SERVING THE LORD WITH GLADNESS: 
SITUATING CHRISTIAN HUMOR IN THREE HISTORICAL CONTEXTS 

By 

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European churches in the sixteenth century faced dwindling attendance due to parishioners’ indifference toward church services, a consequence of factors such as boring sermons and dissatisfaction with clergy and church leaders. As a result, many Christians of the time refused to attend or participate in church services, opting instead for more pleasurable activities such as frequenting theatrical performances and alehouses. Essentially, sixteenth century preachers were forced to compete with vices such as the theater, alcohol, and gambling for the public’s attention and respect. Christian leaders of the time, however, proposed a unique way of ameliorating this dilemma. These individuals suggested preachers incorporate theatrical elements and rhetorical devices, traditionally reserved for popular forms of entertainment, into their sermons. This controversial technique, known as pulpit jesting, proved quite effective in winning parishioners back to the churches. Nearly four centuries later, revival leaders in the United States were using pulpit jesting with even more success than their European predecessors. In contemporary American society, where many Christians similarly find themselves too distracted or indifferent towards participation in weekly religious services, a new breed of comedian has gained enormous appeal by synthesizing humor and Christianity. Christian standup comedians present an interesting case study as they are simultaneously entertainers and evangelists. In short, contemporary Christian standup comedians are heirs to the tradition of pulpit jesting.
INTRODUCTION

While some may see religion and humor as antithetical, many religions feature humorous figures, events, and themes. One may immediately call to mind depictions of laughing Buddhas and bodhisattvas that seem to adorn nearly every restaurant specializing in Asian cuisine. Alternatively, one might think of the ever-mirthful Dalai Lama whose contagious smile can be seen on the covers of his innumerable publications. One familiar with Hinduism may recall the humorous antics of Krishna or the hilarity that ensues during the festival of Holi, where participants frequently consume bhang (cannabis) and playfully throw colored powder at each other. Even the gods of Greek and Roman mythology were known to laugh, though it was frequently at the expense of humankind. Yet, as sociologist Peter Berger points out, “The so-called Abrahamic religions that emerged from the monotheistic experiences of western Asia—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are comparatively underprivileged in the department of mirth.”¹

Fear, more than many other emotions, has come to characterize these traditions. For example, Christians are generally taught to be “God-fearing” from a very young age. During the Great Awakenings in American history, revival leaders such as Jonathan Edwards and Charles Grandison Finney exploited Christians’ fears of eternal damnation, causing thousands of terrified individuals to repent for even the most trivial transgressions. Failure to do so meant having to face the unmerciful wrath of God. Indeed, just a glance at a photograph of Rev. Finney is enough to strike fear into one’s heart, regardless of one’s religious affiliation. The apparent absence of humor in

Christian scripture and theology presents an enormous obstacle for one wishing to make a case for the existence of the comic in Christianity. However, I intend to do just that.

In this work, I demonstrate that humor has, in fact, played an enormous role in shaping Christian identity and sparking intra-faith dialogue over the past several centuries. Preachers and ministers have used humor quite effectively for the purposes of evangelization and reinvigorating the Church during troubling times. To examine the intricacy and history of this topic, I draw quite heavily from three historical contexts. During these particular eras, one finds the largest amount of dialogue regarding preaching techniques, including pulpit jesting, jokes, and humorous anecdotes. These historical explorations then inform my investigation of the contemporary phenomenon that is Christian standup comedy.

In Chapter One, I critically examine past and present arguments made by Christians against and in support of this controversial technique whereby preachers incorporate humor and rhetorical devices characteristic of popular forms of entertainment (such as the theater) into their sermons. Those who support pulpit jesting claim the practice is an effective means of maintaining the attention of lethargic parishioners as well as enticing deviant Christians back to the churches. Those who reject the efficacy of pulpit jesting argue that it violates the sanctity of the church and compromises the authority of the preacher. “How,” they ask, “could a preacher be taken seriously in matters of the ‘utmost importance’ if he handles himself in a wholly unserious manner?”

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2 Pulpit jesting appears to have first emerged in sixteenth century England as a mechanism for maintaining drowsy parishioners’ attention (and consciousness). If, during the course of a sermon, a preacher witnessed members of his congregation beginning to doze off or lose interest in the material, the preacher could regain the attention of his listeners by telling a “merry tale” or joke. Once finished with this brief interlude, the preacher could continue his sermon having refreshed his parishioners.
Although these debates span several centuries and still continue to rage in some circles, I demonstrate that many arguments both against and in support of pulpit jesting are just as pervasive today as they were in the sixteenth century.

In Chapter Two, I explore the preaching styles and contributions of two archetypical pulpit-jesters: Hugh Latimer (1487-1555) and Billy Sunday (1862-1935). In periods where puritanical Christianity pervaded their respective geographic settings, leaving little room for preachers to take liberties with their style of preaching, both Latimer and Sunday utilized their natural talents as evangelists and showmen to draw throngs of spectators wishing to catch a glimpse of their unorthodox, yet effective preaching. I demonstrate that both Latimer and Sunday garnered enormous followings, in part, due to their humorous and animated sermons. In many respects, they are the embodiment of pulpit jesting.

In the third and final chapter, I move from the issue of pulpit jesting to explore its apparent twenty-first century counterpart: the intriguing, contemporary phenomenon of Christian standup comedy. I define Christian comedy as a genre and focus on three important ways Christian standup comedy functions within the American Evangelical subculture: as a mechanism for social bonding, a form of cultural mediation, and religious ritual. I demonstrate that through their unique synthesis of humor and tenets of Christian scripture and theology, Christian standup comedians are unconventional preachers.

I then conclude with a review of the various ways humor has shaped Christianity, particularly in America. Additionally, I argue that, especially within the coming decades, Christianity’s survival in the face of burgeoning secularism will depend on how the
Church and its constituents respond to these threats. Ultimately, I conclude that Christian standup comedians are on the right track by working with secularism rather than against it.

Outline of a Theory of Humor

Before beginning, however, it is important to understand how humor functions, particularly within a Christian context. According to scholar Stephanie Olson, “Comedy performance is an art form and humor is a specialized form of communication that provides a framework in a high-energy setting for people to reflect about the complexity of the world around them.”

This “high-energy” is the direct result of the comedian’s function: to guide listeners through tension-provoking social commentary. The most successful standup comedians are capable of pushing their audience members back on their heels with brazen and sometimes explicit social commentary. These comedians then reconcile or mediate the tension they cause by leading their audience in collective, cathartic laughter. The individual who fails to reconcile this tension within the audience fails as a comedian.

Interestingly, many scholars of humor frequently use religious terminology when elucidating the sociological function of standup comedy. For example, scholar Lawrence E. Mintz claims, “As a part of the public ritual of stand-up comedy, [the comedian] serves as a shaman, leading us in a celebration of a community of shared culture, of

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homogenous understanding and expectation.” Likewise, anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests that the act of joking can be better understood in terms of rite and anti-rite, or as public affirmation of shared cultural beliefs and as a reexamination of these beliefs.\(^4\) As instances of anti-rite, Douglas observes that jokes frequently tend to be subversive in nature. Mintz explains, “Jokes tear down, distort, misrepresent, and reorder usual patterns of expression and perception.”\(^6\) Generally speaking, the most effective jokes are usually those that trick the listener into assuming he or she is in one linguistic framework, when in fact he or she is in a very different one.\(^7\) However, in addition to anti-rite, Douglas also recognizes that “the experience of public joking, shared laughter, and celebration of agreement on what deserves ridicule and affirmation fosters community and furthers a sense of mutual support for common belief and behavior (hence rite).”\(^8\)

To borrow Douglas’ term, “anti-rite” is exactly what pulpit-jesters and Christian standup comedians are doing. Like the “professional laughmakers” or courtly fools of the


\(^7\) Cathcart, Thomas and Daniel Klein. Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar....:Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes (New York: Abrams Image, 2007), 133. Klein and Cathcart use the following crude example to convey their point:

“Which of the following does not belong in this list: herpes, gonorrhea, or a condominium in Cleveland?”

“The condo, obviously.”

“Nope, gonorrhea. It’s the only one you can get rid of.”

\(^8\) Mintz, “Social and Cultural Mediation,” 196.
past, pulpit-jesters and Christian standup comedians play a vital role as “Church-sanctioned deviants” who vacillate between entertaining and preaching. According to Olson, “Standup comedians…perform an important role by providing an arena where an array of volatile and tension-provoking subjects can be publicly scrutinized.” Some of the most prominent pulpit-jesters use humor quite effectively to reconcile societal tensions, such as the looming threats of liquor and the theater. With regards to Christian standup comedians, many will momentarily halt their joke-telling and, essentially, “preach” to their audience. Some Christian standup comedians pause to acknowledge how humor has provided them with a clearer perception of God. For example, Chonda Pierce proclaims, “Laughter and humor is an incredible gift that I think comes from above that helps us get through the day every now and then.” Likewise, Sinbad, echoing the sarcastic words of revival leader Billy Sunday, has joked that humanity, with all its shortcomings, proves “God has a sense of humor.”

Understanding how the pulpit-jester and Christian standup comedian function as “sanctioned deviants” is particularly useful for the purposes of this work. According to Olson, “One aspect of comedians’ relationships with their audiences is their role as licensed spokespersons who identify and talk about contradictions in society that other

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9 Olson, 110.

10 Have I Got a Story for You!, DVD, directed by Stephen Yake (Brentwood, TN: No Whining Productions, Inc., 2000).

11 Thou Shalt Laugh 3, DVD, directed by Truett Hancock (Thou Shalt Laugh, LLC., 2008).
persons may be unaware of or reluctant to acknowledge openly.”

Mintz shares Olson’s sentiments when he writes:

[The comedian] serves two apparently universal functions: as a licensed spokesman he is permitted to say things about society that we want and need to have uttered publicly [sic], but would be too dangerous and too volatile if done without the mediation of humor; and as a comic character, he can represent, through caricature, those negative traits which we wish to hold up to ridicule, to feel superior to, and to renounce through laughter.¹³

Indeed, some Christian standup comedians, such as the rather curt Thor Ramsey, will use the stage to address “volatile and tension-provoking subjects” or culturally relevant issues that one might not be exposed to in a formal church setting.

Mintz goes on to elucidate the significance of “sanctioned deviance” in a religious setting. He suggests, “The pleasure the audience derives from this sanctioned deviance may be related to the ritual violation of taboos, inversion of ritual, and public iconoclasm frequently encountered in cultural traditions.”¹⁴ Essentially, this is a rewording of Peter Berger’s theory that laughter is a cathartic physiological process.¹⁵ To this Mintz adds:

If, as Freud posited, there is a battle going on between our instincts and our socially developed rules of behavior, comedy provides an opportunity for a staged antagonism. Another way of expressing the same process would be as a dialectic in which a thesis—basic human traits and characteristics—is confronted with an antithesis—polite manners and

¹² Olson, 124.

¹³ Mintz, Lawrence E. “The ‘New Wave’ of Standup Comedians: An Introduction” (American Humor: An Interdisciplinary Newsletter 4, 2 [Fall 1977]), 1-3; See also Olson, 110.


¹⁵ See pages 34-36.
social restraint—with a synthesis perhaps being tolerance or at least a relaxation of hostility and anxiety.\textsuperscript{16}

In sum, the pulpit-jester and Christian standup comedian, by virtue of his or her role as a “professional laughmaker,” is \textit{sanctioned} to discuss issues that may utterly contradict or \textit{deviate} from the Evangelical ethos. I intend to demonstrate in this work that the strategies of pulpit-jesters and Christian standup comedians have been used quite effectively for the purposes of evangelization across three historical settings.

CHAPTER 1

THE PULPIT JESTING CONTROVERSY:
ARGUMENTS THEOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL

“If humor without faith is in danger of dissolving into cynicism and despair, faith without humor is in danger of turning into arrogance and intolerance.”¹⁷

- Conrad Hyers

Introduction

Pulpit jesting has been a highly controversial issue among preachers and scholars alike over the course of the past five hundred years. For some, pulpit jesting is perceived to be an effective way to maintain the attention of parishioners during an otherwise protracted and monotonous sermon. For others, pulpit jesting is seen as a sophomoric resolution to periods of waning church attendance since the practice jeopardizes the clerical authority of the preacher or minister more than it helps to edify the souls of congregants.

In this chapter, I examine the role of pulpit jesting in the sixteenth century and analyze the two most frequent types of arguments concerning its use. Theological arguments generally deal with whether or not pulpit jesting is an effective means of communicating the message of the Bible. Practical arguments, on the other hand, typically focus on the pragmatic consequences of pulpit jesting such as whether or not the practice increases church attendance and keeps drowsy parishioners awake during church services. Although these arguments span across several centuries, they demonstrate the pivotal role of humor in that historical context and show that many arguments made by

twentieth and twenty-first century critics and supporters of pulpit jesting are not much different from those of earlier defenders and antagonists of the practice.

Theological Arguments

Since the introduction of pulpit jesting in the sixteenth century, there have been numerous critics to the practice, many contending that humor and Christian faith are fundamentally incompatible. These objections stem primarily from the long-held belief that the Bible is the sacred, holy word of God, and nothing about it or within it is humorous. As scholar Joseph M. Webb explains, the Bible’s defining themes are “sin and forgiveness, suffering and sacrifice, death, redemption, and hope,” none of which are comical in nature.\(^\text{18}\) Indeed, many Christians may find hope in the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but not likely humor. Generally speaking, theological objections to pulpit jesting fall into three rather well-defined categories: 1) pulpit jesting developed out of the much despised Catholic tradition, 2) preaching, not jesting, is the main vehicle for making scriptural truth available to parishioners, and 3) pulpit jesting jeopardizes the clerical authority of the preacher.\(^\text{19}\)

English clergyman John Foxe (1517-1587) was one such objector who argued that not only would pulpit jesting prove to be a distraction to parishioners’ spiritual growth, but such theatrics would also lead preachers to confuse their role with that of the secular actor or entertainer. In his *Actes and Monuments*, Foxe recounts a story of a Catholic preacher named Hubberdin who had a reputation for his antics in the pulpit. According to


Foxe, one day, Hubberdin came upon a church “where the Youth of the parish were dancing in the churchyard.” Hubberdin dismounted his horse and joined the children in song and dance. Beginning in the churchyard, the frolicsome gathering danced their way into the church and onto the pulpit whereupon disaster struck:

And thus old Hubberdin, as he was dancing with his Doctors lustily in the pulpit against the heretics, how he stampt and took on I cannot tell, but “crash,” quoth the pulpit, down cometh the dancer, and there lay Hubberdin, not dancing, but sprawling in the midst of his audience; where altogether he brake not his neck, yet he so brake his leg the same time and bruised his old bones, that he never came in pulpit anymore, and died not long after the same.20

Foxe found the outrageous antics of secular stage performers and the task of preachers to be completely incommensurable. One can even understand Foxe’s concern from a practical perspective—the pulpit, unlike the theatrical stage, was not built to withstand such behavior. Thus, the story of Hubberdin presents a poignant case for why pulpits were to be strictly used for the purpose of preaching.

