by a constellation of forms that recurs in each of its members”\textsuperscript{2}. These forms, in religious comedy, include commonalities in content as well as the explicit religious affiliation of performers and audiences. For example Christian comedy will contain jokes about church, will not contain swearing or dirty humour, will be marketed as “family friendly” and will promote values that are implicitly or explicitly Christian. Mormon comedy will contain the same, and will be identifiable through its Mormon label but mainly by its specifically Mormon content, for example copious jokes about being part of a large family, missionaries, Utah, and \textit{The Book of Mormon}.

The choice of evangelical Christians and Latter-day Saints as the subjects of study was informed by an interest in the beliefs and practices of those groups in particular as well as their prolific production of religious humour. Christians and Mormons are active participants in popular culture, and have a material religious culture that is both accessible and abundant, and of significant interest to the growing body of scholarship on religious engagement with media and popular culture.\textsuperscript{3} These high levels of activity provide a substantial sample size in

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{2} Karyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, ‘Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction’, in \textit{Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action} (Falls Church, Virginia: The Speech Communication Association, 1978), 20.
  \item \textsuperscript{3} Some examples of such studies include Colleen McDannell, \textit{Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America} (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1995); Heather Hendershot, \textit{Shaking the World For Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture} (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin, eds., \textit{Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and
terms of qualitative analysis which is thus large enough to support broadly applicable conclusions. The material is taken from exclusively American sources. The United States of America is a fertile ground in terms of material religion and selecting a single country allows for a more manageable process of data collection, in particular because this dissertation incorporates field research data that I collected from surveys and interviews conducted in four states – Tennessee, California, Utah, and Indiana. The field data builds upon a foundation of textual analysis, providing empirical evidence of the relationship that Christians and Mormons have with religious humour.

This dissertation is underpinned by both humour studies and religious studies. While much of this scholarship does not focus precisely on religious humour as I interpret it throughout this project, a general understanding of what humour is and how it operates is essential to any understanding of a specific type of humour. Humour is a widely debated and contested subject, but the aim is to be able to situate this discussion of religious humour within a wider discourse about humour. Similarly, religious studies, notably Christian and Mormon studies, is needed as a foundation for this particular focus on one aspect of Christian and Mormon culture. Within this broader methodological context, there are numerous ways that religious humour could be approached with precision and each aspect under consideration will require different and selective theoretical tools. The choices made in regards to interpretive methods are done so not out of any notion that they fit perfectly or are exhaustive but because they help to hold religious humour down long enough to explain some of its many features. For instance, Chapter Four required methodologies from theology and studies of religious offence to deal with the question of blasphemy. Chapter Five employs theories of body and boundaries as well as some linguistics to consider the motivations behind clean humour. Chapter Six uses methodology from humour studies that deals with subversion and the social nature of humour to look at religious humour that is socially safe or socially subversive.

The following six chapters explore my research questions by examining religious humour as an instance of popular culture that is informed primarily by religious identity. Chapter One introduces in further depth the processes I have used to identify and analyse religious humour. I will argue that religious humour must be found by considering both its content and


4 All fieldwork was approved by the University of Sydney Human Research and Ethics Committee, Reference 12285. Sample interview questions and a copy of the survey are included in Appendices 1 and 2.
its context because there is a clear difference between humour that is about religion and religious humour. Chapter One suggests that contextual markers such as the type of religious references used, the identity of the author and audience, and the manner of distribution all help to shape the distinguishing features of what makes humour religious. It discusses the methodological approaches needed for a study of this kind, in which the emphasis on empirical analysis of material means that multiple disciplines must be considered as well as field work and popular sources.

Chapter Two takes up the multidisciplinary nature of the study of religious humour and presents a summary of the significant scholarship about religious humour. Since religious humour has received very little notice from the academy, Chapter Two also discusses other relevant methodologies from religious studies, theology and humour studies. This chapter demonstrates that there is much helpful material around the subject, however, there has yet to be any extended investigation targeted specifically at humour made by Christians and Mormons. This dissertation is one of the first of this kind, drawing on a tradition of inquiry into humour and religion as it is seen in the Bible and the historical relationship that Christianity and other religions have had with humour and laughter; and supplementing original data when the subject requires further information than is currently available.

Chapter Three moves away from an examination of current scholarship and towards the question of what believers are saying about themselves. In this chapter I use popular newspapers, magazines, blogs and other sources of popular discourse, as well as survey results from my fieldwork to examine how Christians and Mormons understand the relationship between their religion and their humour. Christians and Mormons have an ambiguous relationship with humour. It is both a positive contribution to faith and society but it is also fraught with the danger of abuse. While Christians and Mormons often speak vaguely and in general terms about their enjoyment and their fear of humour, I will argue that the distinguishing factor is that they desire humour that is appropriate. This means that if humour is to be enjoyed rather than abused, it must conform to certain standards laid out individually, but informed collectively, by religious interpretations of what is appropriate and inappropriate subject matter for humour.

The final three chapters discuss what is meant by the term “appropriate”. I contend that appropriate, in the context of religious humour, means non-blasphemous, clean and non-
hostile. Chapter Four addresses the question of blasphemy. This is one of the greatest threats that humour presents to religion, but this can be offset by the importance that God and the sacred has in the lives of believers. This conflict is mitigated by blasphemy management strategies that prevent any humour from becoming insulting to God, and will very often result in humour that is faith affirming and promotes a Christian worldview. This chapter focuses on humour that is specifically about God, Jesus Christ and the sacred. The case studies are drawn primarily from Christian stand-up comedy series Apostles of Comedy (2008), Thou Shalt Laugh (2006-2011), and the LDS film The Singles 2nd Ward (2007).5

Chapter Five investigates the issue of clean humour, largely through an understanding of what is so offensive about its opposite, dirty humour. For appropriate religious humour, to be clean means that it contains no swearing or sexual and scatological humour. However, I will demonstrate that this is much more complicated than the standard simple definitions of ‘clean’ permit. Whilst the religious ambiguity over the body results in the absence of swearing and sex jokes in terms of what is usually thought of as “dirty jokes”, Christian and Mormon humourists engage in these subjects in ways that circumvent the explicitness of mainstream dirty humour but retain the humour inherent in our physicality as humans. This preserves their purity without compromising the funniness of the body. Again the case studies are taken from Christian and Mormon stand-up comedy as well as the LDS film Sons of Provo (2004).6

Chapter Six discusses the issues of hostility and subversion in religious humour. Christians and Mormons are uncomfortable with humour that attacks and insults others, and as a result much of their humour can be considered safe in the sense that it does not attempt to challenge anyone in case it may cause offence or hurt. I discuss this approach to humour in the Christian sitcom Pastor Greg (2005).7 However, humour also has a profound relationship with humility, and many believers feel that humour can be used as a form of social correction for unacceptable behaviour or as subversion of incorrect or inappropriate beliefs and practices. This perspective is demonstrated through an analysis of the stand-up comedy of Brad Stine and cartoons published in the liberal LDS magazine Sunstone.

6 Will Swenson, Sons of Provo (HaleStorm Entertainment, 2004).
7 Greg Robbins, Pastor Greg (Cornerstone Television, 2005).
Religious humour is in many ways an embodiment of a paradox. There is no consensus on a definition for either, as it is clear that in both instances one person’s experience is not the same as another’s. To describe such experiences is to inevitably dispel some or all of their power. Explaining a joke usually hinders laughter, whilst describing a religious experience can also diffuse its spiritual power. Both rely on a kind of personal assessment; people believe as a matter of faith and people laugh as a matter of taste. What is funny to one person is offensive to another, what one accepts as sacred to another can be profane. Yet both religion and humour are so ubiquitous and so human, that when they intersect, that point becomes a fruitful and fascinating manifestation of culture to investigate.
Chapter One
Identifying and Approaching Religious Humour

Introduction and Summary of Argument

The process of identifying religious humour involves more than noting down when a priest, an imam and a rabbi “walk into a bar”. The presence of religious figures or symbols does not automatically indicate that a joke is ‘religious humour’. Often jokes may be categorised as religious based on such limited criteria. A cursory survey of joke books and websites demonstrates the simplified nature of this kind of categorisation; religious jokes can be found alongside many other shallow groupings such as ‘blonde’, ‘knock knock’ or ‘lawyer’ jokes where the typology is based solely on a sometimes haphazard inclusion of a blonde, a ‘knock knock’ or a lawyer. The use of the label ‘religious’ to classify humour that merely references religion is insufficient because the issue of what makes humour religious has much deeper roots. I will argue in this chapter that interpreting humour as religious involves a two part analysis; both content and context must be considered. The distinction will be made between humour that is about religion and religious humour. Humour that features religious stereotypes and symbols does associate humour with religion, it is about religion. However, for the purposes of this study religious humour is humour that has a religious intention, or is in some way influenced (in either its creation or appreciation) by an individual’s religious beliefs. Religious humour is used in religious ways, that is, as an expression of one’s religious identity (for example using humour to express religious values or to identify oneself as a member of a specific religious group) or as part of religious practice (such as evangelism, religious education or entertainment). This is a broad definition that emphasises two things about the type of humour that is being considered. Firstly, I am interested in an insider perspective, or to put it plainly, religious people joking about their own religious traditions.¹ Secondly, religious humour is not required to have religious content because

¹ I am aware that conceptualising the researcher’s position within any insider/outsider or emic/etic dichotomy is problematic, as Cohen suggests “our clichéd distinctions between so-called emic and etic analyses must be regarded as matters of emphasis and aspiration — of theoretical pretension — rather than of absolute and
many types of humorous content can be used religiously and it is context that is crucial in interpreting examples of humour as religious or not. The same joke told in a bar will be received very differently when it is told in a church, because the conditions that dictate its reception are informed in part by the religiosity of those involved in the exchange as well as the socio-cultural context. Naturally the inverse is also true, whether one is telling a joke in a bar or a church will affect the choice of joke to be told.

While I have just suggested that relying on the presence of religious symbols to identify religious humour is problematic, in practice it can be a helpful preliminary flag when searching through what can quickly become vast quantities of material. It can be a useful first step in data collection, so long as it is later subjected to contextual analysis. When searching for instances of religious humour there are thus two initial questions to be asked of each sample: is the content religious and, ultimately of more importance, is the context religious? Distinguishing religious content and religious context is a complicated task. It is a key argument of this thesis that humorous content of most kinds can, when in a religious context, become religious. This process will be examined in detail over the course of the study, but for now I will turn first to the question of identifying religious content before discussing how that content can be located within a wider religious context. This chapter discusses the processes by which the data for this study was selected. Firstly by identifying religious features in the work such as titles, descriptions, images, and joke content and secondly by identifying the religious context of the work, such as the creator’s religious identity, target audiences, where and how the work is distributed and accessed, and popular discourse about the work (for example if the work is reviewed by a religious blog or newspaper).

**A Brief Note on ‘Religious’**

Above all else the defining characteristic of the subject of this study is the ‘religiousness’ of the material to be analysed. This brings me to the need to clarify what this term means and how it will be used here. I make no pretence of developing a complete definition; rather it is more useful in an empirical study of this kind to suggest a working or operational definition, one that guides the reader towards what is meant in this particular context when an example

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accomplishable difference.” In other words it is used as a theoretical short hand to distinguish myself as a non-Christian and non-Mormon rather than any sense of rigid group boundary. Anthony P. Cohen, ‘Post-Fieldwork Fieldwork’, *Journal of Anthropological Research* 48, no. 4 (1992): 352.
of humour is considered to be religious. The understanding of religion here is intentionally broad, since, to quote Horatio Dresser “religion, like poetry and most other living things, cannot be defined” although “some characteristic marks may be given”. It is these characteristic marks that will help determine whether the data fits this study.

Here ‘religious’ is used to mean references to symbols, figures, beliefs, values, practices or themes belonging to, or directly informed by, organised interpretations of the sacred, that is, religious institutions and traditions. It includes both personal and institutional relations to the sacred, as the two are not always the same or even in agreement; a conflict that is at times a source for humour. ‘Religious’ also includes both explicit and implicit references to the sacred and all its manifestations, so that jokes about creationism or sexual abstinence or family may be included alongside jokes that refer to God, church, Jesus or Heaven, as these are all themes that can be directly shaped by religious belief.

It must be acknowledged from the outset that my working definition of ‘religious’ is firmly planted in Western monotheistic religious traditions. This is by no means intended to exclude other interpretations of practice or belief from being religious. Rather it is only that the data being considered comes from cultures in which ‘being religious’ is for the most part taken to mean ‘being Christian’ and is understood as acceptance of a generally Christian worldview. Specifically, at times I use the term ‘religious’ interchangeably with ‘Christian’ or ‘Mormon’ to describe humour produced and consumed within a Christian or Mormon framework. In particular, the ‘Christian’ humour examined here is produced by Christians who consider themselves to be in some way evangelical. I use George Marsden as a guide for defining this broad collection of Christians. Marsden identifies evangelicals in part through their common beliefs (final authority of the Bible, the real historical character of Scripture, salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, the importance of evangelism and missions, and the importance of spiritual transformation). Evangelicalism can also refer to “a self-conscious interdenominational movement, with leaders, publications, and institutions

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with which people from many subgroups identify”. It is a combination of their beliefs and their community that are intended with the use of the term evangelical Christian.

Another consideration is that throughout this dissertation I take the position that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) is an instantiation of the Christian worldview. This is a controversial position, the justification of which is beyond the task at hand. I accept the premise for two reasons that are relevant to my argument; firstly I accept that because most Mormons identify themselves as Christians they fit into a Christian framework, whilst at the same time expressing distinct Mormon versions of that worldview. Secondly, the historical development of the LDS Church means that Mormonism shares certain theological and cultural attitudes with Christianity in general, and attitudes to laughter and humour in particular. Additionally, Mormons draw on much of the same body of religious material as Christians; it will be shown that they have jokes about biblical stories, Jesus Christ and God, and political themes such as abortion, creationism, atheism, and gender roles in common. Of course each group has different additional material that they draw upon humorously as well; the LDS scripture The Book of Mormon (1830) is a very common source of humour for Mormons exclusively, while Christians can joke about aspects of evangelical culture that are not relevant to Mormons. Basically, I want to establish that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is positioned within the historical culture of Protestant Christianity, and as such it shares a legacy of attitudes with Christians, in particular with regard to humour. However, Mormons and evangelical Christians also simultaneously have beliefs, practices, and cultures that are starkly different, even at times contradictory. This explains why at times I will use methodology or other reference material written about or by Christians to examine LDS culture and beliefs. Such similarities will become clearer the more closely I examine Christian and Mormon discourse, specifically in Chapter Four, where

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5 Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, Mormon America: The Power and the Promise (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), chap. 19. I here acknowledge the complexity of the situation by referencing Jan Shipps who complicates the question each time she is asked whether Mormons are Christian. She does so by attempting to determine the framework within which the question is being asked. Here the framework is the content and referents within the body of humour that makes up this study and the wider culture of popular entertainment amongst Mormons and Christians. Jan Shipps, “‘Is Mormonism Christian?’ Reflections on a Complicated Question”, BYU Studies 33, no. 3 (1993): 439.


I argue that Christians and Mormons share an understanding of “good” humour as something that is appropriately non-blasphemous, clean and non-hostile, an interpretation that comes from shared understandings of sacrality and profanity.

Additionally, all the humour used in my research is American. This is for several reasons, firstly to restrict the volume of data to a single country, which limits the cultural context of the material. Secondly, America provides a wealth of material that is highly commercialised, and as a result it is accessible to a wide audience and has developed into an industry, much in the sense of other Christian or Mormon ‘parallel’ cultures in general.\(^8\) Evangelical Christians and Mormons are visible participants in popular culture, and both groups have developed their own media and consumer goods that demonstrate that their religious lives are not exclusive of consumer culture, and in fact embrace it.\(^9\) A vast array of entertainment media in the form of film and television, music, books, and other goods provide Christians and Mormons with consumer choices that are an alternative to mainstream secular media that may not reflect their own beliefs and values.\(^10\) While an extensive consideration of religious consumerism is beyond the point here, it is important to note that Christian and Mormon comedy is situated within the context of a wider commodification of religion that results in the development of a market for religious goods.\(^11\) Stand-up comedy, comedy films, cartoons, and other humour forms are all part of commercial industries that operate on market values; the tastes of the audience not only affect the popularity of the humourist but also the profits for their distributor, managers, publishers and so on. Such commercialism also results in a stronger sense of mainstream, if we consider it in terms of what sells, although popular culture in general (and humour in particular) will of course vary widely in terms what is acceptable and popular.

I have not designated the above limitations because humour from the American Christian West is in any way ‘funnier’ or more abundant than humour from any other region or culture. Such a focus allows a more manageable and cohesive sample to work with. For now it will be

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used to help describe any indications of religious humour: signs and symbols (of varying degrees of explicitness) of Western monotheism, especially those indicating Christian worldviews and specifically those referencing evangelical Christianity or Mormonism. This includes open and direct references to features of those religions, such as God, Jesus, Biblical and *Book of Mormon* stories or characters, church practices, doctrines, and terminology or jargon. These signs and symbols can also include attitudes or cultural features usually associated with Christian or Mormon worldviews, such as pro-life, sexual abstinence, or references to famous personalities or places for example George Bush Jnr (a well-known Christian) or Utah (one of the most prominent centres of LDS culture).

**A Brief Note on ‘Humorous’**

The capacity for something to be humorous is one of the more subjective, slippery concepts that are addressed in this dissertation and rather than attempt any fully comprehensive definition here I simply want to note the parameters around it that have been used in collecting my material. This is not least because definitions of humour are limited and difficult to use and subject to long-standing discussion and debate amongst scholars of humour, something that I address in greater detail in Chapter Two. For now, the criteria for considering a work to be an example of humour is primarily based on the intention of the work. If the author creates the work with the express purpose of making people laugh, then the work is an example of humour. This can be a very subjective claim to make, especially in regards to religious humour, since I must frequently deal with the problematic but popular notion that religious people are generally only funny accidentally. It is a fruitless pursuit to discuss whether or not something is objectively ‘funny’, and ultimately I am not interested in ‘funniness’ on a quality scale. Rather, in an attempt to keep my material from becoming subject to the whimsy of personal taste, the assessment that something is humorous is based solely on whether the creator of the work intended it to be. Humorous intention is distinct from humorous reception, and while both components make up the perspectives examined in this thesis, humour that is unintentional, spontaneous or conversational is a completely different social phenomenon to intentional or scripted humour and relies on different rules of interaction and interpretation and so for the most part will be left aside.¹² Consider the

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difference between a stand-up comedian who has written and rehearsed jokes with the expressed intention of making their audience laugh (whether they do or not is a separate issue), and the laughs produced by a slip of the tongue in conversation. In the first instance the humour has been deliberately selected based on its imagined humorous consequences, whereas in the second the consequence may be unexpected and accidental. Scripted humour is for the most part consistent, especially in its content, despite differences in audiences. Spontaneous humour is so situation specific that it is unlikely to be able to be repeatable and hence it is more difficult to draw general conclusions from it. All the humour examined in this study has been carefully written, rehearsed and edited (even in cases where the laughs may appear to be spontaneous, as often happens with stand-up comedy). I would suggest that this means that the risk of any potential offence has also been considered and factored in to the creative process, and therefore of greater interest to this particular study.

Comedy, like most forms of entertainment, comes in a wide variety of formats. The following chapters have a primary focus on stand-up comedy, comedy film, and comic strips and cartoons. These forms are supplemented where necessary with jokes. Jokes are in many ways a distinct category of humour, even though in the broadest sense they could be considered as the ‘vehicle’ that delivers the humour within a script. Many humour studies focus on jokes as they exist in cultural folklore, sometimes known as “jokelore”. As social artefacts, they are frequently verbal not written, shared in conversation as semi-spontaneous responses to the social situation of the moment. I am less interested in joking in these situations, however jokes provide a valuable means of analysis of a small parcel of text that conveys meaning and hence are often exceptionally useful in illustrating theoretical points. As much as possible I will try to draw illustrative jokes from my body of religious comedy, although at times the theoretical is best shown through a more standard, familiar joke forms (for example in the discussion below of Hempelmann’s ‘truly Christian’ joke criteria).

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Identifying Religious Content

There is no easy guide at hand to use when encountering humour that has religious content and initially I have utilised the somewhat distanced and quantitative approach of simply recording examples that contain recognisably religious symbols, figures, narratives or other references. This is a worthy exercise, despite many of these examples being discarded after a deeper contextual analysis, especially as they helped to highlight common characteristics found in what would become my corpus of religiously humorous material. A clear example can be found in the television series *South Park*, a cartoon that makes frequent, thorough and well-informed references to religion, but is ultimately unsuitable as ‘religious’ humour due to other content that suggests a non-religious perspective and includes features that are uncommon or even rejected in most other examples of religious humour (specifically swearing, sexual and scatological motifs, violence, blasphemy). While the presence of such themes does not always exclude humour from the religious category, once a sizable collection had been surveyed it became clear that it is uncommon to find religious humour containing swearing and extremes of sexual humour or blasphemy, so examples such as *South Park* could confidently be excluded.

This process may seem somewhat simplistic, but to date there has been no typology developed to classify religious humour and as such I have worked with largely unsurveyed data that had to be sifted through rather roughly at first. The only relevant attempt is Christian F. Hempelmann’s article on “truly Christian” jokes.14 Hempelmann closely examines jokes that are popularly classified (on joke websites or in book collections) as “Christian” to test whether such jokes are what he terms “truly” Christian. For Hempelmann, truly Christian humour relies on there being a religious element in the joke that cannot be removed or substituted while leaving the joke unchanged; he says in regards to Jewish humour (but the rule applies in general) “if they are truly Jewish jokes, deleting or replacing the parts that make them Jewish also deletes the parts that make them jokes as the Jewish element is a necessary part of the script opposition”.15 To explain by example, the following joke is about

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15 This is for the sake of brevity a great simplification of Hempelmann’s theory which relies on an understanding of humour and humour studies especially the work of Victor Raskin. For Raskin humour occurs through a “script opposition”, where two scripts or patterns of cultural background knowledge are placed on top of each other and are in some way comprehensible but in opposition. For Hempelmann, a truly Christian joke
Christianity, but is not, according to Hempelmann’s rule, a truly Christian joke because it may be substituted without changing it substantially or ruining the joke’s effect.

Three nuns in church on a hot day decide to remove their robes because of the heat. Not an unusual habit on a hot day. So about a half hour later, the doorbell rings while their robes are slumped over pews clear across the huge chapel. They ask who it is. “The blind man,” a voice replies. The three nuns decide to simply open the door because the man is blind. He walks in, looks at the nuns and says, “Nice tits! Where do you want me to install these blinds?”

This joke in no way needs to be about nuns specifically, it would work just well as long as the characters are female and the ‘blind man’ is male. The fact that the characters in this joke are nuns simply exploits the nun stereotype in order to emphasise the sexual innocence and ignorance of the women, but it is not necessary for the joke to function as it relies mostly on the double meaning of ‘blind man’. A contrasting example is the following joke about Mormons; it is a truly religious joke in that changing any of the elements renders it nonsensical.

JOE: My home teacher is so good he comes on the first day of every month!
HENRY: Oh yeah? My home teacher is so good he comes the day before that!

This is a slightly difficult example in that it relies heavily on an existing knowledge of the Mormon church to even recognise the religious elements in the first place, but the point here is that Home Teachers (an exclusively LDS institution, in which Home Teachers are expected to complete their teaching obligations by the end of each month) cannot be replaced with anything that does not render the joke absurd. Hence it is a ‘truly’ religious joke.

Unfortunately Hempelmann’s framework is fundamentally a linguistic exercise in joke mechanics, and therefore has only limited potential as a model of use in this study. There will

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16 ‘Best Religious Joke, Rude Religious Jokes, Short Religious Jokes’, 2012, http://www.lotsofjokes.com/religious_jokes_1.asp. Accessed 15/11/12. This joke was taken from an online collection of jokes and so its ideological foundations cannot be traced. The joke itself can be read as stereotypically sexist, but I include it not to discuss its gender implications nor for any potential offense it may cause, but to illustrate Hempelmann’s model. It was selected based only on the fact that it contains nuns, a feature clearly associated with religion.

be times when the analysis moves in very closely to a joke to examine its technique but Hempelmann’s study is too typological to provide any real understanding of such jokes in their socio-cultural context, which is the heart of what makes religious humour meaningful. Hempelmann’s jokes are only structurally dependent on religion; this study is concerned with humour that is socially, psychologically, culturally, and theologically dependent on religion. His definition of Christian jokes does not take into account who is telling the joke and to whom as well as under what circumstances. It does not take into account the motivation or intention of the teller, something that is crucial to the ‘religiousness’ of religious humour. Hempelmann’s examples include copious amounts of swearing and sexual humour, something which, as above mentioned, disqualifies his jokes from my collection, demonstrating that his definition of a Christian joke is significantly different to that which will be used throughout this dissertation. However, I would agree, though for different reasons, with his assertion that “just as Polish jokes aren’t about real citizens of Poland, most Christian jokes…aren’t really that Christian at all”.18 His jokes fall under jokes about religion rather than religious jokes. In being so reliant on religious content without religious context his framework is limited in its analysis of that content as well as in dealing with humour that may not have explicit religious content but be situated within a religious context. Hempelmann’s inward looking focus fails to provide any tools in this situation or for wider analysis in general. Ultimately religious content is certainly indicative but not sufficient to qualify humour as religious.

**Identifying Religious Context**

Hempelmann’s article is the only typological humour study with religion in mind, but in its failure to contextualise we are left without an established model for determining the religious meaning of humour, and here I venture to remedy this situation. This leads to the other crucial step in the data selection process; asking questions that look deeper into the meanings of humour by situating each example in its context, the most significant determining factor in designating humour as ‘religious’. But what exactly is a religious context? This is perhaps a more difficult thing to define than religious content, especially since the term ‘context’ is often considered self-evident and is used without recognition that placing something in context is itself an act of interpretation, and an act of organising material in a selective way

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18 Hempelmann, “‘9 Nuns Giggle, 1 Nun Gasps’”, 28.
(specifically in relation to the perspective of the academic study). In this situation as a researcher I must make a judgement as to whether the context of my humorous material is religious, but there are clues that can be used to lend a method to subjective judgements and it is hoped that context may be viewed here as an analytical tool rather than a philosophical problem. Clues that indicate a religious context range from the obvious to the subtle, but in general are found in the answers to a series of questions asked of the material. I turn now to some of those questions, keeping in mind that more questions will ultimately arise from the process and that at the stage of primary data collection I am chiefly interested in affirmative markers that the humour is situated in a particular “social world of practice”, in this case a religious world.

**Clues within the Work – What is it called? What are its main thematic concerns?**

This is a different process to identifying religious content because it focuses more specifically on the ways in which that religious content is presented. When examining clues within the work, concentration is shifted towards finding the possible intentions behind the work and determining the perspective that it is coming from or promoting. This means a consideration of the language and imagery used as well as the key themes and messages presented. Does the work promote an overall positive attitude towards religion? Does it contain any notable inclusions (for example blessings from or thanks to God, positive jokes about church or community, negative jokes about atheism, and assumed knowledge of religious practices or doctrines), or notable exclusions (such as swearing, dirty humour, hostile, violent or blasphemous styles of humour)?

Sometimes a humorous work will explicitly self-identify as religious. This can usually be seen in the title of work, the tagline or the description (for example on promotional material and websites for films, books, and stand-up comedy). For example, there are a number of Christian stand-up comedy tours that explicitly announce their Christian perspective by using religious terms to describe themselves and their comedy. Religious titles such as *Apostles of Comedy* (2008) and *Thou Shalt Laugh* (2006-2011) are often accompanied by taglines or

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descriptions that seek to flag the religious orientation of the comedy, making it immediately intelligible to audiences seeking a religious element in comedy. *Apostles of Comedy* tells us to “Get ready for comedy of a higher power” and that “God said ‘Let there be light’. He also said ‘Let there be laughter’”. Similarly *Thou Shalt Laugh* calls its comics “America’s funniest Christian Comedians” and suggests that if you are “Looking for funny? Your prayers have been answered”. An LDS example is the stand-up comedy collection *It’s Latter-day Night! Live Comedy* (2003), a play on the popular sketch show *Saturday Night Live*. The tagline reads self-deprecatingly as “Mormons Being Funny. On Purpose”. Such open identification allows confidence in the fact that these works are ‘religious’ in the sense that their use of religious associations is a deliberate way of indicating the religious perspective (if not content) of the works. What that religious perspective means is a question to be pursued further throughout this study, but for now it allows the postulation that religion plays a key role in the performance and appreciation of such works.

**Clues from the author – How can the author’s religious perspective be identified?**

When religious language is not as immediately obvious or familiar, there are other places to search for indicators of religious perspective. The religious identity of those who create works of humour is of great significance to this project; even though it must be noted that simply because a humourist is personally religious does not necessarily make their humour religious. Nor does creating religious humour necessarily mean the author is themselves personally religious. But it does provide a connection between religion and humour that in many cases is worth investigating. The ways in which the religiosity of comedians affects humour are numerous and varied, but the first step is to identify the perspective and worldview of the authors.

This is much easier to do with stand-up comedy, because this analysis is concentrating on one individual whose comedy is often largely dependent on their personality and opinions and they will have sole control over the content and form of the humour. Stand-up comics in the age of the internet are accessible to researchers not only through their shows but also through self-promotion that utilises media such as YouTube. Christian comedians in particular will

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often be explicit about their beliefs, or may belong to official organisations such as the Christian Comedy Association, where the first requirement for membership is “Belief in and adherence to the major tenets of the Christian Faith”.

Some comedians have also authored books on religious subjects, for example Brad Stine’s *Being a Christian Without Being an Idiot* (2004) or Thor Ramsey’s *A Comedian’s Guide to Theology* (2008). This similarly applies to other works that have a single authorial perspective, such as literature, cartoons or personal blogs. I am not concerned with the level of piety of such authors, mostly because there is no spectrum upon which to place comedians and their comedy from ‘high’ religiosity to ‘low’, although undoubtedly there is a link between the personal religiosity of an artist and the religiosity of the work they produce.

I am equally interested in the ways that less devout comedians use religion in their comedy and the comedy of those who would be considered very religious. There are many reasons why a humourist may want to emphasise or de-emphasise their personal beliefs and I am including both cases as it can be assumed that such decisions are informed in some way by those beliefs, hence fitting into my definition of religious humour regardless of the level of individual piety. A clear example of this is John Moyer, a stand-up comedian and writer who wrote the most well-known and influential LDS comedy, *The Singles Ward* (2002). Moyer himself is no longer an active member of the Church, he is “spiritual but not religious”, yet still produces popular comedy that appeals to and reflects the experience of Utahn Mormons.

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29 John Moyer, Interview 1, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (13 June 2010). Moyer has been involved in the majority of LDS comedies as writer, director or actor including *The R.M.* (Halestorm Entertainment, 2003), *The Home Teachers* (Halestorm Entertainment, 2004). And *Mobsters and Mormons* (Halestorm Entertainment, 2005).
In order to gain an understanding of any religious intention behind the work it is crucial to consider the environment that produced it and the web of discourses within which it is situated. Even when there is more than one person in charge of the creative process or there is no specified author, it is still possible to get an idea of the religious context of the comedy. Knowing where the work is coming from as well as the marketing strategies employed to distribute and sell religious comedy reveals much about the intended reception of the work, and such strategies are specifically and deliberately designed to locate the work in a religious context. One of the most important considerations for determining how the work can be accessed is to consider whether it is widely available or whether it is limited to specific audiences. It is also essential to note where the comedy is performed, purchased or otherwise accessed and whether the companies and venues involved are known to produce other religious products or services.

These factors are solid indicators of the influence of religion on the context of the work. For example, many religious stand-up comedians, especially Christians, will perform in church in addition to (or more rarely instead of) the usual haunts of secular comedy clubs or television specials, and their recorded comedy is available (sometimes exclusively) from Christian retailers. By making comedy available through Christian retailing, it can then be assumed that the work is in keeping with the mission and vision of those retailers. For example the Christian Booksellers Association’s mission, “To serve Jesus Christ by equipping those called to share the Good News and make disciples through Christian retail excellence”, shows the religious intention behind the products they endorse. Similarly it can be helpful to look at the institutions that are responsible for the production, publication or distribution of the comic material. *Thou Shalt Laugh* was promoted by Grace Hill Media, a public relations firm that acknowledges its commitment to making the “43% of Americans” who attend church or synagogue “aware of entertainment which shares in their beliefs, that explores their values,  

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30 The environment and discourses are cultural, but also historical. As Robert Wuthnow argues, “As we contemplate the church today, and try to think about its location in the culture of tomorrow, there is much to be learned from distant events”. While much popular religious humour avoids presenting any real historical points of reference, it is important to keep in mind broader historical contexts. This will be considered further in relation to Christian and Mormon motivations for their humour choices. Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 19.

enhances and elevates their view of the world and draws them closer to God”.  

Brad Stine is managed by Michael Smith and Associates, a Christian artist development company whose purpose is “to uniquely teach Biblical principles through the artists we serve”. By taking into account the companies that are in real terms the power and money behind the marketing and distribution of comedy, another thread can be identified in the “web of significance” that makes up religious humour and it helps identify another avenue for the impact religious context has on the comedy.

Additionally, it is important to consider where secondary information about the comedy can be found. This helps in gathering details about the work and its authors as well as gauging public reception and opinion. Comedy, especially film comedy, is often promoted and reviewed in the media, and often mostly in religious media, for example in publications such as Christianity Today or Deseret News. Such media includes news, newspapers, magazines, review websites and blogs. Reading through insider commentary on the material being considered assists in assessing the impact that the comedy has in a wider sense, beyond what clues are contained within the work itself. This is crucial in understanding the social, cultural and religious forces that shape it. A great example is the LDS coverage of the spate of LDS-themed comedies that were released by the LDS company HaleStorm Entertainment between 2002 and 2007. Through the coverage of these films in LDS media the rise and decline of the popularity of these films can be traced. The reasons for this can be seen in opinion pieces, film reviews, and blog discussions about these films which demonstrate that Mormons are thinking and talking about the issues associated with religious humour that I will analyse in this dissertation.

Of course not all religious humour analysed in this project is available through such explicit and mainstream means. It would make an unbalanced study if only humour available through institutionally endorsed channels was considered and would overlook some of the most interesting and important examples of religious humour, in particular those that do not necessarily sit so comfortably with the commercial or the mainstream. Humour is often a

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means of subversion or criticism, and often exists in the margins of society.\textsuperscript{34} As such it may not always be found in the bosom of those institutions or practices of which it is critical. An excellent example of this is the cartoons printed in the alternative Mormon periodical \textit{Sunstone}, which will be analysed in detail in Chapter Six. This magazine is not found in mainstream LDS retailers and has an independent relationship from the institutional church, allowing its critical and controversial discussions to feed into the kind of satirical political cartoons that are regularly published in it. Its depictions of religious content are markedly different to other forms of religious humour such as that available through conventional popular Christian retailers, but they are no less informed by their religious perspective. While at first the religious content of some of the cartoons published in the magazine may appear to be blasphemous or overtly critical, when the context is considered, especially \textit{Sunstone}’s proclamation that it “brings together traditional and non-traditional Latter-day Saints, promoting an atmosphere that values faith, intellectual and experiential integrity”,\textsuperscript{35} it can be seen that these comics are indeed deeply religious. Since there are clues in the environment in which we find this source, it encourages the researcher to consider ways of being religious that may not ordinarily occur when considering more conventional material.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{Field Research}

Field research ultimately aims to put these examples of religious humour into a lived context for the researcher. Religious humour is deeply embedded in specific religious cultures. Not only is its content derived from cultural references, but the very core of a joke’s ‘funniness’ is rooted in an experience of that culture. Laughter is a powerful indicator of one’s belonging, where getting the joke is often dependent on participation in the community and participation in the community can be dependent on getting the joke. For the researcher studying communities of which they are not members, access to the meaning of the jokes of the group will be significantly increased simply by participation, as much as possible, in its culture. The design of the project incorporated fieldwork from the outset. Given the experiential nature of

humour it was always important that I observed religious comedy in action. Religious comedy in action is more than simply being able to attend live shows, although the importance of this is paramount. Religious comedy in action also allows for significant interaction with audience members and performers enabling additional background information to be gathered that would be completely inaccessible from recordings or other static documents.

My primary aim for the fieldwork I conducted was to confirm hypotheses that emerged from researching the primary comic material. In general, theories that emerge from reading through examples of comic data are always somewhat speculative when the researcher has no lived experience of the culture and so must be supported by travel to the country of origin, time spent with people involved in the industry, and with those who not only appreciate or depreciate the humour but then consequently shape the market forces and notions of popular taste. Field research was carried out over two months in 2010 in which I travelled to the United States to conduct interviews and survey religious audiences. I worked in Chattanooga, Tennessee; Los Angeles, California; Salt Lake City, Ogden and Provo, Utah, and Bremen, Indiana. My fieldwork strategy involved three approaches; firstly I aimed to immerse myself in Christian and Mormon cultures, as well as American culture in general, in order to familiarise myself with new cultures and conduct some general participant observations. Secondly, I carried out interviews with comedians in the Christian and Mormon comedy industries. The third approach involved surveying religious individuals on their opinions about religious humour. The interview questions and the survey are both included in the Appendix.

Danny Jorgensen explains that “direct involvement in the here and now of people’s daily lives provides both a point of reference for the logic and process of participant observational inquiry and a strategy for gaining access to phenomena that commonly are obscured from the standpoint of a nonparticipant”. 37 Humour, even of the religious kind, most often references the daily activities of our lives therefore immersion in American religious culture includes

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acts as simple as attending church services and shopping at Walmart. These types of activities were not intended as exercises in strict participant observation. Rather they were designed to familiarise myself, to the degree that is possible as an outsider, with the experience of living as an American Christian or Mormon in general. The more targeted participant observation was reserved for events that were directly relevant to the study, that is, live comedy shows in which the performer’s actions and the audience responses could be carefully observed.

An example of this general immersion experience occurred in Utah, where I conducted an interview over lunch at a restaurant which was described to me as “the most Mormon” restaurant in town. My interviewee, Mormon stand-up comedian Johnny Biscuit, made a conscious effort to immerse me in the LDS culture of Provo, Utah. It was at lunch that I could observe the culture of Brigham Young University students dining, have a local explain the nuances of American/Utahn tipping and service culture, and taste first-hand the Mormon ‘staple’ food Jell-O Salad. Such small banalities are important in gaining a general sense of attitudes or practices that may be exploited for comic effect by religious humourists. Jokes about Jell-O are abundant in LDS humour culture and are made more meaningful to me by the experience of eating it in its home context. This was in contrast to my experiences in Bremen, Indiana for example, where my main aim was participant observation. I attended the live stand-up performance of Brad Stine, an evangelical Christian comic. The performance was recorded and observations were made regarding the audiences’ demographics but also specifically their responses to the comedy, both as individuals and as a group. This can be traced by noticing the kinds of laughter evoked by certain kinds of jokes; a gentle chuckling crowd demonstrates a different level of amusement to a crowd full of loud, explosive guffaws. Following the different kinds of laughter heard from the position of being a member of the live audience gives a distinct advantage over trying to judge an audience’s enjoyment from a recording. Comic effect is especially determined by the interactive nature of a live audience and without such experiences the understanding of the way that humour is operating in a social situation is undernourished.

38 Walmart is the subject of many jokes and has connections with evangelical Christian culture. See Bethany Moreton, To Serve God and Walmart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009).

39 Sharon Lockyer and Lynn Myers, “‘It’s About Expecting the Unexpected’: Live Stand-up Comedy from the Audiences’ Perspective”, Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies 8, no. 2 (November 2011): 165–188.
The second approach was more targeted and was the geographical determinant of the fieldwork. I intended to interview religious comedians that I could also watch perform their shows live. This meant that I had to select a group of comedians from those that I had already researched and considered to be of some degree of influence or standing in the community. I contacted each comedian and set up meetings depending on where they would be having a show that would be convenient for me to observe.\(^{40}\) I sought to get background on their own work, their beliefs and their processes as well as their insights and experiences of their audiences and the culture in general. This produced detailed information about what motivates religious humourists. The creation of comedy, particularly in a commercial sense, is locked in a symbiotic relationship with its reception.\(^{41}\) No one tells a joke without hoping someone else will laugh. This meant that most comedians I spoke with had thought about their humour in an analytical manner since one of their primary concerns was how to appeal to audiences. Hence their comedy is informed both by their own personal beliefs and tastes as well as how it will be not only accepted but actively enjoyed (and by extension purchased) by their target market.

I interviewed six Mormons and two evangelical Christians. I attended the live performances of all but one interviewee, Kurt Hale, who is not a stand-up comedian but a writer and director of comedy films and head of HaleStorm Entertainment, the production company responsible for the release of the vast majority of LDS comedy films. I worked with Johnny Biscuit, who is considered by many as the founder and “godfather” of Mormon stand-up comedy, having established the first comedy club in Utah in the 1990s. I spent time at Wiseguys, a chain of comedy clubs in Utah run by LDS comedian Keith Stubbs.\(^ {42}\) Here I interviewed John Moyer, who is not only a stand-up comedian but also a writer and director, who wrote the first and most influential LDS comedy film *The Singles Ward* and at the time of the interview was also shooting a humorous documentary later released as *The Real Life Singles Ward* (2011).\(^ {43}\) At Wiseguys I also interviewed Spencer King, Todd Johnson and Mike Anderson, all active LDS comedians. The Christians I interviewed have both published

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\(^{40}\) All interviews and surveys are approved by the University of Sydney Human Research and Ethics Committee Ref: 12285.


books on comedy and theology and have released numerous DVDs of their stand-up. I worked with Thor Ramsey while he was performing at a Christian festival called JFest in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Attending a Christian festival also allowed for plentiful observation of Christian popular culture, as the festival also had music and stalls that promoted a wide variety of Christian organisations and businesses. The second Christian, Brad Stine, performed in Bremen, a very small town in Indiana. Stine has released six DVDs and is a prolific writer, blogger and commentator.

The third approach involved administering a survey to Christians and Mormons about the relationship between religion and humour. I developed the survey online, so that a link to the survey could be easily distributed along with information about the project via leaflets at events. This reduced any ethical concerns about pressuring people to participate in the research, although it did mean that my sample was entirely self-selected. The survey was intended to be simple and quick to maximise potential responses, with a section on demographics and short answer questions about the participants’ views on the relationship between religion and humour. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix 2. I had seventy-five responses in total, with approximately half the respondents identifying as Christian and half as LDS. The survey was designed to test my hypothesis about the ways that religious individuals conceptualise the relationship between religion and humour and what kind of language they use to describe it. On the whole, the surveys did confirm that religious individuals viewed humour positively but with certain reservations about its potential for misuse, primarily in regards to blasphemy, profanity and hostility. Many of my respondents used the language of popular discourse around the subject, specifically the terms “appropriate/inappropriate” and “clean/dirty” and describing good humour in various ways to mean “non-hostile or aggressive”. This is terminology that I have found used elsewhere in such discussions and forms the basis for the three chapters that form the bulk of the analysis in this study. All the fieldwork conducted for this project was crucial to understanding religious humour and its relationship to the lives of Christians and Mormons. My interviews and surveys support the findings from both scholarship and primary textual research. The field research contributes original data collected from the communities under examination, and facilitates a better general understanding of the context for the researcher. This provides a

strong foundation for this study with regards to the experiences of believers, something that is crucial to an empirical approach to the issue of religious humour.

**Conclusion: Approaching Religious Humour**

The above discussion illustrates the initial process of sifting through potential sources of religious humour and explaining the criteria that I have applied in accepting or rejecting a comic instance into my body of data. One of the goals of this project is to collate data together so that it may be an accessible resource for future study into this field. It is a nod to the familiar practice of collecting jokes together into compendiums, although my efforts here are the first to offer an analysis to accompany a collection of religious humour from a scholarly rather than pastoral or evangelical perspective. Others have taken similar approaches with other types of humour, such as Gershon Legman’s extensive collection and analysis of dirty jokes. However, the primary goal is to develop a model that helps answer the primary research question: how does religious belief inspire and/or control humour creation and appreciation? People do not always think about their sense of humour theoretically, rather it plays a living and practical role in their lives. It is the job of the scholar to take the cultural artefacts of social groups and apply theories to interpret real life experiences and religiously informed choices. There is yet to be any substantial academic study of religious humour as it is experienced in the contemporary religious lives of Christians and Mormons (or other religious people in general), and as such in undertaking this fieldwork and research I decided that the novelty of the topic required that I develop a specific methodological framework. There are a vast number of theoretical approaches that may be borrowed from to develop such a framework (or frameworks) that help to interpret religious humour. It is the focus of the next chapter to consider in depth the academic fields that provide the background in which this dissertation sits and to draw out the methodologies that will be employed now that I have drawn a preliminary sketch of religious humour.

