

HHE 107 Honors Elective—Fall 2014
3 Credits
Tue 3:00-5:30 pm
Room: Pratt 319

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Office H445
Office Hrs: Tue/Thu 11 am-12:00 pm
Thu 1:30-3 pm

Hilarious Religion: Faith, God, and the Heresy of Laughter



**“Christ never laughed”
(Saint John Chrysostom)**

**“Sorrow is better than laughter:
For by the sadness of the countenance
the heart is made better.
The heart of the wise is in the house of
mourning;
But the heart of fools is in the house of
mirth.”
(Ecclesiastes 7:3-4)**

Disclaimer:

This class does not *need* a trigger warning to protect students’ sensibilities—it *IS* one big TRIGGER WARNING, beginning with the title, which combines words (“hilarious” and “religion”) not normally paired that way. Yes, we are going to encounter outright blasphemy, we will deal with radical irreverence, and we will ponder religious mockery—throughout the semester. Students taking this class shall do so in the full knowledge that many of the authors we will read do not treat religious sensibilities with satin gloves, that they do not shy away from offending religious pieties, and that their business is, on occasion, to ridicule religious institutions, clergy, scripture, and even God. If you cannot deal with this level of provocation, you should think twice about taking this class. At the same time, this class shall be a safe zone where it is OK to laugh at manifestations of religion without censure or moral outrage. By taking this class, we all commit to a high level of tolerance, and we acknowledge the freedom of art to do anything, including satirize aspects of religion and God. This doesn’t mean you can’t or won’t be offended by some of the materials we’ll study, but you will just have to deal with that intellectually and analytically. In fact, monitoring our own responses to the blasphemy and iconoclasm that we encounter is part of the learning experience.

Overview:

This class will explore the vexed relationship between religion and laughter, faith and comedy, God and mirth. We will focus predominantly on expressions of religious humor in a Christian context. Historically, institutional Christianity has not been well disposed toward laughter (to say the least!). Since the early Church Fathers and through centuries of theological writings and monastic discipline, laughter has been treated as an expression of

sinfulness, fallenness, and unholiness. God himself is said to lack humor (Morreall). By contrast Satan is usually depicted with a leering grin, and witches are rumored to laugh boisterously during their “Sabbaths.” It is generally assumed, therefore, that piety and holiness are antithetical to comedy and mirth. The Western philosophical tradition has not been much kinder to laughter, with the suspicion against laughter spanning the gamut from Plato and Aristotle to Hobbes and Kant.

While humor has been treated with suspicion by philosophers and theologians, psychologists and physicians all agree that laughter is not only central to what it means to be human, but that it plays a vital role in mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing. So, how can religion accommodate the healthy emotion of amusement? How should the believer handle sacrilegious humor? Is (or was) blasphemous humor illegal? How did religious comedy change across history? How does religious humor work in specific texts? Is the Bible funny? To answer these—and many other—questions, we will engage with a wide variety of texts, ranging from the Bible to the *Decameron*, to Mark Twain, and to contemporary novelists. To establish a conceptual framework for our inquiries, we will read the works of theologians of laughter such as Jacqueline Bussie, Charles Campbell & Johan Cilliers, Conrad Hyers, and others, and we will read brief historical and conceptual overviews on the various theories of humor by Paul McDonald and John Morreall. To balance the seriousness of such theoretical treatises and the high-brow quality of literary comedies aimed at religion, we will also engage with pop cultural manifestations of religious humor, from “Life of Brian” by Monty Python to comedy routines by Robin Williams, George Carlin, etc.

Assigned Primary Texts:

- Psalms (2, 37, 59), Proverbs (1, 14), Genesis (17-18), Book of Jonah, “The Sermon on the Mount” (pdf on BB)
- Stories from the *Decameron* by Boccaccio (pdf)
- Stories from the *Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer (pdf)
- *The Mysterious Stranger* by Mark Twain (pdf)
- *Blameless in Abaddon* by James Morrow*
- *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal* by Christopher Moore*
- *God is Dead* by Ron Currie, Jr.*

Assigned Secondary Texts:

- *The Philosophy of Laughter* by Paul McDonald**
- “Sarcasm, irony, wordplay, and humor in the Hebrew Bible: A response to Hershey Friedman” by John Morreall (pdf)
- “Religion and sense of humor: An a priori incompatibility? Theoretical considerations from a psychological perspective” by Vassilis Saroglou (web link on BB)
- from *The Laughter of the Oppressed* by Jacqueline Bussie (pdf)
- from *Preaching Fools* by Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers (pdf)
- from *And God Created Laughter* by Conrad Hyers (pdf)
- from *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* by Karl-Joseph Kuschel (pdf)
- from *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco (pdf)
- from *The Uncensored Bible* by Kaltner, McKenzie, and Kilpatrick (pdf)

Assigned Film:

- “Life of Brian” by Monty Python

* = Books you need to purchase (available in LIU bookstore)

** = You need to order this book on Amazon.com

pdf = text available on Blackboard.com. Feel free to print out a copy of each text.