Foxe’s audience would have likely caught the seemingly minor detail that Hubberdin was Catholic. Although Foxe does not directly link Hubberdin’s antics to his religious affiliation, there are several hints that such outlandish behavior is characteristic of Catholic preachers. In the work, *Mirth Making*, historian Chris Holcomb notes:

Using conventional anti-Catholic epithets, Foxe prefices his account of the dancing sermon by calling Hubberdin “a right painted Pharisee” and “a right image or counterfeit, setting out unto us in lively colors the pattern of perfect hypocrisy.” He also accuses him of straying “abroad in all quarters of the realm” performing one-man “pageants,” and of accompanying his sermons with “forged tales and fables, dialogues, dreams, dancings,

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hoppings and leapings, with other like histrionical toys and gestures used in the pulpit.”

The “histrionical toys” of which Foxe speaks likely refer to the stained glass windows, ornate bibles, and gold-plated crucifixes that defined medieval and early modern Catholicism throughout Europe. Regardless of whether or not the story of Hubberdin is historically true, the gaiety and silliness of Hubberdin reflects prevailing sixteenth century Protestant conceptions of the saturnalia that was the Catholic mass.

Additionally, Foxe and his fellow Protestant objectors were deeply concerned over Catholicism’s history of sponsoring carnivalesque rituals and feasts. Two particular Catholic events that they pointed to as examples of Catholicism’s frivolity were Shrove Tuesday and the Feast of Fools (also known as the Feast of Innocents). The festival of Shrove Tuesday occurred on the eve of Ash Wednesday and was incorporated into the church’s liturgical calendar along with the festive period that ran from the New Year through Lent. According to anthropologist Gerald Arbuckle, in *Laughing with God*, “These [festivals] became substitutes for the Ancient feasts of Saturn…during which there was much licentiousness, and slaves dined with their masters, whom they freely mocked.”

Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) elucidates the significance of societal reversal during Shrove Tuesday by describing such church festivities as emotional outlets where ordinary people were permitted to assert their repressed disdain.

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21 Holcomb, 61-62; Foxe, 7:477.


for the “oppressive, hierarchical, and clerical power structures in the church and society itself.”

In other words, Shrove Tuesday was organized disorder sanctioned by the Catholic Church.

Protestant objectors to pulpit jesting also argued that the practice evolved out of the tomfoolery characteristic of the Catholic Feast of Fools, which thrived in parts of Europe during medieval times and the Renaissance. Arbuckle briefly describes some of the festivities:

During this ritual of grotesque buffoonery, ordinary pious priests and respectable townspeople appeared in lewd masks and sang offensive lyrics. Lesser clerics with painted faces strutted around in the sacred vestments and courtly costumes of their superiors while mocking the rituals of the church and court.

It should be noted, however, that not all Catholics supported the populist folk traditions of Shrove Tuesday and the Feast of Fools. For instance, members of the Council of Basil in 1431 condemned the Feast of Fools; although it would continue to be celebrated in some Catholic circles well into the sixteenth century. As historian Barry Sanders notes in *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History*, the Catholic Church recognized that if “organized religion hoped to remain organized, only seriousness would keep it solidly together.” Therefore, one would be mistaken to assume that leaders within the sixteenth

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24 Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); See also, Arbuckle, 117.

25 Arbuckle, 117.

26 Ibid, 117.

27 Ibid, 118.

28 Sanders, Barry. *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 146; See also, Arbuckle, 118.
century Catholic Church were ignorant of the subversive nature of their popular feasts and festivals.

Yet, Protestant objectors could not lay all of the blame for pulpit jesting on Catholicism. Many of these critics attributed the growing interest in the practice to alarming trends within their own tradition. James Pilkington, Bishop of Durham, poignantly sums up the state of Protestantism in sixteenth century England: “For come into a church on the sabbath day, and ye shall see but few, though there be a sermon; but the alehouse is full.” Church of England clergyman, John Northbrooke echoes the concerns of Bishop Pilkington when he declares:

God be mercifull to this Realme of England, for we begynne to have ytching eares, and lothe that heavenly Manna, as appeareth by [the public’s] slowe and negligent comming unto Sermons, and running so fast, and so many, continually unto Playes.

Whereas some Christian thinkers during the Protestant Reformation contested that the public’s penchant for attending theatrical performances instead of church services could be exploited through the incorporation of theatrical elements into sermons, Northbrooke found the public’s fascination with the theater all the more reason to keep it as far away from the church as possible. Northbrooke calls the theatrical stage a “schoole for all wickednesse and vice to be learned in” and inquires, “What other thing doe [entertainers]


teache, than wanton pleasure, and stirring up of fleshly lustes unlawfull appetites and desires? with their bawdie and filthie sayings and counterfeit doings.”

These were not Northbrooke’s only reservations against pulpit jesting. As far as he was concerned, the only thing the preacher should be moving through his congregation was the Holy Spirit, not laughter or mirth. The pulpit, according to Northbrooke, was no place for “frivolous vaine things” such as jokes or pleasant stories not explicitly derived from the Bible. A preacher who would have his parishioners rolling in the aisles laughing during a sermon was no preacher at all—he was merely a court jester under the guise of a Christian preacher. Likewise, the parishioner who laughed in church could hardly be considered Christian since he or she did not take the sermon seriously.

Another theological objector, Andreas Hyperius (1511-1564), vocalizes his discomfort with pulpit jesting in his work, Practis of Preaching. Here, Hyperius contends that pulpit jesting jeopardizes the clerical authority of the preacher or minister. He states that the preacher must be “a very careful and diligent observer of decorum in the universall order and grace of speaking.” As such, Hyperius instructs preachers to “purposely avoide fond and fabulous histories, and the vaine rablement of miracles.” These “undiscreete and unseemely gestures” could potentially turn parishioners against the preacher, making him “the common talking stocke and publicke pastime of the

31 Ibid, 59, 65; See also Holcomb, 64.


Certainly, Hyperius fears pulpit jesting would harm the centrality and decorum accorded the minister in the Protestant tradition. Yet, Hyperius appears less concerned with how parishioners would think of their pastor and more concerned with how they would treat him in public. Just as close friends will playfully tease one another, the preacher who acts more like a buddy than a spiritual advisor risks becoming the “pastime of the people.”

Additionally, Hyperius expresses concern over acts that would (or could) cause parishioners to lose their decorum in the church. He recognized that the preacher wields a great deal of power from the pulpit since parishioners heed his words and emulate his behavior. Pulpit jesting, therefore, not only jeopardizes the authority of the preacher, but also could be an impetus for parishioners to partake in sinful behavior. Thus, Hyperius warns that the preacher should not exhibit “sin in his coolours, that thou privily tickle [the] mindes of thy hearers, and (as ye would say) egge them to conceyve eyther a certaine new desyre of sinnige, or els to take a certaine pleasure of their sinne lately committed.”

Although tales of fools or humorous anecdotes would certainly titillate an audience, Hyperius fears that “those that are wonderfully delighted, when they heare these vices pleaasuntly described” will engage in the very sort of behavior they hear.

Incidentally, contemporary theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) makes many similar arguments against the incorporation of humor in preaching as Foxe, Northbrooke, and Hyperius had nearly four centuries earlier. In Discerning the Signs of the Times (1946), Niebuhr does acknowledge a relationship between humor and Christian

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34 Ibid, 178.

faith. He writes, “The intimate relation between humour and faith is derived from the fact
that both deal with the incongruities of our existence.”36 The key difference, however, is:

Humour is concerned with the immediate incongruities of life and faith
with the ultimate ones. Both humour and faith are expressions of the
freedom of the human spirit…Laughter is our reaction to immediate
incongruities and those which do not affect us essentially. Faith is the only
possible response to the ultimate incongruities of existence, which threaten
the very meaning of our life.37

In other words, humor is a natural response to the incongruities of everyday life, such as
“a proud man suffering from some indignity; or [a] child introducing its irrelevancies into
the conversation of the mature.”38 However, responding to more profound incongruities
such as “man’s position in the universe” with humor does little more than hamper one’s
ability to reconcile the incongruity in question. Niebuhr clearly shares the sentiments of
Northbrooke and Hyperius who argue that humor detracts from a parishioner’s focus and
understanding of the sermon. Thus, Niebuhr concludes, “If we persist in laughter when
dealing with the final problem of human existence, when we turn life into a comedy, we
also reduce it to meaninglessness.”39

Niebuhr also voices some of (what one might call) the most cogent moral
objections to the use of humor in preaching. According to Niebuhr:

Laughter may turn to bitterness when it faces serious evil, partly because it
senses its impotence. But, in any case, serious evil must be seriously dealt
with. The bitterness of derision is serious enough; but where is the

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36 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for To-day and To-

37 Ibid, 100.

38 Ibid, 100.

39 Ibid, 112.
resource of forgiveness to come from? It was present in the original forbearance of laughter, but it cannot be brought back into the bitterness of derision. The contradiction between judgment and mercy cannot be resolved by humour, but only by vicarious pain.40

Essentially, Niebuhr argues that laughter is an inappropriate response to the myriad evils plaguing the human condition. For example, the insidious laughter of the oppressor over the oppressed reaffirms the former’s superiority over the latter. Humor in such cases simply maintains the status quo. Such evil, according to Niebuhr, is most effectively dealt with by “vicarious pain,” or sacrifices made by the oppressors in order to achieve solidarity with the oppressed.

While these examples of arguments against pulpit jesting span hundreds of years, many of the critiques raised persist. Although arguments originating from sentiments of anti-Catholicism are significantly less common today than they were in the time of Foxe, many theological arguments against pulpit jesting, such as the threat it poses to the clerical status of the minister, continue to remain plausible as evidenced by the writings of Niebuhr.

Despite relentless critiques of pulpit jesting, other historical figures defend the practice and provide theological rationales for its usage. English Renaissance man Thomas More (1478-1535), a close friend of Desiderius Erasmus and to whom The Praise of Folly is dedicated, entertains the possibility of preachers incorporating a modicum of wit and humor into their sermons. In A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation (1553), More engages several issues regarding mirth in the Christian life.41

40 Ibid, 103-4; See also Webb, 12.

41 The work is believed to have been written by More in 1535 while awaiting execution. It was published posthumously.
More, responding to the question “Whether a man may not in tribulacion vse some worldly recreacion for his comfort,” writes:

First agreed that our chiefe comfort must be of god, & that with hym we must begyn, & with hym contynew, & with him end also/ A man to take now & than some honest worldly myrth/ I dare not be so sore as ytterly to forbyd yt/ sith good men & well lernid haue in some case alowid it, specially for the diuersitie of mens myndes.  

More is quick to point out that the highest priority of the preacher is to educate his listeners about God—a sentiment shared by Erasmus who insists preachers and parishioners alike understand that this concept is among the key differences between the church and the theater.

Although More approves of men enjoying some “honest worldly myrth,” he does not explicitly address the matter of pulpit jesting as part of the Christian service until he recounts a story of a preacher who quickly captures the attention of his parishioners with the promise of an entertaining story:

A certen holy father in making of a sermon, spake of hevyn & of hevynly thynges so celestially that much of his audience with the swete sowne therof began to forget all the world & fall a slepe/ which whan the father beheld he dissembled their slepyng & sodenly said vnto them I shall tell you a mery tale/ at which word they lyft vp their hedes & herkind vnto that/ And after the slepe therwith broken, herd hym tell on of hevyn agayne/ In what wise that good father rebuked than their vntoward myndes so dull vnto the thing that all our life we labour for.

Considering the reputation of early modern preachers for boring their audiences to sleep, More may be giving this “holy father” the benefit of the doubt by suggesting his words

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43 Ibid, 84.
had an overwhelmingly euphoric effect on the congregation. Nevertheless, this story presents preachers with one rather underhanded method for keeping parishioners awake. However, More eventually acquiesces to the reality that sometimes it takes a “folish mery tale” to keep the eyes of parishioners open. More attests to the sad reality that “our wretchednes ys such, that in talking awhile therof, men wax almost werye & as though to here of hevyn were an hevy burdeyne they must refresh them selfe after with a folysh tale.”

Thus, More’s mouthpiece in the Dialogue, Antony, concedes, “There is none other remedy, but you mos let hym haue yt/ better wold I wish it but I can not help it.”

The congregation’s sudden excitement at the prospect of being told an amusing story, in the example provided by More above, is phenomenon explored by some supporters of pulpit jesting such as the sixteenth century English scholar Thomas Wilson (1524-1581). Wilson argues that perhaps some mirthful camaraderie between preacher and parishioner would make going to church significantly more attractive to those who refused to go for fear of being bored. In The Art of Rhetoric (1553), Wilson responds to the question “Whether it standeth with an orator’s profession to delight the hearers with pleasant reports and witty sayings, or no?”

Whereas objectors like Hyperius would have responded in the negative, Wilson answers in the affirmative, suggesting that many preachers get so carried away in their preaching of the Gospel that they develop a

44 Ibid, 83.


tendency to talk at their congregation, thereby causing them to become restless and irritated:

Yea, the preachers of God mind so much edifying of souls that they often forget we have any bodies. And therefore some do not so much good with telling the truth as they do harm with dulling the hearers, being so far gone in their matters that oftentimes they cannot tell when to make an end. 47

As one of the most enthusiastic supporters of pulpit jesting in his time, Wilson identified the biggest obstacles preachers face when delivering sermons and proposed ways to overcome them. For Wilson, historian Chris Holcomb explains, “The dullness of [Christians’] minds and bodies are obstacles that work against a preacher’s professional and spiritual duty to edify the souls of his congregation.” 48 Thus, if a preacher is unable to adapt to the needs of his congregation, he risks not only losing their attention or putting them to sleep, but also irritating them to the point at which they want nothing more than for the preacher to get out of the pulpit. 49 Such would be the case if preachers, like the one in More’s example, continuously failed to deliver on their promises of amusing tales.

Some supporters of pulpit jesting have found ways to circumvent the telling of superfluous stories and anecdotes by instead using humorous, or seemingly humorous, stories from the Bible. A new hermeneutic that interprets the Bible as a collection of stories that could be taken apart and analyzed just like any other literary work helped counter many theological objections to pulpit jesting. According to Webb:

47 Ibid, 166.
48 Holcomb, 49.
49 Ibid, 49.
[Scholars] realized that the biblical documents, as literary documents, were, at many points, quite humorous; some even argued that the stories that the documents told, if one could get past their ‘sacredness,’ were funny as well; and not just funny in the present, but probably very funny for their readers or hearers of the distant past.\footnote{Author’s emphasis. Webb, 4.}

As this new hermeneutic came to be accepted in more and more circles, preachers and scholars alike challenged long-held, serious perceptions of the Bible and the figure of Jesus by finding the hidden humor within each.