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following chapter is both a literature review and a review of methodology. It discusses the existing literature on and around religious humour and hopes to provide an overview of the theoretical material. Most importantly it sifts through that material to find the particular components of it that will be helpful for this project and signpost the methodology that will then be considered in greater depth in later chapters alongside analysis of primary sources.
Chapter Two
The Field(s) (and Gaps)

Introduction

The scholar of both humour and religion embraces the methodological quandaries of both disciplines, plus an entirely new set of challenges specific to religious humour alone. As already mentioned in Chapter One, both phenomena are so fluid and changeable, so multiplicitous in meaning, that attempts to study them tend to focus on one aspect or another in order to pin them down long enough to undertake analysis. Often they fail to fully integrate, in any practical sense, the religious into the humorous and the humorous into the religious. There are of course a small number of studies that look at religion and humour, and the valuable work that has been done will be discussed below. This chapter presents an overview of the scholarship that paves the way for this current study, and discusses the literature as a foundation upon which this dissertation sits. I will review and evaluate religious studies, theology, and humour studies as disciplines from which methodologies for studying religious humour may be sourced. Rather than attempting to blend a number of diverse approaches into a single method, I will make use of such diversity by applying individual methodologies to individual aspects of religious humour. Attempts at singular or universal definitions and theories of humour have been, on the whole, inadequate, and in order to avoid the pitfalls of claiming to hold a universal method for explaining humorous phenomenon, I will use multiple methodologies where they will be the most appropriate, and in doing so will be able to sketch a fuller and more well-rounded illustration of religious humour.

Religious Studies

This dissertation is firmly seated in the multi-methodological field of religious studies. However, in this section scholarship from a variety of fields is considered that, like this study, primarily focus on religious phenomena. For the most part, religious studies has overlooked
humour in religion as a subject; perhaps because, as Hans Geybels wonders, it may be that the methodological hazards of studying humour are responsible for the lack of scientific literature on the subject, or even that humour was considered too commonplace to attract academic attention. Geybels even asks “Who could name any commonly available literature about humour in Christianity?”, and while I would suggest there are definitely more than the two examples he offers in his accompanying footnote, the sentiment is accurate. It is indeed difficult to find comprehensive scholarship on religion and humour.

The limited cases that do consider religion and humour tend to focus on specific periods in which humour is something that is engaged in outside of ordinary religious experience, where a special time or place is set aside in a ritual or celebratory fashion. Perhaps the most widely known study of this kind is Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*. In this work he examines the scholarship on 16th Century French author Francois Rabelais. However it is Bakhtin’s reflections on the carnivalesque, the grotesque, and the history of laughter that emerge as the distinguishing feature of his work in humour studies. He emphasises the material nature of the body and the subversive nature of laughter in the Middle Ages, where institutions (including religious institutions) sanctioned specific festivals that were public displays of raucous, bawdy laughter. Studies such as Bakhtin’s are useful for putting contemporary religious humour in historical context, and while there may not necessarily be an immediate comparison between a medieval feast of fools and a twenty-first century Mormon comedy film, upon closer examination such historical experiences have left imprints on the religious sense of humour that still shape its expression. Explorations of and challenges to theology, religious authority, bodily purity and societal functioning are all found in religious humour across the ages.

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3 *Humour and Religion* relies heavily on non-English sources and it appears that scholarship on religion and humour is of more interest in Europe than in the English speaking academy. For example see the extensive bibliography in Giselinde Kuipers, *Good Humour, Bad Taste: A Sociology of the Joke*, trans. Kate Simms (Berlin and New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 2006).  
A comprehensive study on the subject of humour throughout western antiquity is Stephen Halliwell’s *Greek Laughter* (2008). Halliwell includes a chapter on what he terms “the antigelastic tendencies of early Christianity”, and is an analysis of early discussions of laughter in the writings of church fathers and in the scriptures. *Greek Laughter* serves as a useful source book of early attitudes towards laughter, and two of his arguments are applicable to the situation in religious comedy two thousand years later. Firstly, Halliwell acknowledges “it is a fact with deep and long-lasting repercussions that laughter plays a disturbing part in the founding narrative of Christianity”. He is referring specifically to when Jesus was mocked by the Roman soldiers during his crucifixion. This is an important issue for theologians like Karl-Josef Kuschel (discussed below), and although the mocking of Christ is a more antagonistic genre of humour than that which I am considering in this study, it carries into modern day Christian sensitivities over hostile or aggressive humour. Secondly, Halliwell makes the crucial point that antigelasticism in the early church has left a ‘disputed legacy’, that “for many Christians, most of the time, there must have been an awkward discrepancy between condemnations of (most) laughter and the lived actuality of their ordinary social lives”. Halliwell argues that although early Christianity was limited in its ability to officially control laughter outside of officially sanctioned release-valve rituals, its attempts to excise it from the life of the body brought it to the surface of existential, moral, social and religious concerns. This resulted in medieval Christians viewing laughter and mirth as both a deeply troubling feature of humanity’s fallen state and a necessary and distinctive “culture of laughter” that stood in a complex relationship to the institutional authority of the church.

There are several points in his argument that speak to the underlying assumptions of this study. Firstly, the institutionalisation of anti-humorous attitudes was (and is) incomplete and

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6 Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, chap. 10.
7 Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 471.
out of touch with what was happening in the lives of religious communities. Secondly, laughter has for a long time been a subject of theological and existential inquiry for religious thinkers from John Chrysostom through to current theologians such as Peter L. Berger and James Martin be discussed in more depth below. Thirdly, and most importantly, we can see the “culture of (religious) laughter” that is the focus of this study, has its roots, like so many other theological questions, in the early church and that the embrace of this culture comes with some contradictions and complexities, particularly in relation to the authority of the institution and the relationship to the body, two threads that will be woven through Chapters Four, Five and Six. It is crucial to note that rather than see the disappearance of humour and laughter altogether (an impossibility if we are dealing with humans) religious communities ‘mould’ it into something that reflects their own culture(s). This study in a sense considers the opposite context to that of early Christian laughter; where humour was once demonised and operated under the weight of Medieval or Calvinistic severity, today laughter is encouraged and celebrated and provides different but equally complex conditions for religious laughter.13

Ingvild S. Gilhus has done several studies on the history of laughter and religion, including the monograph Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion (1997).14 Her arguments employ a similar sense of ‘disputed legacy’ to Halliwell. Gilhus sees laughter as “a fruitful subject for religio-historical analysis” and considers it in its most symbolic, bodily sense, rather than attempting a cognitive or socio-psychological interpretation of what makes us laugh or a universal theory of laughter in religion.15 This is a relevant approach because even though the cognitive and socio-psychological scholarship provides a solid base for interpreting group behaviours (including group laughter) in a real, empirical sense, the symbolic nature of religion also means that a symbolic approach is

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13 See Chapter Three for a discussion of the tensions and conditions that surround religious humour.


15 Gilhus, Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins, 2–3. See below in this chapter for a discussion on humour studies and its attempts, or refusals, to produce a universal theory of laughter and humour.
needed for a deeper consideration of why it is that symbols (specifically in this case symbols of God) are so powerful and fragile when it comes to laughter and humour.

Gilhus demonstrates that there is indeed a connection between laughter and religion, and that the connection differs over times and cultures. Of specific interest is that with the development of Christianity and its cultural dominance, for example over the Greco-Romans, the religious relationship with humour changed significantly and became more fraught with anxieties over the body and loss of control. While the Greeks and Romans were interested in humour for its social corrective and relief functions, the early Christians found laughter to be decidedly troublesome, despite examples of ‘festival’ or ritual laughter, which it must be noted were always under the watch of the church. Gilhus argues “In the Christian era…Compared to the earlier period, a great change in the symbolic ritual use of laughter happened when laughter was condemned because it was associated with bodily life and especially with eroticism”. Importantly, while the orientation of the work is towards laughter in ancient Greece through to the Middle Ages, she includes a chapter on religion and humour in modernity, examining what she terms “the re-mythologisation of laughter” that is born out of historical interpretations of religious laughter. Gilhus sets out a historical model that allows us to see the evolution of religious laughter, and, despite her argument that in contemporary religious laughter the emphasis has shifted onto a cognitive rather than bodily experience, the legacy of the historical Christian experience still retains power. I take up this idea with gusto, and since there is not room in this particular study to devote to the explanation of the historical anxiety associated with laughter and humour by the medieval Christian church and its descendants, I will need to refer the reader to the work of scholars such as Bakhtin, and especially Halliwell and Gilhus. Their arguments about laughter and the religious body are particularly pertinent to Chapter Five.

16 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.
One study that extends the use of historical examples into a broader discussion of the role humour plays in religious traditions across the world is David J. Cooper’s chapter on humour from, notably, an edited volume on religion in everyday life and culture.\(^\text{19}\) Recognising that humour is lived every day acts as a reminder that religious humour is a phenomenon that is subject to all of the unsupervised, spontaneous mess of practical human life. Cooper impressively manages to cover the use of humour in many world religions (including Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and even Jainism), and I would argue this works because his core argument is functionalist, and the functions of humour are then illustrated in examples of humorous religious material. Crucially, the chapter focuses on religious humour as being “at play between the sacred and the profane, order and chaos, social control and subversion and continuity and change” and is used to “negotiate religious boundaries in a variety of ways”, including using humour as a teaching tool, as a sign of transcendence, as a release valve, and as a weapon.\(^\text{20}\) Cooper sums up the fluid nature of religious humour, something that is often overlooked in other studies, but especially in popular perceptions of religious people and their humour. He argues that humour relies on an audience being receptive, something that is likely when the humour conforms to what is already valued, and is successful to the extent that it falls within the community’s norms. With regard to religious humour he writes:

> It may even be deemed useful when it promotes or supports those norms. When humour “crosses the line” and threatens a community’s standards or worldview, however, it may not simply be regarded as “not funny”, but as offensive or even blasphemous. But religious communities are neither static nor monolithic; norms evolve, interpretations conflict, and boundaries shift. For this reason, when humour is used to push the boundaries, it may also get some laughs, perhaps resonating with a countercurrent or expressing as “just a joke” what is difficult to say directly.\(^\text{21}\)

Cooper argues that this mixed response offers a useful window into the group because it shows both its enduring and emerging values as well as its tensions and strains.\(^\text{22}\) This is a helpful summary at the starting point of this dissertation, because it captures the multivalent nature of religious humour and points in directions that are developed further on. This study

\(^\text{20}\) Cooper, ‘Humour’, 1009.
\(^\text{21}\) Cooper, ‘Humour’, 1009.
\(^\text{22}\) Cooper, ‘Humour’, 1009.
is interested in these ‘norms’ of religious communities, and what such “norm-upholding” and “boundary-pushing” looks like in a practical sense. Cooper expresses some important concepts, but the limits of an edited book chapter ensure that his preliminary thoughts need to be extended, and articulated in a deeper and more sustained manner.

The most recent and comprehensive study of religion and humour is the edited volume *Religion and Humour: Challenges and Ambiguities* (2011), and although it is primarily from the field of humour studies I include it here because it is one of the few studies to take religion and humour as a distinct subject of study, specifically the entire subject of study. *Religion and Humour* is a wide-ranging and ambitious work and demonstrates several things about the relationship between religion and humour, although I will of course have to be selective in the discussion here.23 This volume retains the largely historical orientation of other studies and there are several chapters in the volume that contribute to an overall sense of contemporary Christian humour emerging from a historical legacy of tension between the sin and the pleasure of humour.24 However, there are notable exceptions that are unusual in the field and are helpful in thinking about the philosophical or sociological problems of religious humour in the modern world. Walter Van Herck’s chapter “Humour, Religion and Vulnerability” is particularly remarkable in this sense because he moves beyond specific textual analysis into a consideration of what makes religious people sensitive to jokes.25 He applies Francis Hutcheson’s eighteenth century critique of Thomas Hobbes’ superiority theory to the religious situation and argues that making a joke about Christianity, Islam or any other religion would not necessarily involve a disdain for the religion in question, rather, a discerning person would be able to determine whether the joke flows from kindness or malice.26 He summarises Hutcheson’s rules for avoiding abuses of ridicule:

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First, either never to attempt ridicule upon what is in every way great … or, if our wit must sometimes run into allusions, on low occasions … let it not be in weak company, who have not a just discernment of true grandeur. Secondly, concerning objects of a mixed nature, partly great, and partly mean, let us never turn the meanness into ridicule without acknowledging what is truly great, and paying a just veneration to it … Along with our ridicule of smaller faults we should always join evidences of good nature and esteem.  

Van Herck argues that applying these rules to the present day situation would result in “a sharp distinction between ridiculing God on the one hand and, for example, ridiculing priests, rabbis or mullahs. The latter are clearly of a mixed nature, while God or revelation is seen, by the believers themselves at least, as in every way great”. Hutcheson’s rules are very applicable to cases of religious humour in Christian and Mormon comedy; both groups create rules to circumvent blasphemy and other harmful forms of humour and there is indeed a clear distinction in religious humour between laughing at God (which is of course unacceptable) and laughing at subjects associated with the ‘mixed’ human element of religious traditions (priests, rabbis, mullahs). Religious humourists, it will be shown, are concerned not only with not ridiculing that which is great (which includes ensuring the audience has a “just discernment of true grandeur”), but also with creating humour that is esteeming and good-natured.

**Scholarship on Islamic Humour**

Like Van Herck’s chapter, the other most relevant piece in *Humour and Religion* is not about Christianity at all, rather Ulrich Marzolph focuses on “The Muslim Sense of Humour”. Firstly, Marzolph is dealing with the familiar attitude that religious people do not have a sense of humour, which Marzolph argues is due to factors such as the view that the Muslim world is the “ultimate harbour of universal terrorism”. Islam has a similar scriptural and hermeneutical tradition of concern over laughter and humour and its relationship to levity, irreverence and the loss of social control as is found in Christian traditions. Marzolph examines the Qur’an and Hadith as well as Arabic folk traditions, and significantly for my

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purposes, he notes the discrepancy between theoretical condemnation of laughter and humour and the proliferation of humour in Islamic life. Much like Christians and Mormons, Marzolph argues that Muslims debate the permissibility of humour and delineate under what circumstances it is deemed appropriate, for example immoderate excess and socially damaging mockery are banned, whilst the recommended degree of humour is “moderate”.

These are not particularly revolutionary conclusions, but the importance of this study lies in its consideration of the subject in the first place. Religious studies that examine Islamic humour are even more scant than those that look at Christianity (although there is still a greater amount than scholarship on Mormon humour). Similar to studies of Christian and Mormon humour, they tend to be historically oriented, and concerned with scriptural and literary traditions of laughter in the Arab world. While these studies are valuable in their own right, the mention of contemporary popular culture examples is limited to a handful of side notes. Two studies mention current Muslim humour of the kind that is the focus of this dissertation; Marzolph opens his chapter with an underdeveloped description of the Muslim sitcom \textit{Little Mosque on the Prairie} (2007), and David J. Cooper mentions in passing the Middle-Eastern-American stand-up comedy troupe \textit{Axis Of Evil} (2008).

The situation of humour in Islam is similar to that in Christianity, and to a lesser extent, Judaism, due to the monotheistic belief in an exclusive, single, all-powerful and perfect God, with related understandings of blasphemy and the body. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to address humour in religions other than Christianity and Mormonism, however, much can be learned from the experience of other monotheists, in particular the Islamic response to blasphemy. Studies of Islamic humour, as mentioned above, are usually historical, but there

31 See Chapter Four.
34 Zarqa Nawaz (creator), \textit{Little Mosque on the Prairie} (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007); Michael Simon, \textit{The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour}, 2008; David J. Cooper, ‘Humour’, 1034. It must be pointed out that I am referring to English-language studies here.
35 I will devote little time to Jewish humour in this thesis. There are two reasons for this; firstly, despite Christianity’s Jewish heritage, its humour is significantly different. In terms of humour style and content, Christian humour has more in common with Islamic humour than Jewish humour. What constitutes a “Jewish”
is another growing category of Islamic humour studies that focuses on the Muslim response to outsider humour. Of special interest is the Danish cartoon controversy of 2005 in which Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad as a terrorist and it caused an eruption of offence from Muslims all over the world. This event seems to be the first example that comes to mind in any discussion of Muslim humour. Importantly, such studies emphasise the negative – the Muslim lack of humour – more than concentrating on examining positive examples of Muslim humour, although such events as the Danish cartoon controversy do indeed require a scholarly response.\(^{36}\) Like many assumptions made about Islam, the idea that there is a single, unified “Muslim” response to humour is a powerful but painfully simplistic notion. Scholarship on the issue of Muslim humour, albeit brief and limited in focus, helps to shift the attention onto how humour is interpreted from the perspective of religious communities. Despite their focus on outsider humour, such studies are helpful in understanding blasphemy and fundamental humour studies concepts such as permission to laugh, social group inclusion and exclusion, and the relationship between power and humour.\(^{37}\)

There is one last study on non-Christian humour that is especially fruitful when applied to the context of Christian and Mormon humour, Gideon Aran’s chapter “What’s So Funny About

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\(^{37}\) A particularly important study is Lewis et al., ‘The Muhammad Cartoons and Humour Research: a Collection of Essays’. It is a compilation of essays on the event written by eminent humour scholars and published in the journal put out by the International Society for Humour Studies, hence a very thoughtful piece.
Fundamentalism?”, in which Aran states that “Fundamentalists with a sense of humour are the heroes of this essay”. This is an important work not only because it examines humour as used by religious insiders, but because it considers what humour means to them religiously, that is, how their use of humour affects and is affected by their fundamentalist beliefs and practices. He uses field work from Islamic, Jewish and to a lesser extent Christian, fundamentalist communities in Israel to argue that fundamentalists, despite their reputation for humourlessness, use humour in deliberate and religiously specific ways to protect and strengthen their communities. This is similar to the project engaged in by Christian and Mormon humourists who want to protect their communities from the dangers of humour, but also to use its benefits to develop a stronger, happier, and more religious community. While the majority of the humourists dealt with in this study are not fundamentalists in the radical sense that Aran is considering, many of his observations are helpful, in particular from a functionalist perspective, that is, what purposes humour serves in a religious community. Aran’s answers include “institutionalising the (humorous) outburst”, “zeroing in on taboos and tension”, “social control”, “raising the volume on opposition jokes” (internal political humour), and “demonising the other”. His study demonstrates the wide and often contradictory functions that humour can serve, and he correctly points out that “listening to jokes can provide us with something that analysis of radical religious sermons cannot: hints of a latent structure that is sometimes inconsistent with manifest standards, and hints of covert dynamics that touch on sensitive and “illegal” issues”. By studying humour, scholars can access a completely different type of communication used by the groups we study, humorous communication is unlike any other form of ‘serious’ dialogue, and it provides new insights into (often unconscious) modes of idea exchange.

**Theology**

Ultimately, the question that drives the ambiguity over laughter and humour in monotheistic traditions is what God thinks about it and, in a more practical sense, how humour can effect humanity’s relationship with God. Much like any other vice or virtue, laughter and the sense of humour are human characteristics that need to be considered in light of the divine

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39 Aran, ‘What’s So Funny About Fundamentalism?’, 330.
conception of us and our world, and theologians, slowly but with increasing bursts of energy, have begun to address this issue. While it does not, and possibly never will, hold the same level of attention as other significant human-centred theological themes such as evil and suffering or love and fellowship, since the 1960s humour can be seen as a theological problem in its own right, albeit as a comparative blip on the theological radar.  

There are many approaches to the problem of God’s interest in humour, and the solutions or explorations made by theologians are as varied as the questions. This occurs on a metaphysical, transcendental level for some, and for others there is a more embodied sense in which the focus is on modelling one’s life after God’s example. In general the exercise becomes about integrating a comic perspective with a Christian worldview. It must be noted here that these theologies of laughter and humour are based in a Christian worldview, not because of any inherent superiority or stronger relationship between the Christian God and humour, but simply because all but a very few of these available theologies are written by Christian theologians. While this suits this study’s focus on the Christian perspective (and this is argued to include the LDS perspective), it is worth noting that other theologies of humour exist but are sadly in shorter supply.  

This section considers the most notable works of Christian theology that deal with religion and humour, which can be categorised in terms of approach into the following themes: humour in the Bible, humour as a transcendent attitude and ultimate truth, and a third, more tangible theme of humour applied in homiletics and the Christian life.

**Humour in The Bible**

Peter L. Berger dryly remarks that “one does not have to be a Nietzschean to look upon the history of Christian theology as a depressingly lachrymose affair”. The early Church Fathers are the dour face of church theorising, and much is made of their mostly antigelastic tendencies in both historical studies and popular consciousness about religious people and their sense of humour. I refer the reader to the above-mentioned studies for specific references from the early Christianity (especially Gilhus and Halliwell). Most theological

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41 Such as Mustansir Mir, ‘Humour in the Qur’an’.
studies on humour purport to rescue theology from the depths of despair that plagued the likes of John Chrysostom and even Umberto Eco’s fictional Jorge of Burgos. The first method employed is to turn to the holy scriptures for an authoritative position on humour and laughter. Importantly, this is the same method used by the lachrymose theologians of old, however, in pro-humour theology the method is reversed and we see that the Bible becomes not only a source for opinions about humour, but a source of humour itself. While John Chrysostom counted the times Jesus did not laugh, theologians of the happy twentieth and twenty-first centuries count the references to God’s laughter and read between the lines of the word to find the humour that “plays hide and seek with us”.

John Chrysostom’s insistence that Jesus never laughed because it was not noted in the Bible is a sign of a biblical literalism that became virtually unrecognisable once the postmodern approach to textual analysis reached the field of theology. As Joseph M. Webb argues the emphasis on the serious themes of the Bible held sway until well into the twentieth century. He argues that the shift was from using historical criticism, where the Bible is viewed as a window on historical events, to literary criticism, where it becomes a work of literary creation. This meant that those who were looking at the Bible in this new way began to notice that the Biblical documents were at times humorous “if one could get past their sacredness”, and not just funny in the present but for their audiences in the distant past. Theologians and biblical scholars have taken up this hunt for the humorous in the Bible, at times more vigorously than others, but nonetheless with the overarching aim to liberate God and Jesus from an impenetrable sobriety that cannot be supported by scripture; and for many this also extends into liberating the Christian from that same sombre place.

Finding humour in the Bible achieves (at least) two things; firstly, it gives a scriptural basis for integrating humour into a theological interpretation of the world, and secondly, it gives a scriptural basis for integrating humour into the lives of believers. Hence many studies attempt in varying degrees to offer exegeses that suggest the Bible was and is intentionally

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humorous.\textsuperscript{47} There are numerous discussions of particular stories or quotations that can be read as funny, or if not funny, then at least positing a pro-humour perspective. For example, Abraham and Sarah laughing in regard to the birth of their son Isaac (meaning “he laughs”).\textsuperscript{48} The book of Ecclesiastes is often cited as a source for positivity towards humour, although importantly there is a time to laugh \textit{and} a time to weep.\textsuperscript{49} God himself laughs the most in the scriptures, and although he is mostly heard laughing in mockery (“he shall have them in derision”),\textsuperscript{50} we are encouraged to laugh for joy.\textsuperscript{51}

Special consideration is given to the biblical humour employed by Jesus. There is natural concern for the question of Jesus’ laughter and more importantly his sense of humour, for we know his laughter is not mentioned explicitly in the canonical gospels,\textsuperscript{52} but he attended weddings and played with children so there is room for speculation about his sense of humour. A common assertion, something that carries great theological weight, is the effect a sense of humour would have on the understanding of Jesus as fully human.\textsuperscript{53} Conrad Hyers asks “what does the full humanity of Jesus mean if it does not include the freedom of laughter and humour?”\textsuperscript{54}

The first major study of this kind was Elton Trueblood’s \textit{The Humour of Christ} published in 1964.\textsuperscript{55} Trueblood’s controversial study sought to challenge the notion that Jesus did not laugh and that there is plenty of scriptural evidence to suggest that not only did he laugh but

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48} Genesis 17:17, \textit{New International Version}.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ecclesiastes 3:4, \textit{New International Version}.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Psalm 2:4, \textit{New International Version}.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Psalm 126:2, \textit{New International Version}.
\item \textsuperscript{54} M. Conrad Hyers, \textit{The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith}, 16.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Elton Trueblood, \textit{The Humour of Christ} (London: Libra Books, 1964). There are a number of earlier examples, but Trueblood’s work was to spark a substantial interest in the field. See for example George Wright Buckley, \textit{The Wit and Wisdom of Jesus} (Battle Creek: Ellis, 1901).
\end{itemize}
that he deliberately used humour as a strategy for sharing his message. Trueblood suggests that Jesus consciously used humour as a rhetorical strategy, citing his use of irony, paradox, hyperbole and wit in his teachings; for example the absurdity in straining out a gnat but swallowing a camel.\textsuperscript{56} He argues that Christians have failed to see the humour used by Jesus in the Gospels, indeed “we are so sure that He was always deadly serious that we often twist His words in order to try and make them conform to our preconceived mould”.\textsuperscript{57} Trueblood sees this misguided piety as motivated by a fear of blasphemy, since he believes Jesus’ wit and humour to be “obvious”.\textsuperscript{58} This is of course noteworthy for my purposes because it speaks to the concerns that Christians have that laughter may be potentially insulting to God. After Trueblood many studies have focused on Jesus specifically as some kind of humourist, joker and holy fool.\textsuperscript{59} By acknowledging Jesus Christ as a person with a sense of humour these studies allow Christians to claim their own sense of humour as not only a virtue, but as a means by which they can follow his example.

\textit{Humour in LDS Scripture}

Latter-day Saints adhere to biblical directives regarding laughter but have additional scriptural injunctions that provide more explicitly restrictive guidelines. Whilst the few references to laughter in the \textit{Book of Mormon} tend to be in the narrative style of the Hebrew Bible in which laughter is scornful or unbelieving,\textsuperscript{60} the scripture \textit{The Doctrine and Covenants} (1835) is more vocal on the manner in which each Saint is to comport themselves. For instance, each Saint is to “cease from all your light speeches, from all laughter, from all your lustful desires, from all your pride and light-mindedness, and from all your wicked doings”.\textsuperscript{61} Here the laughter is clearly negative because the way laughter is to be thought of is

\textsuperscript{56} Matthew 23:24, \textit{New International Version}.
\textsuperscript{57} Trueblood, \textit{The Humour of Christ}, 15.
\textsuperscript{58} Trueblood, \textit{The Humour of Christ}, 15.
\textsuperscript{60} Alma 26:23; 3 Nephi 9:2, \textit{The Book of Mormon} (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981).
\textsuperscript{61} 88:121, \textit{The Doctrine and Covenants} (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981).
defined by its association with “wicked doings”. One should also “cast away your idle thoughts and your excess of laughter far from you”. Similarly 59:15 states “inasmuch as ye do these things with thanksgiving, with cheerful hearts and countenances, not with much laughter, for this is sin, but with a glad heart and a cheerful countenance”. Thus laughter is not only “wrong doing” and “light-mindedness” but actually “sin”. Yet if we place this verse within the greater context, it becomes clear that laughter is not simply rejected outright, rather the preceding verses suggest that it is referring to laughter on the Lord’s day as sin, “in fasting and prayer…rejoicing and prayer”, that is, in a religious context.

In this study I am not so interested in the specifics of the humour contained in scripture, but it is crucial to mention because by re-reading the Bible and other sacred texts humorously, it sets up a dynamic in which it is acceptable for Christians to laugh about stories and ideas contained in scripture. Without the reorientation of the Bible and other scriptures towards a comic perspective such humour becomes impossible to keep within the bounds of religious acceptability. By opening the text to alternative interpretations, humour becomes ordained by God, something that is no longer exclusive of piety and can even be aligned with other exemplary characteristics of being a faithfully religious individual. Further, this opens up the Bible as a source of comic content. Characters and stories from scriptural accounts provide a significant and frequent source of familiar and meaningful subject matter in contemporary religious humour. For example Christian cartoonist Cuyler Black creates comics based on biblical stories, themes and characters, and even his company is called “Inherit the Mirth”.

Biblical exegesis that opens the door for the Bible as a humorous text has allowed, in a roundabout way, the comic interpretation of biblical stories such as the birth of Christ, the calling of the apostles or the giving of the ten commandments as one liner gags, such as in the cartoons below.

[Figure 1 Cuyler Black, ‘Inherit the Mirth’, http://www.inheritthemirth.com, Accessed 19/4/10].

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63 59:14, The Doctrine and Covenants.
Humour and Ultimate Truth

There is an argument found in many theological studies of humour that suggests that humour is analogous to religion or faith because both have the ability to transcend the reality that we see before us and reveal, no matter how momentarily, a new truth or perspective on ourselves, our world and what lies beyond. These theologians maintain that humour is some kind of key or window into an alternative way of understanding God and the freedom of the human spirit. This perspective views the comic as parallel or complimentary to religious faith, it can enhance faith or be utilised by faith to gain insight on ultimate truth. This is where many of the more significant contributors to the field of theology and humour sit, including Reinhold Niebuhr, Conrad Hyers, Peter Berger and Karl-Josef Kuschel.

An often cited theologian in this debate is Reinhold Niebuhr, in particular from his essay Humour and Faith, originally published in 1946.65 I start with Niebuhr at this point because he stands somewhere between the more traditional view that humour is in general unacceptable, blasphemous or trivial, and the view that humour is a valid expression of the transcendental nature of that ultimate truth. Niebuhr stands apart from many other theologians who give humour a greater role in faith in that he sees humour as meaningful only insofar as it relates to the insignificancies of human life. For Niebuhr, humour is not parallel to faith but the prelude to it, it is incapable of reaching the heights of ultimate truth but can be helpful in approaching human life in a new way, to counter against human folly and vice. When humour is used to approach ultimate incongruities, such as evil, death and the Cross, it fails because they are “too profound to be resolved or dealt with by laughter” and such attempts will ultimately collapse into bitter humour and despair.66 It is not that Niebuhr rejects humour altogether like the theologians of old; in fact, he even gives it a higher place than philosophy in terms of effectiveness in understanding the incongruities of life, calling it “a high form of wisdom”.67 Rather humour and laughter form a strategy for coping with, but never solving, life’s misfortunes and contradictions; for example Niebuhr suggests laughter is helpful for slaves coping with cruelty but is impotent when it comes to really changing those

conditions. In the face of such situations, humour “must move towards faith or sink into despair when the ultimate issues are raised”.68

Other theologians do not maintain the hierarchical separation between humour and religion that Niebuhr constructs. Conrad M. Hyers is perhaps the most prolific writer on the subject of humour and religion. Despite being a Presbyterian theologian, Hyers has published works on humour in both the Christian and Buddhist religions, as well as an emphasis on comic archetypes in mythology and literature.69 In general his focus has been on Christianity, although one can argue that his perspective gives a more universal theory of “the comic perspective” than can be found elsewhere. In his chapter “The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic” (1969) he views the sacred and the comic to not only be in dialogue but to be seeking a kind of dialectic engagement with each other on the deepest of levels, as he writes “the sacred needs the comic as much as the comic needs the sacred; for the comic apart from its basis in the sacred, or the sacred apart from the qualifications of the comic, are equal prey to distortion”.70 Despite this belief that laughter can be abused, for Hyers laughter and humour have redemptive qualities.71 He discusses three levels of humour as analogous to the three states of humanity in relation to the Fall. First there is the laughter of Paradise, which is the innocent and childlike humour of puns and nonsense. Secondly there is the laughter of Paradise lost, which is where laughter expresses frustration, fear, doubt and antagonism as well as the awkwardness and ambivalence of human existence. The third level is the laughter of Paradise regained, “the laughter that comes beyond good and evil” and is associated with maturity, love, freedom and mercy.72 Hyers argues this level is reached through “a prior mercy, a divine grace which has bestowed forgiveness and acceptance upon those who do not warrant it”, that is, the redemption found through Christ. On this level, humour does not

68 Niebuhr, ‘Humour and Faith’, 60.
judge. It could be considered that this more metaphysical conception of humour is what Christians and Mormons are working towards and using as an ideal when they discuss avoiding humour that is hostile or denigrating. I will return to this idea in Chapter Six.

Catholic theologian Karl-Josef Kuschel has developed what he terms a “theology of laughter”.\(^73\) This theology of laughter “derives its legitimation from the laughter of God himself about the state of his creation”.\(^74\) It is a joyous laughter that gives Christians freedom because in laughter they know “the facts of the world are not the end of the matter”, that is, the salvific power of God means that all things in this world are temporary and will be redeemed and humans can access a glimpse of this truth through the upturning of this reality that laughter brings.\(^75\) According to Kuschel, laughter and trust in God are not opposites.\(^76\) But a theology of laughter does have two sides. Like Hyers, Kuschel is wary of malicious and destructive humour. However, he explains that it exists as the other side of a theology of laughter because the joy in God and his creation that is the source of Christian laughter is always tempered in this world by the risk of being laughed at.\(^77\) Kuschel is referring to the mockery directed at Jesus during his crucifixion. This laughed-at Jesus has become the archetype for laughed-at believers.\(^78\) This means that Christians will always side with those who are the victims of mockery because “they will never forget that in his bitterest hour their master from Nazareth belonged among those who were laughed at, indeed that God made a fool of himself for our sake”.\(^79\) Whether Christians and Mormons think about this point consciously is unknown, as I have never seen it mentioned in popular media or through field work with either group, but it does provide a very interesting theological background for religious humour’s emphasis on non-hostile humour. Humour’s potential for abuse is openly and frequently discussed by Christian and Mormon laypersons and theologians (see Chapter Three), but Kuschel’s explicit connection of malicious laughter with the mockery of Christ is intriguing but rare.\(^80\)

Many theologians who express a positive outlook on humour’s place in religion describe humour as having the power of transcendence. Peter Berger is a notable member of this group mostly because his theological text is also often used in the discipline of humour studies. He argues that both religious and comic experiences are examples of finite provinces of meaning which are experienced as an intrusion or an interruption of the everyday reality that cause, however briefly, the perception of a magically transformed world in which the assumptions and rules of ordinary life are suspended.\textsuperscript{81} This transformative power poses a danger to the maintenance of ordinary reality and so must be confined to specific times and places.\textsuperscript{82} To this I would add confined to specific ‘content’ or ‘subject matter’ because part of controlling that threat to the maintenance of reality involves a careful regulation of what is actually being said in those specific times and places. I will discuss this further throughout later chapters.

Berger also argues that one of the primary social functions of religious institutions is the domestication of religious experience. In his typically tongue in cheek style he gives the example of a preacher saying “the most outlandish things in church on Sunday morning”, for instance that the maxims of the Sermon on the Mount be lived daily, a suggestion that is shocking to the bourgeois congregation until they realise with relief “well, that was only in church”.\textsuperscript{83} This has a parallel in the comic formula “that was only a joke” which signals the return from the comic to the mundane world once again. This is the comic as low level transcendence, simply allowing the familiar to be seen as unfamiliar and the world to be seen in a different light from outside or beyond the usual vantage point. For this experience to become religious or transcendent in the higher level there must be faith that sustains the shift into a world that is not temporary, where there is redemption and the miseries of the human condition have been abolished. When viewed through the lens of faith the comic creates an “epistemological reversal” in which the assertions of reality and illusion are inverted and the empirical is questioned as the source of ultimate seriousness, in other words this world becomes the illusion and the reality lies outside this world in Christian redemption.\textsuperscript{84}

This understanding of humour as higher order transcendence is closely tied to an integration of incongruity into a Christian worldview and thus accepting humour as an expression of an incongruity that is already present in Creation. Heather Thompson argues that a theological

\textsuperscript{81} Berger, \textit{Redeeming Laughter}, 205–206.
\textsuperscript{82} Berger, \textit{Redeeming Laughter}, 205-207.
\textsuperscript{83} Berger, \textit{Redeeming Laughter}, 207.
\textsuperscript{84} Berger, \textit{Redeeming Laughter}, 210-211.
perspective holds that there is a double view of the human being which is a source of the comic. She writes “theologians of humour suggest that the double view stems from the human being’s dual citizenship in both heaven and earth … We are at the same time from earth and from god. The continual intersection of these different worlds is the basic source of humour”.

This gives us as humans an essential incongruity that is aligned with, because it is part of, the goodness of God’s creation. The other Christian incongruity is that of the Incarnation. Here “the glory of God Himself dwelt in our mortal flesh and became manifest to the eyes of men”. Some theologians think of the Incarnation in Niebuhr’s terms as the “ultimate” incongruity, where God is simultaneously divine and human and the paradox that redemption comes only through his death and resurrection, hence it is the incongruity that leads to faith. Additionally, Samuel Joeckel points out that “incongruity has a conceptual kinship to Christianity” in the paradoxical teachings of Jesus, for example that the first shall be last or that life comes through death.

Transcendence and incongruity lead towards a third feature of theological discussions about humour that is of significance to my argument, in particular to Chapters Four and Six: humility. Humility is of great concern to both theologians and lay religious people and features heavily in the condemnation of hostile humour and the promotion of innocent humour. Humility is important here because it moves the discussion from the abstractness of theologies of transcendence into the more tangible realm of living a Christian life in humility informed by a theologically sound use of humour. Humour acts as an antidote to pride and hostility because, as William F. Lynch states it, “Comedy is perpetually reminding the uprooted great man that in some important sense he was once, and still is, a bit of a monkey”. Humour not only reminds us of our material, animal, mundane nature but it also,

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88 Scott, ‘The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape into Faith’, 68.
in a religious context, serves to remind us where we stand in relation to God, that is, that we are his creation and our concerns are trivial in comparison to those of the divine. Doris Donnelly argues that “taking ourselves too seriously deals a lethal blow to holiness”. Peter W. Jones believes it should be possible “to speak of a genuine spirituality of laughter, by which is meant the gift or talent of refusing to take absolutely seriously those things which are of less than ultimate concern. Here is included, of course, oneself”. For Jones humour has the power to correct pride. It also has the power to refocus priorities onto God by making sure it is only he that is taken with full seriousness. Jones writes:

The really important and serious moments in the gospels are those moments when Christ goes apart and prays. For surely the one thing that he (and we) could take with absolute seriousness is God himself, the Father, the reality behind all earthly things. This recognition that prayer is the only really serious thing in the gospels brings us to the central point of our argument. Only if a man takes God with total seriousness can he begin to see how to laugh at the other lesser realities around him.

I will return to Jones’ argument in Chapter Four, because the humility of humanity in relation to the majesty of God is an important theme in religious humour that references God but is not blasphemous.

Humour in Homiletics

Theological discussions of laughter and humour open up questions about the ways that laughter and humour may be incorporated into the Christian life. There are a number of works that take this subject into a more pastoral forum, which is moving closer to my own considerations of how the humorous fits with lived religious experience. The difference is that these works by Christian clergy or other religious leaders focus on humour as it can be used in homiletics, while my focus is on entertainment and leisure. However, some of these discussions are revealing, especially with regards to the drawing of boundaries and the question of blasphemy. Most of these writers recommend an embrace of laughter as part of spiritual practice rather than as a separate enjoyment that has little to do with the religious life.

Comedian turned minister Susan Sparks claims that to do this Christians need to “end our spiritual geliophobia”, or fear of laughter. 95 This does not mean that the preacher is not, nor should he or she be, a comedian. 96 As I will elaborate in Chapter Three, humour in religious contexts is always supervised by a sense of propriety and tempered by prudence and responsibility. Lee Van Rensburg argues that prudent and responsible use of humour has much to offer a sermon and even a liturgy. It can help disarm listeners of their defences and provide a refreshing intellectual rest when interspersed throughout a message. It makes a listener more receptive to hard truths and enhances fellowship among the congregation. Even Jesus used comedy (prudently) and so “the crowds received him gladly”. 97 The underlying message of those who advocate for the use of humour in preaching or ministry is that the priority is the word of God and humour should be used where it serves the purpose of expressing that word. Tal D. Bonham explains “People come to church not to hear a jester, but to hear a word from the Lord. Only when God’s Word can be clarified and better communicated through humour should humour be used in the pulpit”. 98

Importantly these perspectives do not focus the comic on the religious, rather the two form a partnership that enlightens the soul to the higher glory of the divine, where the comic becomes a lens through which ultimate truth comes into clearer focus. This takes the discussion somewhat out of the ‘real’ world in that theological discussions may often disappear into the metaphysical and it may be noted, in comparison to the intention of this study, that there are but a few examples of actual humour or comedy cited in these theological musings hence it is unclear what this perspective looks like for Christians and others living religiously and humorously. They are not, for the most part, concerned with jokes and comedy and application of humour in a specific sense.

All these theological approaches to humour have something in common, something that is played out in the way that Christians and Mormons use humour: each approach puts limits onto humour. While the conditions each theologian places on laughter and joking are varied,

95 Susan Sparks, Laugh Your Way to Grace: Reclaiming the Spiritual Power of Humour (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2010), 36. It is worth pointing out that Sparks chooses ‘geliophobia’, the fear of laughter, over ‘gelatophobia’, the fear of being laughed at.
96 Webb, Comedy and Preaching, xiv.
they all suggest that humour, though a characteristic of (or at least given from) God should be used with care and consideration. For Niebuhr, humour is not capable of handling questions of the ultimate, which for my purposes can be extended to suggest a severe limit on jokes about God. For other theologians like Hyers, Kuschel and Berger, humour can be a spiritual endeavour, but can also be misused. What theological studies of humour offer in terms of my argument is a distinction between the comic perspective and the use of jokes in practical, daily religious life. Although their theology provides no tools for what this looks like in practice, it gives religious individuals permission to laugh, and aligns humour with the Christian perspective rather than against it. The second part of this process is recognising that humour must still be conditioned to fit in with that Christian perspective.

Humour Studies

Religious humour, in many ways, is really just a sub-category of humour in general, much like one would be able to identify ethnic humour or dirty humour or lawyer humour as a type. Although the ways it operates may be markedly different and distinct, as a general function of life religious humour forms just one of many avenues for humorous expression and when a religious person laughs, their good humour can be attributed to any number of factors, only one of which may be to do with their faith. This may seem an obvious point, but, as shall be seen, opinions about religious people and humour have been very frequently negative, and it is obvious but important to acknowledge upfront that humour operates amongst all humans; for Aristotle it even distinguishes us from the animals and signals our humanity. Hence if the operation of religious humour is to be fully understood, humour must be understood as a whole. For the moment religious humour will be put aside and the following section will consider what is known (or thought to be known) about humour. Thankfully in the twentieth century the discipline of humour studies has emerged out of the

99 Although, there have been far fewer studies conducted on religion and humour than on dirty or ethnic humour. On the occasion that such studies are written, they frequently consider religion and humour to be completely irreconcilable, for example Paul Jewell, ‘Competing Roles of Dogma and Humour in the Construction and Critique of Social Arrangements’, *New Zealand Sociology* 22, no. 1 (2007): 69–83.

patchy pieces of scholarship begun as early as Plato and Aristotle, picked up again in the seventeenth century by Thomas Hobbes, but left alone by and large until the latter half of the twentieth century. Even a cursory glance over the literature will reveal an uneven and unsure sense of what humour is and this study is not arrogant enough to suggest it can fill in the questions still unanswered by the great minds of humour studies. Thus the reader will not find here any firm definition of humour, nor is this going to be an explanation of why we laugh or why something is funny. In keeping with the pluralistic nature of humour it will be clear that different explanations are at times more suitable than others, yet on the next page that idea that was once so helpful may become irrelevant in a different situation. Humour is a mysteriously human phenomenon, contradictory and changeable like any other human cultural expression and the issue has been considered from a variety of perspectives: philosophical, psychological, biological, historical, sociological, anthropological, linguistic and theological. Thus a cross-disciplinary survey is essential for formulating any solid ground in humour studies.

**Major Theories of Humour**

It is conventional for studies of humour to contain an overview of what have become the dominant theories of humour: Superiority Theory, Relief Theory and Incongruity Theory. A useful overview and critique of the reigning theories is John Morreall’s *Taking Laughter Seriously* (1983), although numerous texts have similarly outlined the characteristics of the theories.\(^{101}\) Importantly, it must be noted that each theory is incomplete and does not explain all instances of humour and laughter, and it is my position that some combination of the three is often helpful, or that each is more helpful in specific situations than others and that such theories exist to be bent and built upon when the evidence warrants it. There is exhaustive literature that explains, evaluates and expands on these theories, so I will consider them only briefly and generally here, for it is important to have them as a background in order to think critically about the ways that humour may be operating.

