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Book Review
Elisha McIntyre, Religious Humor in Evangelical Christian and Mormon Culture

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At first sight one might think that religion and humor do not belong together, or at least do not make a fruitful pairing. The study *Religious Humor in Evangelical Christian and Mormon Culture* by Elisha McIntyre, an Australian scholar in the study of religion, shows that such is not the case at all, although the effectiveness of such humor will depend on its purpose and participants. The study distinguishes between humor about religion and religious humor. Defining the latter, McIntyre writes, "it must be made by religious people, include some sort of religious theme(s), or is at least informed by a religious worldview" (2). This genre supplies the religious market and communicates philosophical and theological ideas. The sources included in the study share a broad, contemporary production context that includes written jokes, cartoons, stand-up comedy, film comedies and sitcoms. One of the central questions in the book is "How does religious belief inspire and/or control humor creation and appreciation?" (6). As the analyzed sources primarily concern Mormon and evangelical productions – often created by evangelical or Mormon comedians, cartoonists, or television producers and mostly intended for evangelical and Mormon audiences – a second set of questions ask, "What are evangelicals and Mormons watching, reading, and listening to for the purpose of humorous entertainment? What criteria do believers use to make their entertainment choices? How does that help them to express and, importantly, reinforce, their religious beliefs and practices?" (6). The last question addresses one of the theses of the book, namely that jokes feed boundary-formation processes for religious groups and individuals because what someone perceives as funny is indicative of that person's worldview. Shared laughter and shared offence-taking are social expressions of group belonging or of disassociation from others. McIntyre proposes that "understanding what

individuals and communities laugh at and do not laugh at is instrumental in understanding the value, boundaries, and wider culture of that group" (182). The book's aim is to understand religious groups and their worldviews through an exploration of humor and its effects.

McIntyre refers to discourse analysis in chapter 2 and to humor studies in chapter 5, but in the remaining chapters her method is not explicit. Much of the study involves hermeneutic analysis of the sources within their context of production and in light of the intended audience. The discussion of this material is enriched by insightful interviews with comedians and other producers of religious humor. Although they are not systematically analyzed but instead used for commentary, excerpts from interviews provide a hermeneutic framework that allows access to the possibilities and limitations of religious humor. The interviews also show that a comedian must fully understand their audience's moral priorities if they are to be able to touch or even push against that audience's boundaries but avoid violating them.

The book is structured in five chapters, with an additional introduction and a short conclusion. The first chapter, "Evangelicals, Mormons and Popular Culture", situates Christian and Mormon comedy in the wider setting of popular culture. McIntyre explains the sensitive relationship between religion and popular culture from the perspective of religious actors. Both evangelicals and Mormons, she notes, are concerned about and often reject popular culture, turning away because in their view it transmits dangerous worldviews, particularly in relation to family values (17). Strategies deployed to counter the dissemination of such representations include the production of an alternative popular culture and regulation, for example via a rating system, two methods that form the core of this study. The discussion of how Mormons are particularly intensely engaged in film productions leads to the observation, "The desire of many religious media producers is to persuade their audiences toward belief in God as well as to beliefs in certain moral principles. […], even though the majority of evangelical and Mormon media ends up being consumed by people who are already believers" (28). McIntyre depicts how religious comedy can be enjoyable while also instructional and persuasive, a multiple intent comprehensively demonstrated in chapters 3–5, in which humor strategies across various sources are explored.

Chapter 2, "Introducing the Challenge of Humor", considers the relationship between humor and religion and elaborates the theoretical framework for the analysis of the sources. The categories for "appropriate" humor developed in this chapter systematize the discussion of the sources. Humor held to be appropriate by religious actors is defined as non-blasphemous, clean, and nonhostile (39). The vital distinction between humorous and offensive is, as McIntyre shows, is often con-

nected with blasphemy: "Blasphemy", she writes, "is what makes religion particularly vulnerable to offense through humor. [...] To laugh about religion is to play with its meaning, something that is potentially dangerous for a comic who is both expressing their own faith and entertaining an audience that does not want to hear its faith as the butt of a joke" (41). The author traces Christian and specifically Mormon sensitivity to laughter and the challenges faced by religious humorists as they seek to "reassure their audiences that evangelicals and Mormons are supposed to be funny, that humor not only is compatible with their religious lives but will even bring spiritual benefits, while at the same time chastise them (gently) for taking themselves too seriously" (45). For a joke to achieve this goal, social factors like its production and reception contexts are as important as its content.

The humor theories considered are not specific to religious jokes and address authors such as Jerry Palmer, Ted Cohen, Mary Douglas and William Fry (46–49). One particular achievement of the study, however, lies in its careful elaboration of the definition of a joke and that definition's adaptation to religion. The moral purpose of the joke is a key element of appropriate religious humor, which must be meaningful rather than empty and frivolous. One such example is found in the connecting of a humorous narrative with humility. The chapter concludes by defining those three principal factors of religious humor that provide the basis for evidence-based chapters 3–5: it must be non-blasphemous (chapter 3: "Blasphemy and Belief"), free from sexual humor and coarse language (chapter 4: "Clean and Dirty Humor") and nonhostile (chapter 5: "Safe and Subversive Humor").

These three chapters provide contextual discussion of the evidence, adopting an inductive approach to what these categories mean in evangelical or Mormon contexts and how they can be further differentiated through detailed analysis. The approach proves fruitful, for it comprehensibly demonstrates the effectiveness of religious jokes. Chapter 3 explains that in the context of this study theologically appropriate jokes not only must be non-blasphemous but also must promote evangelical or Mormon worldviews by depicting Christian values, practices and experiences positively (91). Chapter 4 considers the idea of "clean humor" as opposed to "dirty humor", with the former requiring the exclusion of material on premarital or extramarital sex and homosexuality and a concentration on topics such as purity (95). Purity is understood as modeling how dirty jokes can become clean. McIntyre observes that religious actors and comedians actually talk about sex a lot, but in their own language, which is shared and accepted by their group. Chapter 5 includes an enriching discussion of cartoons from *Sunstone* magazine, which is produced by Mormons but not officially supported by the church (163–175). It shows how religious humor can be subversive but safe, by criticizing religious authorities and religious institutions but not the religious actors' worldview.

According to McIntyre, religious satire can even work as a corrective that criticizes the church authorities' interference in and control of the religious practices of individuals.

In general, *Religious Humor in Evangelical Christian and Mormon Culture* makes a substantial contribution to the growing field of the study of humor (specifically the genre of comedy) and religion. The focus on producers of humorous religious media, and on comedians in particular, in relation to religious audiences proves especially fruitful. However, the large quantity of materials examined is both a strength and a weakness of this study. On the one hand, the study is founded on rich material that allows the development of a persuasive and comprehensive argument. On the other hand, the analysis could be even more acute if it considered the stylistic properties and effects of the different source types: it makes a difference if a joke is presented in a film comedy, by a stand-up comedian or in a cartoon. The approach employed here focuses largely on dialogue, with only occasional reference to action. To determine how religious humor actually works, we must take into account the media in which it is presented. But this hesitation suggests only a desideratum for future studies and does not diminish this book's valuable contribution.