For example, American theologian Elton Trueblood (1900-1994) attacks the stereotype of an utterly somber and solemn Christ in *The Humor of Christ*. Here, he attributes the development of this “false pattern of Christ’s character” to the misguided logic that the sadness and tragedy associated with the suffering and death of Christ necessitates a denial of humor in his life.\footnote{Trueblood, Elton, *The Humor of Christ* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1964), 24.} Trueblood argues that Christ frequently incorporated humor, irony, and wit into his sermons, teachings, and parables. In fact, Trueblood proposes that when the words of Christ are not merely viewed as dry lectures to large crowds or a handful of ignorant disciples, they take on a vivacity and life that makes them all the more illuminating. Trueblood writes, “There are numerous passages in the recorded teaching which are practically incomprehensible when regarded as somber prose, but which are luminous once we become liberated from the gratuitous assumption that Christ never joked.”\footnote{Trueblood, *Humor of Christ*, 10; See also Webb, 5.} Consequently, one could argue that Jesus Christ was the prototypical pulpit-jester.
Trueblood substantiates his aforementioned claim by analyzing the story of the Syrophoenician woman in Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30. According to the Mark account:

[Jesus] went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7:24-30)

Trueblood asserts that Christ’s rather churlish initial reaction to the Syrophoenician woman’s request seems entirely inconsistent with the way he is portrayed throughout the rest of the gospel—that he would withhold his message from the Gentiles (the dogs) and reserve it solely for the Jews (the children) is rather unbecoming of Christ. Trueblood suggests that the only plausible explanation to this discrepancy is that Jesus did not intend for his words to be taken literally by the Syrophoenician woman. Rather, he was speaking in a witty and bantering vein. Trueblood explains, “The hypothesis that Christ’s remark was intended to be humorous is supported by the woman’s clearly humorous and bantering reply. She might, she said, be a dog, but dogs could have crumbs…Christ loved her banter and healed her daughter.” Furthermore, Trueblood suggests the fact that

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54 Author’s emphasis. Ibid, 66.
Jesus fulfilled the woman’s request demonstrates that even Christ had a sense of humor and could appreciate a clever rejoinder.\textsuperscript{55}

Trueblood finds another example of Christ’s humor in Luke 7: 24-26. Here, Jesus teases his listeners after giving a message to a few disciples of John the Baptist:

When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out and see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.” (Luke 7: 24-26)

Trueblood explains that Christ’s rhetorical question “must have made His hearers realize the absurdity of their criticism.” He continues, “The teasing and ironical question was certain to be more effective than would have been a wholly serious and indicative approach.”\textsuperscript{56} This is essentially Wilson’s argument—that parishioners could more easily understand the message of the preacher if he were more amiable and less lugubrious.

In some cases, such as Trueblood’s rather protracted analysis of the parable of the new wineskins in \textit{The Humor of Christ}, it is difficult to distinguish whether or not the words of Christ are authentically humorous or simply seem so because Trueblood is forcing humor upon them. Nevertheless, in responding to the question of why contemporary Christians have such difficulty seeing the humor of Christ, Trueblood makes a profound assertion. He suggests that many Christians fail to find humor in the Bible because they are looking for the wrong kind of humor:

\begin{quote}
The chief difference between Christ’s humor and ours today is revealed in the fact that, in our ordinary experience, we make abundant use of the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 66.

\textsuperscript{56} Trueblood, \textit{Humor of Christ}, 59.
humorous anecdote, for its own sake. The laugh for which we strive is
often the sole justification of the entire effort…There seems to be none of
this in the recorded words of Christ, where the purpose is always the
revelation of some facet of truth.\textsuperscript{57}

Whether or not one is wholly convinced by his arguments or examples, Trueblood—with
his self-described goal of helping “the contemporary student to confront Christ as
actually portrayed rather than as we have imagined Him to be”—was a trailblazer of the
new interpretive theory of the Bible.\textsuperscript{58}

Frederick Buechner (b. 1926) is another contemporary scholar who, like
Trueblood, contends the regnant assumption that the Bible is devoid of humor. In \textit{Telling
the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale} (a short collection of
Buechner’s Lyman Beecher Lectures delivered at Yale Divinity School), Buechner
argues, “I suspect that many if not all of [Jesus’ parables] were originally not grave at all
but were antic, comic, often more than just a little shocking.”\textsuperscript{59} Like the medieval fool,
whose acts of reversal garnered the laughter of the court, the humor of Christ is found in
his words and actions relating to reversal.

Thus, for Buechner, there is humor in Christ proclaiming, “I will give you rest” to
the multitudes who “are weary and are carrying heavy burdens” (Matthew 11:28). There
is humor in Christ declaring, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle
than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24). There is
even humor in the fact that the Messiah spends his time with the last people one might

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 52.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 18-9.

expect—those who Buechner calls “the stooges and scarecrows of the world, the tax collectors and whores and misfits.” To Jesus, the joke is ultimately on the rich and powerful who fail to recognize that for humans, such things are impossible, “but for God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). Thus, Buechner concludes, “It seems to me that more often than not the parables can be read as high and holy jokes about God and about man and about the Gospel itself as the highest and holiest joke of them all.” Like Trueblood, Buechner asserts that the comedy of these incongruities allows the reader or listener to more easily digest the truth contained within these stories. Just as Christ used humor to convey his message to the multitudes, so too, Trueblood and Buechner suggest, should preachers incorporate humor into their sermons to make the “words” of God more relatable to parishioners.

Similarly, American theologian Harvey Cox (b. 1929) counters theological objections to the mixing of comedy with the Gospel message in *The Feast of Fools*. Inspired by the work of scholar Amos Wilder (1895-1993)—who in *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel*, proposed that the Christian gospels contain a wide variety of heretofore unappreciated literary genres—Cox takes the radical step of extrapolating the comedy of the gospel genre to the whole of the Christian gospel itself. According to Cox, traditional characterizations of Christ such as that of the healer or teacher are no longer effective models of understanding Christ in the modern world. Cox

60 Ibid, 71.
61 Ibid, 63.
62 Ibid, 66.
63 Webb, 5.
concludes that the only way for the Christian community to overcome this dilemma is to reassess regnant perceptions of Christ and, instead, begin to see him as the archetypical clown or harlequin. “Laughter,” he asserts, “in this sense, becomes the new voice of faith.”

Cox’s argument can be reduced to the expression, “Desperate times call for desperate measures.” The supporters of pulpit jesting discussed thus far all use unique theologically-based arguments to defend the practice—a practice they believe is capable of reinvigorating the Church. Whereas objectors feel that straightforward preaching is the most effective means of delivering the “word” of God to a congregation, supporters of the practice suggest that pulpit jesting is just as, if not more effective since it simultaneously maintains parishioners’ attention and makes sophisticated theological concepts more relatable. The relatively recent work of Trueblood, Buechner, and Cox demonstrates that humor and Christianity are not, in fact, incommensurable.

**Practical Arguments**

A second category of arguments concerning pulpit jesting deals with the practical repercussions of mixing humor and preaching. Whereas supporters of pulpit jesting argue that the practice leads to increased church attendance, practical objectors doubt its efficacy. Generally speaking, practical objections to pulpit jesting stem from the suppositions that 1) jokes are distracting and sometimes annoying whenever or wherever they are told, but most especially during sermons and 2) joking has serious psychological

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and physiological consequences. Those who have presented practical objections have also (rather humorously, one might add) called attention to traditional stereotypes of Christian preachers, claiming few “are naturally good at telling jokes.”

Northbrooke’s concern over the preservation of decorum during church services was a sentiment shared and expanded upon by Puritan clergyman William Perkins (1558-1602). Although much of his work on the matter was published posthumously in the first decade of the seventeenth century, Perkins proved to be one of the most outspoken practical objectors to pulpit jesting. Unlike Foxe, whose attacks stemmed primarily from anti-Catholic sentiments, Perkins objected to pulpit jesting on the grounds that such acts were distracting to listeners and devalued the Gospel message. In *The Arte of Prophecying* (1607), Perkins writes:

_Humane wisedome_ must bee concealed whether it be in the matter of the sermon, or in the setting forth of the words: because the preaching of the word is the _Testimonie of God, and the profession of the knowledge of Christ_, and not of humane skill: and againe, because the hearers ought not to ascribe their faith to the gifts of men, but to the power of Gods word.

Here, Perkins distinguishes the words of man with the words of God. It is unbecoming of a preacher to detract from the words of God with interjections of “_humane wisedome_” or rhetorical skill (i.e. pulpit jesting). Perkins adds, “If any man thinke that by this meanes barbarisme should bee brought into pulpits,” he should keep it to himself and “ought in publike to conceale all these from the people, and not to make the least ostentation.”

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65 Webb, 13.


68 Ibid, 133.
Like his contemporaries, Northbrooke and Hyperius, Perkins divulges his expectations of sixteenth century preachers and explains why alternative behavior is deleterious to the Christian mission. As to why “neither the words of arts nor Greeke and Latin phrases and quirks must be intermingled in the sermon,” Perkins writes, “1. They disturbe the mindes of the auditours, that they cannot fit those things which went afore with those that follow. 2. A strange word hindreth the understanding of those things that are spoken. 3. It drawes the mind away from the purpose to some other matter.”

Eventually, Perkins concludes, “The telling of tales, and all profane and ridiculous speeches must be omitted.” Thus, whereas some proponents of pulpit jesting argue that the practice is an effective means of maintaining audience attention, Perkins views pulpit jesting as a source of distraction itself, either frustrating the congregation’s understanding or drawing the attention of listeners away from “God’s word.”

Accordingly, Perkins delineates several regulations that he believed allowed preachers to most effectively communicate the Gospel to his listeners. First, he suggests, the preacher must “speaketh soberly and moderately.” Any unusual intonation or “strange word” could potentially cause listeners to lose their focus. Second, Perkins claims, “Hee must bee temperant, who restraineth inwardly his over vehement affections, and hath his outward fashions and gestures moderate and plaine, by the which dignitie

69 Ibid, 135-36.

70 Ibid, 136.

71 Holcomb, 63.

and authoritie may be procured and preserved.”\textsuperscript{73} Again, Perkins and many of his fellow objectors believed that excessive jesting jeopardized the preacher’s clerical authority and status. Lastly, Perkins writes, “It is fit therefore, that the trunke or stalke of the bodie being erect and quiet, all the other parts, as the arme, the hand, the face and eyes have such motions, as may expresse and (as it were) utter the godly affections of the heart.”\textsuperscript{74} Perkins does, however, make some concessions, permitting “the lifting up of the eye and the hand” and “the casting down of the eyes” as these actions “signifieth confidence” and “signifieth sorrow and heaviness” respectively.\textsuperscript{75}

Perkins launches a more direct attack on the practice of pulpit jesting in \textit{The Cases of Conscience} (1609). Here, Perkins responds to questions regarding how recreation fits into the Christian life. For instance, in response to the question, “Whether Recreation be lawful for a Christian man?” He states, “Yea, and that for two causes.”\textsuperscript{76} Perkins claims it is permissible for the Christian to indulge in recreation in order to provide “rest from labour” since “the refreshing of body and minde, is necessary.”\textsuperscript{77} Additionally, recreation is permissible by virtue of “Christian liberty” or the fact that “we are allowed to use the creatures of God, not onley for our necessity, but also for meete and convenient delight.”\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 141.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, 143.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, 143-44.

\textsuperscript{76} Perkins, William. \textit{The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience} (London, 1617), 140.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, 140.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid, 140.
However, when responding to the question, “What kinds of Recreations and sports, are lawful and convenient, and what be unlawful and unconvenient?” Perkins adds several caveats to his aforementioned claims. He begins by stating, “All lawful recreation is only in the use of things indifferent, which are in themselves neither commanded nor forbidden.” With this in mind, Perkins derives three conclusions: “Recreation may not be in the use of holy things,” “Recreation may not be made of the sins or offences of man,” and “We may not make recreations of Gods judgments, or of the punishments, of sin.”

Like Foxe, Perkins’ conclusions are grounded on the supposition that recreational behavior is incommensurable with the purposes of and behavior in the church. He writes:

[Word, Sacraments, Prayer, or any act of religion] are sacred and divine, they do not stand by Gods expresse commandment, and may not be applied to any common or vulgar use. For this cause it is well provided, that the Pageants which have beene used in sundry cities of this land, are put do; because they were nothing else, but either the whole, or part of the history of the Bible turned into a Play.

Perkins goes on to forbid secular recreations such as “common playes” because they do not constitute “things indifferent.” Echoing the sentiments of Northbrooke, Perkins argues that these recreations must be censured on the grounds that “they are nothing else, but representation of the vices and misdemeanors of men in the world.” Of even more concern to Perkins is the fact that these deplorable recreations are known for “causing

79 Ibid, 140.
80 Author’s emphasis. Ibid, 140-41.
81 Emphasis added. Ibid, 140.
82 Ibid, 140.
mirth and pastime” among Christians. Thus, Perkins reproves the practice of pulpit jesting because, as he explains, “It is not meete, convenient, or laudable for men to move occasion of laughter in Sermons” since such behavior is quite distracting, especially during church services.

Other practical objections to humor in preaching stem from the psychological effects of joking. Some critics point to the close relationship between humor and sarcasm. For example, although contemporary scholar David Buttrick, in his book *Homiletic*, suggests that there is some value to humor in the sermon, he concludes:

> There are kinds of laughter that can devastate preaching. Laughter prompted by sarcasm is seldom helpful. Sarcasm is always a form of veiled hostility…Thus, when people laugh at witty sarcasms, they will usually laugh out of shared hatreds. Such laughter in a sermon is rather clearly alien to the gospel.

In *Humor in the American Pulpit*, historian Douglas Adams substantiates Buttrick’s claim with an example of how sarcasm conflicts with the task of preaching. Adams recounts a story of Henry Ward Beecher, who—upon seeing a drunken parishioner swinging his arms and acting like a rooster during a service—stopped his sermon, looked at his watch, and remarked: “What—morning already? I wouldn’t have believed it, but the instincts of the lower animal are infallible.” Regardless of whether or not the rest of the

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83 Ibid, 140.

84 Ibid, 140.


congregation found Beecher’s interjection to be humorous, practical objectors argue that there is no place for such ridicule and sarcasm in the pulpit.

Lastly, practical objectors have also addressed the physiological threat of humor, that is, its ability to cause people to lose their composure. According to Webb:

The implication is that when people laugh, their intellectual and psychic defenses are lowered or removed and they become susceptible to influences against which, without the laughter, they would be able to “protect” themselves.  

Esteemed sociologist Peter Berger (b. 1929) elucidates this threat in *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*. Here, Berger claims, “the comic transcends the reality of ordinary existence; [he or she] posits, however temporarily, a different reality in which the assumptions and rules of ordinary life are suspended.”

Jokes, like dreams or intense religious experiences, are capable of removing an individual from ordinary reality and temporarily transporting him or her into another seemingly “more real” reality. Berger demonstrates the analogous relationship between comic transcendence and religious transcendence by drawing on the critical insights of notable phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (1899-1959).

In his essay, “On Multiple Realities,” Schutz explores the relationship between the reality of ordinary, everyday life, which he calls the “paramount reality,” and those enclaves within the latter, which he calls “finite provinces of meaning.” According to Schutz, paramount reality is “the world of daily life which the wide-awake, grown-up

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87 Webb, 15.