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Superiority

Beginning with what is often considered the oldest of the theories, thought to have started at least as long ago as Plato and Aristotle, the superiority theory at its most basic asserts that laughter is “an expression of a person’s feelings of superiority over other people”.\(^{102}\) This is the kind of humour expressed in our amusement at a person slipping over on a banana peel (a commonly used example of this theory), as we are in a sense pleased at the *schadenfreude* and enjoy the fact that it is not happening to us. Thomas Hobbes developed this idea as part of his general understanding of the human struggle, as Morreall puts it, laughter occurs when we are winning. Hobbes defined laughter as “a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly”.\(^{103}\) For most proponents of the superiority theory, laughter and humour are inextricably associated with base human instincts, they are in essence an expression of hostility and aggression. Their social corrective function, in terms of publicly ridiculing antisocial or unacceptable behaviour, is overshadowed by their potential for harm and social damage.

Henri Bergson composed an entire philosophical treatise on laughter that encompasses elements of all three major theories, but I have included him under superiority theories because contained within his extended musings on the nature of the human and the mechanical (laughter is caused by “something mechanical encrusted on the living”), is one of the strongest ethical objections to laughter: it requires an emotional distance from the object of mirth.\(^{104}\) Bergson calls this “a momentary anaesthesia of the heart”.\(^{105}\) This can be easily misinterpreted by those who are concerned with the care and love of their neighbour as laughter being an endorsement of hardness of heart, and placing the laugher in a position of superiority over the victim rather than caring about their plight. Hence it becomes a contributing factor in the faithful’s anxiety about hostile humour. While I do not suggest that it is a necessary condition for humour that the laugher is fully detached from what they are laughing at (indeed, this would undermine my entire thesis that believers laugh about the

\(^{105}\) Bergson, *Laughter*, 57.
things that are of ultimate concern to them), I would suggest that a “comic distance” is helpful in fostering humour. I emphasise that comic distance is not the same as complete emotional detachment – it is difficult to tell a joke about one’s family if humour means the joker is completely detached – but Bergson is correct in suggesting that for a moment there is a distance between joker and butt of the joke that allows the shift from serious to humorous. This is of course more prominent in aggressive humour, although it could be argued that one is equally emotionally invested in one’s enemy as one’s friend.

The main problem with superiority theories, as with most of the extant explanations of humour, is that they do not explain all humour or laughter. There are of course many times that we laugh for reasons other than that we feel better than someone else. Similarly there are times when we feel better than someone else but do not find it funny. Superiority theory does not explain puns or witticisms, nor does it explain the social or cultural context of successful versus unsuccessful jokes. What is very helpful about the superiority theory will come into play further into this study so at this point it will be mentioned only briefly. The superiority theory helps us to understand that religious individuals, in particular Christians and those influenced by the Christian tradition, have a theological aversion to attacking and mocking others as stipulated in the biblical directive to love one another.\footnote{John 13:34-35, New International Version.} Joking about another person or group can easily fall into hostile assault and hence transgress this directive. A second significant point is that Christians remember the humiliation suffered by Jesus on the cross, and out of deep respect and identification with him wish to avoid anything that may appear similar in form or attitude to the pain their Lord endured as the butt of the joke.\footnote{Karl-Josef Kushel, Laughter: A Theological Essay (New York: Continuum 1996), xx.} The third point to keep in mind is that Christian aversion to laughter that relies on mockery of others is a separate kind of laughter to that which relies on mockery of the self, specifically because it reflects a different relationship to the Christian understanding of humility.

**Relief**

The relief theory holds that laughter acts as a safety valve that releases pent up tension caused by social or psychological pressures. These pressures are particularly intense in relation to taboo subjects, and this is why we laugh harder at jokes that deal with the sexual, the
scatological or otherwise socially hazardous topics. The second major component of relief theories is that humour provides an opportunity to speak of subjects ordinarily restrained under strict limitations or even silence, hence allowing important issues to be brought into the public domain. It seems we could distinguish these points by suggesting that the first is an individual, psychological relief and the second is a communal or social relief. Of course both kinds can occur at the same time over the same stimuli, for example, a sexual joke can be amusing when we are personally embarrassed because of a socially imposed stigma associated with sex talk.

Relief theories are often based in the work of Sigmund Freud, who related the sense of humour to the unconscious, although they have branched beyond his emphasis on psychoanalytical processes to encompass wider themes of repression or social taboo and humour, as well as biological or evolutionary theories which I will leave totally aside. Freud devoted an entire book to the subject, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, first published in 1905. Because the theory that unfolds in this book is necessarily complex and dense, it is not possible here to deeply consider psychoanalytic joke theory beyond a few overly simplified key points that are relevant to this study; firstly, the unconscious contains repressed thoughts and desires. Secondly, jokes are like dreams for Freud, and their formulation as well as their appreciation is directly related to this unconscious store of material. Thirdly, Freud argues that the pleasure gained from laughing is through the release of the psychic energy used to suppress aggressive and sexual urges, as well as what he calls the “economy of psychic expenditure” in which the joking technique in its brevity saves psychic energy which can then be discharged in laughter. These aspects of laughter are heavily theoretical and focus mainly on what he calls the technique of jokes, something that requires much deeper analysis than is possible at this point, although throughout this study I will at times return to close analysis of the mechanics of joking. For the most part however, the technique of jokes in the Freudian sense is the same for religious jokes and non-religious jokes; in fact Freud uses a great number of Jewish jokes as illustrations (although his motivations are not the same as mine). Freud also writes about the purpose of jokes. He classifies jokes into two categories, innocent and tendentious. Innocent jokes are those whose enjoyment is related only to the technique of the joke, that is, the joke is not hiding anything.

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within its structure other than the intellectual puzzle of the joke. Freud sometimes refers to innocent jokes as “non-tendentious”, so obviously they can really only be defined in relation to tendentious jokes. Tendentious jokes are simply jokes with a hidden purpose and Freud states that such a joke is either “a hostile joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire or defence) or an obscene joke (serving the purpose of exposure”).

Freud’s theory has been thoroughly critiqued, much like his psychoanalytic work in general. However it is still a useful theoretical exercise to engage his ideas in relation to religious humour. In particular there is a parallel between innocent/tendentious humour and dirty/clean humour, where clean humour has a tendency to avoid aggression and obscenity, although undoubtedly the categorisation is not going to be a perfect fit since religious humour is by no means always innocent (or even clean). Freud’s idea that joking relieves repressed desires is definitely something worth exploring in relation to religion’s famed difficulty in dealing with ‘tendentious’ issues, in particular sex and the body. Indeed, relief theories in general are a helpful frame to lay over religious anxieties that are played out on comic ground; for example jokes about atheists or hypocritical clergy certainly have some connection with feelings (repressed or not) of hostility, criticism or at least conflict, making them in Freud’s terms tendentious which poses a problem for religion in the same ways already discussed in regard to superiority theories.

**Incongruity**

The interpretation of something as humorous is a cognitive as well as an emotional process. The incongruity theory places the primary responsibility for laughter on the intellectual reaction to something that is in some way unexpected, illogical or out of place, when we perceive one idea to be in some way mixed or replaced with another that does not match, fit or is otherwise non-equivalent. Importantly, the realisation of incongruity usually involves an element of surprise (which is why if we already know the punch line it will be less amusing), but does not always need to be completely unexpected (we can watch a funny movie more than once and laugh at the same jokes despite knowing their outcome). Additionally, I concur

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112 See Chapter Five.
with Elliot Oring’s theory that incongruity can be appropriate incongruity, where there is a perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous (the joke is both incongruous but also in a strange and amusing sort of way it is apt, otherwise it is nonsensical). This demonstrates that there are multiple aspects to explain with the same theory. Discussions of this theory can become heavy in detailing cognitive processes, and while at its most general this is a popular and widely accepted theory of humour, debate still continues over the ways in which incongruity affects our sense of humour. There is no perfect consensus, and as this is not a work of cognitive psychology, only a selective and brief outline of incongruity theories will be offered at this point, selected primarily on how relevant and useful it may be to understanding religious humour.

Michael Mulkay distinguishes between the humorous mode and serious discourse as the two kinds of interpretive frameworks in which we live our lives. Each mode has specific conventions dictating comprehension and behaviour, with the one being the inverse of the other. In the serious realm we employ a unitary mode of discourse in which it is taken for granted that there exists a singular shared reality in which ambiguity, inconsistency and contradiction pose potential problems. In serious discourse people are expected to act in predictable ways and are “obliged to avoid speaking in two contradictory ways at once”. Yet contradiction, ambiguity and multiplicity are necessary components of the humorous mode. In other words, to attempt to give humour a single, explicitly definitive meaning goes against the very principles of the humorous mode that “depends on the discursive display of opposing interpretative possibilities”. After all, to explain a joke (that is to give it one explicit meaning) is to render it laboured and unfunny, and bring it into the serious mode. This spells immediate failure for the joke because not only will the implausibilities and ambiguities of the joke be no longer acceptable, they will also become nonsense because the joke is being judged by the criteria of the serious mode instead of the humorous. Mulkay

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suggests that the reason we can accept the premise of a joke and hence laugh at humour is that humour “operates according to plausibility requirements that are quite different from, and much less stringent than, those operative in serious discourse”. Thus our expectations of a joke are more flexible than for a piece of news, or rather their flexibility is of a different kind, for there are certainly joke expectations that rely on the familiar and when undermined they become part of what inherently makes something a joke.

This theory is particularly useful for my purposes, even simply because there is an immediate parallel between the humorous and the serious modes and the sacred and the profane. Although Mulkay is perhaps setting up a false binary opposition, in which there is some rigid segregation between worlds that does not reflect what occurs in reality, there are distinctions between funny/serious and sacred/profane that pervade the popular imagination, and Christians and Mormons often accept that some clear, recognisable boundary does exist. I include Mulkay’s modes not to suggest something so simple as everything that is profane is funny and everything sacred is serious. Of course this is something that will be problematised in greater detail, but the general distinction is that religion and all its associations are firmly planted within the serious mode and hence interpreting religion through humorous criteria will usually (but not always) result in a failure of that humour, especially from the perspective of believers. This is not because there is some innate factor that makes God intrinsically non-humorous. Rather, it is my argument that, in terms of Mulkay’s assertion that “judged by the criteria of the serious discourse, humour is nonsensical”, those who do not appreciate the humour in a joke about God may be mistakenly interpreting a humorous instance through the serious mode. Thus the humour becomes not only nonsensical but offensive because the content is breaking the conventions (incongruence, subversion, absurdity) which would be otherwise acceptable had the interpretive framework been agreed upon as the humorous mode. Mulkay explains that what is occurring in the crossing or mixing of these two modes (or specific aspects of them) is termed bisociation by Arthur Koestler, although considered by other theorists under different terminology. For Koestler, the production of humour necessarily involves “the perceiving of a situation or idea in two

self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference”.\textsuperscript{119} This includes use of concepts or symbols as well as specific instances of language such as puns and the upturning of social or cultural situations. Another well-known version of this idea is Victor Raskin’s semantic script-based theory of humour, in which a text is “joke-carrying” if it is compatible with two different “scripts” and the “scripts” overlap fully or in part.\textsuperscript{120}

Part of the conflict between the humorous mode and the serious mode is the underpinning assumption that all individuals share the same reality, which is clearly not the case, and once this fact is discovered in the serious mode it is disturbing, whilst in the humorous mode it is celebrated. John Morreall argues that incongruity must be perceived as pleasant if it is to result in laughter, and we can see that this is a key determinant in whether we are operating in the humorous or the serious mode. Morreall suggests a ‘new’ theory of humour, which is basically the same as the ‘old’ with one new addition. He agrees that laughter is a change in psychological state that alters our expected mental patterns, and this change can be both cognitive and affective, and that the change has to be sudden or unexpected. What Morreall’s theory adds is that it is only when the incongruity is experienced as pleasant or enjoyable rather than frightening or anxiety-inducing that it results in laughter or amusement.\textsuperscript{121} Interpreted in light of Mulkay, we can extrapolate out of this that a pleasant feeling is a signifier of the humorous mode, although not sufficient to create it (we can feel good without amusement). It indicates that one’s mood is an important influence on whether something is interpreted humorously or seriously. This may seem like a small point, but it can be quite important when considering the ways that jokes can go horribly wrong (for instance when a practical joke fails because the butt is genuinely panicked by the joke situation) as well as the relationship between faith, anxiety and happiness among believers.\textsuperscript{122} To this it could be added that for a joke to be thought of as funny the pleasant feeling gained from the humour

\textsuperscript{119} Koestler, The Act of Creation, 35.
\textsuperscript{120} Victor Raskin, Semantic Mechanisms of Humor (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1985). Raskin’s theory has also been expanded and developed, especially into the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) with Salvatore Attardo. Linguistics is one of the dominant disciplines in humour studies, and while many linguistic studies of humour can be helpful, for the most part they are very specific and theoretical in a way that is inaccessible to non-linguists. See Arvo Krikmann, ‘Contemporary Linguistic Theories of Humour’, Folklore 33 (2006): 27–58.
\textsuperscript{121} Morreall, Taking Laughter Seriously and see also his article “A New Theory of Laughter”, Philosophical Studies 42 (1982) 243-254.
must be greater than or outweigh in some way the anxiety induced by the joke. I will return to this point when considering the consequences of joking about God (in other words does the momentary pleasure of laughter outweigh the risk of offending God?).

Incongruity theories are heavily focused on the cognitive nature of what happens in the brain of an amused person. I am actually more interested in the external conditions that allow this amusement to occur, what happens in the ‘collective brain’ when something is deemed funny (or not). Superiority and relief theories are more oriented towards these external factors, but the final section considers some pertinent contributions from thinkers that work beyond the three main theories.

**Social and Cultural Influences on Humour**

Mary Douglas approaches humour from an anthropological perspective, and her influential 1968 article “The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception” discusses joking in direct relation to social structure, indeed she asserts that jokes already exist within that structure and the act of joking draws them out. Douglas is important for this study because she emphasises the social conditions in place during a joking exchange. Some of her argument can be viewed as a typical incongruity theory; she states a joke “brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first”. Elsewhere she argues that “the social dimension enters at all levels into the perception of the joke”. For Douglas, the key to joking lies in the fact that jokes actually already exist within social structure, “the joke form rarely lies in the utterance alone…it can be identified in the total social situation” so that humour is culturally embedded and social interaction draws it out of that structure and shapes its form. Lastly, Douglas considers that for a joke to be successful it must be both perceived and permitted. Douglas is key to an understanding of the ways in which a specific social context – in this case religious communities – are intimately involved in the

process of the joke through all stages of creation, reception and success (laughter). If the jokes are already to be found in the social structure, then it follows that jokes about religion will be found amongst religious groups, and that the joke itself will draw out meaning from that social situation. Hence analysing religious humour will extract meaning from jokes that are extracting meaning from their social context.\footnote{Mary Douglas has another study that is of great use to this dissertation, \textit{Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo} (New York: Routledge, 1966). This book is not about humour, however I rely heavily on it for a consideration of clean humour in Chapter Five. Thus I will not discuss it here.}

Another significant study that focuses on the sociality of joking behaviour is the philosopher Ted Cohen’s \textit{Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters} (1999).\footnote{Ted Cohen, \textit{Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters} (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999).} Cohen’s work depends exclusively on the analysis of jokes in their verbal, folkloric forms. For Cohen, jokes are a very special form of social interaction, one that fosters a particular type of intimacy that is based in a shared knowledge. This shared knowledge is one of the key components in a joke’s success. This is because jokes are what Cohen calls “conditional”, that is, in order to succeed there is something upon which the joke depends and the audience of the joke is charged to bring it to the interaction.\footnote{Cohen, \textit{Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters}, 12.} That something is the knowledge of the referents within the joke. Jokes presuppose knowledge about widely held commonplaces, that they know about the language, characters and situations and most importantly that they know what the commonly held beliefs are about those features of the joke, for example, to get an Irish joke one must be aware of (if not believe) the stereotype that Irish are stupid or drink a lot. For jokes that depend on very specialised knowledge that is exclusive to particular groups Cohen uses the term “hermetic”. These are jokes that rely on understanding of jargon or information about that exact subject. Cohen also says that there is not only shared knowledge but shared feeling, and the culmination of this sharing of knowledge and feeling is a community.\footnote{Cohen, \textit{Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters}, 28.} Many cases of religious humour could be considered hermetic. For example, the LDS film \textit{The R.M} (2003) in its very title presupposes the audience’s knowledge of the meaning of the acronym (“Returned Missionary”) and is full of references specific to LDS culture, beliefs and practices.\footnote{Kurt Hale, \textit{The R.M} (2003).}
Douglas and Cohen are but two examples of theorists who consider external social factors as influential on the way that humour behaves, or, perhaps more correctly, makes us behave. It is crucial to note the underlying assumption of studies such as these is that humour is socially constructed, and without a group, it cannot be successful. It is the group and its social dynamics that determine what is funny or not, by creating and sanctioning social forces such as structures, and taboos as well bodies of shared knowledge that are used by group members to identify members and non-members by their ability to participate in the joking culture. Cognitive and structural methodologies are only very useful when individual response to humour is the focus. I am primarily concerned with humour as it is received communally, and though comedy is often created by individuals, and hence influenced by the ways that individual senses of humour operate, that comedy is designed to be released into their particular religious community and is deliberately composed with that community – and all its social rules and regulations – in mind. Methodologies that approach humour from the perspective of group dynamics are then the most suitable for application to the question of religious humour.

**Conclusion**

Religious humour sits at the intersection of a number of different social, psychological, cultural and theological forces and the study of it requires an equally diverse methodological approach. No single theory or discipline is comprehensive enough for the task alone, and any attempt to understand religious humour would be only a sketch if viewed through a single lens. The multivalency of religious humour has perhaps contributed to its neglect in scholarship. There are a substantial number of studies that do consider individual aspects of religion and humour, but few take the phenomenon on its own and apply different methodologies as the situation calls for them. It is natural that theologians study the theology of humour and sociologists the sociology of humour, but in a multidisciplinary practice such as religious studies, it is necessary to use all the methods at my disposal with the aim of painting as full a picture as possible in a single study.

This chapter has considered those various tools. The most important are theories and methods of religious studies, theology, and humour studies. Each offers a unique contribution, and so rather than being a purist in any one discipline, it is more effective to combine aspects of each
(especially since religious studies and humour studies are in themselves so deeply multidisciplinary). With a handful of exceptions discussed above, religious studies has by and large ignored religious humour. Yet I must consult religious studies if I am to understand the religious aspect of religious humour. Without it I cannot begin to grasp issues such as the social construction of blasphemy, religious influence on the body or the historical legacy that is imprinted on religious humour from Christianity’s past. Similarly, humour studies provides some theoretical underpinnings on the social phenomenon we call laughter, for without them humour is a slippery, contradictory and changeable beast that is exceptionally problematic to pin down. Religious humour in many ways operates like humour in general and so humour studies can assist seeing where religious humour is affecting Christians and Mormons simply because they are social creatures and religious studies and theology can help to discern when the humour is specifically affected by their religious beliefs. Theology begins to take this study into an insider perspective, and demonstrates where religious humour can begin to be incorporated into the Christian or Mormon worldview.

This chapter has considered these disciplines because they are all crucial for both a theoretical foundation and an understanding of where this dissertation is placed in relation to wider scholarship. However this study is primarily interested in practice, how religious humour is enjoyed as part of the lived experience of religion. Hence the remainder of this thesis primarily takes an empirical approach, drawing on the ideas discussed in this chapter and developing them as needed when faced with actual primary material from the world of Christian and Mormon comedy entertainment. The next chapter moves its orientation away from scholarship and towards what Christians and Mormons themselves have to say about the intersection of religion and humour.
Chapter Three
Addressing the Challenge of Humour

Introduction

The choice of entertainment via radio, TV and literature, on the part of many, falls short of Christian grace, even short of the standard of enlightened nature. To avoid this blemish of personal piety we need to know when to laugh and when not to. Humour leaps outside its legitimate sphere when it trespasses on the suggestive, the sarcastic, the silly, and the sacrilegious.

- Reverend Leslie B. Flynn¹

The funny thing about a Mormon audience is that instead of their brain asking “Is it funny, will I laugh?”, the first thing they think is “should I find that offensive?” then “is it funny, can I laugh?”

- Spencer King²

Humour poses many challenges to a group’s sense of order, ethics and morality and for many believers the culture surrounding the creation and appreciation of humour can be tense. This chapter will discuss some of the concerns that Christians and Mormons have over the nature and content of humour and argues that rather than rejecting humour altogether, believers maintain standards of appropriateness against which humour can be judged. I will examine popular Christian and Mormon discussions about the limits of humour from newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, websites and field research, and argue that while in general such discussions are very unclear about what exactly constitutes offensive humour, they are clear in their sense that although humour can be abused and misused it can also be a positive attribute to religious belief, if it is appropriate. I argue that despite the vague generalisations that emerge from these discussions, there are three elements that can be discerned as markers for appropriate humour: appropriate means non-blasphemous, clean and non-hostile. This

² Spencer King, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (20 June 2010).
chapter forms the introduction to the following three chapters that will expand further on each of these themes.

**Humour and Offence**

Humour is uniquely equipped to give pleasure but also to insult. This is because humour has an extremely delicate and unstable relationship with serious discourse; it is reliant upon it for its meaning because the serious exists as a foundation from which humour deviates. Certainly, there are forms of humour that are based in nonsense and absurdity with little to no relation to reality, but even these laughs must be interpreted through a framework of serious reality, if only to perceive that they are not real. The interconnectedness of what Michael Mulkay calls the serious mode and the humorous mode ensures that jokes will at times deal with subjects that are usually treated with the utmost seriousness and, for many, have no business being dealt with humorously.³ The fruit of this intermingling can be hilarious but it can also be dangerous. Comedy of this sort is usually referred to as ‘black’ or ‘sick’ humour because it often deals with taboo subjects like death, violence, sickness or tragedy. But it is also reserved for taboo-laden subjects in general, subjects that are rife with cultural sensitivities (such as sex or religion). The danger here lies in the humour being interpreted as offensive rather than funny. Certain types of humourists blur this fine line deliberately (and with varying degrees of finesse) while others may stumble across the border accidentally.

Often we can only see where the line is once it has been crossed. This is because the nature of humour changes according to an incalculable number of circumstances, most importantly the identity of and the relationship between the joke teller and the joke receiver as well as the context in which the humour is expressed. It is also dependant on the joke content, which may be completely out of bounds or it may simply be a case of what Lockyer and Pickering call “comic excess”, where the joke has just “gone too far”.⁴ Humour is an amorphous cluster of characteristics, but one of its more prominent and relevant attributes is that it “at once permits, legitimates and exonerates an insult” and that a feature of comic discourse is that it “allows the contraband cargo of the offence to be smuggled aboard”.⁵ As Giselinge Kuipers

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argues “the polysemy of a joke makes it impossible to say with certainty which function it fulfils or what the joke teller meant: humour is by definition an ambivalent form of communication”. 6 This is particularly true if the boundary between the serious and the humorous becomes confused. 7 This can be alarming for those who believe that serious things should be kept serious. It achieves this boundary confusion through two methods, firstly by being ambiguous in meaning so offensive content can be mixed in alongside other more acceptable interpretations; and secondly, by hiding behind the shield of “just joking”. This is a powerful defence indeed that allows the content of the joke to be rendered benign by simultaneously absolving the joker of any real insult because their joke is not serious, that is, not to be taken as true or real, and by shifting the burden of the joke’s failure onto the individual who is offended. The offended individual can then be accused of having no sense of humour, something that may be considered a serious character flaw. 8 This combines a content-based offence with an additional insult to the personality.

Such a disturbing accusation is frequently levelled at religious people, both from within and without religious communities, with varying degrees of social consequences. Of course, there is always the problem of who is arbitrating between good and bad taste, who is the judge of ‘gone too far’. While the humourist may accuse the believer of lacking a sense of humour, it must be remembered that each person evaluates funniness for themselves, and that there is another side to the exchange in which the joker may be accused of immorality or lacking in ‘good’ taste by telling such a joke. Importantly such judgments are also made communally. Individual and community tastes are influenced by a continually shifting basis of negotiation. Taking a joke to be offensive is a personal decision based on one’s own values, since jokes are not inherently funny or unfunny and are only potentially offensive. 9 I would argue that humour about certain subjects, chiefly those that are most expected to remain firmly in the serious mode, is especially reliant on individual values and especially susceptible to being taken offensively. Religion is one such subject because of its intimate relationship with the

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7 Michael Mulkay, On Humour, 45.
serious mode (it does after all deal with questions of ‘ultimate concern’)\textsuperscript{10} and because religious offence exists as its own special category: blasphemy. Blasphemy is what makes religion particularly vulnerable to offence through humour. Not because religion is in itself taboo – talking about religion is in many ways a key practice of Christianity in the form of preaching, evangelism, personal testimony, prayer and so on – but it is the manner in which it is treated that becomes the concern. To laugh about religion is to play with its meaning, something that is potentially dangerous for a comic who is both expressing their own faith as well as entertaining an audience that does not want to hear its faith as the butt of the joke.

The “Christian” (Lack of a) Sense of Humour

Christians and Mormons have long had the reputation for lacking a sense of humour. Historically, attitudes to humour were a contentious point of concern for religious groups. During the nineteenth century in America, fun and play, and by extension humour and laughter, were associated with lax moral standards and a lack of seriousness required of a fledgling nation establishing itself as independent, virtuous and strong.\textsuperscript{11} Later, in the face of modernity, anxieties developed over threats to the Christian way of life, as Christian Smith states “a series of profound social, demographic and intellectual transformations began to challenge Protestantism’s security, influence and relevance”.\textsuperscript{12} Such challenges to cultural dominance fed a Christian culture of seriousness, and left a lasting impression that levity contributes to society’s dismissal of Christian values. Mormons had a significantly different experience with historical laughter, in that for most of their history they have been a group that was an often ridiculed and excluded minority.\textsuperscript{13} Given their history of being exiled, persecuted and laughed at, LDS culture is particularly sensitive to laughter and the potential for ridicule and is wary when entering mainstream American society.\textsuperscript{14} Hence both groups have an historical reputation for ‘taking themselves seriously’, often because they felt that

\textsuperscript{13} For a more comprehensive discussion of negative attitudes to Mormons throughout history see Terryl L. Givens, \textit{The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myth, and the Construction of Heresy}, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
mainstream society did not, and so emerged the notion that Christians and Mormons are lacking a sense of humour.

Yet despite the notion that religious people have little sense of humour, completely negative attitudes are hard to find documented in popular discourse today. Ironically, the most accessible evidence of this attitude can be glimpsed in the writings of religious humourists, through their protest against an attitude that they have presumably observed through personal experience of their world. They openly decry the impossibility or failure of Christian or Mormon humour, an act which is both a clue to their religious identity as well as a clue to the fact that some people at least must think that Christians and Christianity are not and should not be funny. Cal and Rose Samra suggest that their book of jokes and cartoons, Holy Hilarity, “disproves the notion that Christians are relentlessly dour, melancholy, humourless and joyless” and, although they admit that “some individuals might fit that description”, the implication is that that has little to do with their being Christian. Thor Ramsey acknowledges that some people think that once you become a Christian you lose your sense of humour. Todd Petersen jokes in an online discussion about Mormon humour among LDS humourists that “Mormons spend so much time being offended; you’d think it’s one of the articles of faith”. Well known comic writer Eloise Bell has suggested that “The range of humour that Mormons generate or respond to, at least in public, is about as wide as a bolo tie”.

A clear example of this phenomenon is Orson Scott Card’s column on his blog Brother Orson Reviews Everything entitled “Are Mormons Funny?” Card is a successful and well-loved LDS fiction writer and humourist. His column is a review of two examples of LDS comedy, but before even referring to these texts he launches into an elaborate, fictional discussion with a hypothetical reader who is a conservative Mormon. He tells the story of graffiti positioned on an overpass so that it had the appearance of a caption for the Washington Temple, reading “Surrender Dorothy!” Card then goes on to interpret:

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16 Thor Ramsey, Interview 2, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (4 June 2010).
Let me explain it to those Mormons who aren’t laughing. See, the temple kind of looks like the Emerald City in The Wizard of Oz, and “Surrender Dorothy” is what the Wicked Witch of the West wrote in the sky with smoke coming out of her broom.

OK, let me make it even clearer: This is funny because clearly the Mormons didn’t intend their temple to remind anybody of a classic fantasy movie, but once somebody put up the graffiti, it made everybody think of it and laugh.


But it wasn’t the temple they were laughing at. It was the juxtaposition of the overblown architecture and the greenery and the cleverness of the graffitista. So they weren’t making fun of sacred things. They were making fun of Disney-style architecture and ...

No, I didn’t mean that our temples are somehow like Disneyland, I was talking about architecture, not sacred ... sorry ... yes, I’ll go talk to my bishop.  

Here the hypothetical Mormon takes offence at the original joke as well as Card’s appreciation for the joke, indicating the problem is both with the joke about the Temple (interpreted as a joke at the Temple’s expense), and also with the assumption that Card agrees with the sentiments of the joke, that is, that the Temple looks like Oz or Disneyland and is thus in bad taste and profaned. In the joke, Card is the one who is chastised for not understanding the significance of the Temple and thus laughing at it (“sorry, yes, I’ll go talk to my Bishop”), although I would read his satirical intention as suggesting the opposite; there was no joke at the Temple’s expense and so in a delightful example of irony, the hypothetical Mormon is the one being chastised for not understanding the joke.  

The most interesting aspect of Card’s “Are Mormons Funny?” column is that most evidence of popular religious anxiety over humour can be found in examples of religious humour. Remarkably this demonstrates not only that, again, religious humour does indeed exist, but that religious humourists feel a need to self-consciously reassure their audiences that Christians and Mormons are funny and are supposed to be funny, that humour is not only compatible with their religious lives but will even bring spiritual benefits, while at the same

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20 Card, ‘Are Mormons Funny?’.  
21 This is a clear example of Galia Hirsch’s explanation of irony. See Galia Hirsch, ‘Between Irony and Humour: A Pragmatic Model’, Pragmatics and Cognition 19, no. 3 (2011): 530–561.
time chastise them (gently) for taking themselves too seriously. Another thing to note is that in most cases these humour-hating Christians and Mormons that comedians are responding to are hypothetical or imaginary or are a generalised projection, as in the stand-up comedy series Thou Shalt Laugh’s accusatory question “Who says Christians don’t have fun?”

Presumably the person who has decided to watch a Christian comedy DVD does not think that Christians cannot have fun, nor do the openly Christian and openly funny comedians involved in the show. Who then is this person who scoffs at Christian humour?

Reconciling Blasphemy and Belief: ‘Appropriate’ Humour

The fact is, it is difficult to find religious people who will reject humour entirely. When critics suggest that Christians do not appreciate jokes, what they are actually referring to is the fact that many Christians and Mormons have a very specific understanding of what makes for ‘good’ or successful humour. This understanding is developed largely by viewing humour through their religious framework. This results in a code or standard against which humour can be measured, and that standard is most often referred to as “appropriate”. Humour is successful when it meets the individual’s criteria and is therefore deemed appropriate. Therefore it is not that believers reject humour altogether, rather, they reject humour that is considered by them to fall short of the standard and hence be deemed “inappropriate”. Understanding what believers mean by “appropriate” is fundamental to understanding the ways that religious humour operates, and so the remainder of this chapter is devoted to understanding this term by examining Christian and Mormon popular discourse.

Religious individuals and groups are not the only ones to use appropriateness as a measure for the enjoyment of humour. Most people apply some kind of standard of appropriateness to jokes and what is considered appropriate varies widely from person to person, particularly when it is considered that some humour is even funny by virtue of its inappropriateness. Hence, for example, the humour of Sasha Baron Cohen is hilarious to his fans because their standard of appropriateness is set at a level that encompasses his racist and sexist jokes under its banner. There are many factors that affect how a joke will be written and received,

22 Phil Cooke, Thou Shalt Laugh (Roserock Films, 2006).
24 See for example his films Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan (Everyman Pictures, 2006) and Bruno (Universal Pictures, 2009).
factors that are true of joking in general as well as specifically religious humour. The content of the joke is really only as important as its context, the way it will be received – as appropriate or inappropriate – depends on factors that exist outside the joke, or rather, social factors in which the joke is embedded.

Firstly, the circumstances under which the joke is told will frame the joke’s appropriateness. Jerry Palmer uses the example of telling a dirty joke to an aunt at a grandfather’s funeral. While a funeral may be generally considered as a place where jokes should not be told, it is possible to tell a joke at a funeral that could be appropriate. Ultimately, the situation relies more heavily on what Palmer calls the ‘joking relationship’ between individuals and groups. Palmer discusses joking relationships in tribal societies, but the principles are applicable more widely in that people’s relationship to each other is in part defined by how they joke with each other. Humour builds and expresses intimacy. The nature of the humour will reflect the nature of the relationship, hence making sexual jokes with one’s aunt is likely to be inappropriate because the requisite kinds of intimacy may not be present, and the inappropriateness is compounded by the funerary context which for the most part is agreed upon as exclusively serious. Yet the joking relationship between you and the aunt may still allow for joking on other subjects and on other occasions.

Secondly, the propriety of a joke is determined by, to use Ted Cohen’s term discussed in Chapter Two, the conditions of the joke. This relies on the audience being able to supply the information that cannot be given within the short and succinct nature of joking (an obvious example being the knowledge of characteristics of certain racial stereotypes upon which an ethnic joke will depend). Whether or not such ‘hermetic jokes’ can be considered “inappropriate” again depends on the context and the joking relationships involved. If the audience is made up of group members, hermetic jokes can foster group solidarity. If there are ‘outsider’ audience members present then the same joke can be exclusionary to the person who does not have enough insider knowledge or shared beliefs to participate in the group bonding exercise of joke sharing. It may be considered inappropriate to tell a joke to those who do not have the ‘hermetic’ knowledge to appreciate it, either because such practice is

27 Palmer, Taking Humour Seriously, 12.
exclusionary or because the information contained in the joke could be deemed too sensitive for outsiders to joke about.

Thirdly, the humourist must be able to signal that a subject is being treated humorously.  
Humour cues are not necessary for laughter, and laughter can occur when no humour was indicated or even intended. However, giving humorous clues is a step towards preparing the listeners for the type of interpretive work they will be expected to perform in response to the following communication, and softens the situation so that the joke may be more likely taken as one. Humorous cues include “play framing” with certain scripted phrases (“Have you heard the one about…”, “this is hilarious”) or with non-verbal cues such as smiling, winking, pre-emptive laughing and so on, that indicate “what is contained herein is not real”. Mulkay notes that such cues do not necessarily indicate a joke is to follow, rather it means interpret what is being said as humorous discourse whether or not it is in joke form. William Fry argued that humorous cues are essentially paradoxical in character because they convey that the discourse of which they are part is not genuine discourse and should not be taken seriously. This implies that the signals themselves cannot be taken seriously and therefore do not mean what they appear to mean. If this is so, it seems to follow that the discourse is serious after all and that the signals do mean what they appear to mean: namely that the discourse is not serious. Such paradoxes are a necessary component of humour, but the complicated, subtle and socially learned nature of such cues means that they must be appropriate to the audience in order for them to be successfully transmitted and the joke allowed to proceed.

This relates to an especially important point about humour that has been made most famously by Mary Douglas. Expanding on the discussion from Chapter Two, for Douglas a joke must not only be perceived as such but also permitted. This is the distinction between getting a joke in the cognitive sense (“I understand it”) and appreciating the joke in the aesthetic sense (“It’s funny”), and importantly, being able to laugh out loud in the presence of others. Essentially, humour must be allowed to be funny, and such permission is granted on a case by

29 Mulkay, *On Humour*, chap. 3.
case basis, taking into account all the above mentioned circumstances. When permission is not granted, any laughter that occurs transgresses the rule in place for that circumstance, that is, this subject (for example a grandfather’s death) cannot be laughed at, hence laughter at his funeral becomes inappropriate. There is, of course, the question of who grants the permission. This is a significant question, and in terms of Douglas’ analysis it could be suggested that since the joke rarely relies on what is said but the social conditions under which it was said, the permission is granted by everyone involved in the social exchange, including teller, listener and any others present at the time (this may or may not include the butt of the joke).

**Appropriate Humour in Popular Religious Discourse**

Sociologists and philosophers may speak of humour and laughter in terms of social response, and while humour must indeed be appropriate in the cognitive sense (applicable, relevant and rational), for religious individuals concerned with the effect that humour may have on their spiritual lives it must also be appropriate in the moral sense. This means appropriate is to be taken as a moral judgment; the joke must be ‘proper’, allowed, and socially acceptable with respect to community values. The delicate balancing of all these factors affects how safe the environment is for joking about sensitive subjects. Interestingly, the term appropriate is used more frequently than the term inappropriate in popular religious discourse. ‘Inappropriate’ is frequently substituted by terms more associated with humorous discourse, such as “unfunny”, “offensive”, “bad joke”, “lame”, “mean”, “in poor taste”, “dirty”, “blue”, “low-brow” and so on. A survey of discussions of the proscriptions on humour demonstrates that the embrace of humour is conditional, and the condition is that the humour is appropriate. By examining Mormon and Christian discourse we can see what exactly is meant by the term “appropriate” in the practical sense.

The official magazine of the LDS Church, *Ensign*, publishes articles relating to church doctrine and daily life. One article “A Year’s Supply of Humour” by Eileen Gibbons Kump (a mother of four and Sunday school teacher from Missouri, according to the by-line) deals with the ambiguous nature of humour when she asks:
A sense of humour. What is it? A good disposition? An awareness of or an inclination toward what is funny? Humour eludes tidy definitions, but two things are certain: intelligence goes into its wise use, and most of us recognize it when we hear it or see it.\textsuperscript{34}

Kump feels that somehow humour can be used “wisely” (presumably this also means it can be used “unwisely”) and that it has some quality that is inherently recognisable even if we cannot define it. She also recommends that families accumulate examples of humour to use in the home, called ‘humour storage’. This is an interesting parallel to the Mormon practice of food storage in which a year’s supply of food and supplies is kept in the home in case of emergency. By titling her article “A Year’s Supply of Humour” Kump is immediately associating humour with a popular Mormon practice. Kump goes on to explain that:

A family’s humour storage is a delightful tool for creating humour in the home. The goal is not levity or loud laughter but sanity and \textit{appropriate} fun. Humour is especially valuable whenever the minutiae of daily life threaten the harmony that should be present.\textsuperscript{35}

Kump’s understanding of good humour is that humour be enjoyed in the home to deal with everyday minutiae, that is it has a tension relieving function, but more interestingly that it is not using levity or high volume and it is, most notably, appropriate. She gives no definition of what that means, but I would argue it fits into wider discussions of “appropriate” humour that rely on the assumption that everyone is in agreement about what is and is not appropriate. For example LDS blogger Marie Leslie suggests that humour can be humorous or hurtful. It is hurtful when it uses sarcasm, teasing or levity, and she defines levity as “Lightness of manner or speech, especially when inappropriate; lack of \textit{appropriate} seriousness”.\textsuperscript{36} All that can be solidly gathered from this is that levity is not an appropriate form of humour. It is now known what levity means, however there is still an unarticulated standard of propriety.

Another example from an official LDS publication, \textit{New Era}, goes further into the relationship between humour and appropriateness, in particular in relation to religious beliefs. Peter B. Rawlins’ 1974 article “A Serious Look at Humour” is indeed serious, and while he acknowledges that “good effects flow from wise use of humour” and that this “argues for the

\textsuperscript{35} Kump, ‘A Year’s Supply of Humor’, 64. Italics added.
Lord’s acceptance of this medium of communication”, the bulk of the article deals with the ways humour can be “misused and abused”. According to Rawlins:

the Lord has seen fit to caution us in the use of humour, and we are counselled to live with ‘cheerful hearts and countenances,’ but to avoid ‘much laughter, for this is sin.’(The Doctrine and Covenants 59: 15). Again, we are told to ‘cease from all … light speeches, from all laughter … and light-mindedness’ (The Doctrine and Covenants 88:121) and to ‘cast away … your excess of laughter far from you’ (The Doctrine and Covenants 88:69”).

Rawlins attempts to clarify what this means. He writes:

It would not be wise to attempt to define ‘excess of laughter’ or ‘much laughter’ in terms of decibel levels or time limits. It would also be presumptuous to define the line between the sublime and the ridiculous. However, we may profitably consider types of humour that may detract from spirituality. 

Essentially these types are loud laughter, light-mindedness and flippancy/frivolity. Rawlins invokes Brigham Young as an example of a key method of judging the propriety of humour. He argues Young seemed to approve of “joy and gladness that is full of meat and marrow, or, in other words, full of meaning and sense” as opposed to “vain” or meaningless laughter. Humour, then, needs to have some kind of meaning behind it and when it is empty and frivolous it detracts from the Lord’s command to “look unto me in every thought”.

The most important aspect of Rawlins’ article is his argument that “Closely akin to flippancy is irreverence” and that “Making light of sacred things indicates a lack of affection for and faith in God”. Interestingly, “Irreverence differs from profanity and taking the name of the Lord in vain only in degree, not in quality”. These are serious allegations that he makes against those who use laughter irreverently, and he suggests that at its most extreme, irreverent humour is akin to the doubters who laughed at Christ’s miracles or the Romans who mocked Christ on the Cross.

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40 6:36, The Doctrine and Covenants (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981).
41 Rawlins, ‘A Serious Look at Humor’, 49.
42 Rawlins, ‘A Serious Look at Humor’, 49.
is cast as irreverent, even blasphemous, because, as Rawlins argues, it is a dangerous weapon that damages the vulnerable and in doing so injures God: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me”.44 This idea of humour exploiting the vulnerable is prevalent in Rawlins’ attitude to humour, even as it applies to dirty humour. Exposure to “off-colour” jokes can pollute even pure minds, and weakens one’s resistance to temptation. Rawlins recommends that:

To avoid using humour as a dangerous weapon, we must be compassionately considerate of all that is frail, and humbly mindful of all that is sublime…Those who profess belief in Christ should shape their humour in the light of Christ’s teachings. Being rejected from His kingdom because of a warped sense of humour would not be funny.45

While Rawlins does not use the word ‘appropriate’ directly, he is still employing a framework that relies on a dichotomous understanding of what is essentially a moral evaluation, that is ‘does the humour meet my standard or does it fall short?’, or in his words, is it compassionately considerate, and humbly mindful of the sublime or is it dirty, hostile and a dangerous weapon to be misused and abused?