Assignments & Grading:

1. Each student gives one 10-15 minute presentation on a popular-culture manifestation of religious comedy, preferably multi-media, using Power-Point.*** Give a demonstration of the religious comedy and analyze its approach and content. Provide a written summary of your presentation. 20 %
2. Conduct an empirical research project on laughter and religion**** (including presentation of results in class): 40%
3. Research proposal: Outline of research project, including rationale, introduction, and study design. The proposal is due on **October 7**: 10%
4. Weekly reaction papers. Students will write a two-part reaction: 1. Comment on the assigned reading, quoting specific passages and relating them to humor; 2. Make at least one connection between the primary and secondary (in **bold type**) reading assignments. Each week, class discussing will be kicked off by students presenting their reaction papers to the rest of class. 20%
5. Joke log. Copy down at least one (preferably more) funny passage from the assigned reading. Indicate why you chose this passage. I will call on a random number of students every class session to share their gems with everyone. The joke log can be added on to the weekly reaction papers. 10%

***Examples of topics from pop culture for student presentations:

- Atheist Comedians: George Carlin, Ricky Gervais
- Christian Comedians: Mark Lowry, etc.
- Jokes targeting religion
- Cartoons like Gerard Haderer's *Das Leben Jesu*
- Films like "Bruce Almighty" or "Saved"
- Bill Maher, "Religulous," etc.
- Bits from South Park (e.g. their take on the Book of Job)
- Stephen Colbert (e.g. the bit on the Baphomet statue in Oklahoma City, May 6, 2014)

****Students will carry out a **research project** of their own design. The project should focus on humor appreciation in a religious context. This can be based on a survey or on in-person testing/interviews with subjects from different religious or non-religious backgrounds. Some of the questions to be tackled include whether religious people have a worse sense of humor than the non-religious, if there are differences in humor appreciation between different religions, and whether blasphemous and irreverent humor can have a place in religious life. Students can either work in small groups (up to four people) or act individually (in which case the project can be more limited in scope).

An appendix to this syllabus contains a step-by-step guide to designing and carrying out this project.

Schedule:

Date	Texts & Pages (secondary sources in bold type)	Presentation
Sept. 9	Introduction "Life of Brian" by Monty Python	
Sept. 16	- Psalms (2:4; 37:12; 59:7-9) - Proverbs (1:26; 14:13) - "Book of Jonah" - story of Abraham & Sarah (Gen. 17-18) - "The Sermon on the Mount" (Matt. 5-8) The Uncensored Bible (77-106) Morreall (293-301); Hyers (94-109); Cambell & Cilliers (118-126); Kuschel (43-59)	
Sept. 23	- Stories by Boccaccio (all) - Chaucer ("The Shipman's Tale," "The Summoner's Tale") Bussie (1-27) Eco, from <i>The Name of the Rose</i> (474-479)	
Sept. 30	Mark Twain, <i>The Mysterious Stranger</i> (all) Paul McDonald (77-104)	
Oct. 7	- Morrow, <i>Blameless in Abaddon</i> (1-126) - The Book of Job (all) Paul McDonald (49-63) Bussie (183-193)	
Oct. 14	Morrow, <i>Blameless in Abaddon</i> (129-250) Paul McDonald (21-48; 64-76)	
Oct. 21	Morrow, <i>Blameless in Abaddon</i> (253-404) Campbell&Cilliers (181-216) Bussie (183-192)	
Oct. 28	Currie, <i>God is Dead</i> (1-86) Nietzsche, from <i>Thus Spake Zarathustra</i> and <i>The Gay Science</i>	
Nov. 4	Currie, <i>God is Dead</i> (87-180) Saroglou (191-206)	
Nov. 11	Moore, <i>The Lamb</i> (1-145) (McDonald 105-122) (Campbell&Cilliers 103-118)	
Nov. 18	Moore, <i>The Lamb</i> (146-283) (McDonald 12-16; 123-128)	
Nov. 25	Moore, <i>The Lamb</i> (284-437)	
Dec. 2	Research Presentations	
Dec. 9	Research Presentations Wrapping up	