88 Berger, 205.

89 Ibid, 7.
man who acts in it and upon it amidst his fellow-men experiences within the natural attitude as a reality.”90 Finite provinces of meaning, on the other hand, are the realities experienced as an individual departs paramount reality. Oftentimes, these finite provinces of meaning are perceived as being “more real” than paramount reality. Some common examples of finite provinces of meaning are dreams, drug-induced euphorias, and intense religious experiences such as those found in mystical traditions. Schutz adds laughter, the physical response to humor, to this brief list. He states, “In listening to a joke, we are for a short time ready to accept the fictitious world of the jest as a reality in relation to which the world of our daily life takes on the character of foolishness.”91

Berger sees the insertion of a joke into daily life as an interruption of paramount reality, a more sophisticated expression for what Perkins might simply call a “distraction.” Jokes, often perceived of being wholly un-serious, intrude, very often unexpectedly, into other sectors of reality ordinarily perceived as being serious.92 Berger provides a cogent explanation:

The comic breaks into the consciousness of the paramount reality, which is that ordinary, everyday world in which we exist most of the time, which we share with most of our fellowmen, and which therefore appears to us as massively real. This reality is dense, heavy, compelling. By comparison, the reality of the comic is thin, effervescent, often shared with only a few other people, and sometimes shared with no one at all. As long as it lasts, the comic posits another reality that is inserted like an island into the ocean of everyday experience. It is then what Schutz called a finite province of meaning.93

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91 Ibid, 231.

92 Berger, 6.

93 Ibid, 205–6.
As odd as it may seem, a joke, according to Berger, is capable of rearranging the order of reality. In fact, it is oftentimes that very intentional and abrupt confusion that makes a joke humorous and consequently elicits laughter from the audience. When a joke is told, one is essentially transported to another reality where wordplay, riddles, and double entendres are normative. There is a sort of jolt (marked by laughter or its anticipation) as one moves into the world of the joke and a comparable “reverse” jolt as one returns to ordinary reality.  

Indeed, many religious mystics can attest to this movement between paramount reality and finite provinces of meaning. Members of Pentecostal churches have long been known to have spontaneous fits of crying, laughter, and glossolalia. Such individuals temporarily partake in another reality commonly referred to as being “higher” than paramount reality. Throughout history, many Christian churches have condemned these “signs” or manifestations because of the threat they pose to the order and authority of the church and society. Both the phenomena of spiritual ecstasy and laughter bring about a perception of a magically transformed world and, therefore, are both considered dangerous when they reach a certain level of intensity. According to Berger, these phenomena are “dangerous. . .to the maintenance of ordinary, everyday reality. . .Both[mystical ritual and joke telling] produce ecstasies—literally, experiences of standing outside ordinary reality.”  

Sincere laughter is, as Webb suggests, a form of losing bodily control even though the one doing the laughing remains fully conscious and alert.

94 Ibid, 206.

95 Author’s emphasis. Ibid, 206-7.
Supporters of pulpit jesting, particularly around the sixteenth century, found the threats of waning church attendance and irate or drowsy parishioners to be far more pressing issues than the subversive nature of laughter. As they reflected on the state of the Church, supporters of pulpit jesting concluded that if preachers and ministers were to continue on with the same habits that caused Christians to stay home on Sundays, then the Church would soon be in dire straits. Therefore, many of these individuals presented arguments on the practicality of incorporating humor into sermons. These arguments are derived from the assumption that pulpit jesting is the most effective way to attract parishioners to church services and keep them awake and attentive while they are there.

One of the first individuals to express concern over parishioners’ penchant for dozing off during religious services is Robert of Basevorn who, in his *Forma Praedicandi* or *The Form of Preaching* (1322), writes:

> Opportune Humor, according to Cicero, occurs when we add something jocular which will give pleasure when the listeners are bored, whether it be about something which will provoke laughter, or some story or anecdote. This must be used especially when they begin to sleep.\(^\text{96}\)

As was written by the Roman orator Cicero, the need to delight an audience is one of the three offices assigned to the orator (the others being to teach and persuade). Additionally, nearly two centuries before *The Form of Preaching*, the Christian convert Petrus Alphonsus published his *Disciplina clericalis*, or the *Gesta Romanorum*, which included

\(^{96}\) Murphy, James J. *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001), 212.
humorous anecdotes that pastors could use in sermons to illustrate complex theological topics or simply to keep the wayward minds of parishioners awake and attentive.\textsuperscript{97}

It was not until around the turn of the sixteenth century when the Catholic theologian Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1466-1536) presented some of the most cogent practical arguments in favor of the controversial technique of pulpit jesting. In the second book of \textit{Ecclesiastae}, Erasmus, like Cicero, acknowledges the importance of delighting listeners in general, but is reluctant to advocate pulpit jesting outright as a means to accomplish the ultimate end of preaching, which he believes to be the promulgation of the gospel message.\textsuperscript{98} Erasmus notes that although one may find humorous irony in the Scriptures, there are “nowhere jokes \textit{[iocos nusquam]}.”\textsuperscript{99} Although he finds no biblical precedents for pulpit jesting, Erasmus does acknowledge the fact that contemporaneous preachers who did incorporate “fictitious stories or foolish jokes” into their sermons not only managed their audiences more effectively, but “were celebrated.”\textsuperscript{100} Such claims should have laid Andreas Hyperius’ fears concerning the authority of the mirthful preacher to rest.

Erasmus substantiates his arguments by pointing to several pivotal Church figures, such as Augustine and Jerome, who faced similar challenges in their endeavors to win over potential converts to Christianity and accomplished the task with humor.

\textsuperscript{97} Holcomb, 50.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid, 52.

\textsuperscript{99} Erasmus, Desiderius. \textit{Ecclesiastae} (Basel, 1535), 124; See also Holcomb, 53.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid, 125; See also Holcomb, 54.
Erasmus claims that these individuals “were forced to make great allowances for the ears of the common folk.”

According to Holcomb:

The crowds these early bishops faced were used to witnessing the jests and antics of orators and mimes, and as Erasmus suggests, audience expectations associated with these established and familiar media—secular oratory and mime—were transferred to the relatively new medium of preaching.

Taking into account the successes of early Church leaders who incorporated jesting into their sermons and literary works, Erasmus delineates several rules that a preacher, wishing to do the same, should follow. This effort to standardize the practice of pulpit jesting would thwart imprudent preachers from transforming the pulpit into an arena for comedic performance and theatrics.

Sharing More’s reluctance to permit the use of pulpit jesting outright, Erasmus suggests that it is “more tolerable” for preachers to “use a noise or a word to waken sleepers” instead of telling an entertaining story that could potentially cause parishioners’ minds to wander further astray. However, should a preacher insist on jesting from the pulpit, Erasmus declares that he should draw his comic materials from “ancient” sources, for there he will find jests that provide a “serious and wholesome message.” Additionally, such jests should be used “sparingly and without an appearance of affectation, and not without apologizing for combining the humorous with the divine.”

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101 Ibid, 124-25; See also Holcomb, 53.
102 Holcomb, 53.
103 Erasmus, Ecclesiastes, 126; See also Holcomb, 55.
104 Ibid, 126; See also Holcomb, 55.
105 Ibid, 126; See also Holcomb, 55.
Lastly, the preacher who jests from the pulpit should not do so merely to make his listeners laugh—or as Erasmus puts it, to “draw the lips apart in a grin”—but rather to “apply everything to his hearers’ utility, striving in every way to render most pleasant to his audience that which is most wholesome.”

Such methodical regulations seem a bit odd coming from Erasmus, the author of The Praise of Folly, whose own writings on the subject of religion practically drip with wit, sarcasm, and humor. For instance, in recounting the following example of indecorous jesting that contemporary preachers should eschew, Erasmus comes quite close to engaging in the very practice that he warns against above—a nun was ravished in her room, and when the Abbess asks her why she did not scream for help, the nun replies, “I would have done that, but it happened in the dormitory, where breaking silence is forbidden.”

Likewise, The Shipwreck (1523), one of the most famous of Erasmus’ Colloquies, is described by scholar Craig R. Thompson as ranking among “the best satirical writing produced in the sixteenth century.” The Shipwreck is a dialogue between two characters, Antony and Adolph, concerning various types of Christian worship. Adolph recounts the behavior of a number of Christians who suddenly find themselves caught out at sea in a squall. As their hope for survival rapidly vanishes, Adolph observes some of the Christians tossing “costly wares” overboard, others singing Salve Regina and

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106 Ibid, 126; See also Holcomb, 55.

107 Holcomb, 55.

invoking the mercy of the saints, and even an old priest who “stripped to his underclothes, and with his shoes and leggings removed [. . .] urged [everyone else] to prepare likewise for swimming.”¹⁰⁹ The fate that befalls those caught in the stormy sea conveys Erasmus’ personal opinion toward the various groups of Christians that emerged during the comparable spiritual turmoil that characterized the Protestant Reformation.¹¹⁰ In the end, it is the commentary of Antony that makes this otherwise poignant allegory humorous—when Adolph recalls the myriad saints, martyrs, angels, and demigods individuals prayed to, Antony bluntly asks, “Christ didn’t come to mind?”¹¹¹ Erasmus’ writings demonstrate that humorous stories are, in fact, quite effective and entertaining ways to communicate messages relating to Christianity.

Like Erasmus before him, Thomas Wilson, recognizing that many clergymen of Queen Elizabeth’s reign (1558-1603) significantly lacked the intellect and skill necessary to deliver an engaging sermon, sought to ameliorate the problem by providing pastors with tips for maintaining parishioners’ attention. Wilson begins by suggesting that one way for pastors to win the attention and “goodwill” of the congregation is by inserting “delightful sayings and quick sentences” when discussing “weighty causes.”¹¹² Simple “ornamentations,” such as a sudden change of cadence or volume or the inclusion of a

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 142-43.

¹¹⁰ The first to make it safely to shore is a mother who quietly nurses her child while panic ensues upon the ship. The first to perish among the waves are a group of thirty people in a crowded lifeboat, “each relying on his own resources, [as] they commit themselves to the waves.” Ibid, 142.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 145.

¹¹² Wilson, *The Art of Rhetoric*, 166.
short, “merry tale,” that could be effectively tied to the Gospel message would break the monotony of otherwise dull sermons. Wilson defends this claim by inquiring, “For what is he that loveth not mirth?” 113

Additionally, Wilson argues that humor in the pulpit serves the seemingly counter-intuitive purpose of maintaining order within the congregation. Preachers are capable of employing humor to embarrass individuals, causing them to be “full oft abashed and put out of countenance” in front of the entire congregation, an act denounced by Niebuhr and Buttrick. 114 Ultimately, Wilson recognizes that the most efficient way to communicate the Gospel message to myriad unsophisticated sixteenth century Christians was to “play the fools in the pulpit to serve the tickle ears of their fleeting audience.” 115

Leonard Wright, a contemporary of Wilson, also advocates occasional pulpit jesting and theatrics to “stirre up” listeners and “delight [them] pleasantly.” 116 In his _Patterne for Pastors_—a selection from the aptly titled _A Summons for Sleepers_—Wright claims that preachers must “be well furnished with canonicall authorities, pithie sayings, apt similies, fit comparisons, familiar examples, and pithie histories meete both for comfortation, persuasion, and delectation.” 117 Wright clearly shares Wilson’s sentiment that doctrine itself is not enough to grab the attention of parishioners. If preachers truly

113 Ibid, 166.

114 Ibid, 166.


116 Wright, Leonard. _A Patterne for Pastors_. In _A Summons for Sleepers...Hereunto is annexed, A Patterne for Pastors_ (London, 1589), 45.

117 Ibid, 45.
wish to engage their audiences, they need to incorporate “voice, gesture, and countenance, with a comely motion of the bodie” into their sermons—rhetorical devices characteristic of the numerous forms of secular entertainment to which parishioners of the time often flocked.\textsuperscript{118}

That many companies today try to make their advertisements humorous testifies to the reality that people look favorably upon that which makes them laugh. As Webb points out, “Laughter tends to be a profound method for building critical sensibility and discernment, not just intellectually but, more important, holistically, since it also involves intuitions and emotions in the complex comedic mixture.”\textsuperscript{119} Those who support pulpit jesting on practical grounds recognize the power of humor is not something to be feared. Rather, they see humor as a tool that can be effectively harnessed by preachers for the benefit of parishioners. These advocates of pulpit jesting would certainly agree with Webb’s conclusion, “Properly understood and skillfully used, the comic spirit, and the laughter that can arise from it, is one of those elements that can lift a mediocre pulpit to the level of greatness.”\textsuperscript{120}

Conclusion

The centuries-old controversy surrounding pulpit jesting is fundamentally a debate over how Christian ritual should be performed. For just about every individual who has supported pulpit jesting there has been an antagonist with an equally convincing argument. Needless to say, there have been a wide variety of Christian denominations

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, 46.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid, 16.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, 17.
throughout history that have differed, oftentimes quite dramatically, with regards to their beliefs and practices. What “works” for one group does not always “work” for another. Whereas a more puritanical (literally and figuratively) style of preaching became normative on both sides of the Atlantic during the seventeenth century, pulpit jesting reappeared with the enormously popular biting and humorous sermons of twentieth century frontier revivalists and urban evangelists in America.

The pulpit jesting controversy is ethically empty; that is, no group is right or wrong. Supporters and opponents of pulpit jesting are both advocating what they believe is in the best interest of the Church. However, the needs of the Church have varied a great deal from one historical period to the next. Two of the most notable pulpit-jesters, Hugh Latimer in the sixteenth century and Billy Sunday in the twentieth century, used humor quite effectively to bring Christians back into the pews during periods of particularly heightened spiritual lethargy.
CHAPTER 2

HUGH LATIMER AND BILLY SUNDAY:

ARCHETYPICAL PULPIT-JESTERS

“I am preaching for the age in which I live. I am just recasting my vocabulary to suit the people of my age instead of Joshua’s age.”

-Billy Sunday

Introduction

As was noted in Chapter One, advocates of pulpit jesting argued that the practice was a more effective way to rouse innumerable languid Christians than dry, straightforward preaching. Their claims were vindicated by the works of two hybrid evangelists who, though separated historically by nearly four hundred years, drew enormous crowds eager to witness these individuals skillfully combine their talents as preachers and showmen. In this chapter, I examine the innovative preaching of these intriguing figures, the sometime Bishop of Worcester Hugh Latimer (1487-1555) and a former professional baseball player Billy Sunday (1862-1935). Although, Latimer and Sunday’s unorthodox styles of preaching immediately made them celebrities among the general Christian population and pariahs among Church higher-ups, I demonstrate that both Latimer and Sunday are archetypical pulpit-jesters by virtue of their rather liberal, yet effective use of humor in their sermons.

The Church in the Time of Hugh Latimer

The demeanor with which parishioners held themselves in sixteenth century England may very well shock contemporary Christians. For example, it was not unusual

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for members of a congregation to knit, sleep, or talk to one another when a preacher was delivering a sermon.\textsuperscript{122} Moreover, it was not uncommon for parishioners to cough loudly, sing out of tune, heckle, throw objects, or even storm the pulpit when a service became intolerably vapid.\textsuperscript{123} Historian Chris Holcomb recounts one occasion when the parishioners of Sherborne, Dorset, found the service so boring that they rushed the pulpit and pummeled their pastor so severely that he could not “speak loud enough to preach for six weeks.”\textsuperscript{124} It would appear that many Christian gatherings in Latimer’s time differed very little from a modern-day Night at the Apollo.