Some more recent LDS examples generally support Rawlins’ position (albeit with varying degrees of interpretation of what constitutes irreverence), and perhaps shed a little more light on what exactly counts as irreverent and inconsiderate humour. Newspapers and blogs are particularly vocal on this issue, with several LDS sources addressing the issue of Mormon humour. On the LDS blog Mormon Matters one commentator takes the scriptural admonition of The Doctrine and Covenants 88:121 to be “more in the vein of the mocking of the sacred, seeking certain types of lewd and bawdy entertainment, and the like”.46 Another commentator defended Mormons’ sense of humour: “I think Mormons laugh at themselves about as well as other groups, perhaps better than many. But that doesn’t mean they like being made fun of, or especially that they like seeing their sacred beliefs put on display for mockery”.47 A fellow commentator, ‘Molly’, despite having a more relaxed attitude to humour, still points towards where boundaries are found. She suggests that:

In order to be funny you can’t take yourself too seriously. LDS people tend to take themselves far too seriously and have a formal taboo on mocking their leaders. Trite and light comedy can work in road shows and stake productions, but genuinely incisive humour is out of reach as long as mocking the church, its members, and its leaders is cause for getting one’s knickers in a twist.\(^{48}\)

An article from *The Salt Lake Tribune* is even more specific. Interviewing Mormon humourists, Peggy Fletcher Stack reports that:

[Pat] Bagley [a LDS cartoonist] knows the LDS Church, he says, and knows how far to push it. But he did break a barrier with his caricature of then-President Gordon B. Hinckley being interviewed by Larry King in 1998. It was the first time Bagley ever had depicted a living church president. Though some readers complained that the cartoon was disrespectful, Bagley felt Hinckley was drawn with affection.\(^{49}\)

It can be seen here that one controversial issue is humour about the president of the Church. Because the President is also a living Prophet, many Mormons regard him (or at least his position) as sacred, and as such, joking about the president is often considered off-limits. However, in this case, the cartoonist has redrawn the line by depicting the prophet/president in an affectionate manner. I will return to this redrawing of lines in Chapter Four. Similarly, Stack also interviewed Robert Kirby, a humourist who writes for various LDS publications including *The Salt Lake Tribune*. Kirby “stays away from lampooning LDS temple ceremonies and general authority speeches, but most everything else is a fair target. He especially is amused by people who can’t tell the difference between making fun of God and making fun of yourself”.\(^{50}\)

Christians also discuss this distinction in very similar ways to Mormons, with a focus on how humour can build up or bring down one’s relationship with God and ways that these two kinds of humour can be distinguished. Charles Henderson, a Presbyterian minister, argues against the title of his article “Christian Humour, An Oxymoron?” by claiming that “Because humour is tied so closely with everything that is important in life; it has a religious

\(^{48}\) Workman, ‘How Many Mormons Does It Take to Screw in a Lightbulb’?  
\(^{50}\) Stack, ‘Mormons Can Be Funny, Just Ask Them’, 14.
A Lutheran blog discussion about humour in the pulpit demonstrates other believers supporting this religious dimension, of course within certain conditions. One commentator posted “There is a time for everything. There is a time to tell jokes, a time to have sex, a time to dance, a time to fly kites. Divine Liturgy just isn’t it”. Another Lutheran thinks “the difference lies between the ministerial and magisterial use of humour. The latter is self-serving, the former is a servant of the Word”. These two comments are referring to humour used by preachers to get credit and admiration for their jokes, as opposed to using humour as a tool for genuine spiritual purposes. For Henderson there are also other types of humour; easy, tawdry humour that “can be a vehicle for the nastiest human impulses”. The answer to such damaging humour and “one of the very first steps on the road to salvation” is learning to laugh at oneself because “Only when we are in touch with our own flaws can we truly open ourselves to the saving power of God”. In these comments there is an emphasis on learning to laugh at oneself, explicitly or implicitly linking this act to the Christian understanding of the role of humility in religious identity. Using humour as a weapon against others is frequently thought of as inappropriate, however using humour to deflate personal pride and express humility is a positive and endearing use of humour.

Some Christians are concerned about how to tell if laughter is appropriate for the Christian life. One Christian advice website answers the question “is joking a sin?” with the following:

The best way to know whether our joking is bordering on the sinful is to seek the Holy Spirit and ask for His conviction. He can make us sensitive to when a joke is appropriate and when it may not be… Occasional jokes and jesting, if they are appropriate, are probably for the most part innocent. But there are those who make jokes so often that they can hardly say a sentence without it containing a joke of some sort. This is hardly the most appropriate lifestyle for a Christian, however, as we are told to “live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (Titus 2:12). As with all “grey areas” in the Christian life, seeking God’s wisdom regarding our speech is the most profitable way to go (James 1:5).

53 Comment by wcwirla in Petersen, ‘Pulpit Humor’.
54 Henderson, ‘Christian Humor, An Oxymoron?’.
55 Henderson, ‘Christian Humor, An Oxymoron?’.
Of note here is the use of the term ‘appropriate’ multiple times, both in relation to the joke and to the kind of lifestyle that is desirable for a Christian. In order to get a more definite grasp on what is meant by appropriate, the believer is advised to pray for guidance about appropriate use of speech, and presumably God will give some form of affirmation about the humour choices each individual believer should make.

Since scholars cannot use this method of investigation to discover what is meant by ‘appropriate’, I provide one final example of a preacher giving explicit guidance about humour in sermons. Though it is specifically referring to the use of humour in the pulpit, it gives some clear instructions on what is and is not appropriate humour in general. John Henry Beukema, writing for the preaching branch of the non-denominational communications ministry Christianity Today, addresses the question of why serious preachers use humour.57 Included in his answer is what kinds of humour are appropriate, as well as what kinds are “unfit”, for use in preaching. Firstly, “levity is unsuitable” because it is “lighthearted to the point of being inappropriate”. Of course, this does not tell us where the point of becoming inappropriate is located. But Beukema continues more specifically:

Inappropriate humour has no place. Certain subjects must never be approached in a joking manner. Stories that make fun of a person’s weight, ethnicity, age, political views, or physical limitations are off limits. Sexual innuendos, foolishness, what Ephesians 5:4 calls “coarse jesting,” are unacceptable.58

This shows that one of the points in which joking reaches the stage of being inappropriate is when it makes fun of others or becomes sexual or coarse. Beukema goes on to explain that “Sacred things cannot be mentioned in any humorous context without great care”. Specifically he places a limit on certain sacred subjects, “The rite of baptism and the celebration of the Lord’s Table should almost always be avoided as topics of humour”. He is both suggesting that there should be no humour used in a sermon on this subject, but also, he applies this rule beyond that to a comedic context in general; “It is unlikely that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit should ever be invoked in a comedic context. We should not use humour that confirms stereotypes about God, treats him casually, or otherwise portrays him inaccurately”. Such a portrayal of God would be an instance of blasphemous humour, where

58 Beukema, ‘Why Serious Preachers Use Humor (Part 1)’.
God is in some way presented as anything less than almighty and perfect, that is, for someone like Beukema, inaccurately. Overall, what the preacher is striving for is “humour that is appropriate in topic, timing, and purpose”.

**Appropriate Humour in Field Research**

These attitudes towards humour were confirmed in the surveys that I conducted during my field research. The surveys were designed to evaluate the observations that I made from the analysis of popular discussions from Christians and Mormons such as those discussed above. They were also designed to test whether the conceptualization of humour as ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ was found in Christian and Mormon communities more generally and what this means to them in terms of their choices about humour consumption. Overall, my survey respondents believed that humour was a positive presence in their life and that it can mix with their religion so long as it is appropriate. Out of seventy two surveys, forty percent of respondents used the term “appropriate” or “inappropriate” to describe humour.

For example one respondent justified their tastes by stating “Religion is very important to me, the humour that I have is appropriate because of it” (15) and another explained theirs with “the factors I look for are how appropriate it is, and how much I laugh about it” (34). The need for boundaries is also clear in the responses, for example, “religion and humour make a fine pairing when the time, place and audience are appropriate” (3), while another states that “there are appropriate times for it [humour]” (71). Others explain in terms of what they do not enjoy, such as “When listening to it [humour] we look at if it is degrading or inappropriate” (62), or “vulgarity and things that are inappropriate on a morality level should not be included in humour” (48). Again, this gives a very general description of humour, without really detailing what that specifically means.

The survey sought to further uncover what Christians and Mormons mean when they use the terms “appropriate” or “inappropriate” in reference to their humour preferences. Confirming the discourse discussed above, respondents overall had a problem with humour that was inappropriate, and at times they offered the clarification that inappropriate humour is blasphemous, dirty or hostile. For example regarding blasphemy respondents replied that

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59 See Chapter One, p.21.
“Even the Presidents of the [LDS] church encourage wholesome humour, as long as it’s not blasphemous” (61), or “[humour and religion] can mix, as long as it is not putting down the religion” (56). Other examples show a preference for clean humour that is not hostile, “I think that clean jokes are more funny than dirty ones” (55) and “if it’s not clean it shouldn’t be used” (17), or “[humour should not include] jokes that make fun of anybody, regardless of who they are” (38) and “as long as it [humour] isn’t unkind” (57). Some respondents openly described all three factors as determining their relationship with humour, such as “you should not make fun of God Himself. I personally don’t think you should go out of your way to hurt someone’s feelings…I don’t like jokes about sex because I don’t find them funny and I don’t appreciate foul language” (70). These quotations demonstrate that my field research supported the conclusions that emerged from my analysis of popular religious media, and so I am confident in arguing that there is a specific language that Christians and Mormons use to talk about religious humour and that religious humour has features that are described by those communities themselves.

Conclusion

This survey of opinion demonstrates the diversity of ways that Christians and Mormons think about humour and its use. In addition to the understanding of appropriate humour in general (such as context, conditions, accepted signals and permission), this survey demonstrates a number of common themes specific to religious humour. I will use the term “appropriate” as the overarching way to describe the religious standard applied to humour, however, it is important to break this down into its components because each element must be dealt with separately. From the literature we can distinguish three main factors that determine the appropriateness of humour: appropriate humour is non-blasphemous, it is free from sexual humour and coarse language, and it is non-hostile. These three characteristics constitute the core of religious humour, and while other forms of secular humour can exhibit these characteristics, religious humour is generally identifiable by these traits. This chapter has considered some of the concerns that Christians and Mormons have about humour and its use, namely that humour can be the cause of offence to both individuals and to God, and analysed believers’ use of the term “appropriate” to describe their personal and communal standards for humour. It may seem an obvious point that appropriate humour is non-offensive because it is not blasphemous, rude or mean, so in order to move towards a deeper
understanding of the meaning that this holds in religious humour the three aspects that make up appropriate humour will need further analysis and hence the following three chapters will address each component separately.
Chapter Four
Appropriate Humour I: Blasphemy and Belief

Introduction

I’ve studied theology, and I’ve studied stand-up. And between the two, if I were looking for the presence of the Holy, I’d take stand-up any day.
- Reverend Susan Sparks ¹

God does not need the protection our humourless piety would afford.
- Lee Van Rensburg ²

Of all professions most suited to the task of theology, the comedian is perhaps not one that would be the first to mind. At the heart of this chapter lies two contradictions. The first is that while Christians and Mormons, by virtue of their social human nature, laugh and joke in the same multitude of ways that other groups and individuals regularly enjoy humour, their religious beliefs and practices do have a unique impact on the specific ways that humour is created, appreciated or rejected. I argued in Chapter Three that Christians and Mormons do not reject humour altogether but instead rely on measuring humour against their own standards of ‘appropriateness’. This chapter deals with the first part of this standard, that of keeping humour free from blasphemy and other theologically related offences. This relates to the second contradiction. Historically Christian institutions and cultures have downplayed or denounced the issue (problem?) of Christian laughter, leaving behind anxious and ambiguous assumptions that religion and humour ‘do not mix’. Yet, as I have begun to discuss in the previous chapters, there is plenty of religious humour, which directly, deliberately and delightedly associates the sacred with the funny. This indicates that religious people no longer need (if indeed they ever did) to ignore or deny the humorous element of their spiritual

lives, rather they may find ways of accommodating it. This chapter is concerned with the relationship between the sacred and the humorous and the ways in which Christian and Mormon humourists reconcile historical and theological blasphemy fears with the need to make and appreciate comedy about their religious beliefs.

I will argue that there are strategies used to offset the risk of committing blasphemy with the spiritual benefits of religious humour: religious framing, switching between serious and humorous modes, and ensuring that God is never the butt of the joke. This strategic balancing act will be demonstrated through an analysis of a collection of comedic examples selected on the basis that they contain explicit theological humour, which will be treated as a subcategory of religious humour and which is demarcated by its inclusion of jokes about God, Jesus and doctrine. The samples are taken from two Christian stand-up comedy series: Thou Shalt Laugh (2006 – 2011) and a recording of the Apostles of Comedy (2008) tour, and supported with other examples such as the LDS romantic comedy film The Singles 2nd Ward (2007). While I argue that religious humour is never truly blasphemous – it will be contended that it is actually faith promoting – it is, however, defined in part by its opposition to blasphemy, that is, it is an alternative to humour about religion that is often blasphemous and demonstrates that humour about God not only exists but is theologically sound and even theologically valuable. By considering humorous theology and theological humour it can be seen in detail how religious ideas (in this chapter specifically theological ideas) are used in religious humour and where and how boundaries are drawn and shifted around the sacred. Remembering the definition developed in Chapter One,3 I now turn to what makes religious humour potentially offensive, following on from the previous chapter’s discussion of what standards believers construct to evaluate humour in relation to its appropriateness or inappropriateness. These interpretations of appropriateness will be examined through an analysis of select examples of religious humour to demonstrate the mechanics of how religious comedians use humour to express religious belief whilst keeping the sacred safe from any potential blasphemy accrued through associating God with laughter.

3 Religious humour is humour that has a religious intention, or is in some way influenced (in either its creation or appreciation) by an individual’s religious beliefs. Religious humour is used in religious ways, that is, as an expression of one’s religious identity (for example using humour to express religious values or to identify oneself as a member of a specific religious group) or as part of religious practice (such as evangelism or religious education or entertainment). See Chapter One.
Humour and Blasphemy

For many humour theorists, most notably those interested in the philosophy of humour, the question of whether it is right or wrong to laugh at a given subject is a question of ethics and morality in relation to an external point of reference. For those who are religious the concern about whether one should find amusement in that given subject is also defined ethically and morally, only they use the sacred as the external point of reference. In other words, Christians and Mormons believe God is the one to set the ethical and moral standards for humour, and their interpretations of his instruction provide a template for the ways in which his followers behave in relation to humour and laughter. Of course, humour is not the only area in which believers rely on their understanding of God to provide a system or code by which subjective evaluations can be made. But humour requires a particularly cloudy and unstable negotiation of those standards believed to be God-given. Humour is in the habit of crossing boundaries and confounding categories, and religious humour is one of the clearer cases in which boundaries and categories are confounded, especially when considering the question: if believers negotiate their understanding of what is and is not funny by interpreting instructions from God as interpreted by his representatives, what happens when God himself is involved in the joke? Is this not the ultimate in dismantling the distinction between the sacred and the profane? The meaningful and the trivial? The pious and the blasphemous? Is involving God in our laughter an insult to his majesty?

According to Leviticus 24:16 he that “blasphemeth the name of the Lord” shall surely be put to death “and all the congregation shall certainly stone him”. This biblical injunction was translated in Christian countries into a socio-legal crime subject to all the weight of the state judicial system, although punishments such as boring through the tongue or a month’s imprisonment with only bread and water are no longer enforced, and in many places have been replaced or removed altogether. Previously in Christian societies the danger of the blasphemous act lay in the perceived insult to God and the divine retribution that could be expected to rain down upon a community that housed the blasphemers, as well as the polluting consequences of hearing blasphemy for the believer. Historically the fact that such utterances offended God or Christ was enough evidence for their criminality, but this is no

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longer a primary focus of blasphemy laws. Rather the strongest defence for retaining blasphemy laws remains the protection of a believer’s religious feelings. This becomes especially pertinent in modern multicultural societies where pluralism is celebrated and tolerance encouraged.

The definition of blasphemy appears to be straightforward, but it is of course a subject of much complexity. Peter Jones explains it as “a contemptuous or irreverent utterance concerning the Deity”. David Nash suggests it is “the attacking, wounding and damaging of religious belief” that has returned to become “an extremely combustible part of modern life”. It has become combustible because, to take David Lawton’s argument, “blasphemy stands for whatever a society most abhors and has the power to prosecute”. He goes on to claim “it is a form of religious vituperation against those who have transgressed the timeless truths that a society cherishes. That is why its nature, along with the timeless truths, changes over time”. Distilling these remarks reveals several important points about blasphemy. Firstly, obviously (but necessarily), it involves the religious. Nash notes that it is religious belief that is the target, although it is worth noting that for those who believe God to be real and interventionist, it is possible that he personally suffers from blasphemous insults. Secondly, it involves some kind of active hostility or aggression, usually a spoken or written transgression, although the violence of the act can differ in degree as well as form. This leads to the third point, blasphemy is relative and the level of offence changes as the societal norms change. Fourthly a society (specifically a religious society) has some kind of power to prosecute or regulate blasphemy. This may mean prosecute in the legal sense but more relevant for my purposes is the punishment enacted socially by religious institutions and communities. The ultimate example in the context of this study is an audience refusing to laugh at a joke that they have found blasphemous, hence the joker becomes the target of a religious community’s scorn. As I will discuss further, religious comedians are very wary of the power of audiences to dispense social and commercial punishment by refusing to laugh.

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12 Lawton, Blasphemy, 3.
13 Chapters Five and Six will consider humour that can be offensive to Christians and Mormons that is not necessarily of a religious nature and so not actually blasphemous, even though it is their religious beliefs that inform the response to ‘dirty’ or ‘hostile’ humour.
So while many studies of blasphemy focus on a broad historical and legal survey of blasphemy, it is the capacity of a religious community to self-regulate blasphemy that should be kept in mind here because it is the concern over social repercussions from an audience affronted by a joke that will help to shape the way humourists approach their material.

What is missing from this sketch of blasphemy is the relationship between humour and blasphemy. Existing definitions of blasphemous humour (much like religious humour) are somewhat underdeveloped. For example, Kevin J. Murtagh suggests blasphemous humour is “some sort of presentation [such as a joke, skit or television episode] that is intended to be amusing or funny, in which something deemed sacred is portrayed in a disrespectful or irreverent manner”. The main problem with this definition is that it separates the amusement from the disrespect to the sacred, when the deeper problem with blasphemous humour (from the perspective of believers) is that the humour arises out of this insult to God, in other words, insulting God is in itself funny in addition to any humour that arises out of the joke technique. Murtagh’s definition also gives no indication of what is meant by disrespectful or irreverent. He is writing specifically about the television series South Park (1997-), which is made by non-religious humourists and has a reputation for being deliberately inflammatory and extreme with its satire and levels of profanity. While it may seem that blasphemy is really only different in degree, the kind of blasphemous humour that Murtagh is discussing is exceptionally controversial. For example, the episode where a statue of the Virgin Mary sprays menstrual blood all over the Pope, or when the Mole in South Park: The Movie calls God names like “cock-sucking asshole”. Murtagh distinguishes between humour that simply trades on religious stereotypes (such as one character’s father being stingy because he is Jewish) and blasphemous humour which intends some disrespect for the sacred. I agree with this part of his understanding, since religious stereotypes are problematic for religious humour but not necessarily blasphemous. The blasphemous humour found in South Park is of a different kind to that which those who make and enjoy religious humour fear. Such tremendous obscenity would very rarely, if ever, be found in religious humour.

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The issue for religious humour is far more nuanced than that demonstrated by *South Park*. Identifying blasphemy in *South Park* is relatively easy since its writers make it explicit and are themselves not concerned with any insult to a god they do not believe in. However, for religious humour, both producers and consumers are a very diverse group or groups with an overarching goal of creating humour that is of benefit to their religion, or is at least in keeping with their lives as practicing Christians. What is needed is an adapted understanding of blasphemous humour. In secular entertainment God may be readily insulted with obscenities and the consequences of blasphemy are less severe so I will leave Murtagh’s definition to suffice in those circumstances. But religious humourists are concerned with a ‘correct’ depiction of God and so for my purposes I will suggest that in a monotheistic context blasphemous humour is *humour that does not give God his full due by suggesting that he is anything less than almighty and perfect*.

This definition is deliberately broad, but it attempts to capture the point that in religious humour blasphemy operates on a more detailed, nuanced and delicate balance with belief. The important thing to note is that this definition allows for instances of humour that may be about God and are produced by religious comedians but may still cause offence to other believers because the joke may have failed (in their eyes) to adequately reflect God’s perfection. This helps with examples that are more complicated than a direct insult to God (for example a cartoon that depicts God laundering black and white socks with the caption “and God separated the light from the dark” compared to George Carlin’s joke that begins with “God is an invisible man in the sky”). Additionally, if blasphemous humour is inadequate in its depiction of God, then it can be suggested that non-blasphemous humour has, as one of its primary characteristics, the depiction and in many cases the active promotion of God as almighty and perfect; and I will use an inversion of the above definition of blasphemous humour to define non-blasphemous humour: *humour that gives God his full due by representing him as almighty and perfect*. While it may appear that the two are merely sides of the same coin, it is worth making the distinction because it helps form a fundamental part of my argument that religious humour both avoids blasphemy and promotes belief. It may seem obvious, but religious humour is more than not saying offensive jokes about God;

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16 For example comedians such as George Carlin or Bill Maher who are renowned for their ridicule of God and religion. See for example George Carlin, *You Are All Diseased* (Dir. Rocco Urbisci, HBO, 1999) and Maher’s film *Religulous* (Lions Gate Entertainment, 2008).
it uses blasphemy management strategies to circumvent any potential religious offence in combination with some degree of endorsement of faith, ranging from a personal positivity towards religion through to an active and aggressive evangelism.

One final example will be helpful in beginning to exemplify how denying God his full due gives believers’ discomfort with certain blasphemous humour, and importantly how they choose to respond to such a challenge. Again, South Park provides an exceptionally useful illustration, in particular reactions to the episode “All About Mormons”.18 In 2003 an episode of South Park used the story of Joseph Smith and the establishment of the LDS church as fodder for its satire. The episode focuses on the story of the first vision and the translation of the golden plates into The Book of Mormon. It is a musical episode that emphasises the more implausible elements of the story, including a “chorus” in which the characters sing that Joseph Smith and his followers were “dum, dum dum”. In response to this episode an anonymous, presumably LDS, author created the website All About the Mormons.19 The website asks the question “In an attempt to make viewers laugh, how accurate is the South Park Mormon episode about Joseph Smith?”20 It then proceeds to address each depiction presented in the episode and explain whether the information or representation included was “true” or “false”, followed by a paragraph of explanation of the truth about the church, usually containing a link to a church page reference for further ‘accurate’ information. For example the episode showed that “Mormons have big families”, which the website deems to be “true” because “family is a central part of the Mormon faith”. As the episode gets progressively more theological, so the website gets increasingly upset at the inaccuracies

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20 ‘All About the Mormons’.
represented. Hence *South Park*’s explanation that “Joseph Smith was praying to “please keep our bellies full of yum-yums and luscious goodies” when the Angel Moroni appeared is deemed “FALSE”. Even though the author recognises the joke in the quote, it is not as important as the spiritual implications: “I don’t think anybody actually expected this is what it was, but the REAL context of the story is important!” Finally, when the episode deals with matters not just sacred but controversial, such as the translation of the golden plates, the author accuses *South Park* of “gross inaccuracy” in what is “unfortunately a poor attempt to discredit Joseph Smith and his story”.  

This website illustrates some important points that play a key role in the overall nature of this study. The author does not have a problem with *South Park* using Mormonism in general, rather the issue is its accuracy and its appropriateness. For this Mormon author, the humour is acceptable only when it does not jeopardise an understanding of the truth of the church – that is, it does not risk depicting God in a manner that does not give him his full due – and since this episode is so full of perceived inaccuracies this interferes with the author’s appreciation of the humour. It demonstrates how unhappy some Mormons were at the portrayal of their religious beliefs in this episode, but more importantly it shows how believers actively engage in strategies that help to reduce the effects of the offence and to re-frame the humour in a manner that is faith-promoting. The most interesting thing about this particular response is that instead of responding with aggression, in true Mormon style they have turned this incident into a polite proselytising exercise that converts an offence into an opportunity to explain the gospel. The website contains numerous links to church information and in general has a tone that, while somewhat wounded, still sees this *South Park* episode as an example of secular interest in the church.

**Strategies of Blasphemy Management: Absence**

*All About The Mormons* shows that believers can choose to interpret humour in a variety of ways that result in a reduction of the potential for blasphemy related insult. Similar strategies can be employed towards humour made by those who are members of the religious community. Following on from the above discussions of religious anxiety over mixing the

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21 ‘All About the Mormons’,
sacred with the comic, it would seem that the most obvious and straightforward way of avoiding an accidental slip into blasphemy is to avoid placing God or the sacred in humorous contexts altogether. This is a common strategy employed by religious comedians who do not feel that God is an appropriate subject at all for humour, as LDS comic Todd Johnson said about the difficulty of deciding what is and is not offensive “you can talk about this, but you can’t talk about that, so it’s like, you know what, let’s just not talk about it at all!”.

Some comedians simply do not want to make their religion a primary focus of their humour or of their public persona. For example Spencer King, a Utahn stand-up comedian who identifies as an active member of the LDS church, was very clear about wishing to be known as a funny comedian who happens to be Mormon rather than a ‘Mormon comedian’ who happens to be funny. This is reflected in his stand-up comedy which contains only the smallest amount of religious material, despite his choice of the album title *Pleasantly Irreverent* (2009). Similarly, LDS comedian Mike Anderson explained that he tries to avoid religious humour in his act because it pigeon-holes a performer and divides a crowd. It would be a misrepresentation of religious humour in general to suggest that all the humour focuses on religious subjects (however broadly defined); in practice the proportion of humour that contains religious content varies greatly between individual comedians and comic formats, and religion (in particular God and the sacred) is a minority topic when compared to the number of jokes about family, work, popular culture, observational humour and other secular or everyday topics. Todd Johnson explained that this was because “there’s a lot more to comedy - a lot more to life [than inappropriate topics], because there’s a lot of dumb, stupid stuff that happens, at least in my life”.

While the absence of religious references in the joke content does not always indicate a non-religious piece of humour, for this chapter I include it as a strategy because it is done intentionally and frequently and reveals something more about the role of God in humour and in religious life. It is an important means of keeping the sacred free of any humorous taint, but it is not the only means. It is included here only briefly because I am primarily interested

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23 Todd Johnson and Mike Anderson, Interview, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (11 June 2010).
24 I encountered several of these comedians in my field work, for example John Moyer, Spencer King, Todd Johnson and Mike Anderson.
25 Spencer King, Interview, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (20 June 2010).
27 Johnson and Anderson, Interview (2010).
28 Johnson and Anderson, Interview (2010).
in cases where this strategy is not employed and God or other holy subjects are brought out onto the comic stage; and although for the most part they constitute a quantitatively smaller component of humour made by religious people, for my purposes such instances are more significant and helpful for illustrating the interaction between religion and humour and hence facilitating its analysis. This can be illustrated further through an example that relates to one of the main case studies of this chapter, the Christian stand-up comedy series Thou Shalt Laugh (TSL). The producer of the five part series, Jonathan Bock, claimed in an interview that “Mostly TSL doesn’t have a ton of religious content … What separates TSL from other comedy is that it’s clean and isn’t afraid to say words like Church and Prayer and Bible”. The message that is crucial to take from his comment is that by making Thou Shalt Laugh Christian in theme, comedians are free, but in no way obliged, to mention subjects that are religious. The reasons why they would want to do this are many and varied, but an important reason, and one that is clearly audible in Bock’s tone, is that Christians want to be able to perform and consume comedy that includes the religious elements of their daily lives in an environment that assumes a Christian base or ‘worldview’ but is not necessarily primarily focused on religion.

It is a complex task to balance not having “a ton of religious content” with including “Church and Prayer and Bible”. This is because it takes two of the more conflicting interpretations of humour and puts them in direct competition: firstly that humour is trivial and so diminishes or profanes its subject, and secondly that humour is capable of bestowing powerful and edifying value onto its subject. So on the one hand it is best to avoid religious content because of humour’s profaning powers, but on the other hand including religious content allows believers to enjoy and value religion’s role in their lives. Reconciliation of such a contradiction is achieved by deliberate framing of the religious content (and conversely a religious framing of the humorous content) so it can be deemed appropriate. The previous chapter discussed four factors that primarily influence whether or not a joke is interpreted successfully as appropriately humorous: the circumstances under which it is told, the conditional nature of the joke, the signals that indicate humour is occurring and whether there is permission to joke on that subject or in that context. The four factors identified constitute the humorous framing of a joke or comedic utterance or situation, but importantly they also

29 Jonathan Bock, Interview, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (17 October 2011).
constitute the religious framing, that is whether or not the joke is interpreted as appropriately religious and/or non-blasphemous.

**Strategies of Blasphemy Management: Framing**

Framing, in Goffman’s sense, is a way of organizing or providing an interpretive structure to one’s experience and induces us to filter our perceptions of the world in particular ways.31 The most pertinent example here is the social or rhetorical structure that allows the interpretation of an experience as funny; what is most commonly called in humour theory the ‘play frame’.32 In religious humour, this play frame is used in conjunction with what I will call the ‘religious frame’ so that the joke (or comment or situation) can be read through both frames simultaneously, that is, it becomes both funny and religious. This effect should not be confused with Victor Raskin’s theory of script opposition in that I am not focusing on the two meanings as incongruous.33 In fact it is the very opposite. In religious humour, the religious frame is in part what allows the play frame to be fully enjoyed because in a joke with religious content the religious frame mitigates the potential blasphemy of the play frame. What this means in effect is that any piece of humour that contains potential blasphemous humour (that is, a joke about God or Jesus or the Bible and so on) is ‘made safe’ by its religious context so that the audience can be assured of the humourist’s faith and hence also assume that their intentions are not blasphemous. It also creates a bond between faithful humourist and faithful audience in which it becomes acceptable to say things about God that would be otherwise unacceptable from outsiders.34

This can have the consequence of reducing the pressure to talk about God in a completely serious way. Because the religious framing of the situation provides the background information required to correctly interpret the joke it promotes a religiously appropriate perspective (that is a Christian worldview). The most obvious example of a religious frame

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meeting a humorous frame would be a pastor or bishop making a Jesus joke during a sermon where it is a safe assumption that everyone present is agreed in their worldview. In situations where the humorous frame plays an equal or greater role than the religious frame (such as in all the case studies drawn on for this dissertation in which their primary purpose is to be funny), comedy about the sacred is made funny through its humorous context but made appropriate through its religious context, although of course, a joke may also be funny because of its religious context if it is dependent on religious conditions or content in order for the audience to get the joke. Importantly, the religious framing makes the humour not only non-blasphemous but also helps to accommodate the ‘everydayness’ of religious belief and practice in the lives of believers, so that jokes that are either about specific religious practices or use them as a context for a joke, do not seem out of place or awkward, hence humorously laboured. It allows for humour based in familiar, daily life. Hence in religious humour we find mentions of Church, prayer, testimony, “god bless you” and other habitually religious practices, as well as, more tangentially, subjects such as family values and morality.

This is exemplified in the stand-up series Thou Shalt Laugh. This a comedy tour that is taped in front of a live audience in various locations across America, and there have been five DVDs released between 2006 and 2011. According to its producer, Jonathan Bock, there is no particular religious point of view for the series.\textsuperscript{35} Like many forms of Christian media, Thou Shalt Laugh presents a largely non-denominational evangelical worldview, although this of course will differ from comedian to comedian.\textsuperscript{36} Bock suggests “the explicitly religious title was to give the customer a sense that this product was slightly different than other comedy DVDs”.\textsuperscript{37} This is a somewhat understated way of saying that there is a religious dimension to the show that is both immediately explicit – the customer can hardly miss the biblical inspiration behind the title and being told by the first series’ DVD cover that if you were “looking for funny? Your prayers have been answered” – and will be informing the general perspective of the comedy. Despite Bock’s goal to make Christian comedy “mainstream”, specifically using such religious imagery will attract an audience that identifies with those interests.

\textsuperscript{35} Bock, Interview (2011).
\textsuperscript{37} Bock, Interview (2011).
Strategies of Blasphemy Management: Mode Switching

The second method used to ensure that religious humour is non-blasphemous is to switch between the serious mode and the humorous mode. This may seem obvious, but it can be very difficult to do successfully in a comic context as it relies heavily on the nuances of comic signals (such as an irony, tone, body language) and recognising the point at which the mode needs to change from one mode to the other and back again. Perhaps the most important and most precarious skill is achieving the switch without compromising the overall entertainment value of the comedy, nor trivializing the power of the religious message contained therein. Jennifer Coates argues that:

all of us, as competent speakers, can switch talk from serious to playful modes. Where talk occurs in a formal context, interactants may switch to a play frame from time to time to defuse tension or to provide light relief from a boring agenda, for example. But in informal contexts where interactants know each other well, talk may switch repeatedly between serious and non-serious frames, and conversational participants will collaborate with each other to bring about the switches. The unpredictability of this kind of talk is part of what makes it fun for participants – anyone can trigger a switch at any time.38

While Coates focuses her study on informal conversations, I quote her here because it is important to recognise that mode switching is a central part of human interaction and that there is a socially inbuilt ability amongst individuals to keep up with conversational changes from something serious to something humorous and vice versa, most notably without obvious and explicit markers. In general people are not required to state “I am now being serious” or “I am now not serious” before their communication, and to do so would be socially strange. This principle can be expanded and applied to written or rehearsed texts as well as informal communication. Identifying when the switch has occurred is crucial to correctly interpreting the comedy and its message, and especially in our context, in recognising that the humour is not blasphemous because it has identified where the boundary is and so has switched to the serious mode to avoid laughing at God (or the appearance of laughing at God) in that instance.

The success of mode switching varies greatly, and affects the general tone of the comedy. For example when a mode switch is done in a forced manner it makes both the comedy and the religious sentiment seem forced and hence impacts on the overall enjoyment of the text or performance. I discuss Christian sitcom Pastor Greg as an example of this type in Chapter Six. However, when it is done more artfully, with a great deal of fine tuning and nuance, the fluid nature of mode switching facilitates the appreciation of both humorous and serious messages. This is perhaps because this form of communication more closely matches the fluid nature of humour, and indeed human interaction in general. This section will consider the Christian comic text: Apostles of Comedy (2008), a stand-up comedy tour. I will examine the effect that moving from the humorous mode to the serious mode and back again has on the theological content.

Mode switching in Apostles of Comedy

Apostles of Comedy is a group of independently successful Christian stand-up comedians who perform together as a live tour and have recorded the tour and made it available on DVD as Apostles of Comedy: The Movie. It is the 2008 recording that I am considering here. The group features Jeff Allen, Brad Stine, Anthony Griffith and Ron Pearson. The film is essentially a collection of scenes from each comedian’s stand-up routine, in no particular order. Additionally, the scenes of the comedy are interspersed with interviews with the comedians both individually and as a group, as well as with members of their families. Apostles of Comedy is an example of mode switching in its most clear-cut form. The humorous is segregated from the serious at the most basic level in that each scene becomes a discrete unit with either a humorous or serious message. For the most part jokes are kept on the stage in front of an audience while the personal religious thoughts and feelings of the performers (conversations that ultimately make up a form of testimony) are filmed in private, mostly backstage or at home with their families. On stage, we have a dominant humorous frame; we see each comedian smiling, laughing and open and relaxed in body language, interacting with a large audience which is also only ever shown when they are laughing or

41 Mitchell Galin and Lenny Sisselman, Apostles of Comedy: The Movie (First Look Studios, 2008).
applauding. In most of the other scenes, whether backstage or at home, the religious frame is dominant, the comedians are frequently shown praying or discussing God and his role in their comedy and their lives.

Throughout *Apostles of Comedy* there is a sense that the humorous and the religious are compatible, but subject to an ultimate hierarchy: there is always a point at which the joking must cease, or more accurately, be suspended, so that the more important spiritual message can be clearly and uncompromisingly communicated. The opening scenes set up this dynamic by effectively familiarising the audience with mode switching on a small scale. The film opens with the four comedians bowed in a prayer circle. Anthony Griffith prays that God will enable them to “deliver this message of laughter”. Swiftly the scene changes to show Griffith on stage joking that “My mama used to stress that laughter is the best medicine. Whenever she would whip me and I was crying she would laugh it off”. Once again the shot cuts back to the prayer circle, where Ron Pearson prays that they “be the best they can be”, before cutting to Pearson on stage. This process is repeated for each of the four. Jeff Allen prays for the Lord to “open our hearts and our minds and let the light of grace emit from each and every one of us”, a comment that is especially distinct in tone from his joke in the scene immediately afterward: “I have been a Christian for eleven years and I have figured out that there are places that I have amnesia when it comes to being a Christian. One is the golf course and the other is the airport. If Mother Teresa was playing golf she’d be cussing like a sailor, that’s all I know”. This has the effect of creating two spaces. The first is a serious space in which the group will be communicating serious religious messages (specifically in this example that prayer is a real and positive way to prepare for important things and that it will have a serious and direct impact on the lives of those who pray), the second is a space in which a humorous interpretation of religious content is dominant. Whilst the comedic or religious framing has already been established at the outset, that framing must also be constantly reiterated due to the ease with which human communication slips between modes.

The distinction between the humorous and the serious modes in *Apostles of Comedy* becomes increasingly pronounced as the film moves towards addressing issues of weightier concern. There are two pairs of scenes that most explicitly exemplify mode switching. The first is Jeff Allen joking about his wife followed by his discussion of how he dealt with her cancer diagnosis. The second is Anthony Griffith telling the others about the death of his young daughter followed by him on stage joking about the assumptions people make about his
height. Allen jokes that “people ask us all the time, how do you keep the romance going in your marriage? My wife and I, we try to be intimate, [but] we just remember how much time and energy it takes and rather watch Law and Order”. Much of Allen’s comedy revolves around his relationship with his wife, mostly concentrating on stereotypically gendered exaggerations of her bossy and domineering nature; for example he claims in Apostles of Comedy that “the first thing she did was take my spine away from me. She keeps it in her purse and gives it back to me every time she needs me to do something manly.” Allen’s personal tagline is “happy wife, happy life”. Many of Allen’s comments about his wife have the potential to be interpreted as being made at her expense, however, the mode switching in this situation actually converts the story into a redemptive tale of struggle with sin. Allen tells his fellow Christian comedians (and by extension the audience) about his realisation that his response to his wife’s diagnosis was selfish and concerned only with the inconvenience it would cause him and his career. He compares himself to Job, “who are you little man, to question my ways?”, and discusses how God (with the support of his pastor) revealed to him his own heart and re-oriented him towards her recovery. Although it is likely that the audience is already prepared to take Allen’s jokes about his wife as harmless entertainment, switching to a scene in which his relationship to his wife is juxtaposed to his relationship with God allows his jokes to be taken even more humorously because his good Christian character has been established in all seriousness.

In Anthony Griffith’s case, the inclusion of a discussion about the death of his three year old daughter in between two scenes of stage comedy looks more like a theological exposition, since there are no jokes about his daughter, or about daughters in general, nor is there any humour within the scene, and the jokes before and after do not relate to the subject at all. Moreover, Griffith’s conversation with the other comedians turns to a discussion of how he sees God’s role in this event and his understanding of God’s plan for his life. This is a total mode switch, in which the humorous and the serious are clearly demarcated. As with Allen’s


43 Allen’s comedy is unashamedly sexist, and though it is beyond the discussion here, it is worth noting that his interpretations of his wife’s actions and personality are for the most part exaggerated forms of gender stereotyping found in both religious humour and mainstream humour. Joanne R. Gilbert, Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender and Cultural Critique (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne University Press, 2004).
scene, the obvious indicators are the film techniques that show us that the mood has distinctly changed – slow, moving piano music is introduced while the speakers are soft and unhurried in their delivery, a great contrast to the pacey, upbeat dynamic of stand-up on stage. The camera closes in on concerned faces, there are no smiles, rather Allen and Griffith at times tear up, at one point Griffith is barely able to finish his sentence.

These are more than just emotional, dramatic scenes. They have switched into theological treatises. There is nothing funny about the untimely death of a child, but additionally Griffith’s discussion of the death acts as an indisputable switch to the serious mode, since anything connected with the death of child is most likely associated with seriousness and gravity. I would suggest that in addition to invoking sympathy in the audience, this scene has been included to act as a vehicle for the theological lessons Griffith has learned from the experience; in particular the need to trust in God, to accept that he is the author of life and death, and that there will be a future in Heaven. Griffith explains “I look at life as if it’s a great novel that you’re reading … Now the author of the book is God… And this is the thing, you already know there’s a sequel”. Griffith has elsewhere discussed the experience of losing his child, most notably in his appearance on the secular storytelling podcast The Moth. The story he tells here is also extraordinarily moving and emotional. He also emphasises a distinction and disconnect between the world of comedy and humour and the truth and pain of suffering and death, for example he describes having to hide his grief and still be able to tell funny jokes in order to be a successful comic on The Tonight Show. However, Griffith does not make any mention of his relationship with God or his faith. When compared, The Moth and the Apostles of Comedy versions of this story both share an understanding of the separation between the humorous and the serious. However, Apostles of Comedy allows and encourages Griffith to explain his religious interpretations of this tragic event in the serious religious space created by the mode switching.

Strategies of Blasphemy Management: Butt of the Joke

Whilst the above two strategies ensure that God is given his full due by ensuring that serious religious messages can be understood as real and meaningful by clearly marking them as such, the third (and I suggest the most important) strategy focuses on the content of the humour, specifically in the way that the joke content positions all parties involved, especially that of the joker to the butt of the joke. The framing and the mode create an atmosphere in which the direction of the joke will be read in particular (pro-religious) ways, but one of the main ways that religious humourists manage to both create humour about the sacred and also give the sacred full reverence and devotion is to ensure we are never laughing directly at the sacred. In other words, the sacred is never the butt of a joke. In this way, even humour that at first appears to be about the sacred, and thus potentially blasphemous, upon close examination is often revealed as benign because the target of the humour is in actuality human rather than divine. Laughing at human fallibility is acceptable, even enjoyable, and jokes that feature the sacred expose this fallibility in comparison to God’s standards and hence affirm the superiority of God and encourage the humility of humanity. This rule applies not only to God but also to expressions of his divine will, that is, in doctrine and in institutions. The line may become harder to distinguish the closer the holy object is to human weakness, and often the more ‘mortal human’ content the more provocative the humour may become, but the sacred in the form of doctrine and church is still able to be blasphemed and is thus subject to similar cautious treatment.

There is a difference between laughing at something and laughing with or about it. This brings us to the crux of the argument, that essentially the humorous references to God are not a case of laughing at him. The butt of a joke is a social position that implies inferiority and invites ridicule. The butt is often (though not always) the object of varying degrees of mockery which devalues the butt and thence anything said by them.45 Thus by mocking God one also mocks the church which is the manifestation of his word and will. Positioning God as the target of humour plays into the superiority theory of laughter that explains laughter as arising from the perception of one’s own superiority over the butt.46 Mormons for example

46 See Chapter Two. Superiority theories have been critiqued and developed, and it is true that the superiority theory does not apply to all cases. However, its general sentiment is applicable in the case of the butt of jokes. For a useful overview see John Morreall, Taking Laughter Seriously (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1983).
are admonished to strengthen their brethren in their conversations, making tendentious humour unacceptable behaviour for believers in regard to fellow humans. Although such joking is ill-advised, it is still technically possible in a way that laughing at God is not. God is perfect. It is impossible to perceive oneself as superior to perfection, and thus laugh, unless the actions of God are judged according to our own expectations. When this occurs, the humour is in actuality caused by the realisation that “our conclusions are dramatically wrong”. This is one characteristic of religious humour, when a joke appears to be laughing at God, it is assumed that there is a human somehow responsible for either misinterpreting his word or falsely placing themselves above their humble station and so the mistake (that is, the butt) is always our fault, our shortcomings or our misplaced pride rather than any ridiculous fault in the sacred. Peter W. Jones sums up this attitude in his argument that “only if a man takes God with total seriousness can he begin to see how to laugh at the other lesser realities around him”.

The following section will examine Christian and Mormon examples that demonstrate this principle by including God and/or Jesus as a main feature in the joke without being the butt. I include more jokes from Apostles of Comedy and Thou Shalt Laugh, and to provide a LDS example I will look at three scenes from the film The Singles 2nd Ward. Jokes about God and Jesus are not always approached in the same way. Jokes about God often focus on his interventionist powers as creator and decision-maker and his omniscience and beneficence, while Jesus jokes are more grounded in what is understood as the historical reality of his life as interpreted from scripture. Both approaches always position the human or profane element as below the sacred element, often but not always as the butt. The following examples are jokes that include God or Jesus as an important element in the humour, and I will offer an analysis of their religious content in terms of how each avoids crossing not only their own boundaries but those of their audience while simultaneously affirming a Christian worldview.


God Jokes

Beginning with a very clear example, Thor Ramsey tells the following joke in *Thou Shalt Laugh 3* (2008) about people falling to their death while urinating into the Grand Canyon: “If you’re going to treat one of God’s seven wonders of the world like a toilet, he’s gonna flush you”.

In terms of the joke technique, the most obvious thing is that the humour is in the scatological play on words. However, as an example of religious humour the more notable aspect is that Ramsey acknowledges God as both the creator and master of the natural world (the double meaning in “God’s” wonder is that the Grand Canyon was both made by and belongs to God) and the interventionist, powerful being that will dole out judgment and punishment for transgression (“He’s gonna flush you”). Clearly here it is the people who are doing the urinating that are the butt of the joke, although God’s superiority is further emphasised in Ramsey’s choice of words. The joke can be rephrased “if you’re going to treat one of the seven wonders of the world as a toilet, you’re gonna get flushed”, and it is no longer a religious joke. The people who urinate into the Grand Canyon are still the butt of this joke, but the message becomes one of disapproval of the specific act rather than the insult to God committed by those who urinate on ‘His’ creation. Here the urinators are positioned in relation to God, and ultimately are the subject of his scorn, and hence, the scorn of the audience. This adds another dimension to the joke that is appreciated by a like-minded audience, and is really the crux of what makes this joke religious. The joke’s humorous and religious framing and content allow not only for the wordplay, but also for the affirmation of God’s power, authority and discernment.

Jeff Allen’s comedy revolves around his family, and he frequently situates his family in relation to God. The following two jokes illustrate how he uses his family to express his relationship to God by positioning himself and his wife or children as the butt of the joke in comparison to God’s authority. In *Apostles of Comedy* Allen tells his audience that:

> My wife and I are a praying couple. We believe in prayer, we believe in a creator that answers prayer. So when we had children we prayed, we prayed for patience, tolerance, love and understanding. God answered those prayers with not one, but two, ADHD children. So watch what you pray for – the big guy’s got a sense of humour.

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52 Truett Hancock, *Thou Shalt Laugh 3* (Roserock Films, 2008).
In *Thou Shalt Laugh* he states:

I believe teenagers are God’s revenge on mankind. It’s as if God himself looked down and said “hey, let’s see how they like it to create someone in their own image who denies their existence”.

These two narrative style jokes again demonstrate an acceptance of God as the ultimate decision maker, and even a celebration of his choices in this role. Allen is not angry or resentful that God has given him two children with behavioural problems and he appreciates that humans are the difficult adolescents in God’s family. The power of the first joke lies in its use of appropriate incongruity in the sense that since the Allens did not ask God for children with ADHD, and prayers for virtues are assumed to be answered positively, God’s answer is incongruous, yet raising children with the condition will give the parents all the characteristics they have prayed for and hence his answer to the prayer is appropriate. Built into this is a lesson on expecting God to answer a request on our terms. The joke in no way undermines the very real (to Allen and presumably his audience) belief that prayer is effective and God hears and responds to it. That is exactly what he has done in this instance. The butt of the joke is Allen and his wife, because they thought they could predict or influence how God would act, and hence the specific butt of the joke is their pride, which God had then rebuked with a twist. The joke has the additional result of affirming God’s sense of humour, hence promoting humour in general, and finally demonstrating that humour can be used as a tool for deflating pride or reprimanding other such vices.

The second joke is a rebuke on people more generally through the metaphor of the teenager, a common trope throughout Allen’s comedy. The joke plays on the stereotype of the difficult teenager that ignores or disobeys their parent coupled with the play on the knowledge of the biblical notion that God created humanity in his own image. Here Allen imagines that God sees humans – specifically non-believers or those who have turned from God, “denying his existence” – as difficult teenagers, and the joke acts as a mirror that reflects back at the audience (and perhaps more deliberately broader society in general) their own behaviour towards God by drawing the parallel with insolent teenagers. Allen hopes to make the

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audience laugh, but there is an additional satirical element here that is socially corrective within the Christian framework. Allen is poking fun at those who display the bratty behaviour of an adolescent towards God. If we take the religious framing of *Thou Shalt Laugh* as indication that most if not all the audience do not in fact ignore God’s existence, the butt of the joke shifts again, this time to those outside the group, that is non-believers, possibly creating a sense of superiority over those who are seen as these bratty adolescents. This joke empowers God through positioning him as the active agent, the one with the sense of humour that is playing a joke on his poor mortal children. The butt of this joke is both teenagers and those who despite being adults still ignore their heavenly parent.

In *Thou Shalt Laugh 2* (2007) Taylor Mason, a talented ventriloquist, performs a bit in which he creates an entire fictional telephone conversation where he provides the voice for both Jesus and God as well as Satan. The following is a small portion of a sizable joke that shows an imagined telephone conversation with God. It follows on from Mason claiming to have received a text message asking him to “call God”. After speaking to St Peter, Mason gets through to Jesus (“God’s son, my Saviour”) and asks him to connect him to God. Mason and God (that is, Mason performing the voice of God) have the following fictionalised exchange:

MASON: Okay. We’re on hold one last time. The next person we’ll talk to will be God. I know this – I wrote the bit. He always comes on right now.
GOD: [answers phone] Yeah?
MASON: Hi, I’m trying to get a hold of God.
GOD: Yep. Big G, little od. This is God.
MASON: Oh hi. Um, you texted me.
GOD: Who are you?
MASON: My name is Taylor Mason
GOD: Who?
MASON: Uh, Taylor Mason
GOD: Let me Google you…you got a MySpace.
MASON: Yeah. I got a MySpace page. How about you? Do you have one?
GOD: The entire universe is my space. [wild applause from the audience]

This performance, like Allen’s teenager joke, is provocative in the way that the comedian is adopting the persona of God and speaking on his behalf. This is a potentially offensive move, since it could be considered somewhat presumptuous to assume, even fictionally, that a person can know how God feels and how he would speak.\(^58\) Mason is most provocative here in terms of presenting God as fairly ordinary; he has God using casual language and slang as well as showing him needing to use the internet search engine Google. It may be read as a slight on God’s omniscience that he would not know who Taylor Mason is and would need to look him up on the internet.\(^59\) However, I would suggest a more appropriate reading is that the joke is directed against the pervasiveness of Google and the internet in general, so that to have even God using search engines and mobile phones is more of a satirical comment on the modern age. The inclusion of God needing to ‘Google’ Mason is actually a setup for the real punch line at the end of this section, the line which makes this joke a particularly clear example of religious humour: “the entire universe is my space”. This joke relies on an understanding of the reference to the online social networking site MySpace, creating the pun that turns this joke into a confirmation of God’s universal majesty. Social networking sites have become an extraordinarily popular and powerful social force. Sites like MySpace revolve around individual ‘profile’ pages created by users and used to connect to other ‘friends’.\(^60\) Such sites can be used as a means of self-expression and even self-absorption.\(^61\) Therefore, when Mason asks if God has a MySpace page, the joke is on him not only because it betrays the modern obsession with social networking but also because the assumption that God would use a comparatively petty, small-scale, human-focused piece of technology is incongruous and laughable in the face of his ability to create and sustain the entire universe. The final point to note here is that when the punch line is delivered the audience erupts into


\(^{59}\) After all, according to the Bible God knows even the number of hairs on our head. Matthew 10:30, Luke 12:7, New International Version.


wild applause as well as the standard laughter response. I take this as a confirmation that the 
majority of the audience not only finds the joke amusing but that they agree with the 
sentiment of the joke, that is, the joke serves both humorous and the religious purpose of the 
joke as seen in the appreciation of the pun and the theological message that God is master of 
the universe contained within the joke.

It is not just Christian stand-up comedy that constructs jokes that safely navigate around God. 
I will turn now to a Mormon example. The Singles 2nd Ward 62 is the sequel to the first and 
most popular LDS romantic comedy The Singles Ward.63 It follows openly Mormon 
characters Dallen and Christine on their journey towards marriage. After dating for only two 
days the following exchange takes place:

DALLEN: “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. And praying. [He gets down on one knee and 
produces a ring] Christine McClintock, will you marry me?” 
CHRISTINE: Is that the answer you got? 
DALLEN: Yeah. 
CHRISTINE: See, I’ve been doing some praying too and spending time together has been 
great, but as far as anything more than that? I haven’t gotten the same answer. 
DALLEN: Who have you been praying to?

This scene is a delicate balance of the serious and humorous mode. The preceding montage of 
their two days of happiness is used to set up a self-conscious humour in Christine’s 
observation that their relationship “feels like one big montage”. Yet by convention when 
Dallen announces he has been praying and gets down on one knee this is generally a cue to 
serious discourse. This is what makes his later question all the more surprising, and the 
sudden jolt from one realm to the other adds to the incongruity.64 The elements that make his 
question incongruous and therefore amusing are reliant on the assumption that God actually 
answers prayers. Coupled with a normative LDS monotheism, his question thus becomes 
ridiculous because there is no one else she would be praying to. This is why, if read from a 
LDS perspective, Dallen’s question is not blasphemous but humorous. Reading it thus, it can 
be assumed that Dallen does not actually believe there to be other beings that Christine would

63 Kurt Hale, The Singles Ward (Halestorm Entertainment, 2002). 
64 Jerry Palmer, The Logic of the Absurd (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 43; John Morreall, ‘A New 
pray to, so we do not expect an answer such as “I prayed to Allah”. Yet he must somehow reconcile the disparity of the answer that he himself received from God with the conflicting answer that Christine has received. Again, from the LDS angle of God’s perfection, Heavenly Father would not make a mistake or give such contradictory advice. Therefore she must have received her information from somewhere else.

Working from this assumption then, the joke is not actually on God, but on Dallen for misattributing the inconsistency. In addition the incongruity is actually in the next instant resolved and God’s ultimate wisdom revealed when Christine announces that she was in fact only joking and that she would marry him after all. As it turns out God was consistent, thus dissolving any possibility for ambiguity, multiple interpretation and divine imperfection and in doing so transporting us back into the serious realm in which we can accept seriously the narrative of their approaching marriage.

In another scene, Christine and Dallen have a wedding planner, Tabitha, who is a stereotypical fast-paced, overpriced elitist who has been hired by Christine’s wealthy non-LDS mother. The couple take her to see the LDS temple where they will be married:

TABITHA: [to her assistant] Geoffrey, I’m going to need you to run inside and grab some colour swatches, measurements –
CHRISTINE: Excuse me Tabitha …
DALLEN: You can’t go in there.
CHRISTINE: Only members of the Church with a special recommendation get to go inside.
TABITHA: [scoffs] Pfff! Who’s the manager?
DALLEN: [Looking upwards] I don’t think you know him.

The humour here is a good example of Koestler’s bisociation of meaning in that there are multiple understandings of ‘manager’ existing simultaneously and the characters are reading the sacred (the temple) through the interpretive framework of the profane (business) and vice versa. At the same time, Dallen accepts the description of God as the manager of the temple, and in doing so he changes the meaning of the word, exposing her shallow understanding of the meaning of the temple. Thus it is not blasphemy in this instance for God to be thought of as the manager; God has not become the butt by being likened to a secular

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professional. Rather, the comedy lies in the incongruity of the metaphor that a supreme being could be merely a ‘manager’.

It is worth recalling Elliot Oring’s theory of laughter that stipulates that humour results from not only incongruity but appropriate incongruity, that is, there must actually be a (often initially hidden) relationship between categories that are ordinarily regarded as incongruous. In this case, there is surprise at the initial incongruity, but humour emerges as we realise that in many ways God could be thought of as a kind of manager, particularly in a LDS theological sense where Heavenly Father is thought of as an organiser of matter and energy. In using the term ‘manager’ literally, Tabitha in the end comes out as the butt of the joke in her ignorant assumption that the situation may be changed merely by consulting a manager, as well as in her failed attempt to bring God down to the level of the profane, something that is prevented by Dallen’s adoption and recontextualisation of the term. In addition, Dallen’s emphasis that “you don’t know him” creates a sense of superiority and group definition for Dallen and by extension the LDS viewers who feel included because they do know ‘Him’.

Jokes that deal directly with God as the key character or narrative in the joke are the most uncommon form of religious humour found in my body of examples. Those that can be found share a common emphasis on the message of humility, specifically our mortal humility in light of the awesome power and majesty of God. Jokes such as those made by Ramsey,

66 Oring, Engaging Humor, 1.
68 Other examples from Apostles of Comedy and the Thou Shalt Laugh series that emphasise Godly superiority/human humility include: Ron Pearson (Apostles of Comedy) performs a bit in which he elaborates with chalk board diagrams the questions he asked his high school science teachers about the origin of life, the punch line is that the answer they were all missing is spelled out in the diagram: “GOD”. Bone Hampton (Thou Shalt Laugh 5, 2011) says “I’m an all or none kind of guy. I’m either in a full out sprint or I’m lying on the floor. I don’t believe in jogging. Even the Lord says that he will spit you out if you are lukewarm, I said that’s right Lord, that’s why I’m mad at you about my looks! You should have made me look like Denzel Washington or Flava Flav. This in between is killing”; Michael Jr. (Thou Shalt Laugh 4) “If somebody asked me to explain God in one minute I wouldn’t be able to do it. This is what I would say – God is like a navigational device in your car. You ever been in a car with a navigational device in it, you punch in the coordinates of where you want to go and it says go ten blocks and turn left. Now you go ten blocks and turn right. It doesn’t abandon what you’re supposed to do, it recalculates what you’re supposed to do, to get to where you want to be, based on where you are. The only problem is if we keep making the wrong turns the road conditions are going to be different, it’s going to be rougher, and we’re running out of time. So that would be my break down, and then I would just leave because I got nothing clever after that”. In addition to these two specific comedy tours examples include: Robert G. Lee “I have irrefutable proof that God exists: He’s knows I’m an idiot but He still loves me. Case closed” as well as “I don’t think God will send me to hell for that [joke]. I think he’s just going to put me out in the hall”, as in a wise teacher disciplining a
Allen and Mason, and in films such as *The Singles 2nd Ward* poke fun at human pride and fallibility rather than at God himself, we can see that it is not God’s rules, choices or actions that are funny, rather it is humans’ misinterpretation or ignorance that becomes the butt of the joke.

**Jesus Jokes**

This emphasis on humility is also a core thread in jokes about Jesus. Jesus is given a similar level of reverence as God the Father in much Christian comedy in that he is also never the butt of the joke. However, the jokes tend towards a more historical narrative style that uses imaginative humorous expansions and exaggerations of biblical accounts of Jesus. More occasionally, the joke is based on fictionalised interactions between Jesus and our world. Both these kinds of jokes rely in part on an understanding of Jesus as a historical figure but also on a belief in the reality of the biblical accounts and most importantly the reality of his divinity. It is of course possible to appreciate such jokes without truly adopting the Christian belief in the miracles of Jesus or his second coming (simply knowing the reference is adequate to ‘get the joke’ but does not necessarily imply an identification with its attitude).\(^69\)

What contributes to these jokes being religious jokes – that is not only non-blasphemous but also faith affirming – is that the Jesus of such narrative jokes was, is and will be real (in the spiritual sense) for those who tell and appreciate them. For example, laughing at a humorous exaggeration of Jesus’ miracles does not equate to laughing at the miracles themselves (or the fact that there are such things as miracles).\(^70\)

This is where we can see that the religious framing makes a significant difference in the way that the joke can be interpreted. Robert C. Roberts suggests that there is a Christian “sense of normal” in which Christian behaviour, thought, emotion and a “distinctively Christian view of things” is understood as normal, real and self-evident; and “pagan” behaviour, thought or

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\(^69\) De Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*, chap. 11.

\(^70\) This is similar, for instance, to the way that many God jokes rely on the acceptance of prayer as being efficacious. For example see the discussion above on *The Singles 2nd Ward* (2007).
emotion appears laughable, ludicrous and ridiculous from this perspective. Of course, Roberts argues, it is equally possible and has often happened, that the order of incongruity is reversed, and the Christian perspective is viewed as weird and laughable. By taking Roberts’ first perspective, and applying this idea to jokes about Jesus, the target of the joke becomes clearer in that it is not ridiculous in and of itself that Jesus, for example, performed miracles. This is a good example since there are many Jesus jokes that incorporate or reference his miracles, be it ones already recounted in the gospels or hypothetical or imagined miracles that he may perform. In accepting the ‘normality’ of Jesus’ miracles there is room to move beyond the potential humour in the absurdity or impossibility of such acts and into a more faith affirming position of laughing at the (real or imagined) response to such acts. An example of this can be seen in Todd Johnson’s description of what happens when he tells a joke about swimming with sharks. Johnson explained:

I went snorkelling and we were supposed to be looking at leopard sharks, and I’m nervous but their mouths are on the bottom so apparently they’re not supposed to bite you, they can give you a hickie but they can’t bite you, and I had something come flying past me and I didn’t realise it was a seal and I thought I was going to be the second person to walk on water. As long as I say it that way, that was fine. But when I brought it up a different way, I turn around and say only me and Jesus are the only two people to walk on water. Once I say the word Jesus people are like “whoa, hey”. I didn’t say I was like Jesus, I was just saying that he and I had been walking on water, because I was scared and he was good at it.

Consider the following two jokes, both examples of imaginative expansions of the gospel narratives. Michael Jr. in Thou Shalt Laugh 4 (2009) imagines what life was like for Jesus’ brother James:

[I] Read the Bible a lot, found out that Jesus had a little brother. Anybody know his name? James! That’s right. When I found that out I was like ‘wow, Jesus is your big brother? How much pressure is that!’ How many times did he have to hear ‘how come you can’t be more like Jesus, James?’ because you know everybody probably thought that James could do all the things Jesus could do, but he couldn’t. He was just James, he wasn’t James Christ.

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73 Johnson and Anderson, Interview (2010).
Remember the wedding banquet? Jesus turned the water into wine, everyone was amazed, it was delicious, it was the best at the banquet. But they don’t tell you about the next banquet. Jesus left early, they started running out of wine, everybody looked at James. ‘Hey, last time this happened your brother made some wine. Dude! You just going to stand there with your sandals on? You not going to make no wine?’

And you know how little brothers are, they follow their big brothers everywhere, I’m sure everywhere that Jesus went James would follow. If Jesus went there so did James. I bet one time James almost drowned. [Pause while audience laughs in recognition of the joke]. [Mock explanation] Because Jesus walked on water. James tried to...[deliberately trails off because the punch line is so obvious to this audience].

Horace H.B. Sanders in *Thou Shalt Laugh 3* tells the following joke about Jesus’ critics:

Everyone knows someone who is negative all the time … I call it ‘player hating’. It’s nothing new. It’s in the Bible. They used to hate on Jesus. For real. Every time he would do a miracle, the Sadducees and the Pharisees would be over there player hating on him. Jesus would go out there and walk on water. People would be like ‘man, ain’t that Jesus? He just walked on water!’

Here go the player haters: ‘man, that ain’t nothing but some ice. Wait till December I could do that too’.

Or Jesus fed the multitude …. With two fish and five loaves of bread. Or five fish and two loaves of bread, depending on what church you go to. Everybody was so happy: ‘look at Jesus he fed everybody, plus the women and children. With two fish and five loaves of bread, or vice versa’.

Here go the player haters: ‘yeah, but he didn’t cook the fish though did he. It’s still got the bones in it. I need some ketchup or hot sauce with my fish’.

And then the biggest thing he did, the most important miracle we celebrate, he gave up his life, they didn’t take it he gave it up, then three days later he rose from the dead. And he was alright! [audience applause] – yeah, go ahead and clap – and he was walking around, they said for forty days he did all kinds of miracles that you couldn’t even count in all the books of

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74 Truett Hancock, *Thou Shalt Laugh 4* (Roserock Films, 2009).
the world. So you know that people had to be out there [saying] ‘Yo man look! Ain’t that Jesus from Nazareth? They crucified him. And look he back from the dead’.

Here go the player haters: ‘yeah, but he still got those same sandals on don’t he. If he knew he was coming back, he could’ve went shopping first’. 75

In both these humorous situations, Jesus’ miracles such as turning water into wine, walking on water, and resurrection, are accepted as having actually occurred by all characters even by those that are presented as his critics (they complain that Jesus did not do enough with his miracles, rather than suggesting that they did not happen). In the first joke, the humour is built upon the common understanding of brotherly expectation that the younger child is often in the shadow of its older siblings. Of course, within the framework of Michael Jr.’s beliefs, there is absurdity in the idea that any human would be able to match the talents and achievements of the son of God and hence any attempt to do so is amusing. Such attempts are incongruous and as such comical. Michael Jr. spins a hypothetical tale in which the butt of the joke is the people who would mistakenly expect James to turn water into wine, a feat that is impossible not because it is simply unable to be done (as for example a non-believer may interpret it), but because it is impossible for anyone but Jesus Christ. 76 We feel sorry for James being cast in the shadow of the ultimate overachiever, but when read in a Christian framework the butt of this joke is not really James (he was after all an apostle and hence a sacred figure) but those who place divine expectations on to a mortal figure, and naturally the audience laughs when he falls short (or “drowns”).

In Sanders’ joke, the ‘player haters’ are an exaggeration of the negative depiction of the Pharisees in the gospels. 77 They are the clear butt of this joke, something that is reinforced by the description of all those around them as being in awe and amazement at the miracles of Jesus. The thematic butt of the joke is undue negativity, doubt and criticism, but the choice of a gospel setting for such critique works to make the joke a specific comment on religious

75 Truett Hancock, Thou Shalt Laugh 3.
76 Compare to other jokes that laugh specifically at the miracles rather than the response to the miracles, such as John McNamee’s cartoon “Jesus’s Lesser Miracles” which are “turning mayo into light mayo”, “walking across hot asphalt” and “waking Lazarus from the bed”. John McNamee, ‘Jesus’s Lesser Miracles’, Pie Comic, 3 April 2012, http://piecomic.tumblr.com/post/20418893787. Accessed 12/4/11.
77 For example “But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them’”, Luke 15:2, New International Version.
doubt and criticism. The criticisms levelled by Sanders’ ‘player haters’ are superficial at best; in part because of the humorous nature of the joke (a switch to the serious mode would at this point be the joke’s ruin and as a comedian he must embrace the absurd and the silly), but also because such flimsy critiques as not dressing appropriately for his own resurrection serve to reinforce that critiques of the resurrection are silly. Again, offering up a non-silly argument against the reality and meaning of the resurrection (even for example from a scholarly or Jewish/Pharisaic perspective) would not only be completely out of place and against the perspective of the comedian, it would be unfunny. This does not apply to the moment where Sanders approaches the serious mode when he is building up to the resurrection punch line. By building up his description of “the most important miracle we celebrate” with a preacher-like intensity the tension of the joke is increased, he gains the applauding support of the believing audience, and ultimately the incongruity between the awe-inspiring nature of the resurrection and the petty criticism of the ‘player haters’ is all the greater, all the more funny and all the more faith affirming.

A final joke from *Thou Shalt Laugh 3* is told by Leanne Morgan:

> My twelve year old asks me the craziest questions. The other day she asked me “did Jesus ever have head lice?” How are you supposed to answer a question like that? I said “well, baby, if he did I know he healed it”.

Here we move towards a more hypothetical vision of Jesus, where the focus is still on his miracles but has shifted from the miracles that happened in the gospel accounts to the very idea that Jesus could and can perform miracles in any and all situations, past, present and future. This is another good example of a Jesus joke with potential to push the boundary of propriety by associating the son of God with a medical condition often linked with uncleanliness and general unpleasantness. There are two factors that mitigate this potential blasphemy. Firstly, the question is asked by a child and prefaced as being something drawn from a “crazy” childish imagination. The presence of a child in a joke is often an indication of its Freudian innocence (that is, not hostile or rude). Secondly, this is a joke that once again emphasises Jesus’ ability to perform miracles with an additional reference to his humanity. This is a crucial point, and something that can be observed as a distinction between

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78 Truett Hancock, *Thou Shalt Laugh 3*.
79 See Chapter Five p.123.
jokes about God and jokes about Jesus. In orthodox Christian thinking, Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. Jokes about Jesus tend to locate him firmly in this world, either in the biblical setting or in some future setting into which he has returned. Importantly, jokes such as Morgan’s show Jesus as possessing a human body, something that becomes theologically significant in that Jesus suffered in the same ways that humanity has suffered, even if that suffering is something as simple and minor as head lice. The identification of Jesus’ suffering with human suffering is an important theme in this joke. But the real key to why this joke is both funny and religious is the punch line; without the miracle of healing, the joke becomes a blasphemous barb at Jesus’ suffering (even potentially or hypothetically). Because Morgan not only states that Jesus would have healed himself, but also assumes this as a reality (“I know he healed it”), the joke is another exercise in faith affirmation, a triumph of Christ’s power over even the smallest, most human trials.

Conclusion: Avoiding Blasphemy, Promoting Belief

David Heim, executive editor at The Christian Century, says the only subjects worth joking about are serious subjects. He writes:

On that score, religion should be a rich source of jokes - provided you take it seriously…so many of the jokes and cartoons that cross our desks at the Century are not amusing [because] they don’t take religion seriously enough…Humour arises only in the tension between the sublime and the ridiculous, the serious and the profane.

Heim’s comments sum up the sentiment that pervades religious humour about the sacred: only when we take God seriously are we able to joke about him. Blasphemy is a real and grave threat for individuals and communities that believe in a God that is almighty and perfect. To suggest otherwise can have serious social consequences amongst the devout. Religious comedians know this all too well and the risk of blaspheming is a powerful adjudicator in comic decisions, for the greatest social repercussion for a comic is to have an

80 It is important to note here that this argument is less applicable to LDS theology since the orthodox Mormon understanding of God is that he does in fact have a physical body, as LDS humourist Edgar C. Snow Jr. puts it “Perhaps the test for [the funniness of] Mormon humour should be whether God himself would slap his own knee when he heard your attempt at humour. (And this is entirely doctrinal since we Mormons believe in a God who actually has knees.)” Edgar C. Snow Jr., ‘The 10 Commandments of Mormon Humor’, Sunstone no. 119 (July 2001): 76.

audience fail to laugh. Yet, given the role that religion plays in the daily lives of Christians and Mormons, the risk of joking about the sacred can be well worth taking for the potential spiritual benefits that come with adopting a humorous perspective on spirituality. The religious comedians I have analysed in this chapter orient their jokes in such a way that humour does not end up in blasphemy. When humour is used appropriately it can be non-blasphemous and even faith affirming. Religious comedians who make jokes about God, Jesus, the Bible, The Book of Mormon or other sacred beliefs and practices are careful to manage any potential insult. They employ strategies of blasphemy management to ensure that the reality and reverence of God and the sacred is left intact. They consciously switch between the sacred and the serious and always make sure that the sacred is never the butt of a joke. In doing so, religious comedians free themselves and their audiences to laugh about things of a theological nature without damaging their spirituality. The jokes about God and the sacred discussed above are not only non-blasphemous but actually promote a Christian worldview when they use humour to positively depict Christian values, practices and experiences. In this chapter I have argued that religious humour is a conscious effort to make humour that is theologically appropriate. The next chapter continues the examination of ways that religious humourists negotiate the limitations of humour and reconfigure joking in ways that are morally appropriate.
Chapter Five
Appropriate Humour II: Dirty and Clean Humour

Introduction

If you’re doing something specifically for LDS people you know you’ve just got to be uber uber uber squeaky clean.

- John Moyer 1

When we advertised my last project Square, I was going for ultra ultra clean, family friendly, Mr Soccer Mom, I’m square and I don’t care.

- Thor Ramsey 2

John Moyer and Thor Ramsey articulate the generally ambiguous sense of what it means to make humour appropriate for Christian and LDS audiences. That is, as we have seen in Chapter Three, humour that is appropriate needs to be “clean”, but clean humour, it seems, is so effective a shorthand that its advocates feel no need to define the phenomenon. Clean humourists often describe their content in circular terms, advertising to their audience that their jokes are good and clean, even “ultra ultra clean” or “uber uber squeaky clean”, but leaving the specifics of what this cleanliness actually entails up to individual assumed knowledge. Sometimes there are a few more details. Clean humour can be described as “family-safe” or “family-friendly” because it is “Guaranteed safe for the entire family”. 3 This takes us a little further because it indicates an intended audience. Yet we are still left wondering what makes humour “clean”. A deeper search reveals that clean humour is frequently conceived of in terms of what it is not. Many clean comedians believe that “it

1 John Moyer, Interview 1, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (13 June 2010).
2 Thor Ramsey, Interview 8, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (6 June 2010).
3 Ken Seagran, The Clean Comedy Tour (Laugh Out Loud Productions, 2006).
doesn’t have to be filthy to be funny”. One clean joke website claims “No obscene language or vulgarity here”, while another states “You will not see foul language or indecency of any kind on this site”. A third confirms that in order to understand clean humour we must consider it in dialogue with its opposite: “dirty” humour. It says “Tired of all the dirty jokes on the net? Visit our site…Certified to be 100% clean!”

These comments may be distilled into a preliminary definition of clean humour as humour that is free from vulgarity or obscenity and by virtue of this fact it is suitable for families, specifically children. Yet this definition reveals very little about the motivation behind clean humour. It is built upon assumptions that must be unpacked, and it is my intention in this chapter to draw out an understanding of clean humour that goes beyond the tautological explanation that it is not dirty. So I will add to the above definition that clean humour is humour that uses tactics of avoidance, euphemism and religious framing to avoid the acknowledgment or discussion of offensive elements of the body. My main concern is to examine the purpose of creating a category of humour that is distinct and identifiable under the label ‘clean’ and how this then allows certain types of humour to be deemed appropriate religious humour. The purpose of clean humour is twofold; firstly clean humour attempts to protect the religious individual and community from any potential impurity that could be passed on from exposure to dirty or inappropriate comic material. Secondly, clean humour uses the social power of group laughter to create and reinforce unique group identity, solidarity and boundaries. Of course enjoying humour that does not contain swearing or profanity is not an inherently religious act; rather, what I want to emphasise is the use of the specific term ‘clean’ in religious rhetoric to signify a particular religio-cultural group and its associated cultural characteristics. Clean humour is not in itself religious in any literal sense, but it relies on an interpretation that is informed by religious belief and practice.

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Significantly, clean humour, like non-blasphemous humour, is not as clear cut as some of the popular discourse implies. The second part of this chapter will consider just how ‘clean’ clean humour is; in other words, I will use examples of religious humour to explore the extent of censorship and the types of content that are allowed or disallowed. I argue that clean humour, again like non-blasphemous humour, is not simply a case of removing all the potentially offensive elements. It is instead a complex negotiation of drawing and re-drawing lines of transgression that are in a constant state of flux according to the different standards and tastes of both those who create religious humour and those who consume it. I will demonstrate this by analysing cases of humour that are attempts to answer the ‘problem’ of dirty humour and so deal with the themes that cause the most controversy for clean humour enthusiasts: swearing and sexual humour. Firstly I will analyse examples of jokes that incorporate sexual themes and discuss the ways in which such themes are made appropriate through the incorporation of the humour into the Christian and Mormon worldviews and making sure it is boundary respecting and thus faith affirming. Secondly, I will analyse one method employed to avoid the problem of swearing where familiar obscene words are replaced or substituted by other words, often with a similar sound or cadence. Most examples are taken from two stand-up comedy series; Apostles of Comedy (2008) and the Thou Shalt Laugh series (2006-2011), as well as the LDS comedy films The Singles 2nd Ward (2007) and Sons of Provo (2004) and supplemented by other illustrative stand-up comedians. Finally I will consider how clean humour acts as socially cohesive force, both from within the group through the experience of shared laughter and from without as a factor in differentiation and distinction from mainstream culture.

Dirty Humour

But what is “dirty” humour and what makes it so offensive? And by extension what is “clean” humour and how does it make humour less offensive? It becomes clear that upon closer inspection interpretations of “dirty” and “clean” are informed by Christian conceptions of the body and its boundaries. Specifically, clean humour can be understood as part of wider religious purity discourse. I suggest that clean humour is a verbal and/or visual manifestation of Christian concern for bodily purity, both for the individual body and the collective body of the church. The danger of dirty jokes lies in their potential to corrupt or pollute that body. Clean humour is thus an attempt to reduce that danger through the removal or censorship of
the offending elements. These offending elements are almost exclusively related to the body, and can be classed as sexual humour, humour that employs obscene or foul language and scatological or toilet humour. I will argue, following Mary Douglas, that words can pollute in the same way that physical pollutants do, that is, if there is no such thing as ‘real’ dirt (because what is dirty is a subjective evaluation of a concept in relation to individual systems of interpreting order and chaos) then the dysphemistic word for excrement, for instance, is as upsetting as the excrement itself.9 The rhetoric of clean humour is closely linked to notions of bodily purity and bodily pollution because through language these boundaries between the pure and impure may be maintained or dismantled, placing the spiritual nature of humanity at risk of profanation.

Dirty Humour and the Pollution of the Christian Body

Comedy is the most vulnerable point of entry into a system.10 If humour penetrates boundaries and the body is a boundary that may be penetrated, an effective way to prevent such a violation of borders is to wall up the hole at the point of entry: jokes about the body. Because humour is composed of multiple and often contradictory meanings, such meanings can in theory hide or encode offensive sentiments.11 Lockyer and Pickering suggest that nothing is inherently funny or unfunny, which means that the difference between offensive and humorous content is determined by social and cultural constructions of offense and amusement.12 In this section I will discuss what it is about dirty humour that can cause it to be taken as offense rather than amusement.

It is not enough to explain the discomfort with dirty humour by suggesting that Christians and Mormons hate the body and so feel it to be unmentionable. Taboos are in general more complicated than that. There is nothing inherently negative or objectionable about the body, its fluids are not innately disgusting. Rather the body is culturally instilled with values, for example disgust or pleasure, and those values change upon context. Even for groups that do

have a sense of discomfort around the body, that discomfort is not indiscriminate, the objections against bodies are specific. The key to understanding the discomfort with dirty humour is grasping the contradiction that for Christians and Mormons, the body is sacred and profane, it is able to be defiled but is itself defiling. It is sacred in the sense that it is a creation of God and thus must be kept untainted out of respect and obligation. Yet out of that very same creation comes the blood, excrement and fluid that pollute. Striving towards perfecting such spiritual nature in the face of animal nature is a cause for acute anxiety. Enacting a separation between the pure body and the impure body helps to clarify this incongruity and allows both kinds of bodies to operate. Segregation of the pure and impure is achieved by means of taboo. A taboo is a fence constructed around an issue that is deemed by the community to be dangerous to some degree. Douglas defines a taboo as “a spontaneous coding practice which sets up a vocabulary of spatial limits and physical and verbal signals to hedge around vulnerable relations”. These vulnerable relations in humorous discourse are precisely those that make up the content of dirty humour; relations between sexes, between the body and the spirit, between public and private, and between social statuses and identities.

Dirty humour revels in the breaking of taboos. It is especially equipped to do so in one swift movement because it incorporates the power of humour to be subversive and the power of the body to be subversive. The power of the dirty joke lies in this two fold attack on boundary. Dirty jokes allow us to deal with subjects that are the cause of anxiety and render them harmless, or at least momentarily controllable. Yet, it seems that if the issue is about unease caused by the body and its associated contaminants, religious humour could embrace the use of dirty jokes to confront anxiety-inducing topics almost as kind of systematic desensitisation therapy. However, this is not generally the case. Vassilis Saroglou has argued that Christianity encourages a dislike of sick and disgusting humour because “the religious ideal of universal harmony is broken by the disorder, deformity, and chaos introduced by disgusting things, including disgusting jokes”. This is strong language, and while disgusting things can be the source of terror and dread, it is also possible that they are not objected to out

of a true sense of fear, but out of a more moderate sense of inappropriateness or discomfort with the matter that is out of place. This is particularly true of humour because, unlike for instance the threat that bodily excretion poses to high religious ritual, dirty humour usually operates in the everyday; it is seen on television, or heard in the playground. Thus the unease about it reflects or is equal in magnitude to the unease that surrounds familiar bodily habits like going to the toilet and having sex. Richard Beck calls this a “Gnostic affront” in the sense that the banality of our animal nature is an “existential affront to our aspirations of being transcendent spiritual creatures”.

An important part of breaking a taboo is the act of bringing something that is considered private into the public domain. This is why swearing, toilet humour and sexual humour have the potential to be either funny or offensive. Such humour gives rise to incongruity and the expression of repressed urges but also breaks the boundary that prevents the hearer from feeling polluted or soiled. It is even possible to have both responses present in the one joke exchange; as Freud demonstrated in his study on jokes the dirty joke gives relief to the teller’s unconscious by making the hearer, or more commonly the object, feel polluted or violated. The body, especially bodily functioning, is largely relegated to the private sphere. When it trespasses into the public sphere the result varies from outright disgust to hearty amusement. A third response to dirty humour is shame or embarrassment. Embarrassment about sexual humour is tightly bound to the unmentionable nature of sexuality in general. For Christians and Mormons, the bind is given extra strength from an institutional suppression of sexuality that reinforces shame about sex and the body, specifically sex outside of marriage, and guilt over the satisfaction of suppressed desires.

19 Ruth Wajnryb, Language Most Foul (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2004), 175.
21 Leonore Tiefer, Sex is Not a Natural Act and Other Essays, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 85-90.
The laugh of the listener implicates them in the sentiment of the joke.\textsuperscript{23} It is a cue that they have understood the joke and all its inferences and have accepted it as funny rather than offensive. In this respect a Christian who laughs at sexual humour can be seen as explicitly or implicitly accepting an attack on conservative morality. The joke is approving or at least openly depicting sexual relations, something that either violates the sanctity of sex in marriage or the taboo over discussion of sex in public, or frequently both. It may be pointed out that this Christian who is laughing has not actually done anything in breach of their community’s taboo structure. If one laughs at a joke about masturbation, it is not the same as masturbating in public. Yet the resulting shame may only be different in degree not kind.\textsuperscript{24} Both are bringing into the public sphere a topic that is designated private by communal consensus.

The difference in degree is informed by the relationship of language or symbol to its referent, in other words the success with which a word invokes an object and its connotations. Dirt and dirty language have so far been treated as synonymous. However, the distinction must be made; obviously defecation is not the same as saying “shit”. What they have in common is that dirt and dirty language form the bookends to the taboo that surrounds bodily function. Ruth Wajnryb argues that central to the rejection of excreta is the fear of contamination. She states:

[Contamination] carries from the thing reviled to the words that represent it. The fear of contamination from dirty things becomes the fear of contamination from dirty language. Faeces are dirty therefore their associated thoughts or words are also dirty – as if exposure to them could contaminate as much as exposure to the thing to which they refer.\textsuperscript{25}

This is the first side of the bookend; where the contamination flows from the object to the symbol. Mary Douglas gives us the other side, where the contamination flows from the symbol to the object:

\textsuperscript{25} Wajnryb, \textit{Language Most Foul}, 72.
Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obvious symbolic systems of purity…Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the table.26

This connection between object and symbol is what makes dirty language operate in the same ways as dirt. Both are interruptions of order and thus security, as Douglas puts it “our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications”.27 This is why it is not entirely metaphorical for one dirty joke website to warn its readers that “Our dirty jokes are so dirty you might just have to take a shower after reading them!”28 Or the reverse in which the moral or conceptual is physically washed when a child has its mouth washed out with soap.29

Pollution is contagious. In a practical sense this is where much hygienic discourse sources its power. The spread of germs and disease is closely associated, especially in the modern medical model, with contact with a polluting substance. Similarly in religious discourse contact with substances (or persons) deemed impure effects the purity of the believer.30 This is because the line between the physical and the psychological when it comes to the logic or psychology of disgust is fuzzy. Rozin, Haidt and McCauley argue that “a particularly important feature of contagion, paralleled by disgust, is the journey from the physical to the moral. Although moral contagion is often indelible, it is sometimes treated as if it is physical”.31 Richard Beck provides a good religious example of this in his book Unclean (2011) in his discussion of the contamination based criticisms that the Pharisees have of Jesus

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26 Douglas, Purity and Danger, 44.
27 Douglas, Purity and Danger, 45.
29 Chen-Bo Zhong and Katie Liljenquist, ‘Washing Away Your Sins: Threatened Morality and Physical Cleansing’, Science 313, no. 5792 (8 September 2006): 1451–52. This study showed that the physical act of washing directly affected moral and ethical feelings amongst participants.
and his social associations with “unclean” people in Matthew Chapter Nine. Beck applies
the four principles of contagion described by Rozin et. al to a Christian experience. The
four principles, in brief, are Contact (where contamination is caused by contact or physical
proximity), Dose Insensitivity (where minimal, even micro, amounts of pollutant cause
harm), Permanence (once deemed contaminated nothing can rehabilitate or purify the object)
and Negativity Dominance (the pollutant is always “stronger” than and ruins the pure object,
but the pollutant is never rendered acceptable or palatable). We can see this operating in
Beck’s observation that the Pharisees cannot imagine that Jesus (the pure) might have a
purifying effect on the sinners, or that contact between the church and the world defiles the
church.

In clean humour rhetoric, those who are at the highest risk of contamination are children.
Thus, as mentioned in the introduction, the most common descriptor given for clean humour
apart from its “cleanness” is its safety for children. When a website or stand-up comedy show
is advertised as “family-friendly” this amounts to a concern over the exposure of children to
controversial content. Christians often place great emphasis on the inclusion of all members
of the family in the consumption of media and entertainment, and while young viewers enjoy
humour as much as their parents, and do not passively absorb the information presented to
them through media outlets such as television, there is still a need for adults to engage with or
even supervise their children’s viewing experiences if they are to help them interpret what
they watch within the framework of the parental belief system. Regardless of children’s
agency in enjoying humour and entertainment, their protection gets swept under the popular
evangelical media catch phrase “family values”, where their safety is prioritised and their
innocence emphasised.

32 Beck, Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality and Mortality.
33 Beck, Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality and Mortality, 27–30. See Paul Rozin, Linda Millman,
and Carol Nemeroff, ‘Operation of the Laws of Sympathetic Magic in Disgust and Other Domains’, Journal of
35 Beck, Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality and Mortality, 30. Beck then goes on to discuss how this
is a striking feature of Christianity, that Jesus does in fact purify the sinners, but this is beyond my point here.
37 Razelle Frankl, “Transformation of Televangelism: Repackaging Christian Family Values”, Media, Culture
and the Religious Right, ed. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998),
163 – 190.
Of course the innocence of children is a contested subject in itself, something that is socially constructed and culturally mediated.\(^{38}\) In clean humour rhetoric, children represent pure and nonsexual beings, an attitude that reflects the adult assumption that childhood innocence is closely associated with sexual ignorance, so this becomes a rationale for keeping sex away from children.\(^{39}\) The reverse also occurs in which the presence of children in a joke or cartoon signifies that the humour is clean. It may also be suggested that the importance of keeping sex away from children, even in its encoded form inside a dirty joke, lies with the fact that they are yet to fully learn the extent of the taboos that govern behaviour around sex and other bodily functions. Children are fascinated by the body and its processes, and any shame or understanding of them as “dirty” must be inculcated through socialisation.\(^{40}\) Until they fully grasp the magnitude of body taboos, and can employ protective behaviours appropriately, they are at risk of absorbing prohibited attitudes and information. This is understood as a corruption or a pollution of the child, which we can link back once more to Douglas and matter out of place; sexual knowledge in a child defies the classificatory system and so the “dirt” is seen as spoiling or ruining an ideal order, in this case childhood as innocence. Laughter is also contagious and so its association with the contagion of sexual knowledge (something that can be implicitly connected to sin) gives dirty humour a particularly potent kick.

To bring this argument around to the point of this chapter, I am interested in the ways that such disgust and discomfort are informed and expressed religiously. A number of my survey respondents made the direct claim that their religion was the cause or motivator behind their dislike of comedy that contains dirty material. For example statements such as “Religion is very important to me, because of my religious beliefs I try to not make dirty jokes” (32) or “I do not appreciate dirty jokes because of what I’ve been taught in my church” (29) indicate that believers use their religious beliefs to guide their choices regarding humour. Here I offer Richard Beck’s argument as an explanation for this behaviour: “the psychology of disgust and contamination regulates how many Christians reason with and experience notions of


\(^{40}\) Wajnryb, *Language Most Foul*, 73.
holiness, atonement and sin”.\textsuperscript{41} I am particularly interested in his use of the term “regulates”. The interpretation of sin through the language of disgust forces efforts to regulate references to sin using the language of sanitisation. By understanding sin as disgusting, dirty jokes that are disgusting also move closer to sin, hence dirty jokes are a direct affront to a Christian or Mormon’s practice of sin avoidance and by participating in language about sinful things, especially laughing at such things, causes not only contact with the sin but also a failure to take that sin seriously and hence to give it greater potential to be destructive.

**Clean Humour and the Shoring Up of Boundaries**

It is the issue of sin avoidance that manifests in the creation of clean humour as an alternative to dirty humour. Christians and Mormons take seriously the injunction to “keep oneself from being polluted by the world”.\textsuperscript{42} Dirty humour is anomalous to this vision because it exists in contrast to conceptions of an ideal order; it brings the private into the public and confuses the boundary between pure and impure, moral and immoral. Mary Douglas states that there are several ways of treating anomalies. She explains “Negatively, we can ignore them, just not perceive them, or perceiving we can condemn. Positively, we can deliberately confront the anomaly and try to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place”.\textsuperscript{43} The ways that clean humour operates can be seen to reflect these ways of dealing with anomalies. In clean humour sexual remarks, toilet references or obscene language are anomalous because their offensiveness excludes them from humour which is designated as enjoyable and positive. The anomalies of dirty humour are treated exactly as Douglas describes; they are either avoided or cut out completely and condemned, or they are reconfigured to fit into a new pattern of reality, that is, the religious worldview.