In England, public indifference and disdain toward the Church became so severe that Queen Elizabeth imposed the Act of Uniformity of 1559, requiring all of her subjects to attend services on Sundays and holy days, or suffer a fine.\textsuperscript{125} Included in the Act was a provision that levied strict regulations on parishioners’ behavior while they were in attendance of Church services: “To abide orderly and soberly during the time of common prayer, preaching, or other service of God.”\textsuperscript{126} Unfortunately, the public’s response to the Act was negligible as individuals continued to flock to their local theaters and alehouses on Sundays instead of their local churches. Those who could afford to would happily pay

\textsuperscript{122} Holcomb, 57.

\textsuperscript{123} Herr, Alan Fager. \textit{The Elizabethan Sermon: A Survey and a Bibliography} (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 31-4; See also Holcomb, 57.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid. 34; See also Holcomb, 57.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, 57.

\textsuperscript{126} Bray, Gerald, ed. \textit{Documents of the English Reformation} (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1994), 332; See also Holcomb, 57.
the mandated fine so long as they did not have to suffer through what many found to be mind-numbing Christian services.

The proliferation of popular forms of entertainment in sixteenth century England—such as the theater, alehouse, street performers, bear-baiting, dice play, archery, and football—is perhaps one of the main reasons why one finds numerous records of parishioners’ restlessness and boredom during church services and, consequently, a steady decline in Church attendance.¹²⁷ Much to the dismay of church leaders, the preacher in early modern England was oftentimes forced to compete with actors and acrobats for the attention of parishioners.¹²⁸ This, as was discussed in Chapter One, was the impetus for figures such as More, Erasmus, and Wilson to advocate the use of pulpit jesting, a technique that incorporated elements of these more popular forms of entertainment into the sermon. These individuals recognized that sixteenth century preachers had to be just as alluring as other forms of entertainment if they wished to compete with the alehouse and theater.¹²⁹ Hugh Latimer put the words of sixteenth century pulpit jesting supporters into action.

The Pulpit Jesting of Hugh Latimer

Scholar Horton Davies recognizes Latimer as a “master of pulpit jesting” with his frequently “mocking and railing” sermons.¹³⁰ Yet, by no means did Latimer use the pulpit

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¹²⁸ Holcomb, 56.

¹²⁹ Holcomb, 56-7.

as a forum for testing out jokes on the ears of his listeners, a potential consequence of pulpit jesting voiced by John Foxe. As Holcomb explains, “[Latimer’s] jests and merry tales were hardly incidental to his overall persuasive aims, mere digression in a discourse on ‘weighty causes.’ Rather they often propel his argument forward by demonstrating in a concrete and entertaining fashion some point he is trying to make.”\textsuperscript{131} Latimer reconciles the concerns of reluctant supporters as well as vehement objectors to pulpit jesting by exploiting the technique as a teaching tool rather than a rhetorical device with the sole purpose of keeping parishioners awake and attentive.

A clear example of Latimer’s effective use of pulpit jesting can be found in \textit{A Sermon Preached by Master Hugh Latimer, The First Sunday after the Epiphany, Anno 1552}:

> We have a common saying amongst us, “Every thing is as it is taken.” We read of king Henry the seventh, at a time he was served with a cup of drink, a gentleman that brought the cup, in making obeisance, the cover fell to the ground: the king, seeing his folly, saith, “Sir, is this well done?” “Yea, Sir,” said he, “if your majesty take it well.” With this pretty answer the king was pacified. So it is with us, as touching our salvation. Our works are unperfect, but God taketh the same well for Christ’s sake: he will not impute unto us the imperfectness of our works, for all our imperfections and sins are drowned in the blood of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{132}

Latimer’s smooth transition from a “pretty tale” to religious instruction proved to be an effective means of conveying the Gospel message to audiences prone to inattentiveness.

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid, 58.

and restlessness. Moreover, Latimer’s pulpit jesting was a useful mechanism in that it allowed him to bring the message of the Gospel down to the level of his listeners, thereby making it easier to lift up the members of his congregation to contemplate the relationship between their own imperfections and salvation. This, of course, was an argument made in support of pulpit jesting by Thomas Wilson.

In fact, Latimer was so successful at securing the attention and respect of his listeners that he could afford to jest about the challenges he himself faced as a preacher in sixteenth century England. For example, in *Sermon the Sixth* of Latimer’s *Seven Sermons preached before King Edward the Sixth, 1549*, Latimer uses a joke to stress the importance of attending church services, “I had rather ye should come of a naughty mind to hear the word of God for novelty, or for curiosity to hear some pastime, than to be away.” Although such a statement would have likely struck a harsh chord among objectors to pulpit jesting, Latimer was a realist. He understood that churches need parishioners just as much as parishioners need churches. Whether parishioners slept during a service or not was a secondary concern to Latimer. Unless Christians went to church, they were guaranteed to receive unsatisfactory religious instruction.

Whereas some individuals were unequivocally against permitting pulpit jesting in church, Latimer was willing to take any measures necessary to bring the public back to

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133 Holcomb, 58.

134 Ibid, 58.

the pews, even if it meant making certain allowances: “I had rather ye should go a
napping to the sermons, than not to go at all.”  

He continues with a humorous story:

I had rather ye should come as the tale is by the gentlewoman of London: one of her neighbours met her in the street, and said, “Mistress, whither go ye?” “Marry,” said she, “I am going to St Thomas of Acres to the sermon; I could not sleep all this last night, and I am going now thither; I never failed of a good nap there.”

What truly distinguished Latimer from contemporaneous preachers was his ability to engage his listeners. In the example of the “gentlewoman of London,” no matter whom the listener interprets to be the butt of the joke (the woman who falls asleep during sermons or the preacher of St. Thomas of Acres whose sermons regularly put his parishioners to sleep), Latimer still communicates an important message to his congregation. If the woman who falls asleep during the sermon is perceived to be the object of laughter, then the story serves as, what Holcomb calls, a “gentle corrective” against dozing off during a sermon. On the other hand, if the congregation takes the enervating preacher to be the object of laughter, then Latimer merely makes light of his own profession to the amusement of his listeners. Based on the examples of Latimer’s sermons, such as those provided above, it seems safe to agree with historian Joanna Lipking’s claim, “It seems unlikely that [Latimer’s] listeners often slept.”

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136 Ibid, 201.
137 Ibid, 201.
138 Holcomb, 59.
Even the harshest critics of pulpit jesting cannot deny Latimer’s ability to form powerful bonds with and between his listeners through collective laughter. Unlike the more stern and solemn preachers of his time, Latimer was capable of seeing the world from the perspective of his listeners. Such insight played a pivotal role in making Latimer an accomplished preacher. It was not until the turn of the twentieth century when Christians were introduced to Billy Sunday, an evangelical revival leader, that Americans could claim their own unparalleled pulpit-jester.

The Revival Meeting in the Time of Billy Sunday

The revival meeting was arguably the most significant vehicle for evangelism in America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thousands of individuals, devout Christians and sinners alike, would gather beneath enormous tents or around temporary tabernacles to bear witness to the sermons of renowned preachers. These powerful events, some large and noisy, others small and fairly tame, helped maintain the strength of American evangelicalism in the face of seemingly ubiquitous threats such as liquor and gambling.¹⁴⁰

According to scholar Ted Ownby, revival meetings can be classified into three categories: the church meeting, the denominational or multidenominational meeting, and the camp meeting. He writes:

The most prominent was the protracted meeting held in a church, during which a visiting minister served for the duration of the revival. Larger and becoming more popular in the twentieth century was the denominational or multidenominational revival meeting held in the towns. Local church leaders often hired a traveling evangelist to hold such meetings in a large tent or public building. The most famous form of revival, the camp

meeting, was a community’s largest religious gathering, often employing two or even three ministers. Held either outside a church or at a campground established for that purpose, a camp meeting attracted substantial crowds from throughout the area.\textsuperscript{141}

Particularly in cases of large camp meetings, much of the public’s enthusiasm and excitement in the days leading up to the revival can be attributed to the fact that these events were, in a sense, enormous parties where men, women, boys, and girls could freely interact with one another, sharing gossip as well as huge meals together.\textsuperscript{142}

Of course, as Ownby notes, “Despite their popularity as social events, the revival meetings had far greater significance as religious institutions.”\textsuperscript{143} Gaiety and mirth would slowly give way to the more serious business of edifying souls and revivifying Christianity in the surrounding region. Unlike the services where Latimer preached, individuals in attendance ran the gamut from upper-middle to lower class. Moreover, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, and other Christian denominations could all be accounted for in most cases.

Yet, despite the myriad differences among participants, most seem to have been able to benefit from revival meetings. Ownby writes:

\begin{quote}
For some, particularly the young, meetings provided opportunities to undergo conversion experiences and join the church. Long-devoted church members welcomed the opportunity to renew their Christian commitment. Finally, and least obviously, the meetings allowed many of the so-called sinners of a community to show their acceptance of evangelical Christianity even while their actions belied that acceptance.\textsuperscript{144}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid, 145.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid, 145.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid, 148.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid, 148.
\end{flushright}
The recorded accounts of participants provide contemporary scholars with a wealth of information regarding the goings-on of American revival meetings. Yet, regardless of size or duration of the revival, it appears that one of the most common accounts from participants is that these meetings renewed religious interest within the surrounding community. As Mississippi Baptist preacher T.S. Powell writes, the ultimate goal of revival meetings “should be a nearer approach to God by all who name his name, a fuller consciousness of the divine presence of the Holy Spirit, pardoning, refreshing, comforting, and strengthening, for the duties devolving upon every follower of Christ.”145

One Mary Bethell, who attended a camp meeting in North Carolina in the latter-half of the nineteenth century, claimed, “I have felt since the camp meeting…that my faith is strengthened I enjoy more religion than I ever did before.”146

From these and multitudes of similar accounts, Ownby concludes, “The meetings helped restore religion to its proper place in evangelicals’ daily lives, giving them new determination to purify their private lives and to become more devoted family members.”147 Yet, by the beginning of the twentieth century, Americans would be introduced to a new evangelist whose unique style of preaching and use of humor revolutionized the revival movement.

145 Powell, Theophilus Schuck. *Five Years in South Mississippi* (Cinncinati, OH: Standard Publishing Co., 1889) 67; See also Ownby, 156.

146 Ibid, 156.

147 Ibid, 156.
The Populist Humor of Billy Sunday

Despite his fame as a fan-favorite outfielder for the National League’s Chicago White-Stockings, William T. Ellis, Sunday’s foremost biographer, continuously reminds readers of the evangelist’s otherwise typical life. Of Sunday, Ellis writes, “He is not made of a special porcelain clay, but of the same red soil as the rest of us. He knows the barnyards of the farm better than the drawing-rooms of the rich.”148 Like Latimer, Sunday’s success and popularity can be attributed in part to his familiarity with the lives of “ordinary” men and women. Born in the small Mid-West town of Ames, Iowa in 1862, Billy Sunday spent most of his formative childhood years in an orphanage. Sunday eventually found work on his grandfather’s farm and worked his way through high school as an errand boy.149 He continued to eke out a living by performing odd jobs until he was eventually signed by the White-Stockings from his amateur team in Marshalltown, IA.

Sunday, however, was not reared as a Christian. In fact, he embraced the roughneck lifestyle of professional baseball players during the early part of his tenure with the White-Stockings, frequenting saloons and gambling with teammates. Sunday sarcastically recalled this time later in his life stating, “I know there is a devil for two reasons; first, the Bible declares it; and second I have done business with him.”150 It was not until his conversion in Chicago sometime during the late 1880s that the Billy Sunday beloved by hundreds of thousands was truly born—or more appropriately, born-again.

148 Ellis, 22.


150 Ellis, 182.
Sunday’s life before his conversion enhanced, rather than hampered, his evangelism. Again, like Latimer, Sunday’s familiarity with working-class life allowed him to connect on a deeper level with his audience, a characteristic of Sunday’s style of preaching that contributed to his popularity and mass appeal. As historian Bernard A. Weisberger writes, “[Sunday] made the ‘familiar style’ of discourse—the shirt-sleeved talk, full of illustration from daily life—a superb and supple weapon for the control of a crowd, and he did it with full consciousness of its effects.”

Sunday himself even declared, “I want to preach the gospel so plainly that men can come from the factories and not have to bring along a dictionary.” Sunday’s comprehension of the nuances of both the American ethos and working-class vernacular significantly contributed to his success as an evangelical preacher. This, combined with his natural talents as a showman, made him arguably the most effective spokesman for Christianity in America at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Like Latimer, Sunday distinguished himself from contemporaneous preachers by weaving various types of populist humor into his sermons. Generally speaking, Sunday incorporated humor in one of two ways: with either an occasional interjection of a quick and witty one-liner or by relating a biblical story in backwoods style. These techniques were extremely effective in maintaining the audience’s attention and attracting throngs of otherwise skeptical Christians to revival meetings.

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151 Weisberger, 249.

152 Ellis, 69.

153 Weisberger, 243.
Even today, nearly a century after they were first uttered, many Christians, particularly in the American South, can recall some of Sunday’s most memorable one-liners. These humorous quips were frequently used by Sunday to criticize the behavior of his audience. For example, Sunday condemned those he considered to be Christian in name only with lines like, “Going to church doesn’t make a man a Christian, any more than going to a garage makes him an automobile” and “If a doctor didn’t know any more about Materia Medica than the average church member knows about the Bible, he’d be arrested for malpractice.”\textsuperscript{154} Once, he even joked, “God likes a little humor, as evidenced by the fact that he made the monkey, the parrot—and some of you people!”\textsuperscript{155} Sunday’s penchant for laughing with and at his Christian cohorts made him less like Latimer, who used “pretty stories” and “merry words” to refresh his congregation, and more like Tommy DeVito, the character played masterfully by Joe Pesci in \textit{Goodfellas}. Yet, unlike the crude banter between DeVito and his fellow mobsters, Sunday’s humorous and oftentimes biting quips were intended to goad listeners to become better Christians.

On other occasions, Sunday, keeping true to his maxim, “Let’s quit fiddling with religion and do something to bring the world to Christ,” would use his one-liners to spur members to action, to awaken what he perceived to be an utterly somnolent Church.\textsuperscript{156} For instance, he condemned seemingly apathetic Christians with claims such as, “You sit in your pews so easy that you become mildewed” and “I read the other day of a shell which had been invented which is hurled on a ship and when it explodes it puts all on

\textsuperscript{154} Ellis, 77, 249.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid, 310.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid, 61.
board asleep. I sometimes think that one of these shells has hit the Church.”

Such statements validate Weisberger’s conclusion that “No one, save Billy Sunday, could tell an audience that the church needed fighting men of God, and not ‘hog-jowled, weasel-eyed, sponge-columned, mushy-fisted, jelly-spined, pussy-footing, four-flushing, charlotte-russe Christians.”

Again, spectators would have seen such ribbing for what it was—a wake-up call for anyone and everyone who called themselves “Christian.”

No one was free of Sunday’s disparagement. To the women in the audience, Sunday would frequently criticize their vanity with statements like, “If...you...would spend less on dope, pazaza, and cold cream, and get down on your knees and pray, God would make you prettier.”