The first case, where the anomalies can be ignored or not perceived, translates to a general exclusion of the offending element. This is perhaps the most straightforward method of filtering out filth, based on exactly the same principles of hermetic segregation of humour from the sacred that I discussed in Chapter Four. The difference is the direction of

\textsuperscript{43} Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 48.
contamination; blasphemy management strategies are designed to protect God from pollution, whilst clean humour is designed to protect the community from pollution. By creating humour that does not contain dirty content the audience does not have to deal with its consequences. A blanket ban on the use of expletives or sexual innuendo is also a simple way to reduce ambiguity. Douglas argues that in cases of confusing moral standards pollution beliefs help to reduce the ambiguity.\textsuperscript{44} Taboos around sexuality are by no means as clear cut as perhaps I have been implying, so the nuances of exactly what is objectionable about sex become reduced to the most obvious common ground and the safest option: avoiding the issue all together. Perhaps it could be thought of as a kind of verbal abstinence.

For example, in stand-up comedy routines featured in \textit{The Clean Stand-up Comedy Tour} (2004) all the comedians joke about marriage, a subject area that would lend itself to humour of a sexual nature.\textsuperscript{45} There are of course no such jokes. The humour tends towards the trials and tribulations of relationships, especially the differences between men and women. On the same tour Carlos Oscar jokes about his wife’s pregnancy, but there is no mention of the bodily labour, only jokes about her exploiting her pregnancy to get him to do things. Thor Ramsay’s routine includes many situations in which he gets very angry, such as queuing and getting stopped by the police, but there is not a single obscenity uttered. In fact, the show opens with a skit set at the security gate to the studio, where “The Bleep Man” arrives only to be told his services are unnecessary because this is clean comedy, “there’s nothing to bleep”. Listening carefully to the Bleep Man’s dialogue reveals the one word that gets ‘bleeped’ or censored is “moron”. The safer choice is made in this instance because the word can be understood. It is not technically vulgarity in that it is not a body reference, although it is an insult, one that is quite cruel in nature due to its derivation from an out-dated model of intellectual disability. Thus to include it in a film that is so heavily reliant on presenting itself as clean indicates that the distinguishing factor is the word’s relationship to the body rather than its insulting potential.\textsuperscript{46}

In the second case the anomalies are fit into a new pattern of reality as new rules are negotiated. This most immediately occurs between the humourist and their audience at the

\textsuperscript{45} Ken Seagran, \textit{The Clean Comedy Tour} (2006).
\textsuperscript{46} See Chapter Six.
time of the joke telling (laughter or “unlaughter”\(^\text{47}\) provides instant and effective feedback), although this situational response is guided by negotiations that are happening in the wider world of the community through public discourse in church, media and culture.\(^\text{48}\) Religious comedians who know they will be performing for a substantially Christian or Mormon audience will consciously fit their material into the new pattern that they have observed and, as part of the community themselves, have experienced. This is particularly important for comedians wishing to find success in a market that evaluates based on standards of morality as well as taste. As a result anomalous subjects like sex and scatology still make it into some religious humour, only in a form that has been fed through this new pattern and thus can reflect its values, that is clean, safe, not boundary violating and ultimately faith affirming.

**Clean Sex Jokes**

I have been arguing that clean humour has the deliberate and explicit boundaries around sexual humour and swearing, but I want to turn now to some examples that demonstrate that this boundary contains within it a variety of interpretations of the directive to not speak about sex. It seems contradictory that sexual humour could be clean, but the clean humour label does not always prevent talk of sex and sexuality. Consider the following joke from Jeff Allen:

> My wife and I now hide food in our bedroom to keep it from the kids. We’ve got a stash of brownies and muffins next to our bed. So we go in our room late at night and lock the door. I’m sure the kids think we’re doing something else, we’re really just under the covers eating brownies and laughing at them. You get to forty-five and it really gets pretty pathetic; “the brownies are here woo hoo!” holding hands running down the hall, “lock the door you vixen ha ha!” And right before the door closes, the kids are in the living room “aw that’s disgusting!” …

> We have three children a twenty-two year old, an eighteen year old and a five year old. Five. Ran out of brownies one night.\(^\text{49}\)


\(^{48}\) See Chapter Three.

\(^{49}\) Phil Cooke, *Thou Shalt Laugh* (Rosrock Films, 2006).
This is a sex joke, as in it contains references (albeit indirect and unspoken) to sex and the core of what makes it funny is based on understandings of stereotypes about age and sexuality. The first thing of note is that all clean sexual humour occurs within a narrative of marriage. It is rare to see any reference to sexual intercourse itself occurring outside of marriage. Although there are many jokes about dating, such jokes are rarely concerned with the sexual aspect of dating and more about developing relationships that presumably intend to end in marriage. For example Ron Pearson has a joke about the difficulties of Christian dating because Christian men focus on finding “Bible Barbie” and Christian women focus on finding “Missionary Ken”.50 This does not mean that jokes about dating always ignore the physical aspects of the experience. LDS comedian Dave Nibley describes the funny side of trying to hold hands on a first date.51 Similarly Todd Johnson, also an LDS comedian, jokes that he wishes his friends would stop setting him up with girls his size (he is overweight) and that when they are “monkeying around” the image is unattractive and disturbing and looks like “two sea lions”.52 Rather there is a clear line drawn where characters in a joke narrative may kiss or hold hands but they simply do not have sex unless they are married. Most stand-up comics who tell jokes with a sexual flavour will usually at some point in their act prior to the joke mention their spouse in a way that identifies them as married and hence any joke about their sex life is covered by the knowledge that such behaviour is operating within religiously sanctioned boundaries.

The second feature of clean sexual humour is its use of euphemism. This is different from attempts to make deliberately creative amusing euphemisms.53 Euphemism in these jokes operate as a “linguistic fig leaf”54 to deal with a taboo subject and allow a joke to be appreciated through the token “sweet talking” that means the audience knows what is being referred to without direct exposure to it.55 This is a middle point between pretending that sex and sexuality is non-existent and explicitly and dysphemistically joking about sex. LDS

50 Mitchell Galin and Lenny Sisselman, Apostles of Comedy: The Movie (First Look Studios, 2008).
51 Paul Eagleston, It’s Latter-day Night! Live Comedy (HaleStorm Entertainment, 2003).
53 For an example of hilarious euphemisms see Monty Python’s “Penis Song (Not the Noel Coward Song)” from Terry Jones, The Meaning of Life (Universal Pictures, 1983).
54 Hugh Rawson, Rawson’s Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Double Talk: Being a Compilation of Linguistic Fig Leaves and Verbal Flourishes For Artful Users of the English Language (New York: Crown, 1995).
55 Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
comedian Todd Johnson explained that despite the obvious importance of sex in the lives of religious people, he avoids sex jokes, “which is funny because a lot of the time it doesn’t matter what religion it is, whether it’s LDS or Catholic or Christian or whatever there’s always going to be a lot of families. So we know there’s a lot of sex going on, but yet people don’t want to talk about it. It’s kind of behind the door. We have nine kids but we don’t know how they show up, we do believe in the stork”\textsuperscript{56}. By side stepping the subject and creating a new language through which this important but awkward aspect of Christian life can be discussed, clean humour still allows humour to enact its function of social taboo pressure release.\textsuperscript{57} So in Jeff Allen’s joke above while he does not use a specific euphemistic word to replace sex, he uses a euphemistic concept or phrase “to run out of brownies” that allows the audience to giggle about not only the sex but also the creative manner in which Allen has referred to sex, with the added benefit of never having to hear sex talked about directly. I will discuss euphemism more fully in the next section.

A third feature of clean sexual humour is that sex and sexuality can be mentioned in order to critique the relationship between the world and sexuality, be it the secular world or the Christian world. This is far less common, because it involves the introduction of controversial subjects, but the potential to condemn inappropriate sexuality outweighs the risk of introducing a subject of temptation and awkwardness.\textsuperscript{58} This does not mean that the level of explicitness is increased but forms a gentle and subtle way of chastising or commenting on sexuality. John Tesh in \textit{Thou Shalt Laugh 4} (2009) tells a story about having to buy bras for his wife online. He jokes “My wife wanted me to go online and buy some bras. I put in her dimensions; [to the audience] you’re not getting her dimensions, Sir, this is not that kind of show”.\textsuperscript{59} Again, this is a very circuitous way of joking about men’s interest in women’s bodies, whilst making a dig at modern entertainment’s focus on sex. Another example from \textit{Thou Shalt Laugh 3} Leanne Morgan’s humorous story about buying fashionable low riding jeans. She says to the sales assistant “Are my panties supposed to be coming out this far up my back?” and the sales assistant replies “No, you’re supposed to wear a thong”. Morgan is outraged by the suggestion and proudly proclaims “Excuse me Miss, but I’m a Christian and I

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{56} Todd Johnson and Mike Anderson, Interview, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (11 June 2010).
\item \textsuperscript{57} Sigmund Freud, \textit{Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious}.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Truett Hancock, \textit{Thou Shalt Laugh 4} (Roserock Films, 2009).
\end{itemize}
don’t use my panties for evil!” The humour in Morgan’s joke lies in the hyperbole of claiming that wearing a certain type of underwear is a serious act of evil, but she is also suggesting that there is a real link between women’s fashion, sexual expression, temptation and evil.

There are also comedians who use clean sexual humour to make fun of Christian sensitivities about sex. Chonda Pierce, a successful Christian stand-up comedian, performs a bit in which she talks about having sex with her husband then adds to the end of the story her gentle criticisms about her Christian audiences’ reaction to such a frank discussion. She begins the story by explaining “One time, and I love to tell this because it makes my kids grossed out, we went ‘parking’. I’ll have to find a young person to talk about this with; I just want you to know, that when you’re not looking your parents are having sex”. The audience responds with loud laughter and cheers. Pierce continues the story, where she describes the difficulties of having sex in a car at an older age (“I couldn’t get his shirt unbuttoned, I had to find my reading glasses”), then tells how a police officer knocked on the car window. She continues “The cop asks to see our licenses and asks “are you guys married?”, like he was going to throw up or something. “Yes, we are married. Look, we’re Christians, we ain’t dead!”.

After this relatively explicit story, Pierce turns her attention to the audience:

Y’all are so weird, I see some of you that look just like my mother. Y’all like the good stories, you want someone to come up here and tell you a good story. Y’all want me to get up here and tell you that the Lord saved me from prostitution, and drugs and alcohol, and y’all wave your hankie saying ‘praise the Lord’. [But] stand up here and talk about having sex with my husband and everybody’s [puts her hand over her mouth in mock embarrassment]. Some of you aren’t even comfortable hearing the word. Sex. Sex! Sex! Sex! Sex!

I am fifty one now, my mother called me four days ago, early in the morning and says “y’all weren’t having S-E-X were you?” She still spells it! I don’t think the woman has ever said the word out loud in her life. You know, it’s usually like “in the family way”. When she sees somebody pregnant, they’re “in the family way”. She’s pregnant! “Don’t say pregnant!” I didn’t know it was such a dirty word.

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61 Chonda Pierce, ‘E-Women’.
Pierce is frustrated by the taboo that she sees being built up around sex. Of course, the sex that Pierce is trying to free from this taboo is within marriage, framed in a family context (since, she explains, it is her daughter moving back home that forces Pierce and her husband to have sex in a parking lot). Pierce uses humour to gently ridicule what she sees as an overly sensitive reaction, and by comparing her audience to her conservative mother and exaggerating their overreaction back to them, she satirises her community’s relationship with sexuality.

As can be seen in the jokes of Chonda Pierce, clean humour is not always as ‘safe’ as the above examples that use underwear or food as a symbol for sexuality. I want to turn now to two other comedians from my field research that operate at what I would argue to be the edge of what might safely be considered appropriately clean by a mainstream or popular audience of Christians or Mormons. The first example is Mike Anderson, an LDS comedian. Anderson has jokes that are among the most sexually explicit of my body of data, specifically in theme as well as literal words and content. An example:

I heard about this thing on news. It’s called ‘born again virgins’. These people have had sex before, but they decide they want to be virgins again so they stop having sex and they’re born again. My wife is doing this. I am not happy! Because apparently I’m doing it too! She keeps telling me she’s saving herself, I don’t know what for, probably someone special. Gotta respect that …

I try to treat my wife well. We were at a friend’s wedding the other day and during the reception he got up and was like ‘I would now like to perform for you all a song I wrote about my wife’. And I was like ‘Dang! That is totally good, he is totally getting laid tonight’. So later on I got up and was like ‘I would like to perform for you all a joke I wrote about my wife’. I did not get laid. That’s when she became a virgin.  

The first thing to note is that Anderson does not immediately locate this story within a wider marriage narrative like Chonda Pierce or Jeff Allen do. This is unusual, most jokes of this sort begin with “My wife” or “My husband”, although this is possibly because he is speaking about sex in relation to abstract, “other” people. When the narrative turns towards his own

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62 Mike Anderson, Wiseguys Comedy Club, Ogden, Utah, (11 June 2010).
In his personal life, he brings it into a marriage context. Yet this is to be expected, as Anderson is a devout Mormon and does not believe in sex outside of marriage, as indicated by his lament that he must be abstaining from sex because his wife is. The unexpected element of this joke is that his references to sex are both explicit (by clean comedy standards) and personal. While clean comedy is never dysphemistic, it also rare that it is orthophemistic, that is direct and literal, so to use words like virgin and sex openly edges towards breaking of the taboo on sexual language.63 I would argue that Anderson’s use of the expression “get laid” is actively pressing against the boundary because it can be seen as what Allan and Burridge describe as a euphemistic dysphemism, where “laid” is a euphemism for sex which masks a dysphemistic intention, that is to talk about having sex in a way this is casual and associated with slang and low talk.64 This is not the same as Chonda Pierce’s use of the expression “to go parking” because they could no longer “enjoy every room in the house, if you know what I mean”. Pierce uses these as euphemisms that do not mask anything other than a description of sex.

Another point on this joke is that Anderson expresses an enjoyment of sex and such personal revelation is uncommon in clean humour. Of course his enjoyment is expressed in an oblique manner through the more cautious approach of expressing upset at being denied sexual activity by his wife. This also supports any traditional gender roles associated with sexual relationships that are promoted by the LDS church, and Christian culture more generally, where the female is constructed as having the obligation to control the sexual activity of the male through her modesty.65 However, Anderson later subverts this by joking that behind every man there is a powerful woman and behind every powerful woman is a lesbian, “I’m starting to think I am a lesbian. Because she is tough. And she won’t have sex with me”.66

Mike Anderson tells another joke that tests how explicit clean humour can be. Like many other religious comedians, Anderson tells jokes about his children. For example in the following joke:

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63 Allan and Burridge, Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language, 31–34.
64 Allan and Burridge, Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language, 39.
My youngest is three, she’s starting to talk a lot and that’s cool, but she can’t quite say her K’s and hard C’s. So it gets a little bit embarrassing in public. Like every time we see some cats she’s like “Looks Dad, titties!” [mimes looking, then looks very disappointed] “I don’t see any titties”. Apparently she’s just like her father. Always trying to pet the titties. 67

This joke contains more oblique wordplay but like the previous joke references both sex/sexual body parts as well as Anderson’s own personal interest in sex. Another controversial aspect of this joke, is the way that Anderson has used his child to make a sexual joke. He is in part laughing at his daughter’s inability to speak properly and her resulting unintentional humour. Childhood misinterpretations and silliness is a frequent and innocent feature of clean humour, what Donald Capps calls “kids say the darnest things” type of humour, a type of humour, argues Capps, that carries negligible social risk. 68 However, the actual nature of this joke is both sexual and challenging to one of the primary concerns of clean humour that I discussed above: protecting the innocence of children, especially with regards to sexual knowledge. If the focus of this joke was only on the daughter’s mispronunciations, then it would be unintentional dirty humour by virtue of its referent (breasts), but ultimately innocent. The punch line is what makes this joke challenging to clean humour boundaries. Anderson has used this childish mistake to carry a joke about the adults’ sexual enjoyment, and the mixing of the two is unusual and controversial. For many Christians and Mormons, and indeed the wider population in general, the associating of children with sexuality is unacceptable. 69

Anderson knows that performing jokes such as this one is risky. He goes through a process of self-censorship in relation to both his own personal standards as well as those of his audience. He described the process; “I’ll write a joke in my head and I’ll think ‘that’s kind of funny, but I don’t know if I should say it’. It’s not necessarily who’s going to see me but it’s like, now, I’m pretty active LDS and if I say this is that going to conflict with my standards?” 70

67 Mike Anderson, Wiseguys Comedy Club.
70 Johnson and Anderson, Interview, (2010).
above joke about his daughter is an example he gave for jokes that cause him conflict. He admitted that this is a joke that his wife would prefer him not to use and that he actively considers “who’s in the crowd tonight? Is there anyone I know? Is there anyone from the Ward?”

Comedians are very aware of the effects their jokes have on audiences. I take my final examples of controversial clean humour from Thor Ramsey’s set on Thou Shalt Laugh 3. During this set, Ramsey includes several bits that are clean sex jokes, although, like Mike Anderson and Chonda Pierce, they are controversial in the sense that they deal with sexuality directly and express Ramsey’s interest and enjoyment of sex.

Firstly, he describes his feelings and experiences of shopping in the lingerie store Victoria’s Secret:

That store makes me nervous. I don’t know about you, I gotta pace outside that store for ten or fifteen minutes before I get the courage to walk inside. Once I get inside I gotta walk around for ten or fifteen minutes before I get the courage to try anything on… I’m sweating it, it’s a confusing store. The lady helping me goes, “is your wife an A,B,C, or D?” Well I know she’s not failing! She actually asked me “what did you have in mind?” What did I have in mind? Ma’am, why do you think people shop here? What did I have in mind? Well, we’re Christians so I thought I’d get her a Miracle bra.

The producer of Thou Shalt Laugh 3 was involved in the selection of the material to be included in the show, and appreciated this joke. However, Ramsey does not perform this anymore because he felt that in general the Victoria’s Secret subject matter is too much for his audience to be comfortable with. The joke includes a punch line that turns on the element of surprise and incongruity where the expectation that Ramsey would be shopping for a woman is dashed as he says that he will try something on himself. Of course, in this context, where all the jokes have already been framed within the Christian worldview and

72 Truett Hancock, Thou Shalt Laugh 3 (Roserock Films, 2008).
73 Thor Ramsey, Interview 3, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (5 June 2010).
75 See Chapter Two, p.56-59.
76 See Chapter Four, p.92.
Ramsey’s heterosexual, marital sex life has been established, it is absurd to think that Ramsey would wear women’s underwear and so the thought is funny rather than anxiety producing.\textsuperscript{77}

This joke also includes a theological pun, playing on the name of a Victoria’s Secret brand of push up bra, “the Miracle bra”.\textsuperscript{78} The second bit I would like to discuss uses theological humour in addition to clean sex humour, sharpening its controversial edge further.

This brings me to the most controversial part of the program. I’m going to talk about Christians and their attitude to procreation. Now, kids, if you’re in grade school, procreation just means we’re ‘for creation’… One meaning of procreation, kids, is that you’re staying with Grandma…We can be a little uptight about this particular issue, which I don’t understand because theologically, we serve the God who created sex. That’s the God we serve. That’s where the whole phrase ‘God is good’ came from. God is good! [raises an eyebrow suggestively] All the time.

I was playing in a comedy club in Houston, Texas, years ago, with a friend who didn’t share my faith. And he was going off on about how prudish Christians can be, and I shared this verse from the Bible with him. This is from Proverbs Chapter Three, and I quote: “rejoice in the wife of your youth and let her breasts satisfy you always”.\textsuperscript{79} He could not believe that verse was in the Bible, I had it memorised because I am standing on the promises of God. That’s right, I am not just a hearer of the Word, I am a doer of the Word. And I love practical application; “Honey, let’s have a bible study!”

This passage contains several subjects that might be considered troubling for many Christians. It recognises the need to have a special category of sexual information for children, given the expectation that because \textit{Thou Shalt Laugh 3} is clean all its content should be safe for children. Ramsey acknowledges this, then exploits it as an opportunity to make humour out of the double meaning of “pro” and the euphemism “staying with Grandma”.

\textsuperscript{78} The bra is more correctly called “the Miraculous Bra”, but the joke would work the same. See www.victoriassecret.com. Accessed 24/4/13.
\textsuperscript{79} This verse is actually in Proverbs 5:18-19 “May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer – may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated by her love”. \textit{New International Version}. 
The association of sexuality with God’s creation is a bold move, seemingly one that might make Christians uncomfortable in its flirtation with dirty humour and blasphemy. However, as I argued in Chapter Four, blasphemous humour is humour that does not give God his full due by suggesting that he is anything less than almighty and perfect. I argue here that the first part of this joke does not meet this criteria because it emphasises quite strongly God’s magisterial position as Creator of everything, including sex. It emphasises that humanity serves him, and especially, the joke praises God for this particular aspect of Creation. Whilst the joke is rich in sexual innuendo, it counters it with the critique that Christians are in fact doing a disservice to God by denying that what he has made is “good”. There is cheekiness in Ramsey’s implication that he is standing on the promises of God because God promises satisfying sex. However, placed in the bigger theological picture that Ramsey himself as well as Thou Shalt Laugh 3 and clean religious humour in general presents, such tongue in cheek remarks are appropriate because they form part of the larger picture of “doing God’s Word”.

Whilst this joke satisfies my understanding of non-blasphemous humour, it still deals explicitly with sexuality. It is mitigated somewhat by the faith promoting messages contained in the joke’s promotion of sex as part of God’s good creation, although there is still the question of how to secure audience laughter over audience discomfort. One final example will further illustrate how Ramsey deals with this challenge:

My lovely wife and I, we did in vitro fertilisation. Six times! Now, if you’re not familiar with in vitro fertilisation, it’s just a scientific way to have babies, that’s not as fun…

People ask me what’s the difference between natural pregnancy and in vitro fertilisation … I use the analogy of a junior high school dance … Here is natural pregnancy as a junior high school dance: You’ve got a nicely decorated gymnasium, and over this side of the gym you have one eighth grade girl. Because they only let one girl come to the dance every month. Now on this side of the gym you have two billion eighth grade boys … then the band begins to play, they’re everywhere, they’re bouncing around, they’re trampling each other, many are killed or partially wounded, but not one idiot makes it over to ask her to dance. And even if you have a low student body count, you still have 500,000 morons who can’t find one girl! That’s natural pregnancy. And all this takes place under water by the way.

In vitro fertilisation works like this: you got the same thing, you got the nice junior high school dance. Now let’s say in this class they have thirty eighth grade girls. What they do is
they take twenty-six of the girls and they freeze them. Don’t worry their parents have signed permission slips. And then they put four girls out here on this side of the gym. And over here you have your two billion eighth grade boys, but you have a teacher take the boys by the hand, walk them over to the girls and say “now DANCE!” . And that’s how babies are made.

Ramsey has here employed strategies of clean sexual humour such as euphemism (by way of analogy) and through the framing of the joke within a narrative of marriage. Additionally, Ramsey understands that in addressing in vitro fertilisation (IVF) as a subject, there would always be Christians who would find that problematic. Ramsey “received flak” for this IVF joke specifically because of the sexual orientation of the material. He hypothesised that this was because the bit was illustrated by bringing a young man and a woman from the audience up on stage, which he says gave it a “different feel to what was intended”, suggesting that the visual and physical presence of a man and woman on stage made the material more sensitive and uncomfortable. To counter this, at times Ramsey has needed to enhance the religious framing of the joke, in which he takes the time to prepare the ground so his audience will accept that his joke is coming from an appropriate perspective. He explained:

Sometimes I actually have to state it: “we didn’t lose any eggs”, and that right away eliminates that concern for a lot of Christians. And we didn’t lose any eggs, it’s a long story, it’s not a funny story, but we wrestled with all that stuff. As Christians, if you believe that life happens at conception (most Christians take that point of view) then you have an issue with these fertilised eggs; what are you going to do with them now? So if I say [to the audience] we didn’t lose any eggs, ‘phew!’ they can rest easy listening to the rest of the story without sitting there having to judge me or be concerned about what I’m saying or what I’m teaching. “Oh, he’s just promoting something that shouldn’t be promoted”. So it gives them freedom in terms of permission to laugh. And that’s why I do state I’m against abortion at the beginning of that joke, because the thing I found about the Christian audience is that they have to know where you’re coming from. Then they feel it’s okay to laugh. Otherwise they’re conflicted; “I’m laughing now, am I promoting what he’s saying which I shouldn’t laugh at?” So there’s another level of depth even in laughing for them.

Guaranteeing a shared perspective is an important way that clean humour counteracts the offense of sexual humour. Ramsey says he can tell these jokes to audiences made up of

81 Ramsey, Interview 8, (2010).
married couples because of their shared experience (since this is, it is presumed, the only group that would be sexually active). However, this IVF joke remains “so touchy a subject” that Ramsey has, as of 2010, decided to remove it from his act for the sake of his continued career.

However, Ramsey argues that these jokes actually work best with Christians because of their sensitivities. He takes an almost Freudian/Relief theory perspective on their success; jokes about sex act as a release valve to relieve the pressure that surrounds the subject. Christian audiences are given permission to laugh via the dimmed lights of the theatre and the anonymity of the crowd, and this permission is especially liberating when the joke has been appropriately framed and Christian perspective affirmed. Ramsey suggests these jokes work for Christians in relation to the wider context of modern society in general. For Ramsey, comedy has lost its shock value amongst mainstream audiences and as a result it is difficult to make provocative comedy. However, in the Christian realm, the IVF bit for example, does not “hit as hard” with a secular audience because there is no shock value left. He states:

[The IVF bit] can work in a conservative Christian crowd because I’m edging along the lines of, you know, without actually coming out and talking about things in a graphic way. I’m still talking about sex, reproduction, things like that, but the repression makes that work. Whereas in a culture that’s not repressed at all, what can you do that’s subtle? You can’t be subtle anymore. Even if you look at some of the old school bits that people were doing that were considered racy at the time, the thing that worked was the repression of our culture. And my argument has always been that things like Playboy magazine and all that stuff owe their success to us repressed religious people, they really do. They can chide us all they want for our prudishness but if it weren’t for our prudishness their naughtiness wouldn’t work. The in vitro bit only works in an air of repression. It works, but still it’s a touchy bit.

This is an important observation, and demonstrates the intricacies and complexities that surround clean humour, specifically the balancing act between creating humour that is not offensive but is still funny. This tension is a common ingredient in humour, and acts as a reminder here of just how difficult it can be to analyse humour because it can simultaneously “work” and “be touchy”. For Ramsey, the increased level of potential offense works in favour

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82 See Chapter Two, p.55-56.
83 Ramsey, Interview 8, (2010).
of the humour, possibly because, in Freudian terms, there is a greater amount of psychic energy to be discharged through the laughter and hence a greater feeling of pleasure and relief.\textsuperscript{84} I have included the above examples of clean sexual humour to illustrate that although there are clearly common features that can be identified as clean humour, within that criteria, the degree of personal interpretation and willingness to push boundaries is arbitrary and variable, even for the one comedian. I will return to the tension between safe and challenging humour in greater depth in Chapter Six.

\textbf{Substitute Swearing}

Building on the above discussion of euphemism, the analysis now turns to the strategy of substitution, known variously as “substitute swearing”, “disguised swearing”, “non-swearing”, or even “almost curse-words”.\textsuperscript{85} At its simplest substitution occurs when swearing is deemed the necessary response to a situation but the actual obscene words are deemed too polluting so a replacement word is used instead. Keith Allan and Kate Burridge describe this as a euphemistic process where new words or expressions are used as an alternative to “dispreferred expressions”. Dispreferred expressions typically denote taboo topics, and the taboo terms associated with them are often avoided because their use is regarded as distasteful and potentially offensive to the hearer’s sensibilities. Some speakers claim that uttering the taboo words offends their own sensibilities.\textsuperscript{86} Uttering the words themselves is proof that the impurity of dirty language has crossed their boundary into their own body, as one Mormon blogger suggested “I think it’s evidence of corruption”.\textsuperscript{87}

Deborah Cameron has called the use of euphemism and other linguistic practices born of an urge to improve or ‘clean up’ language “verbal hygiene”.\textsuperscript{88} In Mormon parlance there are words like “fetch”, “flip”, or “freaking” as substitutes for “fuck” or “fucking”, while “scrud”

\textsuperscript{84} Freud, \textit{Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious}.


\textsuperscript{86} Allan and Burridge, \textit{Euphemism and Dysphemism}, 11.


\textsuperscript{88} Deborah Cameron, \textit{Verbal Hygiene} (London: Routledge, 1995), 1.
and “heck”, or even the elaborate “H-E-double hockey sticks” can be found in place of “shit” and “hell”. In some Christian cultures there are other expressions like “sugar” in place of “shit”. The words are different but they function similarly. In the same way that the above discussion suggested that dirty words have the same effect as physical exposure to a polluting substance; the words are inherently connected to what they signify. It could be argued that in this sense it does not really matter that the person has said “fetch” instead of “fuck”, the connotations are the same. According to one LDS blogger “what we have actually done is take the negative meaning behind the real words, and placed them onto these replacement words. Now I ask you, did we as Mormons just create a new culture of swearing?”

Similarly, another states “What all of these SSWs [substitute swear words] have in common is that they are replacing a profane or vulgar expression – but not hiding what is really meant – or interpreted by the hearer. You might innocently say “Oh my gosh”, but that may not be what my brain registers. Especially if the word is a close SSW”. Brad Stine, an evangelical Christian stand-up comic, discusses his motivations behind substitute swearing, and he argues that the manner in which words (and in the following case, signals and gestures) are deemed ‘bad’ is an arbitrary decision made because it is something humans need to do but Christians are ‘not allowed’ to do. He explains to his audience:

And as a Christian, [cursing] was just something I was not allowed to do. You know as Christians we grow up and we’re not supposed to curse. And that’s good, it’s good to watch your mouth. But the problem is it slips out now and again. Because you’re human … The truth of the matter is, it’s not fair that we don’t have curse words. Christians should have their own curse words. Because I don’t care how holy you are, you slam your hand in a car door and something’s coming out of your mouth. … Nobody has to learn how to curse. You have to learn how not to …

It’s so natural to curse that we even invented a hand signal so that if I’m cursing you in the car I can let you in on it. We decided that the middle finger meant that I’m cursing you. We just made that up. I feel sorry for the middle finger … The middle finger isn’t bad we just decided it was. Of course sometimes I get angry and I have to watch myself, trying to be a good Christian boy, someone cuts me off in traffic I want to give them the old finger, but I’m not allowed to. I figured it out though, I just give them the whole hand.

‘Hey! Guess!’ [holds up all fingers]. That way I can get out of it.

‘Hey are you cursing me?’

[Holds up first finger] ‘No, I’m saying you’re number one, what’s the big deal?’

Stine manages to not curse the other driver directly by hiding the middle finger curse under other, non-insulting gestures such as holding up the first finger. The other person is spared the insult, and Stine has been a “good Christian” by not actually cursing, although, as the bloggers argued above, his hostility can still be felt in the motivations behind the substitute.

Swearing behaviour amongst religious communities is naturally varied, but its proliferation in LDS culture makes it a frequent target for humour. This is illustrated in a scene from the Mormon film *Sons of Provo*, a mockumentary about a fictional boy band in Utah, appropriately named “Everclean”. The scene has the band’s manager Grayson lose his cool and break out into a string of “non-profanities” calling scout children “freakin’ fetchers” and asking “are you flipping kidding me?” and finally exclaiming “Don’t be such a butt!” Everyone in the room is silent. The members of the band are deeply offended by Grayson’s outburst and suffer a deep sense of public shame. The following scene shows the band discussing their offense at Grayson’s “potty mouth”. Will claims that “Justin Timberlake’s manager would never throw out language like that”. Danny asks whether “saying ‘flip’ isn’t wrong? Cause he doesn’t mean ‘flip’ when he’s saying it”. The band ultimately decide to fire Grayson because “We’re choosing the right … he just has a huge potty mouth that he can’t control”. The reaction is extreme, but it is comically exaggerated to poke fun at their sensitivities and the extent that Mormons police themselves.

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Sons of Provo features Everclean performing a number of ‘hits’ that are based on various Mormon religio-culture themes. This includes songs such as “Word of Wizzum” (about the LDS dietary code The Word of Wisdom), “Love Me, But Don’t Show Me” (about not having sex before marriage) and the song most relevant here “Dang, Fetch, Oh My Heck!”, which parodies this Mormon tendency to use substitute swear words. The song is upbeat, catchy and performed with choreographed dancing, and a stage set that includes an oversized toilet to emphasise that using these words makes one a “potty-mouth”. For example consider the following abridgement of the song’s lyrics (words in brackets are samples of male and female voices):

CHORUS
Dang, fetch, oh, my heck
What the holy scud?
H-E-double hockey sticks,
That’s frickin’, flippin’ crud

[oh, my heck – that’s a bunch of garbage!]
[flippin’ crud. Freakin’ fetchin’ flippin’]
[oh my heck, such a potty mouth!]

If ya cut me off drivin’, spill you Coke upon my shoes
There’s no telling what my mouth might say.
I’ll break out a string of non-profanities to make your ears curl
In my religiously edited way.

If my football team is losing, if a brick falls on my head
If you go “BOO!” and you catch me unawares.
My reaction will display a certain G-rated tone
So as not to offend the Man Upstairs.

…I can’t believe you said that. You’re such a potty-mouth! x 3
[Okay, Mr Poopie-Pants]

CHORUS

[Holy Heck!]
[Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!]
[Ouch my ears!]\(^{95}\)

“Dang, Fetch, Oh, My Heck” is an extension of the themes from the above scene, an exaggeration of the shock and outrage that is caused by ‘real’ swearing and applying it to examples of Mormon ‘fake’ swearing. The song is particularly interesting here because the song makes explicit the religious motivation behind substitute swearing (“religiously edited”

\(^{95}\) Swenson, Sons of Provo (2004).
and “so as not to offend the Man Upstairs”), although it is Mormons themselves that are depicted in the song as so upset by word like “scrud” and “darn it” that their “ears curl”.

Like the satirical scenes in Sons of Provo, Brad Stine uses the issue of cursing to critique the hypersensitivity of believers. He expounds to his audience his thoughts on Christians and language:

See it’s about words, and words are very important, I believe in words. But sometimes we make them bad, that actually weren’t. Jesus used words that we wouldn’t allow to be said in church. Did you know that? He called the Pharisees “a generation of vipers”. What does that mean? Son of a snake. You’re a son of a snake! We have a similar term in the United States of America. We do. We can call somebody a son of a dog. Now if you don’t think it’s a curse word, at least it’s an insult. Saying you come from an animal.

See now we got a problem – either Jesus cursed, which makes him a sinner, which means he’s not God. Or sin isn’t always what we think it is. Christianity isn’t as black and white as we’ve tried to make it. You gotta remember, our Bible is filled with words that you wouldn’t say to a kid. It’s filled with concepts that you wouldn’t want to say to a child. Because it’s for adults too. Christians have got to stop acting like a bunch of babies.⁹⁶

However, it is not necessarily the case that such reactions are meaningless overreactions. There is an alternative argument to the idea that substitute swearing is simply replacing a “bad” word with an “acceptable” word. Cameron points out that “the most fundamental desire to which verbal hygiene appeals is the desire for order” and that linguistic law and order acts “as a surrogate for the real thing”.⁹⁷ Thus with substituted swearing, it is not actually the words used that matter, rather it is the rejection of foul language and the subsequent act of censorship that work to establish the order necessary to reduce potential taboo transgression. By actively choosing to say “flip” when one stubs one’s toe or to call someone “a freaking fetcher” when suffering road rage, the “swearer” is also actively re-establishing the boundary between the acceptable and unacceptable. They know that “fetch” means “fuck”, but they have simultaneously ensured that it does not mean “fuck” because “fuck” has been rejected in the act of selection. It is a symbolic act, and can be compared here

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⁹⁷ Cameron, Verbal Hygiene, 218.
to the Islamic purification rituals that involve a washing of the body that is not directly related to the removal of dirt.\textsuperscript{98} It is also important that all substitute swear words are devoid of bodily references and so are not a vehicle for the same kinds of body pollution in the way that foul language is. In the act of using a substitute word, the comedian identifies themself as an advocate of clean humour, and this identification is more important than the actual linguistic associations of the word chosen.

**Clean Humour and Identity**

The embrace of certain types of language is deeply connected to individual and community identity, as Richard K. Blot states “language is inescapably a badge of identity”.\textsuperscript{99} Furthermore, Giselinde Kuipers argues that humour is a form of communication embedded in social relationships.\textsuperscript{100} As can be seen in *Sons of Provo* and the jokes of Brad Stine, the rejection of cursing and, in a separate step, the embrace of culturally devised substitutes, is a way to tease and provoke but it also flags to others one’s religio-cultural belonging. In the first section of this chapter, I addressed the concerns over dirty humour’s ability to break down boundaries around the individual Christian body. The remainder of this chapter will consider how clean humour is used to signify belonging to a particular religious group. As I argued above, liking clean humour is not in itself a religious preference, however, many Christians and Mormons make their humour creation or consumption choices based on whether or not the humour is clean.\textsuperscript{101} The term “clean” is especially used as a marker for Christian (more so than Mormon) identity. The term harnesses the rhetorical power of the positive associations that the word has come to connote: purity, morality, safety, innocence and family-friendly. It acts as a marketing shorthand, many Christian comedians and humourists are marketed as ‘clean’ in addition to being ‘funny’; indeed, often their funniness is dependent upon their cleanliness. Importantly, religious comedians act as an alternative

\textsuperscript{101} See the discussion of my field work surveys in Chapter Three, p.79-80.
choice to mainstream entertainment, something which is often perceived to be fraught with danger.\(^\text{102}\)

**Dirty Humour in Mainstream Comedy**

Thor Ramsey opines that “there is a whole generation now that are vulgar for the sake of being vulgar. And all their language does is show a lack of creativity”.\(^\text{103}\) Amongst many Christians, both performers and audiences, there is a belief that mainstream comedy is almost always dirty, that is, it relies solely on sexual humour, toilet humour, violence, degradation and swearing, or what George Carlin famously called “The Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television”, although the list of unacceptable words is certainly longer for clean humour advocates.\(^\text{104}\) Since many Christians and Mormons find such a focus to be inappropriate, religious humour can in part be identified as a move away from mainstream types of humour that are regarded not only as inappropriate, offensive or simply unfunny but also as lazy, uncreative and predictable. Ramsey described one experience he had working in mainstream clubs in which the comedian he was scheduled to follow did a bit “literally about having sex with a toaster” and “the crowd ate it up”.\(^\text{105}\) Ramsey was disappointed with the comedian’s joke because the level of humour was so low-brow but also because it was unchallenging and “juvenile” and symptomatic of the mainstream culture. Ramsey, as well as the other religious comedians I worked with during this research, expressed concern at the tendency for mainstream comedians to rely on “filth” to get laughs. Whether or not this is an accurate description of popular comedy is less important in terms of clean humour than the perception that secular or mainstream comedy has this tendency.\(^\text{106}\)

However, it is worth mentioning one other example from my field research. At the Comedy Store club in Los Angeles, one show was a line-up of several comedians doing short acts.\(^\text{107}\)


\(^\text{103}\) Thor Ramsey, Interview 5, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (6 June 2010).

\(^\text{104}\) George Carlin, ‘Seven Words You Can Never Say On Television’, *Class Clown* (Atlantic/Wea, 1972). These were *shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits.*

\(^\text{105}\) Ramsey, Interview 5 (2010).


\(^\text{107}\) The Comedy Store, Los Angeles (June 10, 2010).
This gave a reasonable sample of a variety of performers, and every single comedian except one relied heavily on jokes that involved sexual content, scatological content, swearing, and other humour that may be deemed outside the boundaries of clean such as violent or hostile jokes. The exception was a comedian named Argus Hamilton. His act was indistinguishable in terms of comedic delivery, but his act contained no swearing. Later in his act he included two comments that indicated he could potentially be a religious person; firstly mentioning his attendance at church and secondly a joke that when swimming with sharks “it’s impossible to find an atheist in that situation”. I do not mention this anecdote as any sure proof of an immutable correlation between no swearing and religious belief. Rather it speaks to the relevance of using the absence of swearing or jokes about sex and scatology as an indicator for clean humour and consequently potential for religious belief. After all, as a counter example, the well-known comedian Jerry Seinfeld does not swear in his act but not because of any religious motivation.

**Clean Humour as an Identity Marker**

The most obvious way that clean humour marks its adherents as a group is by distinguishing themselves from this “dirty” mainstream. Edward Croft Dutton studied evangelical university students and argued that they swear infrequently, idiosyncratically and not strongly, and that this use of language formed part of their witness evangelism but also helped to form their identity as a group, specifically in contrast to those who did swear and were not members of the group. Dutton’s analysis focused closely on the evangelism of the groups, but he has some relevant points in regard to the ways that Christian groups use certain behaviours to set themselves apart and to maintain a sense of purity. Dutton’s argument is also more widely applicable than just to substitute swearing, although this is possibly one of the most clear and concrete examples. It applies to the features of clean humour in general, specifically avoidance of sexual and scatological humour as well as swearing. Dutton contends that the

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108 Argus Hamilton, The Comedy Store (June 10, 2010)
109 See Chapter One, p.17.
111 Dutton, “‘Bog Off Dog Breath! You’re Talking Pants!’"
lack of swearing and sex/toilet talk brings the group closer to the centre of power (which from their perspective is God) because it maintains boundaries and retains purity, giving a sense of superiority because members of the group are purer than non-Christians, something that is a powerful witness.\(^{112}\) He writes “in order to demonstrates how close they are to God, group members must be pure and this includes not using words like “cunt” and “fuck”.\(^{113}\) Importantly, these behaviours act as a community of practice and provide social cohesion.

The swearing (or non-swearing) behaviours that Dutton witnessed are expressions of what Gary Alan Fine has called an “idioculture”.\(^{114}\) An idioticure is essentially a small group culture, a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and customs by which a small group of people defines itself and enables its members to share a sense of belonging and cohesion and construct a shared reality and sense of meaning.\(^{115}\) Fine says that in an idioticure “members recognise that they share experiences, and these experiences can be referred to with the expectation that they will be understood by other members”.\(^{116}\) He argues that within these groups, joking is an example of such an idioticure, what he specifically calls “joking cultures”.\(^{117}\) For Fine, joking creates comfort in a group and maintains group relationships by building commonalities. It is embedded in cultural context and requires individuals who are aware of and considerate of each other’s identity.\(^{118}\) He writes “it is not just that the parties know each other, but they share a history and an identity and can understand joking references”.\(^{119}\)

Clean humour in itself is not an identity. One can of course be a fan of clean humour, but this is applying a social emphasis to a genre of humour that can be categorised by common characteristics. Similarly, clean humour fans are not necessarily one single group, they do not know each other and their numbers (if indeed they can be calculated at all) are large in

\(^{118}\) Fine and De Soucey, ‘Joking Cultures: Humor Themes as Social Regulation in Group Life’, 2–3.
comparison to the types of small groups that Fine studied (such as Little League Baseball
teams and groups of co-workers), although they are small in comparison to other mainstream
popular culture markets. Rather, what I am suggesting is that once large numbers of
individuals come together as an audience for a comedy show or a film screening of clean
humour, they become a small group with an idioculture because they share history and
identity and can understand joking references. Clean humour becomes an idioculture because
it is an expression of religious identity, it is used to exhibit ‘Christian-ness’ or ‘Mormon-
ness’ and distinguish its enthusiasts from other, mainstream culture. As I argued above, clean
humour can be an act of separation, distinction and boundary setting that satisfies Robert
Freed Bales description of the tendency of small groups towards “developing a subculture
that is protective for their members and, is allergic, in some respects, to the culture as a
whole”.120 This lends a sense of cohesiveness to clean humour performers and their
audiences, who share values that they view as distinct and reflective of not only their tastes,
but of their morals and their social norms, all of which are not perceived to be part of wider,
secular, “dirty” culture. Again, clean humour is not in itself religious, nor an identity, but it is
characteristic of religious identity. Recall the majority of my survey respondents identified as
religious and admitted to looking for clean humour as a factor in their humour choices and
that that choice was informed by their beliefs.