On other occasions, he would use his witticisms to bring smiles to their faces. For example, Sunday has been recorded saying, “There are a good many things worse than living and dying an old maid, and one of them is marrying the wrong man.”

Being the gentleman he was, Sunday reserved his harshest criticisms for the men in the audience. Yet, despite his frequent haranguing of audience members, Ellis notes, “No father would hesitate to take his boy to the big men’s meeting which Sunday holds in every campaign; and every woman who has once heard him talk to women would be glad to have her daughter hear him also.”

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157 Ibid, 269.

158 Weisberger, 248-49.

159 Ibid, 248-49.

160 Ellis, 202.

Sunday had a repository of one-liners applicable to all sorts of issues and just about every member of his audience. To the sinners he declared, “Death-bed repentance is burning the candle of life in the service of the devil, and then blowing the smoke into the face of God.”\footnote{Ibid, 73.} To the devout Christians he warned, “Don’t let God hang a ‘For Rent’ sign on the mansion that has been prepared for you in heaven.”\footnote{Ibid, 404.} On many occasions, Sunday simply tried to get a rise out of his audience with outrageous remarks like when he once told his listeners that an angel could not live in New York City for a week and return to heaven without “being disinfected and fumigated and given a bath in Lysol and formaldehyde.”\footnote{Weisberger, 256.} Such humorous interjections were a practical means of securing the audience’s attention and favor during a long sermon that was oftentimes delivered outdoors beneath a tent that provided spectators will little relief from the summer heat.

Sunday’s wit and sense of humor is also manifest in his propensity for reinterpreting Christian Scripture in his own backwoods and unsophisticated manner. Take Sunday’s retelling of the story of David and Goliath, for example:

“Who’s that big stiff putting up that game of talk?” asked David of his brothers.

“Oh, he’s the whole works; he’s the head cheese of the Philistines. He does that little stunt every day.”

“Say,” said David, “you guys make me sick. Why don’t some of you go out and soak that guy? You let him get away with that stuff.” He decided to go out and tell Goliath where to head in.

So Saul said, “You’d better take my armor and sword.” David put them on, but he felt like a fellow with a hand-me-down suit about four

\footnote{Ibid, 73.}

\footnote{Ibid, 404.}

\footnote{Weisberger, 256.}
times too big for him, so he took them off and went down to the brook and picked up a half dozen stones. He put one of them in his sling, threw it, and soaked Goliath in the coco between the lamps, and he went down for the count. David drew his sword and chopped off his block, and the rest of the gang beat it.\textsuperscript{165}

Sunday was, of course, preaching for the age in which he lived and, like Hugh Latimer before him, took certain liberties with well-known Biblical stories in order to give them new life and be more fully appreciated by his predominantly working-class listeners.

Sunday was also known for his ability to bring an entire crowd to boisterous laughter with his mock prayers, many of which had something to do with Sunday’s personal life. For example, Sunday once began a prayer, “Oh, say, Jesus, save that man down at Heron Lake that wrote that dirty black lie about me!...Better take along a pair of rubber gloves and a bottle of disinfectant, but if you can save him, Lord, I’d like to have you do it.”\textsuperscript{166} On another occasion, Sunday led his audience in a prayer that used exclusively baseball jargon:

\begin{quote}
Lord, there are always people sitting in the grandstand and calling the batter \textit{[Sunday]} a mutt. He can’t hit a thing, or he can’t get it over the bases \textit{[sic]}, or he’s an ice wagon on the bases, they say. O Lord, give us some coachers out at this Tabernacle so that people can be brought home to you. Some of them are dying on second and third base, Lord, and we don’t want that.\textsuperscript{167}
\end{quote}

Such a prayer would have been truly appreciated by the men in the audience, who Ellis notes frequently outnumbered the women: “His tabernacle audiences resemble base-ball crowds in the proportion of men present, more nearly than any other meetings of a

\textsuperscript{165} Ellis, 252.

\textsuperscript{166} Weisberger, 249.

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid, 249.
religious nature that are regularly being held.” As was noted above, such statistics did not cause Sunday to tailor his sermons to a specific demographic.

Sunday’s rather liberal use of humor greatly contributed to his mass appeal. As Ellis notes, “Shrewd students of the campaigns have often remarked that there are so few tears and so much laughter at the evangelist’s services. There is scarcely one of Sunday’s sermons in which he does not make the congregation laugh.” Unlike preachers of bygone eras, Sunday was not afraid to use his gift of humor to make the message of the Bible more accessible and interesting to Christians of the early twentieth century. Whereas many prominent Christians found such pulpit jesting unbecoming of an acolyte of Christ, the man who once said, “Why, I am almost afraid to make some folks laugh for fear that I will be arrested for breaking a costly piece of antique bric-a-brac. You would think that if some people laughed it would break their faces,” was far more concerned with the immediate edification of as many American souls as possible. Indeed, Sunday’s use of humor assisted him in accomplishing this goal.

An Evangelical Performance

Yet, what is perhaps most significant about Sunday and Latimer before him, particularly for the purposes of this work, is that they set a precedent for subsequent Christian preachers and, more recently, Christian standup comedians by simultaneously being both evangelists and entertainers. As was mentioned earlier, Sunday was no stranger to the business of entertainment and spectacle having been a baseball player

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168 Ellis, 34.

169 Ibid, 261.

170 Ibid, 261.
beloved by many fans. In fact, Ellis suggests that Sunday’s relatively short stint in professional baseball directly contributed to his standing as an evangelist, “His success as a preacher has gained luster from his distinction as a base-ball player, while his fame as a base-ball player has been kept alive by his work as an evangelist.”\textsuperscript{171} Ellis continues, “If Billy Sunday had not been an athlete he would not today be the physical marvel in the pulpit that he is.”\textsuperscript{172} Indeed, the vivacity and energy Sunday brought with him to the pulpit contributed enormously to his success as a revivalist.

Besides adding a humorous twist to otherwise plain stories and Bible vignettes, Sunday frequently acted them out, turning exegesis into a one-man show as he skipped, ran, walked, bounced, slid and gyrated on the platform.\textsuperscript{173} According to Weisberger:

He would pound the pulpit with his fist until nervous listeners expected to hear crunching bone. He would, in a rage against “the Devil,” pick up the simple kitchen chair which stood behind the reading desk and smash it into kindling…As he gesticulated and shook his head, drops of sweat flew from him in a fine spray. Gradually, he would shed his coat, then his vest, then his tie, and finally roll up his sleeves as he whipped back and forth, crouching, shaking his fist, springing, leaping and falling in an endless series of imitations. He would impersonate a sinner trying to reach heaven like a ball player sliding for home—and illustrate by running and sliding the length of the improvised tabernacle stage. Every story was a pantomime performance.\textsuperscript{174}

One of Sunday’s most popular performances was his reenactment of Naaman the leper bathing in the Jordan River. Again, Weisberger notes, “[The story] was reproduced with extravagant vitality by the evangelist, who would stand shivering on the bank, stub his

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{171} Ibid, 33.
  \item \textsuperscript{172} Ibid, 45.
  \item \textsuperscript{173} Weisberger, 247.
  \item \textsuperscript{174} Ibid, 247.
\end{itemize}
toe on a rock, slap sand fleas, shriek with cold at the first plunge, and blow and sputter as he emerged from each healing dip.”175 Not since Jonathan Edwards preaching *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* had Christians been so affected by the gesticulation and body language of a preacher. In the case of Sunday, spectators were certainly more prone to laugh at his entertaining and humorous acts than they would have been if he simply read the stories verbatim from the Bible.

Indeed, there was no role Sunday could not play. Spectators guffawed as he depicted an egotistical, high-society woman cuddling a pug dog as if it were her own child, or a drunk sinner staggering into a saloon, or even a fellow preacher ordering groceries in his pulpit manner.176 These acts brought his sermons to life. As Ellis notes, “When in a sermon he alludes to the man who acts no better than a four-footed brute, Sunday is for an instant down on all fours on the platform and you see that brute.”177 Few witnesses to Sunday’s animated revivals could argue against his effectiveness as an evangelist. As Ellis explains, “Their reasoning is something like this: On the stage, where men undertake to represent a character or a truth, they use all arts and spare themselves not at all. Why should not a man go to greater lengths when dealing with living realities of the utmost importance?”178 Such a statement substantiates the arguments of supporters of pulpit jesting that humor is an effective means of revealing the ultimate “realities” of Christianity.

175 Ibid, 247.

176 Ibid, 247.

177 Ellis, 139.

178 Ibid, 139.
So, why were Sunday’s actions in the pulpit so significant? Yet again, Ellis offers a cogent answer:

People understand with their eyes as well as with their ears; and Sunday preaches to both. The intensity of his physical exertions—gestures is hardly an adequate word—certainly enhances the effect of the preacher’s earnestness. No actor on the dramatic stage works so hard. Such passion as dominates Sunday cannot be simulated; it is the soul pouring itself out through every pore of the body.\(^{179}\)

Indeed, Sunday’s style of preaching was highly unconventional, but that is precisely what made him so effective and memorable, even more so than Latimer. If Sunday was going to truly awaken the Church and call all men and women to repentance, he needed to bring something new to the table—or perhaps more appropriately, the tabernacle. As Ellis suggests, “To do this is a man must be sensational, just as John the Baptist was sensational—not to mention that Greater One who drew the multitudes by his wonderful works and by his unconventional speech.”\(^{180}\) Sunday’s sensationalism on the platform secured him a place in the history of the American evangelical movement.

**Conclusion**

Despite the complaints of church leaders, the impact Hugh Latimer and Billy Sunday had on Christianity is indisputable. Of Sunday, an Iowa preacher, likely speaking for thousands of ministers across America, once said:

The man has trampled all over me and my theology. He has kicked my teachings up and down the platform like a football. He has outraged every idea that I have had regarding my sacred profession. But what does that count against the results he has accomplished? My congregation will be

\(^{179}\) Ibid, 138.

\(^{180}\) Ibid, 69.
increased by hundreds. I didn’t do it. Sunday did it. It is for me to humble myself and than God for his help.\footnote{181}

Latimer and Sunday understood that the Parnassus of a thriving Church could not be brought to fruition without a fundamental adjustment to the way Christian ritual was done. By exploiting their senses of humor and natural talents, these individuals made a blasé and draconian tradition familiar to a wide spectrum of Christians across diverse historical and geographic settings. In the words of Ellis, “When a preacher succeeds in lodging that conviction in the minds of the multitudes, he is heaven’s messenger. Whether he speak in Choctaw, Yiddish, Bostonese or in the slang of Chicago, is too trivial a matter to discuss. We do not inspect the wardrobe or the vocabulary of the hero who rides before the flood, urging the people to safety in the hills.”\footnote{182} Recently, an unlikely “hero” has emerged, reinvigorating evangelical Christians throughout the United States—the Christian standup comedian.

\footnote{181}{Ibid, 263.}

\footnote{182}{Ellis, 195.}
CHAPTER 3

CHRISTIAN STANDUP COMEDIANS:
ENTERTAINERS AND EVANGELISTS

“With comedy we make much more serious points than we do with anything…serious. A laugh is one of the most profound things that can happen to a human being. When you make a man laugh, you have evidently hit him right where he lives—deep. You’ve done something universal. You’ve moved him…”

Introduction

Over the course of the past fifty years, a new genre of comedy has emerged. Christian humor, as it is typically called within the entertainment industry, has secured a foothold in the American comedy landscape. Christian standup comedians effectively synthesize evangelism and entertainment. As professional entertainers, Christian standup comedians reside outside of the realm of the church and, consequently, the pulpit. Thus, their antics do not detract from the inviolability of the preacher, priest, or church itself. However, Christian standup comedians are nevertheless evangelists in their own right as their routines frequently contain highly religious rhetoric. This chapter examines the use of humor in the evangelical tradition from a sociological perspective. I present a brief overview of the genre of Christian comedy and explore the ways several popular Christian standup comedians mediate their faith and shape evangelical identity through their comedy routines. More specifically, I examine three ways Christian standup comedy functions within the evangelical community: as a mechanism for social bonding, a form of cultural mediation, and religious ritual.

183 Wilde, Larry. How the Great Comedy Writers Create Laughter (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976), 6; See also Olson, 109.
Defining Christian Comedy

The ambiguity surrounding Christian comedy makes the task of adequately defining the genre rather daunting. Needless to say, countless jokes have been made at the expense of Christianity throughout the tradition’s nearly two thousand-year history. Yet, one would not classify the humor of comedians such as Richard Pryor or Jerry Seinfeld as being “Christian.” Although both of the aforementioned comics have joked about topics such as God, Jesus, heaven, and hell, one would certainly not find CDs or DVDs of their performances lining the aisles of Christian bookstores across the nation. Likewise, not all comedians who identify themselves as Christian can be categorized as Christian comedians. Conversely, some entertainers, such as Sinbad (whose popularity as a comedian peaked during the late 1980s and early 1990s with humor largely tailored to urban African-Americans) are recognized today as Christian standup comedians despite their secular pasts. Such ambiguity begs the question, “What exactly is Christian comedy?”

Unfortunately, no definitive answer exists. However, for the purposes of this work, I use the following informal, functional definition: Christian comedy is a genre of humor in which the Bible, Christian beliefs, and rituals are used to elicit a positive laughter response from an audience—typically one that maintains strong Christian values. I define a positive laughter response as an audible, volitional expression of mirth and amusement (this can include laughter and cheering) at something generally understood or intended to be humorous. The positive laughter response differs from the negative laughter response in that the former is not insidious or intended to offend; that

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is, it does not cause harm or ostracize any individual or group.\(^{184}\) Additionally, the Christian comedian is characterized by a strong affiliation with the Church and its constituents (most Christian standup comedians are Protestant and often evangelical), familiarity with Christian scripture and the nuances of the Christian faith, and, perhaps most importantly, an unequivocal devotion to Jesus Christ and the singular God of Christianity. Christian comedy is ultimately humor that can be appreciated and enjoyed by Christians of all genders, races, and ages with material rarely breaching a “PG” rating. The following examples help to substantiate the aforementioned definition.\(^{185}\)

Though certainly not the typical Christian standup comedian, the humor of self-described “Conservative Comedian” Brad Stine sheds light on some of the distinguishing traits of Christian comedy. In a performance recorded for the HBO documentary *Friends of God*, Stine jokes:

> We believe Jesus was God on earth. He was God for thirty-three years, but he only told people about it for three! [Stine makes a skeptical facial expression] Don’t you think his friends must’ve suspected something? C’mon, people go to the beach to go swimming, Jesus’s just walkin’ on the water. “No wonder he never brings a towel.” He’d go to picnics, never brought food, but always had plenty for everybody.\(^{186}\)

Here, Stine takes two well-known stories of miracles performed by Jesus—walking on water and feeding a crowd with only a few fish and some loaves of bread—and gives them a humorous twist without degrading Christianity. The subsequent laughter elicited

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\(^{184}\) The laughter elicited by Henry Ward Beecher’s joke in Chapter One at the expense of the wild parishioner is an example of a *negative laughter response*.

\(^{185}\) All jokes and stories hereafter, unless otherwise noted, elicited positive laughter responses from the audience.