A clear example of clean humour as a marker of identity was whimsically expressed by Thor
Ramsey as the need for Christian comedians to market themselves to the “Soccer Moms”.
Ramsey has a background working in mainstream comedy clubs, and at first thought that
there was a market for comedy that was edgy but with a Christian worldview. After
experiencing the Christian subculture he came to realise he was mistaken and that such a
market does not exist. He said “The Christian subculture for better or worse, is dominated by
‘soccer moms’. I’m only using it as a marketing term, not using it disparagingly, not using it
to demean them. It’s just that the mothers in the Christian world tend to shop at Christian
bookstores where the products are sold, they tend to be the ones purchasing these things, so
they’re the ones you’re really appealing to”.121 Ramsey has identified the primary economic
powers behind Christian popular entertainment, but he also notes that as the primary
economic powers, these Soccer Moms also have the power over the content. This means that

120 Robert Freed Bales, Personality and Interpersonal Behavior (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1970),
121 Ramsey, Interview 3 (2010).
“if you’re trying to build an audience, that’s your audience. And if you want to have a career, you’ve got to give them what they want”. According to Ramsey, the Soccer Moms want “absolutely family friendly”. Ramsey even goes so far as to say “they don’t want any social issues. I was under the mistaken assumption that you could talk about anything from a Christian worldview. But that is not the case”. For the Soccer Moms, here a shorthand for clean humour audiences in general, family-friendly, non-offensive humour is part of their understanding of being a Christian in modern consumer society.

Conclusion

Clean humour is more than humour that is not dirty. Clean humour is a response to dirty humour, but it is also humour that bolsters Christian and Mormon identity by reinforcing values and morals that are drawn from Christian and Mormon religious beliefs and cultural standards. For many Christians and Mormons, mainstream humour is inappropriate in part because it is perceived to be dirty, full of swearing and offensive sexual and scatological material. Such humour is offensive to the Christian body both individually and collectively as it violates those boundaries that are constructed in service to the maintenance of purity. Dirty humour causes symbolic offense, but its effects are as if those offended had come into physical contact with the offending effluvia. Christians and Mormons who are offended by swear words, toilet humour or sex jokes feel morally, and by symbolic extension, physically polluted.

The result is in general the avoidance of entertainment that contains dirty content. Clean humour can be thought of as humour that does not contain these elements, however, as I have argued above, this is not as straightforward as proponents of clean humour rhetoric make it appear. Humour often relies on the oddities of the everyday, and for Christians and Mormons as well as any other group, the daily reality of the body and all its associations is a source of amusement. One particularly challenging subject is sex and sexuality. In clean humour then, there is the contradiction between the preservation of boundaries around the pure religious body and the human desire to laugh at sex and bodily functions. Some clean comedians have ways of incorporating sexual content into their routines or scripts through strategies that

122 Ramsey, Interview 3 (2010).
123 Ramsey, Interview 3 (2010).
minimise the direct exposure to the polluting material, what I have above called “clean sex jokes”. This is most commonly through clear framing of the material within an appropriate religious and moral context (in particular situating any joke within the context of marriage), as well as heavy use of euphemism. Euphemism is especially developed in the clean humour emphasis on substitute swearing. This is both a source of humour and a target of satire.

The key to understanding clean humour is not simply knowing what it is not or does not include, because sometimes clean humour does include those features. Clean humour is important in understanding religious humour as a whole because it forms part of what makes religious humour appropriate, according to the groups’ own standards. Appropriate humour is clean, but clean humour is also appropriate because, like the theological humour discussed in Chapter Four, it expresses the Christian or Mormon worldview and is ultimately faith affirming. Clean also reinforces identification with and belonging to a specific religious group. Sex and swearing can be made clean, and hence enjoyable, by adhering to the conditions set out by the groups’ moral and cultural standards. This is less about excluding offensive subjects altogether and more about being able to incorporate those subjects into a safe, faith affirming comedy experience.
Chapter Six
Appropriate Humour III:
Safe and Subversive Humour

Introduction

If you’re really an artist, you seek to use comedy as a tool. So how do you use that tool to confront a world that says no confrontation?

- Johnny Biscuit

The potential for humour to be used as a “tool of confrontation” makes it of particular concern for Christians and Mormons who can be very wary of humour that they perceive to be hostile or subversive. They reject humour that is aggressive, mean-spirited or degrading and so often the humour they create is designed to completely lack these characteristics. It is intended to be safe, uplifting, and loving of one’s neighbour. Yet humour is often at its most potent when it makes a target of the behaviours and foibles of a group or individual and there is plenty of religious humour that harnesses this power of humorous critique. As a result there are two conflicting attitudes within Christian and Mormon communities; firstly, that humour should be safe and non-tendentious or “nice”, and secondly, that it should be challenging and socially corrective. This chapter argues that *hostile and subversive humour is inappropriate when it insults and harms but is appropriate when it corrects and improves.* How it is used depends on whether humour is thought to protect believers or to challenge them, but it is always designed to make them “better” Christians and Mormons. Thus religious humour is perhaps never more delicate than when believers hold it up as a mirror to reflect back on their religious communities because it balances precariously between being insulting and reformatory. This chapter considers these two approaches to appropriate religious humour. An examination of examples of religious humour reveals that what constitutes “hostile” and “non-hostile” – that is, inappropriate and appropriate – is extremely open and varied. However, at times hostile and subversive humour can be used. Firstly, I will

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1 Johnny Biscuit, Interview 2, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (16 June 2010).
argue that some religious humour avoids potential offence by ensuring the comedy does not attack, mock or degrade, and hence it is safe. However, by virtue of this concern about safety, often this kind of religious humour is less effective as a piece of comedy entertainment. I will demonstrate this through an analysis of the first and only Christian sitcom, *Pastor Greg* (2005). Secondly, I will argue that there is another alternative kind of religious humour that endorses humour that pushes boundaries and is deliberately and enthusiastically satirical and subversive. However, the key to what makes these kinds of humour qualify as religious humour is that the underlying motivation is not to harm or attack but to critique aspects of the Church and religious community in order to make religious individuals stronger, more faithful and authentic in their faith. This chapter will discuss the socially corrective form of religious humour through the stand-up comedy of Christian comedian Brad Stine, followed by an analysis of subversive religious humour as found in a selection of cartoons published in the liberal LDS magazine *Sunstone*.

**Hostile Humour**

Hostility is perhaps an unusual quality to attribute to a social practice that for the most part is intended to be enjoyable and entertaining. However, it is not just Christians and Mormons who are aware of humour’s dark side. Most people have experience of jokes at their expense or jokes that rely on hurtful stereotypes. Some groups even share a reputation of humourlessness with religious people, for example feminists. A branch of humour studies is devoted to the ethics of humour, or in other words, “when is it wrong to laugh?” Such approaches consider situations where humour is used to reinforce social prejudice and to marginalise disadvantaged individuals and groups. There are certainly times when it is collectively agreed that it is wrong to laugh, and although I would argue this is very often

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socially constructed (it is generally acknowledged that one does not laugh at a funeral for example), each situation is also uniquely assessed by the individual as to whether laughter is right or wrong (it is entirely possible to laugh at a funeral as well, even if you are the only one laughing).

Of greatest concern, however, is not where or when the humour is occurring. This is not what makes it hostile. Hostile humour is essentially about the sentiments contained in the joke. What is meant by hostile humour in this study is, in a general sense, humour that in Freud’s terms is always tendentious. In other words humour that seeks to wound, insult, degrade, make fun of, exploit, oppress or is otherwise motivated by a malicious intent. The clearest and most often cited cases of these types of jokes are usually categorised as sexist, racist, and homophobic, as well as sick or black humour. I would also suggest that hostile jokes can equally be targeted at any individual based on personal characteristics in order to provoke laughter from that individual’s discomfort, for example jokes targeted at a person’s physical appearance or level of intelligence. Whether the humour targets a group or an individual, and whether the butt of the joke is present or not, it is usually the case that the content of the joke is a primary factor in determining its level of aggression.

Hostility is an emotionally-charged expression of aggression, and insults and outward attacks are for the most part socially (or indeed even legally) reprimanded. The difficulty with humour is that by its very nature it plays with truth and meaning, and as Berys Gaut states “it is not answerable to the ethical constraints that rule serious discourse, and is often at its most effective when it subverts our customary responses”. Hence it is unpredictable, and most importantly can be exonerated (or at least an attempt to exonerate can be made) by claiming “just joking”, a phrase that, in theory, magically dissipates any hostility or offence intended

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7 It is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider more unspoken kinds of hostility, where the content of the joke may not be as hostile as its tone or more subtle implications that are conveyed in body language and facial expression, for example ‘snide’ remarks or sarcasm.


by the joker. In practice this phrase is as effective as the individual or group decides it to be at that moment. For Christians and Mormons, the humorous intent is not always enough to compensate for the hostile sentiments contained in the joke.

One issue that humour presents to the ethically minded is one of empathy and identification with the butt of the joke, or in a sense the ‘distance’ between the joker/audience and the subject. It becomes a question of how we respond to those sentiments contained in the joke. The more closely one identifies with the object of humour, the more one feels the brunt of the joke’s hostility. Henri Bergson classically argued that for a person to be amused by something, they must have an absence of feeling, what he called a “momentary anaesthesia of the heart”. This means that to laugh at something, or specifically, someone, is to have no relationship to them, no empathy for them, nor any sense of identification with them. This means that the feelings of aggression are in no way experienced by the laugher in solidarity with the butt of the joke. But there is an additional layer; the audience is not hearing the joke in a vacuum devoid of feeling altogether, for if they felt nothing the humour would likely have no effect. Jean Harvey argues that the term ‘audience’ for the person or group hearing and laughing at the joke is a misnomer because “a peculiar feature of acts of humour is that there is not much room for genuine bystanders. The telling of the joke calls for a response…To laugh at the joke is to be involved”. Harvey argues those who laugh at the joke align themselves with the joke teller. She calls these laughers “secondary agents”, and they “give weight to the act by endorsing it”. There are also those who do not laugh, and in doing so are giving a vote of repudiation and disassociating with the joke teller.

So while the secondary agent may not identify with the butt of the joke personally, they are still experiencing some kind of emotion with regards to the ethics of the content of the joke. For those that do laugh, Gaut states that “we often let our guard down where humour is concerned, and reflection may reveal that we are doing more than imagining the world from

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an odious perspective: we may discover that this perspective is really our own”.15 This is an idea that is more fully explored by Ronald De Sousa, who claims that:

in contrast to the element of wit, the phthonic element in a joke requires endorsement. It does not allow of hypothetical laughter. The phthonic makes us laugh only insofar as the assumptions on which it is based are attitudes actually shared. Suspension of disbelief in the situation can and must be achieved for the purposes of the joke; suspensions of attitudes cannot be.16

The enjoyment of phthonic humour – humour that endorses an element of malice – is directly related to one’s attitude about the target, therefore, De Sousa would suggest, in order to find a sexist joke truly funny one needs to be sexist in that they hold sexist attitudes, whether conscious or not. He says that such attitudes cannot be suspended, therefore, such jokes can never be hypothetically funny, only actually funny because they resonate with some deeply held attitudes about the subject. De Sousa’s argument has been questioned, but it is an interesting point for my purposes because it implies a direct link between jokes and moral behaviour, something which is of great concern to religious communities.17

**Christian and LDS Perspectives: Loving Your Neighbour**

Many Christians and Mormons would agree with De Sousa’s assertion that laughing at certain jokes betrays that those attitudes are held by the amused. Theologian Robert C. Roberts also sees the correlation between what one laughs at and personality. He states:

we all know about spiritually dubious senses of humour: humour can be malicious, racist, sacrilegious, sexist, “sick”, silly, and trivial; and we might suspect that people who enjoy these in a big way tend to be malicious, racist, sacrilegious, sexist, “sick”, silly, and trivial people. If a sense of humour is a Christian virtue, it should have some special features in consequence of its fitting into the Christian personality.18

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16 Ronald De Sousa, ‘When Is It Wrong to Laugh?’, 240.
As I have been arguing, it can be believed that to laugh at hostile or subversive humour is to admit that one supports, or at the very least does not openly oppose, its sentiments. For Christians and Mormons however, this not only reflects badly on them as a moral person, but it reflects badly on their behaviour as a follower of Jesus Christ. Jesus emphasised two commandments; firstly to love God and secondly to love your neighbour.\(^{19}\) Paul also instructs that “Love does no harm to a neighbour”.\(^{20}\) Additionally, for Mormons, God also despises hatefulfulness towards others, stating “And let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbour”.\(^{21}\) Laughing at your neighbour with a view to insult or demean them transgresses these scriptural directives. Evangelical minister Leslie B. Flynn even linked hostile humour to sadism, “Enjoyment of another’s sufferings, either in the ancient cruelty of the Roman arena or in modern rough horseplay, is not humour but sadism”.\(^{22}\)

As I discussed in Chapter Three, along with swearing and dirty humour, some Christian and Mormon humourists claim that the most offensive thing about mainstream secular comedy is that it is based solely on attacking and insulting others. As a result, religious humour often tries to distinguish itself by restoring a more biblical approach to comedy, where love, or at least the avoidance of unkindness, is a motivating factor. Pastor Flynn suggests that “the kindliness of humour demands mildness in the misfortunes we laugh at”.\(^{23}\) This is the attitude that motivated Thor Ramsey to remove a joke that insulted the authors of the Left Behind series (1995-2007) of apocalyptic novels from his routine because he had received feedback from Christian audiences that it was “just plain mean”.\(^{24}\) In another case the director of the LDS comedy film The Singles Ward (2002) rejected the opportunity to produce another film because he felt the material was “mean-spirited”.\(^{25}\)


\(^{20}\) Romans 13:10, New International Version.

\(^{21}\) Zechariah 8:17, The Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981).


\(^{23}\) Flynn, Serve Him With Mirth, 16.

\(^{24}\) Thor Ramsey, Interview 1, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (5 June 2010).

\(^{25}\) Kurt Hale, Interview, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (16 June 2010).
Discomfort with Subversion

Appropriate humour is rooted in the ‘love your neighbour’ sentiment but is often practically translated into an avoidance of anything political or radical. Johnny Biscuit says that, for example, joking about the authoritarian nature of the LDS church is a “Live Wire! Live Wire!” Religious humour has an uncomfortable relationship with subversion because of the way in which religion closely forms personal and group identity. When a joke is made, the difference between making fun of people and making fun of God – that is, blaspheming – can be unclear and potentially explosive. This section considers some reasons why religious people may be uncomfortable when humour is subversive through the work of the psychologist Vassilis Saroglou.

Saroglou argues that religion negatively affects humour creation and appreciation, that is, it is a personality trait of religious people to have a low propensity for humour. Another of his studies suggests that this is because “components substantial to humour as well as many personality traits related to sense of humour are, respectively, prohibited by, and related in an opposite direction to, religion”. For Saroglou, humour is inherently subversive and, since religious people hate subversion, they are also adverse to humour, both socially and psychologically. According to Saroglou, the religious personality is close-minded and may be dogmatic, intolerant of ambiguity and submissive to authority. He states that religion itself is animated by the need for meaning, order and closure, control and self-mastery, as well as a predilection to conservatism and risk-avoidance. On the contrary, humour presupposes recognition and enjoyment of incongruity, the questioning of norms and authority, and is associated with a high need for play or risk and a low need for conscientiousness and closure.

Sarolgou’s position is overly simplistic, and these wholesale descriptions attribute too much conservatism to religion on the one hand, and too much subversion and freedom to humour

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26 Johnny Biscuit, Interview 1, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (16 June 2010).
on the other. As I will discuss in due course, humour can be quite tame and religion sharply subversive. The complexity is lost if a religious relationship with humour is conceived of as a monolithic picture that has the religious person (who in these studies is clearly Christian) confused and unimpressed by all humour in general because it threatens the order they have so meticulously attempted to preserve with their “obsessional personality traits”. This image says little about giving over to God’s will, or spontaneous mystical experiences and religious practices that do not necessarily focus on self-mastery or the rejection of ambiguity. It also ignores the history of political and social activism amongst Christians, many of whom may be quite open to risk, spontaneity or challenge to authoritarianism. Saroglou provides a shallow interpretation of the role of religion in the lives of believers when he expresses that “it is intriguing that religion is connected to personality so deeply that it seems to reach even one’s own sense of humour”. One wonders at this surprise, when his own studies have taken religion to be a quantifiable component of personality, one that, according to his own conclusions may be influential enough to prevent the religious individual appreciating or creating humour in general.

Even as his reader takes into account the specific, preliminary and experimental nature of the studies, the overall conclusion he draws (that religiousness may be negatively associated with sense of humour) is exposed as a generalisation in his concluding request: “Finally, we ask people who will react to this article by insisting they know religious people with a good sense of humour, to think twice: it is possible that religious people may have a good sense of humour despite their religiosity; and not necessarily because of it”. Even when presented with evidence to suggest that there are in fact religious people with a good sense of humour, religion is never allowed to be an actively creative influence on humour, instead it can only be a stumbling block for the personality to overcome. In others words, he is claiming a causal relationship that flows in only one direction, where religion may cause humourlessness but not humour. Yet taking my above criticisms into account and considering that his conclusions do not apply indiscriminately, there are elements in Saroglou’s work that help to clarify certain tendencies of Christian and Mormon humour, namely the preference for “clean” humour and non-hostile, non-subversive humour. Saroglou argues only for one type of

30 Saroglou, “Does Religion Affect Humour Creation?”, 44.
31 Saroglou, “Humour Appreciation”, 151.
religious humour, that is the safe, conservative, gentle ‘rib tickling’ type that will be seen in *Pastor Greg*.

**Safe Religious Humour: Pastor Greg**

Greg Robbins, creator, director and star of the Christian sitcom *Pastor Greg* recounted that “I once read an interview with John Travolta where he said that he enjoyed playing bad guys because there were no boundaries for the characters; they had no moral compass. I think that’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard”.\(^{33}\) For Robbins the most distressing element is that there are no moral boundaries, something that for Travolta and Hollywood in general is a benefit and a creative challenge. But for Robbins and other Christians in the entertainment industry the lack of moral boundaries and guidelines is a problem, something that takes away from the quality and purpose of entertainment and importantly something to be rectified. For Christians there is a sense of frustration with the inappropriateness of available entertainment “because you just can’t relax watching this steady stream of sin, [so] you turn off the television. There has got to be better entertainment that does not wound your spirit, but refreshes it instead”.\(^{34}\)

There are indeed attempts to create such refreshing viewing. The challenge for religious entertainment (or its related but distinct cousin, entertainment that is not religious but acceptable by religious standards) is to find a balance between unbounded freedom and absolute restriction. This is particularly difficult when it comes to comedy entertainment, given the fluidity of humour and its uncertain relationship to boundaries. Lockyer and Pickering describe this in terms of a spectrum where “excessive contentiousness produces offence instead of humour, and excessive politeness produces boredom”.\(^{35}\) I argue that in many cases, the Christian and Mormon apprehension over the first problem results in a tendency towards the second. *Pastor Greg* is an important but little known example of this tendency.


Greg Robbins describes his intentions for *Pastor Greg* as both an alternative to the broken nature of secular television and a beneficial experience in its own right. He says:

> I want this to be different from commercial television. Most shows try to gain an audience by including sexual innuendos and put-downs. I have seen commercials that are so sexually provocative it makes me sad. I’d rather gain ratings because we have fun stories, great characters you enjoy, and receive an uplifting message.\(^{36}\)

This uplifting message is of course extrapolated out of the Christian message of redemption through Jesus Christ. *Pastor Greg* then is an expression of two Christian concerns; firstly, that the entertainment is safe and free from offensive elements, and secondly that it is uplifting. The following analysis considers whether these two concerns are focused on so intensely that they are ultimately to the detriment of the humour.

*Pastor Greg* is promoted as the first and only Christian sitcom, with the explicitly religious tagline “Proof that God has a Sense of Humour”. The series was co-produced by Uplifting Entertainment and Cornerstone Television, both Christian production companies, and first screened on Trinity Broadcasting Network in 2003. The show ran for three seasons. In this section I will discuss a sample of the show from the first four episodes of the first season. Greg Robbins plays Greg, a reformed wild child whose life of drinking and womanising landed him in prison for the night, where he read the Bible and became a Christian. After graduating from seminary, his first calling is as Pastor to the old-fashioned Merlin Church, where his casual dress, laid back style and unconventional ways stir things up and challenge the church staff and the congregation to grow in their understanding of what it means to be a Christian. This could be read as “mild” subversion of the congregation’s traditions and expectations, but it is used primarily as a means of setting up equally mild conflict that has guaranteed resolution by the end of each episode when the subversion is revealed as only superficial, for example what he wears is only a minor distraction from his more important commitment to God. Each episode focuses on the “madcap” adventures and mishaps that come with the job of running a church. Each episode has a theme that forms the moral, or lesson, of the episode, such as “Impressions”, “Friendship” or “Patience”.\(^{37}\)

\(^{36}\) ‘Christians in Cinema: Greg Robbins’.
Robbins bases the show on the comedy style of classic comedy television like *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Mayberry R.F.D* and *I Love Lucy*. Robbins deliberately uses classic shows from the 1960’s as a comedic pattern, rather than the inappropriate “shock value” comedy used in contemporary sitcoms. This results in comedy that is largely reliant on visual or sight gags and slapstick, that are based on the bumblings of buffoons and the chaos that comes from misunderstandings. Mayhem is a dominant comic theme in such comedy. This is certainly the case with *Pastor Greg*, every episode has the characters confused and running around in an urgent panic, trying to get everything done in a comically short amount of time, playing the demands of different characters against each other and generally stressing themselves into a comic farce. In the pilot episode “Impressions”, Laurie, the church secretary, is waiting for the arrival of the new pastor, but when he arrives she mistakes him for a homeless person because she is too busy dealing with the chaos caused by the double booking of a wedding and a funeral on the same day. Much shouting, worrying and interrupting ensues, until the exasperated Greg simply steps up to perform the wedding ceremony and is revealed to the surprised staff as the pastor they have been waiting for all along.

A notable aspect of this more classical approach to comedy is the extensive amount of slapstick humour used in *Pastor Greg*. This is particularly important in regards to the above discussion about the Christian attitude to hostility and harm. Traditionally, slapstick involves some degree of violence. It is both violence to an individual brought on by their own lack of awareness or coordination (as in a person slipping over on a banana peel), as well as a more aggressive type of violent act committed by one person towards another (as in the Three Stooges’ habit of poking each other in the eyes). Part of the magic of a slapstick routine is the way that, regardless of the degree of assault, the performer remains uninjured in any real sense. They endlessly bounce back and the signs of their distress serve only as a source of laughter. They might feign unconscious with their whole body, or they might make a “cadenza”; where smiling, their eyes roll back, palms to the floor, the performer spins and

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prances until they fall to the floor unconscious, as signalled by a final kick of the legs.\footnote{Peter Kramer, ‘Clean, Dependable Slapstick: Comic Violence and the Emergence of Classical Hollywood Cinema’, in Violence in American Cinema, ed. J. David Slocum (New York: Routledge, 2001), 104.} What contributes to the comedy in these scenes is not simply a case of schadenfreude and amusement at someone else’s pain. In these slapstick moments, the performers are not simply getting hurt, but they are getting hurt with a “physical eloquence”, as Peter Kramer describes it, these kinds of slapstick routines “were acts of violence, carefully broken down into distinct, easily recognisable and ferociously emphatic gestures and moves, the precise execution and intricate combination of which was to be appreciated as the comedian’s artistic creation”.\footnote{Kramer, ‘Clean, Dependable Slapstick’, 103–104.} In other words, this type of comedy relies on a masterful execution of physical signs that are recognisable and symbolic of extraordinary pain without actual pain.

*Pastor Greg* attempts this in as far as there is physical comedy, that is, comedy based on what the body or bodies are doing. For *Pastor Greg* this mostly means falling down, characters colliding with each other or exaggerated facial expressions. Greg, and several other, especially male, characters are often depicted as buffoons. Although the male idiot is an established trope of the sitcom genre, Greg, as spiritual leader, is never actively made to look stupid.\footnote{Jodi M. Reese, ‘Heterosexual Masculinity in the Sitcom Genre: The Creation and Circulation of the Male Idiot Character Type’ (Master of Arts, Georgetown University, 2004).} He is only clumsy or forgetful, a loveable clown more than mocked simpleton. One of the opening scenes of the first episode shows Greg getting stopped by a police officer. He panics that he had been speeding, but the officer has pulled him over simply to let him know he had left his coffee on top of his car. Another scene has Greg get his jumper caught in his car door, the zipper on the front gets stuck and when he goes to open the door he drops the keys on the ground which he cannot reach so he becomes trapped and struggles against the vehicle.

The slapstick in *Pastor Greg* is mostly gentle, self-imposed, obvious and non-violent. Perhaps one of the more “painful” incidents depicted is in the pilot episode during a montage that explains Greg’s conversion story. While spending the night in a prison cell, contemplating his situation, Greg’s voice-over explains “then something hit me”, and we see Greg getting hit in the head with a flying piece of chicken as well as an enormous copy of *The Holy Bible* that an unknown cell mate has thrown. He begins to read it and is converted.
immediately. Getting hit in the head with an object of this size is painful, however for Greg the joke is in the visual gag that plays on the double meaning of “something hit me”, as in he had both a realisation and a physical head injury. Even less sophisticated is the scene in which four of the staff members have come in to admire the new set for the children’s play. When it is revealed that the church klutz George was the one who built it, all but George take a ‘hammy’, overly exaggerated step away from the set. George says to them “Don’t worry, this set is as sound as a dollar”. As they all turn to walk out of the room, the set comes crashing down, all but one piece. Naturally, when Flo observes “well, at least there’s something still standing”, the final piece crashes down and Frank slowly and deliberately takes the hammer out of George’s hand. A final example of Pastor Greg’s interpretation of classic humour is the episode “Friendship”, where the annual church picnic turns into a pie-throwing fight after Greg trips over and accidentally throws a pie in Laurie’s face. This sets off a full-blown food fight with the entire picnic. The scene is several minutes long and includes smaller gags within the overall ‘pie gag’; for example slow motion of one member getting multiple pies thrown at the m, or another still eating his pie as the chaos continues around him. A pie in the face is a classic gag, but also unsurprising and predictable, which will ultimately impact the enjoyment of the humour.44

Despite all these classically inspired gags, Pastor Greg has little of the grace of shows such as The Dick Van Dyke Show. Dick Van Dyke was known for being “rubber-faced and impossibly double-jointed” but also creative, earnest and ‘unhammy’.45 The slapstick in Pastor Greg is predictable and literal, and illustrative of the heavy-handedness that much of the humour, as well as the underlying Christian message, exhibits. When Greg is rushed to make all his appointments in the episode “Stress”, he looks frantically for the briefcase that is in his hand. He asks Laurie “Have you seen my briefcase?” She tells him “It’s in your hand” and he responds “Never mind, I’ll get it when I come back” and leaves the room with it in his grasp. There are no extremes in Pastor Greg. The humour is safe in that it displays no violence, no outright aggression and the jokes are predictable and familiar. Greg is so stressed he cannot see that he is holding a briefcase. The church accountant stresses out over a receipt for $1239 for finger painting supplies, but it turns out they actually cost only $12.39. Two

elderly ladies make snippy remarks about who makes the best raspberry pie. There is nothing challenging in these kinds of jokes.

It is not only the physical humour in *Pastor Greg* that is without teeth. The other forms of humour, as well as other sitcom elements such as story and character development, all become subordinate to the motivating desire to testify of Jesus Christ. Robbins is unambiguous about his intentions, “I want to make no mistake about it. When I say this is a Christian situation comedy, we claim Christ as our Saviour. There is a message of salvation in every episode”. This message is what dominates the sitcom, and an open religious message such as this sits awkwardly alongside the desire for non-hostile, safe, uplifting humour. I discussed in Chapter Four an important strategy used by some religious comedians to prevent their humour from becoming blasphemous: mode switching. *Pastor Greg* is a clear example of this technique succeeding in its goal of separating God from humour, but failing in its goal of assisting in the communication of a joke. This frame-switching is done without the extreme level of segregation seen in *Apostles of Comedy* in Chapter Four, rather it simply means that the humour in each of the scenes becomes overwhelmed by Robbins’ desire to make the message of Jesus unmistakable. This is a key feature of non-hostile or non-subversive humour. The worry that the real message may be missed or misinterpreted leads to a very conservative approach to joking.

Consider the following scene from the pilot episode “Impressions” in which Greg, who at this point is still unrecognised as the new pastor, sits down with some of the children who are drawing pictures in the nursery:

RILEY: Hey, aren’t you our new pastor?
GREG: Yes! Yes I am your new pastor. So how long have you guys been coming to this church?
RILEY: Our whole life!
GREG: That long huh?..
RILEY: Yeah, it’s going on five years for me. …
GREG: So what can you tell me about the church?
RILEY: Well it’s a good church.

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46 ‘Greg Robbins: God Has a Sense of Humor’.
47 See Chapter Four, p. 105.
GREG: Yeah? What kind of stuff do you do?
RILEY: Let’s see. Well we learn about Jesus Christ.
GREG: That’s pretty cool. So what do you learn about Jesus?
RILEY: We learn that he lived here a long time ago, and he helped people learn about God.
BOB: And did you know God is Jesus’ daddy?
GREG: You know, I do believe I’ve heard that before.
RILEY: And that he had twelve depimples that helped him?
SHERRI: Not depimples, they were descendants!
RILEY: Oh, yeah. And then about 2000 years ago he died on a ‘T’, and you know what happened then?
[She leans in to Greg with eagerness]
GREG: No, what?
RILEY: He came back to life!
GREG: Whoa!
RILEY: Yep. …
GREG: [shows Riley his drawing] What do you think?
RILEY: [shows it to the other children] Tell you what, you can come back and practice some more later.

It could be argued that this is simply an incidence of “kids-say-the-darndest-things” humour. However, other cases in which the religious sentiment overwhelms the humorous sentiment abound in Pastor Greg. In the first episode, Greg has doubts about his ability to lead this church. Laurie gives him a ‘pep talk’ and encourages him by telling him that “You might make a mistake…But God does not”. Greg is inspired and as he leaves he says upwards to the Heavens “Let’s do it, Dude!”. After he has left Laurie, bemused, says to God “Dude? You gave us a pastor that says ‘Dude’?”. She laughs and nods, and we know that God has indeed not made a mistake. The comedy of Greg calling God “Dude” gets a laugh, but mainly serves to reinforce the message of the rest of the serious scene. Similarly, Greg gives a ‘pep talk’ to one of the parishioners, George, in the form of a football commentator yelling and cheering for God. Afterwards, George gets arrested and put on community service at the church. He worries about the judge and Greg tells him “hey man, God is the judge. And I think maybe he could be telling you to slow down, stop getting speeding tickets and wait for him”. Greg says that they will “surrender this to the Saviour”, and the scene becomes about prayer.

It is not just Pastor Greg, or indeed religious comedy in general that allows moralising to saturate its comedy. Secular sitcoms also, especially those in previous decades, can be
weighed down by an overemphasis on the message of the episode as well as television companies loyalty to the policy of avoiding offence by avoiding subversive or controversial content.48 However, religious programming like Pastor Greg is marked by the kind of self-consciousness that causes the Christian reputation for corny, hammy, unfunny comedy. One Christian minister and musician Bob Kirkpatrick describes it “With some Christians, their humour is so lame that they would be booed off the stage in the clubs. It’s like a guy who tells you a joke and keeps nudging you in the ribs, saying, ‘Get it? Get it?’” 49 Clearly Pastor Greg has not been booed off the stage, and although it is yet to spawn a movement of Christian sitcoms, its moderate success can be seen in the production of three seasons of the show and syndication on a number of Christian television networks, including the highly influential Trinity Broadcasting Network.50

**Travis T. Anderson and “Wholesome” Entertainment**

The moderate success of Pastor Greg it is not necessarily a question of the quality of the humour. Pastor Greg provides a comfortable Christian alternative which is perhaps its greatest contribution. I have called this a preference for “safe” humour, but another word that could be used to describe it is “wholesome”. Mormon philosopher and film scholar Travis T. Anderson has discussed this attitude in a Mormon context, but I think it also applies to the Christian environment. Anderson explains that though Mormons understand that “wholesome” properly means something that is nutritious or edifying, the most common Mormon use of the word in relation to entertainment simply refers to something without objectionable content.51 He calls this a “negative standard”, where the criteria used to evaluate the worth of art and entertainment is based on only whether the item does or does not contain objectionable content. The danger of guiding our viewing choices with a negative standard is that our consumption becomes empty and we no longer seek the good in art, only the absence of the bad, which causes a disproportionate focus on the bad. He argues:

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…movies, books, films, music, drama, dance and other forms of art and entertainment that are without objectionable content are not in consequence of that fact spiritually nourishing. And if something is free of objectionable content but is not nourishing, then it is the mental equivalent of diet soda – no unwanted calories, perhaps, but nothing very good for you either. All of this begs the question, then, how and why has the lack of objectionable content, in and of itself, become such a prevalent standard of goodness?52

Anderson distinguishes between vigilance and surveillance in evaluation of entertainment; the former is a healthy way to ensure one’s entertainment consumption is nourishing while the later encourages the consumption of “mental diet soda”.53 A surveillance approach fosters a problematic obsessive attention to evil. A clear example of this is the non-denominational Dove Foundation, a Christian group that scrutinizes film, television and books for objectionable content and gives an approval rating according to the degree of sex, nudity, violence, language and drug use.54 They provide a review, including a comment on the film’s worldview, and award or deny a ‘Dove Seal of Approval’. Importantly, not only are the offending features mentioned, they are catalogued in extreme detail. For example the number and type of profanity is counted and catalogued and the type of nudity is scaled (a score of 1 means the film includes “baby’s behind; shirtless men, low cut shirts, short skirts seen occasionally on women” while a score of 4-5 is given for frontal nudity).55 Pastor Greg predictably received the Dove Seal of Approval based on its score of zero: meaning no sex, bad language, violence, drugs, nudity or ‘other’ (such as disrespect for authority, lying, or witchcraft). The Dove Foundation gives no leniency for objectionable content that is intended as humorous. Scores are given based on the content rather than the intention, and so for example it treats dirty jokes in the exact same manner as serious sexual references.

Pastor Greg is problematic because it is an example of entertainment that lacks objectionable content but does not by virtue of this fact alone then become a high quality piece of comedy nor does it offer anything particularly valuable in terms of the wider goals of humour such as

52 Anderson, ‘Seeking after the Good in Art, Drama, Film and Literature’, 234. Italics in the original.
53 Anderson, ‘Seeking after the Good in Art, Drama, Film and Literature’, 235.
social commentary or insight. It is not “nutritious”. This is perfectly acceptable in Freudian ‘innocent’ humour that is light, gentle and non-hostile. Greg Robbins had made clear his intention to uplift viewers and promote the message of Jesus Christ. These are active goals, that perhaps could be better expressed through a riskier (though not necessarily risky) approach to humour. I will now consider what happens when religious comedians do take a riskier approach to their comedy, in both content and delivery. These kinds of humour are in distinct contrast to comedy like *Pastor Greg* and demonstrate that there are other ways of interpreting the directive to keep the jokes appropriately “non-hostile”.

Subversive and Hostile Religious Humour

Some Christians and Mormons interpret Jesus’ words to mean that loving your neighbour can also include helping them through constructive criticism. Humour can help in this goal because of its relationship to humility and exposing of truth, where being laughed at or joking about a controversy can lead to a change for the better. Leslie B. Flynn argues that this is the only time when hostile humour can be beneficial. He says “purity of humour seems to vary inversely with the amount of discomfiture suffered by the victim. The more the pain, the less the quality of the joke, *unless the pain is inflicted in love for the victim’s ultimate welfare*”.\(^{56}\) This might be when the victim – be it an individual or group – demonstrates some amount of undue pride or is themselves inflicting pain on others, or, more abstractly, when they have somehow violated the social contract and need to be reprimanded through similarly social means. These three actions or behaviours form the main motivations for religious humour, and the following section discusses the important function of laughter as a social corrective.\(^{57}\)

Fine and De Soucey argue that humour operates as social regulation in group life. It does this by serving several functions: it smooths group interaction, it is used to share affiliation, it separates the group from outsiders and secures the compliance of group members through social control.\(^{58}\) It is the last of these functions that is of most interest to the analysis of subversive and hostile religious humour because when Christians and Mormons like Leslie B.

Flynn speak of humour as pain for ultimate welfare, that involves an act of social control. This is because, presumably, the victim will not be so offended (due to the “gentler” or at least less direct nature of joking) that they reject or leave the group, however their infraction becomes clear and can be addressed publicly but circuitously, hopefully resulting in some kind of change or awareness of the reason for criticism. Fine and De Soucey write “A strong joking culture constitutes one of the more effective techniques of social control... The target, the member who has violated group expectations, is reprimanded, but because the frame is a joking one, there is formally no criticism; the reputation remains formally unsmudged”. They suggest that the key to social control through laughter and humour is repetition; this is how humorous motifs become part of a joking culture in the first place, as a recognisable language between group members, and “by being repeated, the joking has the force of settled case law within this micro-society”. In other words, this is an extraordinarily powerful force, and so it is understandable that there are deeply felt sensitivities surrounding the process of laughing at or being laughed at.

A point central to this study is that how a joke is received depends on several contextual factors, and, especially in regards to questions of subversion or hostility, perhaps the most important of these factors is the relationship between the joking parties, that is, who is joking about whom to whom. In particular, when there is some degree of criticism bundled up in the joke this factor becomes even more significant in the jokes reception and can determine the difference between being taken as an insult or being taken as a funny jab at a legitimate shortcoming. One psychological study found that “people are extremely sensitive about criticism of their group when it stems from an outsider, but are relatively tolerant toward criticism stemming from an in-group member”, or as the study was titled, “It’s OK if we say it, but you can’t”. There are of course cases when the in-group criticism is more hurtful, for example if the criticism is seen to jeopardise the integrity of the group as in cases when the group is of illegitimately low status and vulnerable to attack from outside groups. However, their study shows that criticism from the inside is for the most part accepted because it can be the instigator of change. Interestingly, they state that not only do people think poorly of the

59 Fine and De Soucey, ‘Joking Cultures: Humor Themes as Social Regulation in Group Life’, 11. For a more detailed discussion of joking cultures see Chapter Five, p.32
60 Fine and De Soucey, ‘Joking Cultures: Humor Themes as Social Regulation in Group Life’.
out-group critic, but the criticisms themselves are rejected as unfair and untrue. A clear example of this in a comedy context is the Mormon rejection of Matt Stone and Trey Parker’s satirical depictions of the LDS Church in *South Park* (1997-) and *The Book of Mormon: The Musical* (2011). Stone and Parker are atheists with a “fondness” for Mormons.\(^6^2\) That is not always enough to counter the deep offense caused by their comedy. For example, on the extreme end their depictions of Mormons are rejected with sentiments such as “There is absolutely nothing uplifting, edifying, or virtuous to be gleaned. And while some of the music is catchy and happy-sounding, it is merely a colourful envelope with which the spiritual anthrax is delivered to its victims, the audience”.\(^6^3\)

Michael Austin writes of the Mormon image in literature and criticises those who, arguably like Stone and Parker, imagine that “as long as their [works] use humour to criticise Mormon culture, they have done all that they need to do to peddle their work as ‘satire’. But this is a category error; simply making fun of a culture or religion does not constitute satire.”\(^6^4\) There needs to be something in the humour that moves the joke beyond a simple put-down. What moves the joke into the realm of the satirical is the justice of the joke, or more specifically the fairness of the criticism wrapped up inside it. Berys Gaut states that:

> relishing the appropriateness of the attack involves appreciating its justice…it is not the viciousness, i.e., the fact that the jokes display the vices, that we relish in these cases: it is the fact that they hit their target, and the target *deserves* to be hit. These jokes display not immorality, but a tougher, less tender-hearted, kind of morality than the one we often like to think we believe in.\(^6^5\)

This is another case of inflicting pain for the victim’s ultimate benefit, a kind of ‘tough love’ approach. There is amusement in knowing that a barb is not only true, but *justified*, that is, it has found a negative feature of the butt of the joke that is worthy of being ridiculed. A distinction between religious humour and other kinds is that it is very unusual to find jokes

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64 Michael Austin, ‘Swifts of Our Own’, *Sunstone* 22:1, no. 113 (March 1999):64.

that have as their only goal the shock and hurt of another person. In religious humour that can be considered subversive or hostile, even the most outrageous sounding jokes are most likely rooted in love for the target of the ridicule. Joel Kilpatrick, an evangelical Christian and creator of the satirical news website *Lark News*, explains the relationship between love and satire:

I don’t think you can write good satire without loving the thing you’re satirising... It doesn’t work when it’s mean-spirited or venting of personal opinions. But overly cautious satire fails as well. If your humour gets safe and fluffy and sentimental, then your faith gets safe and fluffy and sentimental. Humour becomes a pinch of satire and a heaping helping of warm affirmation.

In other words, good humour is an appropriate balance of love and critique. When the humour becomes fearful and cautious, it becomes, like *Pastor Greg*, self-conscious and needy. Kilpatrick even suggests that it harms a person’s spirituality. Michael Austin desires to see Mormons create “Swifts of our own”, that is, quality satirists in the vein of Jonathan Swift. He argues that satire is motivated by a sincere desire to improve the target. “Criticism motivated by anything else – be it contempt, revenge, anger, intellectual disdain, or political disagreement – may be devilishly funny, or it may be gentle and good natured, but it should never be confused with satire”. Often religious comedians will speak of their comedy as a kind of sugar coating for an important message, as something that “makes the medicine go down”. They understand that an outright attack will not reach their goal, which is first and foremost to make people laugh, and secondly, to make them think. Christian comedian Brad Stine stated that “frankly as a comic, the number one responsibility is laughter. If they’re not laughing, I haven’t really done my job. Now I’m just a teacher or preacher”. Satire is the subversion of something loved in order to improve it, like discipline delivered firmly but gently to a small child. For religious humourists, stepping outside the security of more

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66 For example in mainstream comedy there are acts like Robert Smigel’s creation Triumph The Insult Comic Dog who is a puppet that comically insults people, organisations, cultural icons and even takes requests. See Robert Smigel, ‘COME POOP WITH ME!’, *Triumph The Insult Comic Dog*, http://www.triumphtheinsultcomicdog.com/. Accessed 12/3/13.
68 LeBlanc, ‘Laughing with Evangelicals’.
69 Austin, ‘Swifts of Our Own’, 64.
70 John Moyer, Interview 1, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (13 June 2010); Brad Stine, Interview, interview by Elisha McIntyre, (27 June 2010).
71 Stine, Interview, (2010).
typically safe humour is a risk. However, they view that risk as worthwhile if their subversive or hostile jokes may result in their audiences becoming better Christians or Mormons.

**Brad Stine: Stand-up Comedian as Cultural Critic**

According to Stine, the only difference between him and a teacher or preacher is the laughter, although, as I will discuss below, Stine’s ambitions are indeed much grander than merely getting a laugh. In fact, Stine feels particularly strongly about the issue of preaching in comedy. For Stine, while he would readily admit that his comedy has a political and religious motivation, he distinguishes what he does from a straightforward preaching role. He explains that:

> I did a NBC nightly news once when I was doing one of my albums and the guy said to me “do you consider yourself more of a preacher or a comic?” I said “I find it an interesting statement that you would say that to me. Why, when I say what I believe, I’m a preacher, but when [mainstream comedian] Chris Rock does it, he’s a social commentator?”

This is how Brad Stine views himself, as a social commentator rather than a preacher. He has no official training in ministry, although he leads a prominent men’s ministry called GodMen, and has the pace and manner of an emotive, energetic evangelist. But he does not have the accountability of an official religious leader. His shows include almost equal doses of heavy religious messages and the petty irritations of daily life, although “there are times when I feel like I get too heavy, no it should always be at least 51% funny”.

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73 Stine, Interview, (2010).

74 Stine, Interview, (2010).

75 Stine, Interview, (2010).
Brad Stine prefers to identify as a follower of Jesus rather than a Christian.\textsuperscript{76} In making this statement, something he also does on stage to Christian audiences, he is beginning to set himself not outside but to the edge of the group, putting just enough distance between himself and the audience to offer up some “truths” that, according to Stine, they need to hear. Of course, his audience are also followers of Jesus, but he marks himself deliberately to position himself on the margins where stand-up comedians can embrace the role of insider/outsider in order to satirise and criticise a group with greater immunity.\textsuperscript{77} One way of viewing this process is to consider the stand-up comedian as a kind of anthropologist or social commentator. There are two studies that already consider this, and although I would certainly suggest that this model does not apply to all religious comedians (many in fact avoid any real social commentary, as discussed above), or indeed all genres of humour, the model does help to understand what Stine and his co-humourists are trying to achieve.