\(^{186}\) *Friends of God: A Road Trip with Alexandra Pelosi*, DVD, directed by Alexandra Pelosi (Home Box Office, Inc., 2007).
by the joke demonstrates the audience’s familiarity with Christian scripture; they “get” the joke and are not offended by it. No one is being ridiculed, ostracized, or hurt in any other way by the joke’s content. Thus, a positive laughter response is elicited by virtue of the fact that the joke is in good taste and made at nobody’s expense (Jesus included). Needless to say, Christian children and adults of all genders and races can enjoy Stine’s joke.

Similarly, in opening Thou Shalt Laugh 2, one of a currently four-part Christian standup comedy series produced by the creators of the enormously popular Blue-Collar Comedy Tour, Christian standup comedian and emcee Tim Conway remarks, “It is a wonderful, wonderful idea to come here and see comedians where you can actually bring the whole family.”187 Conway praises the family-oriented humor of the forthcoming comedians and reassures parents that what they and their children are about to see is not the crude or explicit standup routines one might find at a Laugh Factory or an Improv comedy club. This is wholesome Christian comedy.

The audience applauds Conway’s sincerity and he promptly begins the show with a joke about his own christening:

When I was christened, I was already four months old. So, they took me to the church…my mother and father and all the relatives…They placed me on the altar…and they were all praying [Conway mimics praying]. Now being four months old, I was rather active, so…while they were all praying, I had fallen off the altar. So, after the prayers and everything the priest looked up and he said, “Um” [Conway, pretending to be the priest, looks around confusedly]. And my dad looked up and he said, “He’s risen!” The priest said, “No, he’s fallen.” [Conway points towards the ground].188

187 Thou Shalt Laugh 2: The Deuce, DVD, directed by Phil Cooke (Thou Shalt Laugh, LLC., 2007).

188 Ibid.
Again, this joke elicits a positive laughter response. The camera cuts to the audience, showing several families enjoying a laugh together. As the cachinnation quells, Conway adds, “This is the God’s truth and I wouldn’t say that [Conway looks upwards] being in here.” The audience breaks out into laughter again and the seemingly ever-cheerful Conway introduces the first performer.

Likewise, Thor Ramsey, host of the popular Bananas Christian standup comedy series, is himself a Christian standup comedian whose sense of humor may also help elucidate the genre. One of Ramsey’s most well liked jokes is his rationale for eating candy and other unhealthy foods. He explains, “If you eat healthy, you live longer…. But, as Christians, this world is not our home.” As the audience laughs and applauds, Ramsey marches around the stage shouting cheers such as, “Have a Twinkie for Jesus!” and “Eat Sugar, See God!” Clearly, Ramsey is very vocal about his affiliation with Christianity and its doctrines regarding the afterlife. By revealing their personal religious beliefs, beliefs that accord with those of the audience members, Christian standup comedians strengthen Christian communities in many ways.

**Christian Standup Comedy as Social Bonding**

According to Dr. Robert R. Provine, author of *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, “Most laughter is not a response to jokes or other formal attempts at humor.” Instead, many anthropologists understand laughter as an oral, nonlinguistic

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189 Ibid.

means of expressing group cohesion. Provine explains, “Laughter plays a…nonlinguistic role in social bonding, solidifying friendships and pulling people into the fold. You can define ‘friends’ and ‘group members’ as those with whom you laugh.”\textsuperscript{191} Scientific evidence for these claims can be found in studies of tickling. Generally speaking, a \textit{positive laughter response} is elicited when one is tickled through physical contact by friends, relatives, lovers, or those with whom one has close social bonds.\textsuperscript{192} Nearly all attempts to tickle oneself end in failure and one would find it quite displeasing and perplexing if he or she was trying to be tickled by a complete stranger. Thus, laughter comes most easily for all comedians (Christian and non-Christian alike) if they are able to effectively establish a homogenous community with and for the audience. As Mintz explains, “‘Working the room,’ as comedians term it, loosens the audience and allows for laughter as an expression of shared values rather than as a personal predilection.”\textsuperscript{193}

Brad Stine is particularly masterful at “working the room.” Instead of diving headlong into his comedy routine, as is the case with most standup comedians, Stine tells the audience a little bit about himself. He declares, “[Number one,] I am a conservative comedian, listen to me, a conservative….comedian. One of two known to exist in the Western hemisphere. Number two, I am a Christian. I believe that God is real and I am proud that that is the heritage of my country.”\textsuperscript{194} The crowd begins to cheer and applaud. Stine now knows he has the crowd on his side. He continues, “And number three, I

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid, 47.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid, 109.
\textsuperscript{194} Friends of God.
\end{flushright}
believe the United States of America is the greatest country that has ever existed on the face of the earth.” The audience’s applause crescendos into a standing ovation. What began as respectful acknowledgement of the audience’s approval of Stine’s remarks has, at this point, become observable confirmation of the shared bond between audience and comedian.

Yet, Stine is not quite finished. Possessed by the same enthusiasm Christians witnessed in the sermons of Billy Sunday nearly a century ago, Stine paces the stage with fists clenched shouting, “It’s worth fighting for! It’s worth dying for! Because there’s never been a country like this. It’s better than Europe! That’s…why…we…left!” The entire audience is now on its feet, showering Stine in applause and cheers. After a few moments, Stine takes a deep breath of satisfaction, grins, spreads his arms out towards the audience and announces, “Oh, yeah! I have found my constituency.”

The extremely popular Christian standup comedian, Chonda Pierce, is also quite skilled at establishing a strong connection with and between members of her audiences. Pierce, whose fan base is predominantly made up of conservative, evangelical women eighteen years of age and older, caters much of her material to this demographic. For instance, Pierce opens her comedy special Have I Got a Story for You! by running out onto the stage singing “The Girls are Back in Town,” her own rendition of Thin Lizzy’s hit song, “The Boys are Back in Town.” As she is dancing around on stage, the camera

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195 Concerning her largely female fan base, Pierce has been known to joke, “I did not set out to have an audience that is primarily women. I started trying to minister to the whole family…and men just quit coming.”

196 Have I Got a Story For You!
pans over the audience showing hundreds of women (and a handful of men) on their feet, joining her in song and dance.

A clearer example of Pierce’s skill at cultivating group homogeneity can be found in her opening routine during Thor Ramsey’s *Bananas* comedy special, an event she was chosen to host. “I am excited because of what media is doing in getting the Good News out there and clean stuff out there,” Pierce begins to a few cheers from the audience, “Has anyone seen that Mel Gibson thing, ‘Passion of the Christ?’” The crowd of a few hundred individuals cheers loudly, some starting their ovation simply upon hearing Mel Gibson’s name. Pierce continues, “Is that the greatest evangelistic tool there ever was created?” Again, the audience cheers loudly. “I’m telling [you]...the movie is, but also the fact that Mel Gibson is going to be in heaven.” After pausing briefly to allow the crowd’s laughter and applause to settle, she adds, “I mean the pitch now is ‘Ladies, would you like to spend eternity with Mel Gibson?’” The audience bursts out in laughter and applause as Pierce beams in the spotlight. “Let’s sing ‘Just As I Am,’” she adds, before pretending to swoon beside an imaginary Mr. Gibson.

However, what an audience chooses to not applaud or cheer for is equally important for understanding how social bonding functions within the realm of Christian standup comedy. Take, for instance, Lisa Alvarado, a Hispanic Christian standup comedian, and her performance in the *Thou Shalt Laugh 3* comedy show. Alvarado is well-received by the audience during the early part of her routine, but when she mentions that she is a recently divorced mother of a child she had out of wedlock while still a teenager, the air is practically swept from the theater. She pauses a moment after making

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197 *Bananas featuring Thor Ramsey*, DVD, directed by John Jackson (Columbus, OH: Guardian Studios, 2004).
this revelation, perhaps expecting some applause from single mothers present, but even the crickets in the theater remain silent. Alvarado promptly attempts to redeem herself by adding, “I would not recommend teen pregnancy to anybody, but...looking back, I wouldn’t change my decision on that because God gave me this beautiful son who I adore and now I have this relationship with Jesus Christ which is amazing!” The crowd politely applauds and Alvarado continues with her routine.

Perhaps Alvarado would have received a different response to her marital status had she been performing for a more socially progressive audience. Unfortunately for her, this was not the case. Clearly, the complete silence that permeated the theater testifies to the tension she built up amongst the audience and her failure to reconcile that tension. In fact, the audience’s responses to Alvarado’s subsequent jokes seem to be affected by the audience’s shared antagonism toward her unbecoming behavior. For example, Alvarado jokes:

And now I only date Christian men because I think they can see things about my character and personality a little bit quicker. For example, I was out on a date with this guy, it was our third date, we’re out to dinner and he leans across the table and says to me, “I know what your spiritual gift is.” I said, “Wow, that’s really soon!” He goes, “You have the gift of singleness.” [A few muddled laughs can be heard from the audience] I was like, “Oh, yeah? Well I also have the gift of prophecy, uh huh, yea, and you and I will not be speaking in tongues.”

Despite her best efforts to regain the affection of the audience, Alvarado is faced with a unified front for the remainder of her performance. The most applause she receives after her aforementioned revelation occurs when she ends her routine, thanks the audience, and

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198 Thou Shalt Laugh 3.

199 Ibid.
walks off stage. Because of the solidarity built amongst members of the audience by the Christian standup comedians who preceded her, Alvarado instantly became a pariah upon revealing her un-Christian behavior.

**Christian Standup Comedy as Cultural Mediation**

Christian standup comedy also serves as a mechanism for cultural mediation. Cultural mediation is a cornerstone of the work of Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). In *Mind in Society*, Vygotsky argues that sign systems—such as language, writing, and number systems—are created by societies and play a reciprocal role in the cultural development of that very same society.\(^{200}\) Vygotsky believes that the internalization of these culturally produced signs brought about observable behavioral transformations in individuals.\(^{201}\) For instance, a parent verbally teaching a child that which is “right” and that which is “wrong”—or rather, that which society deems “right” and “wrong”—is just one example of cultural mediation. Cultural mediation relates to Christian standup comedy, because the routines of many Christian standup comedians, like a priest’s homily or preacher’s sermon, condition children and adults alike how to understand their culture, both religious and secular, and how to behave within it.

According to Mintz, “The key to understanding the role of stand-up comedy in the process of cultural affirmation and subversion is a recognition of the comedian’s traditional *license* for deviate behavior and expression.”\(^{202}\) Just as the priest or preacher

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\(^{201}\) Vygotsky, 7.

has the authority, or “license,” to tell people what thoughts or behavior are acceptable or improper, so too does the standup comedian affect listener’s participation in and understanding of the world. However, unlike the traditional clergyman, Mintz claims, “[The standup comedian] represents conduct to be ridiculed and rejected.” For example, the late Mitch Hedberg garnered an enormous cult following with his outrageous stories and one-liners that frequently made him the object of ridicule. In America especially, Mintz claims that standup comedy:

Operates within a universal tradition, both historically and across cultures, that it confronts just about all of the profoundly important aspects of our culture and our society, and that it seems to have an important role allowing for expression of shared beliefs and behavior, changing social roles and expectations.

Of course, all styles of standup comedy can be understood as forms of cultural mediation, but what differentiates Christian standup comedians from the “Mitch Hedbergs” is that the former incorporates and reinforces traditional Christian values and beliefs.

Parts of Brad Stine’s comedy routine effectively demonstrate how Christian standup comedy functions as cultural mediation or, rather, an outlet for engaging Christianity’s loss of culture privilege. In several of his performances, Stine temporarily digresses from his joke-telling and rants about American liberalism to indict the liberal media’s repression of Christianity, particularly in popular culture. For example, Stine complains, “Because of my politics; because of my patriotism; because of my religious beliefs and those three ideas that drawn [sic] against my worldview, when I die, I will be


204 Ibid, 202.
stuffed, mounted, and sent to the Smithsonian Institute in the “Why-He-Never-Got-His-Own-Sitcom Display.” Here, Stine functions as a cultural mediator by lecturing his audience on the perceived prejudice against Christian standup comedians. He extrapolates this prejudice to include the entirety of conservative Christians in America.

On the subject of why neither he nor any other Christian standup comedian have their own sitcoms or specials on Comedy Central or other cable networks, Stine sarcastically argues:

Because Hollywood doesn’t let people like us on their TV shows. You know why? It’s obvious. Because since only HALF of America votes conservative and since only NINETY PERCENT of Americans believe in God and since MOST Americans are patriotic, they realize there’s just no market for what I’m doing.

As the audience of several hundred people begins to applaud Stine’s social commentary, he interjects, “It’s called, ‘Tolerance,’ liberal people. Remember that word?”

Yet, this is hardly the climax of Stine’s tirade. “There are two groups of people,” he continues, “apparently you are allowed to make fun of in this country…nobody cares. Number one: Southerners.” Mixed in the audience’s subsequent applause are a few moans of agreement and boos. He continues, “Number two: Christians.” Like the earlier instance involving Lisa Alvarado, the crowd goes eerily silent almost immediately.

“Christians can be MOCKED all day long,” Stine shouts, “even though Christians are the people that happened to actually start this country. They founded it. We can be MOCKED! Never see us anywhere, never see us on TV, and if we do show up, we’re the serial killer!” A few muddled laughs can be heard from the audience. He continues, this

\[205\] Friends of God.

\[206\] Ibid.
time in a calm, hushed tone that slowly crescendos into an angrier one, “People don’t want to admit that. Christians started this country. And we have people in this country, especially judges, who’ve decided that they don’t care what the majority wants, they will implement THEIR ideology and make it illegal to have a moral…point of view.” Stine pauses momentarily to let his words sink in. The camera cuts to a shot of a completely somber-looking audience who look more like they are watching the final act of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* than a comedy show. The theater remains completely silent. “That is judicial tyranny,” Stine shouts, “but, I say there’s a whole bunch of people like us…who aren’t going away…and win our country back.” The theater suddenly erupts with applause and the entire crowd rises to their feet cheering as Stine declares, “And we’ll fight for it.”

Stine’s lambasting of American liberals is a form of cultural mediation in that it ingrains and reinforces radical conservatism in the minds of his Christian listeners. In short, Stine is teaching his audience that it is “right” to be a Christian and it is “right” to be a conservative, but it is “wrong” to be a liberal. Having heard Stine’s obloquy, audience members are likely to leave the theater with a significantly more antagonistic attitude towards liberalism and a more sympathetic attitude towards conservatism than they had prior to the show.

However, not all Christian standup comedians take such a conservative approach. For example, some of Thor Ramsey’s material can be considered rather “edgy.” Making light of hot-button issues for most Christians, namely intimacy and sex, is the proverbial “bread and butter” of many of Ramsey’s routines. By engaging such topics, Ramsey also

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207 Ibid.
serves as a cultural mediator. For instance, in a Los Angeles performance, Ramsey jokes, “*Time* magazine called L.A., ‘The Capital of Silicone.’ And I was thinking to myself, ‘I think that’s why God flooded the earth when he did because if he flooded it now, none of the women in L.A. would drown.’” As the audience bursts into laughter, Ramsey picks up the microphone stand, and, pretending to be Noah on the Ark, begins prodding over the side of the imaginary boat shouting, “Get Away! Leave us! We already have two of everything!” As humorous as the imagery may be, the idea of Noah pushing women with breast augmentation back into the flood waters suggests that they are unworthy of salvation and are among the company of the damned whom the great flood was intended to extirpate. In telling this joke, Ramsey is indirectly asserting that there is something sinful about women who undergo breast augmentation.

In the same performance, one finds another instance of Ramsey serving as a cultural mediator. He begins by bluntly telling the audience, “[My wife and I] home-school our daughter.” The statement elicits a considerable amount of applause from the audience. “It’s pretty cool to home-school,” he adds, “this way if her lunch money gets stolen it stays in the family.” After pausing a moment in order to let the laughter settle down, he continues, “People still give us grief though like, ‘You home-school her?!” Aren’t you concerned about her socialization?’” Ramsey makes a sardonic facial expression and delivers the punch line, “Uh, yea, that’s why we home-school her.” Again, the crowd breaks out into laughter and applause. Like the joke above, Ramsey is serving as a cultural mediator by suggesting that there is something inherently “wrong”

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208 *Thou Shalt Laugh 2.*
and dangerous about public schooling and that the best type of education a Christian child can get is through home-schooling.

In the third installment of the *Thou Shalt Laugh* series, incidentally hosted by Sinbad, Ramsey begins a joke by stating, “I want to talk about Christians and their attitudes about procreation.” The camera cuts to some suddenly uncomfortable-looking audience members. Nevertheless, Ramsey continues, “Now kids, uh, if you’re in grade school, procreation just means we’re ‘for Creation.’ That’s one meaning of procreation. The other meaning of procreation, kids, is that you’re staying with grandma. That’s the other meaning.” The palpable tension in the audience dissipates with laughter.

Notice that Ramsey, unlike Alvarado, receives a *positive laughter response* from the audience after telling the above joke. As is the case with many of his routines, Ramsey walks a fine line between clean, “family-friendly” humor and crude, offensive humor. Whereas Alvarado failed to establish for the audience that she shares their Christian values, Ramsey nearly always begins his routines with several jokes and personal anecdotes that prove he and his family are God-fearing, Bible-reading, church-going Christians. Thus, when a joke such as the one above is told, the audience does not feel threatened or offended because they recognize Ramsey is one of them. Alvarado, on the other hand, is likely perceived as a greater threat to the audience’s solidarity (which is strengthened by shared values). One can only wonder what parents in the audience would have felt knowing that their son or daughter sitting beside them was listening to a woman talk about her positive experience having a child out of wedlock. Hence, Alvarado failed in that instance to be an effective cultural mediator.

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209 *Thou Shalt Laugh 3.*
African-American Christian standup comedian, Bone Hampton, provides one last example of how Christian standup comedians serve as cultural mediators. In one routine, Hampton begins, “I’m just trying to work on doing things better. Right now, the Lord is talking to me about doing things in moderation. And I thought he was talking about the big stuff. I didn’t know he was talking about stuff like eating. Know what I’m saying?” He explains, “Gluttony ain’t high on my ‘sin value chart.’ Gluttony ain’t up there with murder and selling drugs. Gluttony down here [Hampton lowers one hand to the ground] with stealing paper clips from the job and making too many copies at Kinkos and not paying for it.” The audience expresses its enjoyment of the joke with boisterous laughter and applause.

Like the jokes of Stine and Ramsey, Hampton’s humor shapes the way audience members understand their society and religion. Obesity is one of the most prominent health issues in America today. As the camera pans around the audience, one cannot help but notice that many audience members, as well as Hampton himself, appear to fall within that demographic of Americans suffering from obesity. By asserting that there are far worse sins than unhealthy eating habits, Hampton is, as he says, proposing a “sin value chart.” Just as Dante Alighieri delineates a hierarchy of sin in his *Inferno*, where gluttony is one of the first three and, comparatively speaking, least monstrous rings of hell, so too does Hampton assert a new framework for understanding an all-too-common venial sin. In this case, Hampton serves as a cultural mediator by telling his rather

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210 *Thou Shalt Laugh 2.*

211 See Canto VI of Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno.*
obese Christian audience that gluttony, if one can even consider it a sin, is hardly a sin at all. Thus, Hampton validates audience members’ unhealthy eating habits.

**Christian Standup Comedy as Religious Ritual**

Interestingly, the relationship between the comedian and religious ritual has a surprisingly long history. According to scholar Larry Wilde, “The origin of the word ‘comedian’ goes back to ancient times. The Greeks had a festival of music and dancing called a ‘komos.’ The chief entertainer was called the ‘komoidos’ and from this evolved our word comedian.”

212 Other sources suggest that the earliest professional comedians can be traced back to the ancient Egyptian civilization. Although there is certainly some ambiguity surrounding the exact birth of the professional comedian, it can be said with a great deal of certainty that the profession recognized today is a derivative of the royal fool or “professional laughmaker” who, as early as the second century of the common era, would entertain guests at religious feasts in Greece by playing tricks and telling stories.

214 In Chapter One, it was discussed how pulpit jesting was perceived to be a product of these festivals. Likewise, Chapter Two demonstrated how revival leader Billy Sunday played the dual role of ‘komoidos’ and evangelist at his revival meetings. In sum, “professional laughmakers” and pulpit-jesters are ancestors of the standup comedian, who is employed to guide an audience in collective laughter.

212 Wilde, 8.


214 Ibid, 45.
In fact, Christian standup comedy performances closely resemble Christian religious services in many respects. For instance, it should not be too difficult to see how Christian standup comedians are quite analogous to formal clergymen and clergywomen since both the sermon-giver and joke-teller speak directly and bluntly to a group of individuals about the realities of the world. Additionally, the preacher and comedian stands alone on a stage or platform, which literally and figuratively raises him or her to a position of prominence above the congregation or audience. Their exhibitions are done privately in special locales (the comedy club and the church) which are set apart from the rest of society. The priest, preacher, and comedian are all capable of uniting their listeners, making them feel as if they are part of a homogenous community. The words and actions of these particular individuals have profound effects on the values, thoughts, and behavior of their listeners.

In a sense, Christian standup comedy performances can be understood as unorthodox Christian rituals since the Christian standup comedian functions as a both a ritual leader and “sanctioned deviant.” In fact, many Evangelicals and Pentecostals are exploiting the powerful psychological and physiological effects of laughter in their religious services.\(^\text{215}\) According to Provine, “Unlike the more subtle practices of prayer or meditation, worshippers can actually feel the physiological changes taking place within their bodies during laughter and assign this effect to the divine.”\(^\text{216}\) This phenomenon is commonly referred to as “holy laughter.”

\(^{215}\) Provine, 134-35.

\(^{216}\) Ibid, 134-35.
Some of Thor Ramsey’s routines effectively demonstrate how Christian standup comedians function as ritual leaders. For instance, in one performance, Ramsey, taking on an uncharacteristically serious tone of voice, appears to begin to deliver an informal homily regarding false perceptions of evangelical Christians. The audience, however, quickly discovers that Ramsey is actually using scripture to make a joke about men’s fascination with women’s breasts:

I was playing in a comedy club in Houston, Texas years ago with a friend who didn’t share my faith and he was going off on how prudish Christians can be and I shared this verse from the Bible with him, this is from Proverbs, Chapter Three, and I quote, “Rejoice in the wife of your youth and let her breasts satisfy you always.” He could not believe that verse was in the Bible…I had it memorized because I am standing on the promises of God.217

Here, Ramsey plays the role of the mock preacher. By using a rather crude joke about human sexual behavior, Ramsey is actually making a more profound point that those who heed the messages of the Bible will ultimately be “satisfied.”

Ramsey provides a much more explicit example in a “bit” he does on his personal experience with the controversial medical procedure of *in vitro* fertilization. Ramsey begins by explaining that he and his wife have tried *in vitro* fertilization six times, a claim that elicits a much more reserved response from the audience than is typical of a Thor Ramsey routine. He begins, “Now, if you’re not familiar with *in vitro* fertilization it’s just a scientific way to have babies. It’s not as fun.” The proverbial ice is finally broken with the first few laughs from the audience. At this point, Ramsey calls upon two audience members, one male and one female, to help him demonstrate the difference between natural pregnancy and *in vitro* fertilization. Ramsey directs the male volunteer to one end

217 *Thou Shalt Laugh 3.*
of the stage and the female volunteer to the opposite end. He continues, “Ok, so, I use the analogy of a junior high school dance.” With the stage set, Ramsey begins with a demonstration of natural pregnancy using his reluctant volunteers:

Okay, you got a nicely decorated gymnasium…and over on this side of the gym you have one eighth grade girl, okay, because they only let one girl come to the dance every month. Okay, now on this side of the gym you have two billion eighth grade boys. Imagine two billion of him. Okay, so you got two billion eighth grade boys over here, then the band begins to play, the boys are everywhere, they’re bouncing around, they’re trampling each other, many are killed or partially wounded, but not ONE IDIOT makes it over to ask her to dance! And even if you have a low student body count…you still have five hundred thousand MORONS who can’t find one girl! That’s natural pregnancy. And all this takes place underwater, by the way.\footnote{Ibid.}

The audience bursts into uncontrollable laughter as the volunteers “act out” their respective gametes. After settling down the audience, Ramsey continues with his demonstration:

\textit{In vitro} fertilization works like this: okay, you have the same thing, a nice junior high school dance decorated very nicely…Now let’s say this class, they have thirty eighth grade girls. What they do is they take twenty-six of the girls and they freeze ‘em. Don’t worry, their parents have signed permission slips…and they put four, uh, girls out here on this side of the gym. Over here you have your 2 billion eighth grade boys, but you have a teacher take the boys (by the hand), walk them over to the girls and say, “NOW DANCE!” And that’s how babies are made.

Ramsey has the crowd rolling in their seats. He thanks the volunteers, relieves them of their duties, and continues with his performance.

It would seem highly unlikely for one to hear a priest or preacher talk about men’s affinity towards breasts or the ridiculousness of his experience with \textit{in vitro} fertilization. Ramsey, however, by virtue of his role as a “sanctioned deviant,” is permitted to freely engage such topics. The significance of his role as a surrogate ritual leader is most
consequential in his joke about *in vitro* fertilization. By employing the technique of self-satire, Ramsey actually defends the highly controversial medical procedure, a culturally relevant issue that audience members may never hear of, or hear of as explicitly, in a church setting. Although *in vitro* fertilization is a social issue that many evangelicals have publically attacked, oftentimes quite vehemently, Ramsey, having led his audience in mirth and amusement for nearly a half-hour, is capable of, through such a comedic demonstration, convincing audience members of the practical benefits of *in vitro* fertilization. Like a pied piper, Ramsey uses his authority as a “sanctioned deviant” and his sense of humor to win over the audience so that they might hopefully leave the show with a new outlook on the medical procedure.

**Conclusion**

To borrow a term from Olson, Christian standup comedians are “protoanthropologists.” They discuss everyday reality as well as higher reality in their routines, which are then interwoven with humorous distortions.\(^\text{219}\) Tim Conway, Chonda Pierce, Thor Ramsey, Bone Hampton, Lisa Alvarado, and Brad Stine all shed light on Christian beliefs, values, meanings, associations, rituals, institutions, behavior, and language—all of which form the research of contemporary anthropologists.\(^\text{220}\) As I have demonstrated, Christian standup comedians present a fascinating case study for scholars within the fields of sociology, anthropology, and religious studies not only because they effectively synthesize humor and Christian faith, but also because they are celebrated by thousands of evangelical Christians for that very reason. In the coming years, it will be

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\(^{219}\) Olson, 123.

\(^{220}\) Olson, 123.
especially interesting to see if Christian standup comedians are able to outshine their pulpit-jesting relatives by revitalizing Christianity in a post-modern world.
CONCLUSION

In 2008, between the months of February and November, nearly 55,000 American citizens responded to the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS). This over-the-phone survey marks the third in a landmark series that has chronicled changes in the religious loyalties of the U.S. adult population within the 48 contiguous states since 1990. In March 2009, Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, both faculty members at Trinity College, published the survey results from 1990, 2001, and 2008 in a twenty-four page summary report. What they found left many Church leaders speechless.

In 2008, the percentage of U.S. adults who claimed to have “no religious affiliation” was nearly double the amount it had been in 1990 (from 8.2% in 1990, to 14.1% in 2001, to 15.0% in 2008). Based on these statistics, Kosmin and Keysar concluded the U.S. adult population has continued to show signs of becoming less religious, with one out of every five Americans failing to indicate a religious identity in 2008. These so-called “Nones” are an amalgamation of all the respondents whose answer to the survey’s key question “What is your religion, if any?” was either “None” or “No Religion.” Essentially, this group can be best described as the non-religious,

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222 This statistic is derived from combining the percentage of “Nones” with the percentage or respondents who refused to answer the key question or answered “Do Not Know.” Ibid, 2.

223 Other common responses included “Humanistic,” “Ethical Culture,” “Agnostic,” “Athiest,” and “Secular.” Ibid, 2, 23.
irreligious, and anti-religious—although this includes anti-clerical theists, the majority are non-theists.\textsuperscript{224} In short, the 2008 findings demonstrate that Americans are slowly becoming less Christian and that, in recent decades, the challenge to Christianity in American society does not come from other world religions or new religious movements (NRMs), but rather from a rejection of organized religion and, thus, Christianity itself.\textsuperscript{225}

How the Christian community responds to this challenge in the coming decades will be extremely important and worthy of attention by sociologists and scholars of religion. Churches throughout America are struggling to keep their doors open to parishioners, a consequence of dwindling attendances and the ailing economy. However, as I have shown in this work, the twenty-first century is not the first time Christians have been compelled to respond to such challenges. Christianity faced strikingly similar troubles in sixteenth century Europe around the time of the Protestant Reformation when multitudes of individuals eschewed religious services in favor of more pleasurable activities such as the theater or tavern. Like the Christians of sixteenth century England, the waning commitment to the Church on the part of many contemporary American Christians can be attributed to a plethora of reasons. More than ever before, Christian parents are forced to juggle their religious duties with commitments such as work, driving the kids to school, laundry, grocery shopping, a daughter’s daily piano lessons, a son’s lacrosse game, and so on. Many modern families are so overwhelmed with these responsibilities that going to church seems like just another chore, one that all too often gets placed on the backburner until the holidays of Christmas or Easter.

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid, 2.

\textsuperscript{225} Ibid, 3.
It is highly unlikely that government officials will respond the same way to public indifference towards the Church as sixteenth century monarchs did by imposing strict regulations on church attendance. Indeed, such an act would be unconstitutional. Yet, Christians today can still learn from the past. Both Hugh Latimer and Billy Sunday awoke a lethargic Church by doing what many perceived to be the unthinkable: combining humor and preaching. Despite all of the criticisms levied against these preachers and their style in the pulpit, thousands gathered to hear their sermons. Today, Christian standup comedians are taking steps in the right direction by giving new life to Bible stories that Elton Trueblood compares to “old coins, in which the edges have been worn smooth and the engravings have become almost indistinguishable.”226 In the coming decades, it will be interesting to see whether or not preachers, priests, and other Christian leaders opt to hold tight to past habits or instead attempt to revitalize the Church and “serve the Lord with gladness” (Psalm 100: 2).

226 Trueblood, Humor of Christ, 18.
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