The first study is Stephanie Koziski’s “Stand-up Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Cultural Critic”.\textsuperscript{78} Koziski is not writing metaphorically, she writes of the actual similarities between the work of the anthropologist and the stand-up comedian. She says “documenting areas of tacit knowledge and bringing them to the conscious awareness of their particular audiences are important functions performed by the anthropologist and the stand-up comedian in their respective roles”.\textsuperscript{79} The anthropologist reports their findings to their community of scholars through the channels of academic publications, while the comedian’s process is more immediate, reporting directly to an audience from the stage, and receiving instantaneous feedback through laughter. The second study is Lawrence E. Mintz’s “Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation”.\textsuperscript{80} In this article, Mintz argues that stand-up comedians, whilst often providing a butt of the joke for humour, more importantly act as a comic spokesperson or mediator, an “articulator of our culture”.\textsuperscript{81} Of course, rather than “our” culture I suggest “a” culture, as the comedians in this study are certainly articulating culture and values that are specific to a particular group or groups. However, the point still

\textsuperscript{76} Stine, Interview, (2010).
\textsuperscript{79} Koziski, ‘The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist’, 57.
\textsuperscript{81} Mintz, ‘Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation’, 75.
holds; the speech of stand-up comedians tells us much about their cultural values. Importantly, as I have mentioned previously in Chapters Three and Four, the stand-up comedian has special permission to say controversial “truths” and has a special exemption from the expectation of normal behaviour.\textsuperscript{82}

The difference between a stand-up comedian and an anthropologist is that the comedian is allowed, indeed encouraged, to support their statements not with scientific observations but with personal opinions. The comedian nor the anthropologist are passive observers or reporters, but crucially, comedians do not claim to uphold the rigorous standards of scholarship. They also speak with authority, something that is not simply a by-product of the power of having a microphone.\textsuperscript{83} Where the anthropologist speaks with the authority from scholarly discourse, the comedian speaks with the authority from popular culture. The anthropologist seeks to understand, while the comedian, as part of the group, already understands all too well and wishes to spark thought, recognition and, perhaps, change. In Koziski’s words, “the anthropologist is – by training – a sympathetic outsider, while the comedian is, in most cases – by temperament – a cynical insider”.\textsuperscript{84} However, armed with a microphone and an opinion, the stand-up comedian still shares the objective Victor Turner set out for anthropologists: to “cut out a piece of society for the inspection of [their] audience and set up a frame within which image and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be scrutinised, assessed, and perhaps remodelled”.\textsuperscript{85}

This is certainly the case with Brad Stine. He believes that he has been called by God to provide a powerful entertainment alternative to Christians. He says “I thought I was being called to the non-believer, you know, to tell God’s story. But that’s not what I believe is my ultimate purpose. Mine is to my own tribe. Mine is to be a missionary to Christians”.\textsuperscript{86} Yet he is not simply an alternative to mainstream, secular entertainment. Stine is an alternative to Christian entertainment that is safe, unchallenging, and, for him, most hated of all, politically correct. He actively seeks to challenge “his tribe” to think about their actions, and more importantly their beliefs; “I’m not just going to walk through this and allow your thing and

\textsuperscript{82} Victor Turner, quoted in Mintz, ‘Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation’, 74.
\textsuperscript{83} Gilbert, \textit{Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender and Cultural Critique}, 69.
\textsuperscript{84} Koziski, ‘The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist’, 63.
\textsuperscript{85} Koziski, ‘The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist’, 60.
\textsuperscript{86} Stine, Interview, (2010).
my thing and be tender. I believe I have an obligation to hold you accountable for what not only you believe but the way you’re representing God”. The “you” he is referring to is other Christians and, while he is particularly harsh on non-Christians, he saves his personally high expectations for his own “tribe”.

This sense of accountability pervades all of Stine’s comedy. His act looks much like a combination of preaching, lecturing, chastising, and clowning. He moves about the stage at high speed, his pacing back and forth increasing with the passion of his speech. As does his volume. He pauses rarely for breath, with his jokes coming rapid fire alongside his “rants”. The audience, whilst laughing and frequently applauding, sit absorbing the intense energy that comes from a passionate, engaging entertainer who is shouting in many ways at them and demanding they “wake up” to themselves and their culture. It is angry, sarcastic and very often accusatory to a group who may or may not have members present. For example, he hates the word “oops” because it is “a word that blames gravity when you mess up!”

Even religiously, we are responsible. He tells his audience that Genesis reminds us that God had a plan for us and that we should think about “what were things supposed to be like before we messed them up?” That is why there is an “O” in “G-O-D”; “to remind us that it is OUR fault”. It is not comfortable viewing. In God’s Comic (2012), Stine uses a sixteen year old boy in the audience as fodder to joke about youth and their self-centredness.

It is not comfortable viewing. In God’s Comic (2012), Stine uses a sixteen year old boy in the audience as fodder to joke about youth and their self-centredness. He jokes about the boy not knowing anything about the past, and being addicted to technology. The boy laughs, and his parents who are with him at this family show also laugh, but it is an awkward laughter produced by being put in the spotlight and being targeted as a representative of all that Brad Stine feels is wrong with youth culture. Stine wants to implicate his audience personally in wider cultural issues, whether they are to blame for their active involvement in the problems that beset the Christian community or whether they are merely tacitly to blame by doing nothing to resist.

87 Stine, Interview, (2010).
90 God’s Comic (2012).
91 God’s Comic (2012).
Brad Stine does not want comfortable viewing. His comedy is aggressive. His tone is antagonistic. He stops short at “ad hominem attacks”, but only because of his faith. He explains:

My faith demands that I see every human being as being made in the image of God and God desperately wants them to come home. Including… all the people with whom their ideas I completely disagree with. But they’re humans, and they’re probably nice people. And so I’m commanded as a Christian, I am not allowed to hate people, but I’m commanded to hate ideas that are different than God’s.\(^\text{92}\)

This notion of not being “allowed” to hate is curious. It allows Stine to make jokes that are hostile, angry, even cruel. But because all his work is viewed through the religious frame, his rage becomes righteous.\(^\text{93}\) He has jokes that are not necessarily part of that frame specifically, for example “I don’t hate cats, if they just stay in the road where they belong”.\(^\text{94}\) This is a violent image, but not necessarily an attack on any one person or group.\(^\text{95}\) Other jokes, for example all his jokes about atheists, get very close to an attack, but due to this idea that he is “allowed” to hate ideas that are different to God’s, he is free to call Atheists illogical and stupid. He accuses them of being insane because they are afraid of a God they do not believe in, then he mocks them by pretending to be an Atheist afraid of a Unicorn.\(^\text{96}\) He says in response to the Atheist belief that God is invented to prop up Christians in their weakness: “God is a crutch. Yeah? Well not believing in God is a coma”.\(^\text{97}\)

This is a side point to the main focus of this chapter (in-group subversion) but it demonstrates the types of hostility that would perhaps be the most acceptable to Christian audiences due to their outsider target. It may be assumed that Stine would be kinder to his own tribe. But as I have been discussing, his motivation is not kindness. He is not “tender”. He performs

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\(^{92}\) Stine, Interview, (2010). Italics added.

\(^{93}\) See Chapter Four, p.92.


\(^{95}\) Stine believes God created humanity above animals, and he jokes about his dislike for animal activists and frequently praises hunting. So I am not considering this joke beyond his own worldview in which cats do not have nor deserve “personhood”.

\(^{96}\) Stan Moore, *Brad Stine: Tolerate This!* (Right Minded Records, 2005).

\(^{97}\) *Tolerate This!* (2005).
“spiritual open-heart surgery”, and laughter is his anaesthetic.\textsuperscript{98} Consider the following jokes taken from some of his stand-up recordings. His style is one of lengthy monologue, his one liners are few, but always embedded in a more extensive commentary. I will quote some of them in full, in order to both get a feel for the way he presents his ideas and to analyse the content.

You’ve got to stick up for your tribe. You know why we’ve allowed people to take stinking Christmas signs out of our stores? Because we have gotten too politically correct in this country and political correctness is a cancer, I can’t stand it…I want to watch political correctness die in my life time. But first, I want to watch it suffer.\textsuperscript{99}

Stine’s greatest bugbears are very specific. He cannot abide political correctness, he despises it enough to concoct this ferocious image against an abstract idea. In the quotation above, as in many of his bits, he is enraged by what he perceives as the “wussification” of Christmas into “Happy Holidays”. His rage never extends into full swearing, but he is constantly substitute swearing, calling everything “stinking”.\textsuperscript{100} His feelings on Christmas are further explained in the following bit, where he objects to people saying “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas”.

Why don’t we want to say Christmas? Because it’s got ‘Christ’ in it and after two thousand years he’s still intimidating people. When a religious person says ‘I’m the way’, people don’t want to hear it… And I want to say it to the rafters! I’ve even seen Christian people not say “Merry Christmas”. There are people in China right now, people who are in jail because they had a page of the Bible. And Christians in this country won’t even say “Merry Christmas”. It amazes me the cowardice. That’s the price you pay when you’re rich and safe… We have traded safety and comfort for freedom.\textsuperscript{101}

The source of his hatred can be traced quite clearly through his comedy, both non-Christians and, more offensively, Christians themselves, have given up practicing Christianity in a way that is truthful and in keeping with God’s commandments. This is not a comedian who is


\textsuperscript{100} Stine’s earlier tour was called \textit{Rebel Without A Curse} (2000). For a discussion relevant to whether “stinking” qualifies as cursing or not see Chapter Five, p.138.

subtle, although he says he requires his audience to work. As he expresses above, he is upset that Christians have become lazy and safe, although at other times he blames the liberal Atheist agenda for the removal of God from American public life and culture. These two issues are resolved, because for Stine it is Christians becoming safe and lazy that has allowed the decay of America as a nation of God. So by attacking Christians, calling them cowards, lazy, and safe, Stine is actually expressing his patriotic aims and doing the double task of making Christians better Christians and strengthening them to restore America as the superior, Christian nation it was intended, by God, to be. Stine realised that Christians had become lazy in America:

as soon as we started putting handles on our Bibles. There’re Christians around the world trying to hide their Bibles, but we’re like “oh, my Bible’s too heavy! Lord, thank you for this handle, it makes it easier, but is it possible you could fashion some holy handlebars so I could steer my Bible? Perhaps a wheel and a saddle like I might bring it in, come in early and lay it down on the pew or between the seats so I can save it so I can leave and go to Starbucks and get a double-latte-cappuccino-frappe so I can stay awake for the second service?” We got fifty Bibles apiece we don’t even know where the books are, we gotta have tabs to tell us where everything is: [pretends to cry hysterically, flipping through a Bible] “Where’s Genesis?! Where’s Genesis?!“

Stine is criticising American Christians’ superficial relationship with the Bible. Again, Stine compares American Christians to those in other countries who have Bibles despite the danger. This is a serious message that undercuts the surface flippancy and absurdity of the joke that Christians would be so lazy that they do not want to carry their Bibles but have their Bibles carry them so they can get their ludicrously melodramatic coffee order filled rather than have any deep understanding of the Bible itself.

This abhorrence of melodrama is a common theme; for Stine it is exemplary of political correctness taking over and making Christian culture weak and overly sensitive. He laughs at Catholics and their overreaction to visions of Mary:

102 Stine, Interview (2010).
All the Catholics are going to Hell because they see Mary everywhere. “Look, Mary’s in the side of the road! Mary’s in the toaster! Mary’s in a tortilla!” And it’s true. Catholics see Mary everywhere.

But this is not a jibe at an outsider group, rather it is a launching point that makes his criticism perhaps more potent, because the beginning of the joke makes the mostly evangelical, Protestant audience laugh at Catholics, but then uses that momentum to turn the target around onto Protestants themselves. This further emphasises the hypocrisy of laughing at outsiders when there are the same issues within the group, as Stine would liken it to Jesus pointing out that the Pharisees clean the outside of a cup while the inside is still dirty.¹⁰⁴ He continues the joke:

Protestants see Satan everywhere. “Oh Satan’s in my radio! Satan made me lose my job!” No, your incompetence made you lose your job. Ever seen these people that always blame Satan for everything that happens in their life? If he did anything he just woke them up that morning. They took it from there.

Everybody’s always looking for a place for Satan to show up, some weird place that Satan’s going to show up. When I was growing up it was backward masking. Satan’s everywhere! He’s going to be in the backwards records. In the 80s it was the New Age! Satan’s in the New Age! In the 90s it was, something. I don’t know what it was.

Now it’s Harry Potter books. Harry Potter books! Don’t even touch the cover! I was in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and a church had a Harry Potter book burning. Let me tell you something, I believe as a believer of Jesus, that everything you do is supposed to drive people to the cross and not away. And let’s face it, nothing makes people come to the door of the church like a good old fashioned book burning huh? Use your minds! Think about people and how they perceive you…I think a good rule of thumb is, if Hitler tried it, maybe go another direction.¹⁰⁵

This is perhaps one of the most pointed barbs that Stine offers up to his audience; comparing Protestants to Hitler is indeed a dangerous move to make. To counter this risk, he exploits the stand-up comic’s immunity when it comes to being the social commentator to give the

impression that he is simply making an accurate observation. Hitler did burn books and so do Protestants. Whilst it is Stine who is making this connection, he maintains his impunity by never admitting to acting this way himself. He also excuses himself of any unkindness with the following justification, delivered in such a way as to absolutely shut down any counter argument (although, by virtue of him being the only one on stage, with a microphone, at his own show, he would be unlikely to encounter one).

I know I’m the Christian boy, I’m not supposed to offend people. And I agree, I don’t want to hurt people’s feelings. But I got a flash for you my friends, listen very carefully. There’s a difference between maliciously offending somebody on purpose and somebody being offended by truth. This is what we’ve forgotten. If you’re offended by the truth, that’s your problem. I have no obligation to not offend you if I’m speaking the truth. The truth is supposed to offend you, that’s how you know you don’t got it!  

By placing the blame of offence squarely on the offending party, Stine absolves himself of any blame for causing the offence. Stine goes further than most comedians in relation to the issue of offence. Many comedians, if they cause offence, will either excuse themselves by claiming they were “just joking”, or will apologise.  

Stine not only blames the offended party for being offended on a personal level, but also accuses them of denying or refuting truth in a wider, more abstract sense. This is a huge claim, but one that Stine makes repeatedly. By linking his jokes to the (exclusive) truth, any criticism he makes of either outsiders or his own “tribe” become legitimate.

108 Stine believes in absolute God-given truths and rejects any kind of relativism that he sees as symptomatic of postmodernity. Brad Stine, Interview (2010).
Sunstone Magazine: Reform Through Subversive Humour

In an article for the Washington Times non-Mormon journalist Julia Duin announces that “finding Mormon freethinkers was not an easy thing to do until I began reading Sunstone magazine, the bad boy of the Mormon world”. Since its inception in 1975 Sunstone has provided an alternative, liberal, intellectual, creative and challenging voice for Mormons and those interested in the Church. Sunstone publishes witty cartoons alongside its penetrating articles of social commentary, and the two are deliberately linked. The cartoons work in tandem with the magazine’s other content to bring to life its motto of “faith seeking understanding”. This of course does not always sit so well with the official LDS Church who is known more for “faith seeking obedience”. While the magazine is not openly hated by the Church, as past editor Dan Wotherspoon said “it is never going to put their arms around us and caress us”. The relationship is interesting for this study because again as Wotherspoon put it “the editors work really hard to make sure the tone of the article is not a person trying to trash the church… [but someone] trying to bring questions that are ultimately constructive…” yet at the same time he says “Ooh you don’t want the bishop to see you have Sunstone on your coffee table”. Sunstone attempts to bring a deeper understanding to the faith through addressing important issues that are often avoided by an institutionalised church culture. This section considers some of the many ways that Sunstone subverts the LDS Church and its community with humour, through an analysis of examples of cartoons published in the magazine that address the authoritarian nature of the institution in regard to theology and orthopraxy.

According to Mormon teaching, when Joseph Smith received the Book of Mormon from a heavenly being and restored the true church of Jesus Christ, one of the key outcomes of this restoration was a return to the true structure of the Church authority, that is, a paradoxical blend of hierarchy and lay priesthood. Every worthy male is called to hold the Priesthood, yet the Church is governed from a centralised system of authority that filters down from the President who is also a living Prophet, through the General Authorities into local leadership

111 ‘Introduction to Sunstone Magazine’, Mormon Potluck.
such as the Ward (congregation) Bishop. None of these men (and they are all men) are professional clergy. But the nature of the Church is that, as one article from the official Church publication *Ensign* described it, “when the prophet speaks, the debate is over”.

Mormon and scholar Terryl L. Givens describes the Church as “one of the most centralized, hierarchical, authoritarian churches in America to come out of the era famous for the “democratization” of religion”.

According to a history self-published on its 25th anniversary, *Sunstone* is “a scholarly forum and an opinion rag. A literary gazette and a news service. Faithful and sceptical. Exultant and descriptive. Soapbox and altar. Mirror and canvas. Vision and inkblot”. Begun in 1975 by a group of ‘thinking’ Mormon university students, it has grown to encompass magazine publications as well as forums and its well-known annual Sunstone Symposium. *Sunstone* attempts to resolve the tension between intellectualism and faith, often by addressing points of controversy and sensitivity – for example homosexuality in the Church, Mormon feminism, secret/sacred doctrines such as temple ceremonies and, notably, critiques of the institutional Church. This has resulted in tension with the Church, but *Sunstone* “helps people feel they are not alone if they are not in total lock step with the church and its ideology”. One Church magazine published a thinly veiled warning against *Sunstone* in an article warning against “Alternate voices”. However, *Sunstone* creates an intellectual environment that is in constant tension with but ultimately in support of the Church and the LDS faith.

This tension is sometimes referred to as the “Iron Rod/Liahona dichotomy”. In the Book of Mormon the prophet Lehi has a dream vision in which a rod of iron leads a straight and narrow path to the tree of life (which symbolises God’s word) and those who do not stray from holding fast to the rod reach it and those who let go stumble in the darkness. The Liahona was a compass that guided the prophet Lehi by divine inspiration and only worked

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116 Duin, ‘Sunstone Opens Mormon Culture’.
119 1 Nephi 8:19, *The Book of Mormon*. 

184
“according to the faith and diligence and heed” of his followers. In other words, belief in the Church is arrived at through holding fast to the rod or deciphering the directions of the Liahona. *Sunstone* is generally thought of as a Liahona approach, that is, open to interpretation, willing to find one’s own way rather than blindly clutching at rigid authoritarianism.

This authoritarian structure is fertile soil for Mormon subversive humour. Mary Douglas says that humour comes from structure because it is drawn from it as anti-structure. Already this tension has turned into the famous symbol of the Iron Rod versus the Liahona in Mormon popular parlance. This can be seen in the following cartoons published in *Sunstone* in 1991. They illustrate not only *Sunstone*’s self-awareness about its relationship with the Church, but also its willingness to poke fun at the Church’s discomfort with *Sunstone*’s very existence. *Sunstone* is not anxious about the Church’s disapproval. It plays with it. Figure Two points out the tension between living an Iron Rod life and a Liahona life, and we can see a parallel between a church life and the Iron Rod and a *Sunstone* life and the Liahona. Figure Three explicitly links the reading of *Sunstone* with the behaviour of Satan, and importantly with original sin. It depicts several of the Church’s official publications, so that the cartoonist has put the Church’s words into the mouth of God so that these official publications (*Ensign*, *New Era*, *Friend*, and the *Church News*) are endorsed and encouraged by Heavenly Father himself.

[Figure 2 Calvin Grondahl, first published in *Sunstone* 15:3, no.84, (October 1991), p.3.](https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/issue-details/?in=84)

[Figure 3 Calvin Grondahl, first published in *Sunstone* 15:4, no.83, (September 1991), p.3.](https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/issue-details/?in=83)

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120 1 Nephi 16:28, Ibid.
One of the most salient points about Sunstone is that it comes from a largely believing LDS perspective, something that I am arguing is a necessity in religious humour. This is not always a harmonizing perspective, which is not the same as an unbelieving perspective, but it is always one that seeks to strengthen rather than weaken the faith. The above cartoons do not suggest one does not go to Church or the falsity of Adam and Eve, rather, it is a comment on what the cartoonist sees as the Church’s rigid imposition of what and how to believe. A distinction is made between beliefs and the ways in which those beliefs are practiced. This is a theme that frequents Sunstone. These next cartoons deal with questions of theology and belief, and here it is necessary to remember the arguments put forth in Chapter Four as a framework; that the sacred is never the butt of the joke of the joke, and that a non-blasphemous joke is one that gives God his full due by representing him as almighty and perfect. The motivation of religious satire is the improvement of the religious community, and so the orientation of the following cartoons is not to ridicule the sacred characters that are drawn but to expose how much authoritarian institutionalisation interferes with spiritual truths.

Figure Four features Jesus subjected to the strict dress code policy that is enforced at Brigham Young University (BYU) an official LDS tertiary education institution. This policy codifies what are known as “grooming standards” which form part of the wider obligation for students to uphold the BYU honour code which includes rules on moral behaviour such as chastity, avoidance of alcohol, tea and coffee, and clean language. The standards are so meticulous as to specify regulations on types of dress, hairstyles and facial hair. So too the joke in Figure Four is the suggestion that the BYU standards are so rigid and all-encompassing that they even render the Saviour unrecognisable. Mormons are taught to recognise the signs of his advent and the image presented here is so incongruous with the image usually presented by the Church that it is comic.

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122 The BYU official website explains the Dress Code for Men as follows: “A clean and well-cared-for appearance should be maintained. Clothing is inappropriate when it is sleeveless, revealing, or form fitting. Shorts must be knee-length or longer. Hairstyles should be clean and neat, avoiding extreme styles or colours, and trimmed above the collar, leaving the ear uncovered. Sideburns should not extend below the earlobe or onto the cheek. If worn, moustaches should be neatly trimmed and may not extend beyond or below the corners of the mouth. Men are expected to be clean-shaven; beards are not acceptable. Earrings and other body piercing are not acceptable. Shoes should be worn in all public campus areas”. 'Church Educational System Honor Code', Brigham Young University, http://saas.byu.edu/catalog/2011-2012ucat/GeneralInfo/HonorCode.php#HCOfficeInvovement. Accessed 25/3/13.
Figure Five builds on the same joke that the Church institution is so severe that it prevents Mormons from recognising the spirituality that is the very reason for the Church in the first place. Here a Church leader is blind to the consequence of an appearance from the angel Moroni by a legalism that means the significance of the event is overshadowed by Moroni’s infraction of the Church handbook of rules, made even more hilarious by the fact that Moroni’s arrival with a trumpet is a possible announcement of the second coming of Jesus Christ. Here the joke is firmly at the expense of the short-sighted Church member.

Similarly, Figure Six depicts the Church practice of correlation, in which the Church organisation maintains consistency across all aspects of the Church in doctrine, ordinances, meetings, organisations, written materials and other practices. The cartoon depicts the Legacy Theatre in Temple Square, Salt Lake City, a Church owned and operated complex of information, education and proselytising. The theatre regularly screens the official Church-made film *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration* (2005). Here the joke is that correlation has “gone too far” by anachronistically placing the standardised words of a standardised testimony into the mouth of the founder and prophet of the Church, Joseph Smith. That the Church would be so arrogant is absurd, but the cartoon makes the point that correlation, as a symptom of Church control, has become so out of control that it would be but a small exaggeration that correlation would try to rewrite history and override even the revealed words of the prophet.

[Figure 5 Jeanette Atwood, first published in *Sunstone* no. 133 (July 2004), p.3.](https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/issue-details/?in=133)
Figures Seven and Eight use the practice of bearing testimony to highlight the way that Church authority has leaked into even the most spontaneous and spiritual practices of the faith. A testimony is a spiritual witness given by the holy ghost; in theory it is both impromptu (the spirit can move in you at any time and testimony is often highly emotional and personal) and organised (all Mormons are encouraged to “have a testimony” of the Church, that is a spiritual conviction that the Church and all its doctrines are true) and there are monthly testimony meetings where members bear their testimony. Also, missionaries are trained to bear their testimony when teaching others about the Church. It is both extremely personal and heavily formulaic. The cartoons exaggerate the heavy hand of the Church organisation and exposes the influence of Church rigidity by taking the stereotype to its full fruition, that is following the logic of the stereotype to its most extreme point – in this case Church leaders handing out disciplined directions for one’s testimony (something which does not actually happen but is a plausible exaggeration) or missionaries openly and dysphemistically describing Church processes.

[Figure 7 Jeanette Atwood, first published in Sunstone no.138 (September 2005), p.33. https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/issue-details/?in=138]

[Figure 8 Jeanette Atwood, first published in Sunstone no.137 (May 2005), p.3. https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/issue-details/?in=137]

The final two cartoons I will consider are particularly sharp because they address the Church’s reaction to criticism. They are cheekily self-reflexive, Sunstone is well aware that at times it forms part of the group of critics that their own cartoons are referencing. But as will be seen, it is the Church’s response that is the target here. From the perspectives of these cartoons, the Church overreacts in the extreme to disparagement or criticism from both outside and inside the fold.

Figure Nine shows a ridiculous situation in which the institutional Church, represented by the authority of a medical man in a white coat, has developed an inoculation against criticism from outsiders. The cartoon cites specific “diseases” against which the inoculation will protect. These are actual instances in which the Church has felt “attacked”. For example, the two websites shown are both condemning exposés from ex-members or mainstream
Christians out to denounce the Church. Ed Decker is a former Mormon who is now the director of a Christian anti-Mormon group called “Saints Alive in Jesus” and presents an anti-Mormon radio program. Decker is particularly known to Mormons for the negative depiction of them in Decker’s film The Godmakers (1982) and the book version The Godmakers: A Shocking Expose of What the Mormon Church Really Believes (1984). Big Love (2006-2011) is a television drama that follows the lives of polygamist Mormons in Utah, and is a cause of concern to the Church because they feel it is mistakenly identified with the official Church rather than the fundamentalist groups. Lastly “obnoxious podcasts” refers to the proliferation of podcasts in recent years that encourage discussion of LDS subjects, often with an open-minded or critical approach. The joke in this cartoon is not only in the exaggeration of the Church needing to inoculate against criticism, but rather it is in the very content of that inoculation. As inoculation works by injecting a person with the very virus that they are to develop immunity against. Hence this doctor is injecting the child with small doses of the types of criticisms levelled at the Church from these above mentioned sources, such as polygamy, racism and magic. The similarity between “inoculation” and “indoctrination” is not just a play on words. The cartoonist has deliberately associated the acceptance of doctrines that are thought by many to be the most problematic for the Church with the process of accepting something “for one’s own health and good” as a child might get a painful needle jab.

[Figure 9 Jeanette Atwood, first published in Sunstone no.148 (December 2007), p.3.  
https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/issue-details/?in=148]

In Figure 10, the institutional Church, represented by men in suits, has another extreme reaction. This time it is to intellectuals, represented by the pages of their scholarship and their left-leaning, liberal perspective is depicted in the academic facial hair, tweed jacket and feminist earrings and haircuts. Those singing would be members of the Priesthood, and the song they sing is a well-known LDS hymn, sung at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple in 1836, and so a very spiritually significant song. The humour is of course in the play on the meaning of fire burning. The words in the hymn refer to spiritual burning, while the cartoonist mocks the Church as if they may as well be literally setting those who question on fire. This is a metaphor for the Church practice of disciplining and even excommunicating “intellectual” or dissenting members of the Church. As harsh as it is to make the literal joke about the lyrics of the hymn and the bonfire, the more subversive element in the cartoon is the accusation of hypocrisy in likening a literal burning to a spiritual practice, and insinuating that the Church engage in violent, extreme acts of aggression whilst simultaneously participating in spiritual devotion.

Not only are the themes of the above cartoons generally controversial, but the ways in which the jokes are carried out is, by general Mormon or religious humour standards, exceptionally provocative. The underlying theme of all of them is a challenge to authority, that the Church institution is in fact a very human organisation that thinks more of itself than it should and deserves to be mocked for this misplaced claim to power. It is possible for cartoonists to make use of momentum gained from Sunstone’s independence of the Church. But, like Brad Stine, they are not creating humour with the intention of hurting their fellow believers. For Sunstone in particular, such humour defeats their purpose of fostering open dialogue about the Church, specifically about issues within the Church that are elsewhere ignored or avoided, with the explicit intention of benefiting and developing a deeper Mormon faith. The

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129 For example a famous case came to be known as “the September Six”, when in 1993 the Church excommunicated six academics in a single month for their controversial scholarship on feminism and theology. Peggy Fletcher Stack, ‘Exiles in Zion’, *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 16 August 2003, 14; ‘Six Intellectuals Disciplined for Apostasy’, *Sunstone* 16:6, no. 92 (November 1993): 65.
above cartoons attack the idea of a faultless Church authority in order to create space for other forms of LDS spirituality that might otherwise be marginalised by the “Mormon Machine”.

Conclusion

Brad Stine has said “The provocative voice is interesting, and it’s crucial in a democratic society to push envelopes – if nothing else, just to let us see how far we don’t want to go. That way, we can define our boundaries”. Stine is elaborating an argument that Christians and Mormons have over what is appropriate to include in humour. Stine’s comment, even for a comedian who I have argued is subversive, hostile and religious, is based in a conservative method of assessing entertainment, one that relies on a negative standard, where the choice in entertainment is based solely on a lack of objectionable content. Stine pushes so that his “tribe” can know what is inappropriate, so they can see “how far they don’t want to go”. While a negative standard says little about where they do want to go, it is still valuable in determining the ways that Christians and Mormons think about hostile and subversive humour.

For the most part, Christians and Mormons are aware of what makes humour inappropriate for them. They are generally uncomfortable with humour that is malicious and undermining, but are often willing to accept humour that has a socially corrective function. I have argued in this chapter that there are conflicting concerns over what exactly this means. For some, such as Greg Robbins and the cast and crew of Pastor Greg, this means that anything that interferes with the communication of the Christian message is a misuse of humour and that any humour that is extreme or radical is not worth jeopardising the evangelical potential of the work. This dramatically affects the quality of the humour, but the motivation behind the humour is enough to make the show enjoyable. On the other hand, for others, subversion and aggression can be useful tools in bringing about the Christian virtue of humility and causing those who have stepped out of socially or religiously proscribed roles to consider their actions. Significantly, such social criticism needs to be deserved. Brad Stine and the

cartoonists of *Sunstone* never attack those that are vulnerable or innocent. For Stine, his target is his own “tribe”, his equals. For *Sunstone* it is the Church’s misplaced sense of power in complete institutionalisation. The humourists do not exploit power, rather they challenge it in order to force their audiences into a more profound state of consciousness about their faith. The commonality among all humourists who are faced with the issue of hostile and subversive humour is that their comedy seeks to use humour to benefit their religious communities. For those like Robbins who are conservative in their approach to humour, choosing humour that is safe is protective, uplifting, and a positive contribution to their audience’s life as a Christian in a confronting modern world. For those like Stine and the *Sunstone* cartoonists, confronting real and difficult issues through humour is a way to deepen their experience. It is an especially unique feature of religious humour that critique and avoidance of critique can have the mutual goal of making “better” believers.
Conclusion

For many, religion and humour are incongruous, incompatible, and irreconcilable. In this view each are polarised as opposite sides of life and on the rare occasion when seen together are thought to be awkward and estranged bedfellows. This study is about those instances when religion and humour are found together, not just side by side, but operating as that single vehicle of meaning: the joke. I have argued, against the popular imagination, that not only does this happen, but it happens frequently and with deliberate intent. Religious people choose to make humour about their religion and incorporate it into their religious lives. They do so enthusiastically and with agency and produce and consume both informal social humour and humour as popular entertainment. I have focused specifically on the comedy entertainment watched and read by evangelical Christians and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, however, the principles are perhaps applicable to other religious groups, especially in monotheistic traditions.

The meeting of humour and religion is nuanced and complex, and, like many expressions of culture, requires a great deal of finesse to unpack the meanings encoded in something as seemingly simple as a joke. It may at first appear to be a simple pun or silly image. However, humour asks for a number of levels of interpretation. The first, cognitive, level “gets” the joke. It uses the knowledge and logic to understand what is being said. The second level is cognitive and social and aesthetically appreciates the incongruity that makes it funny. I have been arguing throughout this dissertation that there is then a third level, one that plays a crucial role in the joking behaviour of Christians and Mormons. This level is social and cultural, but it is also moral. Christians and Mormons evaluate the humour of a joke using standards developed in conjunction with their religious beliefs and identities to determine whether or not it is appropriate. If it is not deemed appropriate, it is most likely unsuccessful – in other words, offensive rather than funny.
The use of religious belief and identity as a reference is the core difference between religion about humour and religious humour. This difference has been largely ignored in academic scholarship, and this dissertation began with a discussion about what makes a joke religious as opposed to simply about religious subjects. It may seem like a small distinction, but it is a key component in determining any deeper meaning behind the kinds of humour that have formed the body of material used in this study. In order to understand what I mean by “religious humour”, I developed in Chapter One a working definition that could help shape not only the selection, but the interpretation of jokes and other types of humour. I argued that for the purposes of this study religious humour is humour that has a religious intention, or is in some way influenced (in either its creation or appreciation) by an individual’s religious beliefs. Religious humour is used in religious ways, that is, as an expression of one’s religious identity (for example using humour to express religious values or to identify oneself as a member of a specific religious group) or as part of religious practice (such as evangelism, religious education or entertainment). This discounted humour that uses religious subjects without a religious perspective (such as in the television series South Park) and focused instead on humour that is created and consumed within some kind of religious framework where religious humour can begin to make its fullest sense.

To claim that religious humour is humour that expresses religious values goes somewhat towards understanding what distinguishes it as its own category. However, this is an empirical study, and the underlying motivations were to examine how the expression of religious values interacts with the lived religion of Christians and Mormons. The research questions that underpin this study were firstly, what are Christians and Mormons watching, reading and listening to, and secondly, how does that help them to express and, importantly, reinforce their religious beliefs and practices? While these questions have been of lesser interest to scholars of both religion and humour, Christians and Mormons actively concern themselves with discussing humour and its relationship to their identities as believers. I have drawn heavily on their own writings on this subject and have thus firmly situated my work in the perspective of those being studied. I have attempted to
place an academic framework over those more popular discourses in order to understand what religious people are thinking about their own lives.

The answer to these questions, I have argued, is that Christians and Mormons are watching, reading and listening to popular comedy entertainment much like any other participant in contemporary culture. They watch films and television, they read cartoons and comic strips, and they listen to stand-up comedy. These forms of entertainment are not simply meaningless and lightweight amusement. Humour communicates values both explicitly and implicitly, and for many Christians and Mormons, what they laugh at reveals something deeper about who they are as a believer. Humour can be faith-promoting or faith-corrupting. It has a religious and moral message, so they take care when producing or consuming comedy, especially when that comedy directly relates to their beliefs. They want humour that promotes their own Christian worldview, so they need humour that directly discusses what it means to be a Christian or Mormon. But such humour is dangerous, and so religious humour becomes a valuable measure of where these communities negotiate boundaries.

This leads to an important question that links my two research questions above: what criteria do believers use to make their entertainment choices? I answered this question in Chapter Three, where I argued that Christians and Mormons choose humour that is appropriate by their own standards. There are three elements that can be discerned as markers for appropriate humour: appropriate means non-blasphemous, clean and non-hostile. I came to this conclusion after examining a number of discussions that Christians and Mormons have had about the subject of religious humour, including evidence from my survey work in the field. Appropriate humour is, put simply, free from any “objectionable content”\(^1\). In Chapters Four, Five and Six, I have developed this understanding of the criteria for “appropriate” humour. These chapters demonstrated that in religious humour the answer to what makes something non-blasphemous, clean or non-hostile varies widely. I argued in these chapters that different humourists interpret each condition in diverse ways and maintain unique boundaries in terms of what is and is not

\(^1\) See Chapter Five, p. 175.
appropriate. Often, the way that humour appears at first is not always in keeping with its underlying motivations and values.

Chapter Four focused on the requirement that appropriate religious humour is non-blasphemous. This is perhaps the most important of the three criteria given that Christian and Mormon religious humour emerges out of a relationship with God. I defined non-blasphemous humour as *humour that gives God his full due by representing him as almighty and perfect*. This demonstrated that it is more than simply not mentioning God or the sacred but involves a detailed desire to present as well as promote a Christian worldview. This is achieved by what I have termed strategies of blasphemy management. Religious humourists ensure that the joke is read through a religious frame, so anything contained therein is taken as having a religious worldview. They safeguard any content that is sacred by switching from the humorous to the serious mode, sometimes within the single joke. Most importantly, Christian and Mormon humourists make certain that God and the sacred are never the butt of the joke. These strategies guarantee that God will always be given his full due, and hence the Christian worldview is not only defended but endorsed. I demonstrated how these strategies are used in the stand-up comedy series *Thou Shalt Laugh* and *Apostles of Comedy* as well as the LDS film *The Singles 2nd Ward*. These media show the ways in which believers actively incorporate their theological beliefs about God and the sacred in their comic material.

Chapter Five discussed the need for appropriate religious humour to be clean. This is an often used but poorly explained term that has come to be identified with religious humour. Clean humour is usually described as “not dirty”, that is, it does not contain any swearing, sexual or scatological humour. There is a need for a more in depth definition, and I have argued that clean humour is *humour that uses the tactics of avoidance, euphemism and religious framing to avoid the acknowledgment or discussion of offensive elements of the body*. This contends that even though the majority of clean humour does not contain any explicit content there are still cases in which bodies and their relations are made humorous. These cases allowed me to identify the nuanced tactics used to minimise the offence caused by open discussion of uncomfortable topics while exploiting the
amusement inherent in the taboo. I examined this conflict between the offensively uncomfortable and the amusingly uncomfortable again through *Thou Shalt Laugh* and *Apostles of Comedy* with additional analysis of Christian and Mormon stand-up comedians, as well as the Mormon practice of substitute swearing in the film *Sons of Provo*.

Chapter Six considered the third aspect of appropriate religious humour, its relationship to hostility and subversion. I argued in this chapter that hostile and subversive humour is inappropriate when it insults and harms but is appropriate when it corrects and improves. How it is used depends on whether the humour is thought to protect believers or be needed to challenge them, but it is always designed to make them “better” Christians and Mormons. This last point is crucial for understanding religious humour that is controversial. Much of religious humour is gentle and uplifting and, like clean and non-blasphemous humour, designed to entertain without causing undue discomfort or offence, as I illustrated through analysis of the slapstick, evangelical humour of Pastor Greg. However, there are cases when humour is needed to rectify what is perceived to be lapses in Christian or Mormon standards or judgement and mistakes in the church community. This was seen in the comedy of Brad Stine and the cartoons published in *Sunstone* magazine.

Scholarship that considers religious humour and the contemporary joking culture of Christians and Mormons is the beginning of a fruitful field of investigation. This dissertation has sought to supplement the extant knowledge about the relationship between religion and humour. Understanding what individuals and communities laugh at and do not laugh at is instrumental in understanding the values, boundaries and wider culture of that group. Humour and laughter, by virtue of its adroit manipulation of meaning, can betray sentiments and prejudices, beliefs and misbeliefs that may otherwise go unnoticed or be hidden. The model of religious humour I have developed can be applied to many more cases than those contained here, and with any study of this kind, the more material it is tested on the more we can uncover other avenues of investigation. There are a number of paths that lead off from the work I have presented. The question of
appropriate humour can be further applied to more examples of religious humour from Christians and Mormons. It would also be constructive to see whether the model would be helpful for other religious groups or whether it would be entirely inapplicable. I would suggest that it would be effective for other groups of Christians, such as Catholics or other Protestant denominations, as well as for other monotheistic traditions, especially Islam. The appropriateness of non-blasphemous humour would be true of any group that holds beliefs to be sacred, although the conditions and methods used to protect the sacred may vary amongst groups that have a different interpretation of God, the sacred and blasphemy. The relationship that other religious traditions have with humour is a desperately undernourished field and would benefit greatly from further academic attention.

There are also a number of thematic issues that this dissertation has brought forward but was unable to fully explore. Importantly, the intersection of gender and religious humour. I touched the subject briefly in my discussion of religious humour and the body, however, much religious humour relies on complex interpretations of gender as well as sexuality. Similarly, my discussion of subversive and safe humour brings up questions of the role of humour in power and politics. Political humour is a rich field of study in humour studies in general, and it would be interesting to apply some of this work to religious humour. This study has also brought to the fore the world of religious entertainment, and while there is substantial work that has been done on religious popular culture, there is room to consider further the place that humour has in religious media and marketing.

Finally, I have intended this dissertation to be a collection of material that provides a useful resource for those embarking on an investigation of religious humour. I would like to close this collection and analysis with a final joke that represents many of the elements discuss in the pages above, from the suitably named *The Big Book of Church Jokes*:
One communion Sunday, the communion steward prepared an unusual communion. When it came time to uncover the elements, the grape juice looked darker than usual. The minister thought nothing of it and began to serve the communion. Promptly from receiving the cup, each recipient’s face took on a stunned look. When it came time for the pastor to receive, he discovered the reason for the strange looks: the juice was prune juice! One parishioner stated “Perhaps this is a divine commentary on our spirituality… we need a little loosening up!”

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Appendix One:
Sample Interview Questions For Professional Christian and Mormon Comedians

The purpose of interviewing professionals in the comedy industry is to gain information about the production of religious comedy, and to support close readings of samples of religious comedy. Questions will focus on each comedian’s faith and its impact on their motivations, content and attitudes to humour, their experiences as a religious person in the entertainment industry, and their understanding of their audiences. The interviews will seek to gain detailed information about how the participant’s religious beliefs affect their sense of humour. Questions will focus on what participants find funny/unfunny and why, their experiences of religious humour, their participation in and consumption of religious humour, and their understanding of the values expressed or represented as well as critiqued in religious humour. Questions will also be asked about the particular example of religious comedy at which they have been approached in order to develop a close reading of specific examples. Interview questions are designed to be open and encouraging of extended discussion.

1. Why did you become a comedian?
2. Who is your audience? Do you target any specific groups or do you try to appeal to everyone?
3. What is the appeal of comedy made by religious comedians? Is it popular/successful?
4. How does your faith shape your sense of humour? Does your comedy effect your relationship with God? With your church? With your family and friends?
5. Do you include humour about your religion in your act? How do you negotiate the boundaries between funny and irreverent? Has anyone ever been offended by your act?
6. Do you include your personal beliefs in your act? Why?
7. Do you see your comedy as a platform for social commentary? For witness?
8. How does your comedy express your values and/or ethics?
9. Do you intentionally include controversial subjects in your act, or do you prefer to avoid such content?
10. What is the difference between your work and more “mainstream” comedy?

11. How does being open about your religious beliefs impact on your career? Does it influence where you perform, who you perform for, and how you are received in the entertainment industry in general?

12. Do you think that Christian/Mormon comedy is becoming its own genre, if not industry?

13. Do you agree with labelling your work as “Christian”/“Mormon”? What are the benefits of making such a distinction? What are the problems?

14. What does “clean comedy” mean to you?

15. What do you think about Christians/Mormons and their sense of humour?

16. Do you feel that your act is a way of disseminating information about your faith to the public?

17. Do you get any negative feedback? If so, what kinds of criticisms have you encountered?

18. What positive feedback have you received?

19. Can you comment on the quality of Christian/Mormon comedy in general?
Appendix Two: Questionnaire

University of Sydney, Australia

Research Project: *God’s Comics: Religious Humour in Contemporary Evangelical Christian and Mormon Comedy*

HREC#12285

QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is voluntary and answers will remain anonymous. By completing this survey you agree that your words or attitudes may be described or quoted (anonymously) in academic publications. You may leave out any question you do not wish to answer. Please refer to the Participant Information sheet provided if you would like more information.

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire.

Age (please circle): 

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-35
- 36-50
- 51-60
- 60+

Gender: 

Religious Affiliation: 

Do you consider yourself (please circle): Extremely religious  Very religious

- Moderately religious
- Not very religious

- Not religious at all

What kinds of comedy do you enjoy? What Factors do you consider when choosing the kinds of comedy you or your family watch/listen to?

Do you like humour about your own religious group/tradition? Does it make a difference if the person making the jokes is a believer?
Is religion very important to you? How do your religious beliefs affect your sense of humour?

Do you think that religion and humour should not mix? Why/Why not?

Are there subjects that should not be included in humour? What kinds of jokes do you find offensive?

How does humour contribute to your understanding of God or your beliefs?

How do you find out about and gain access to these kinds of comedy (e.g. friends/family, church, internet and online shopping, television etc)?

Any other comments?

Thank you for completing this survey. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.