

A. Houck

Prof. A. Houck, Religious Studies and Theology and Joyce McMahon Hank Aquinas Chair in Catholic Theology, Saint Mary's College, Indiana, USA.

E-mail: ahouck@saintmarys.edu
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2272-095X>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.42i2.13>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2022
42(2):181-205

Date received:
17 May 2022

Date accepted:
29 October 2022

Date published:
14 December 2022



Published by the UFS
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

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“For mine is the bitter, the ale and the lager”: Parodic prayer and the spirituality of humour

ABSTRACT

In 2001, two prominent Anglican pastors caused consternation by publishing parodic versions of the Lord's Prayer. Given the centrality of prayer in Christian spirituality, objections are to be expected when humour is applied to a prayer text. This article argues that parodic prayers can have a place in Christian spirituality, particularly when they are viewed through the lenses of literary understandings of parody, ecclesial history, and humour studies. In particular, these texts are best understood by recognising that humour and laughter have many meanings, and express and shape relationships. Although the genre is little known at present, parodic prayers belong to a long tradition, most prominent in French and Latin texts of the 11th to the 16th centuries. This article reviews that history, showing that medieval parodic prayers arose from within the Church and often expressed ethical concerns through satire. They could also go further, speaking to the relationship with God that is at the heart of Christian spirituality. The article then examines contemporary examples of parodic prayers, arguing that the confluence of humour and faith expressed in medieval parodies is still possible and potentially salutary today, both in furthering the work of justice and in expanding the religious imagination. The genre of parodic prayer shows that the realm of the spirit can not only tolerate laughter and humour, but also welcome and thrive in them.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Our beer, which art in barrels, hallowed be thy drink ... For mine is the bitter, the ale and the lager. Barmen.” In 2001, two popular British pastors, J. John and M. Stibbe, caused some consternation in the Church of England when they published a collection of jokes and anecdotes, *A box of delights*, that included this translation of the Lord’s Prayer into the words of “a heavy-drinking young male”. A similar translation into the words of “a shopping-obsessed girl” addresses “Our Marks, which art with Spencers” and ends, “For thine is the Naff Naff, the Cartier and the Versace. Amex” (John & Stibbe 2001:215). According to an article in *The Telegraph* about the prayers, the “dismayed” reactions included one from Anthony Kilmister, Vice President of the Prayer Book Society:

I shall be treating this book with contempt. I just think this sort of thing is puerile and utterly trivial (Petre & Capon 2001).

It is understandable that members of the Christian community might object to “this sort of thing”, to turning a prayer text into an occasion for humour. Yet there are ample signs that parodic prayers may have something to contribute to Christian spirituality. One is the genre’s durability. In the Christian tradition, parodic prayers have a long history, dating from at least the 11th century. Another is their likely inevitability. From a literary perspective, parodies are imitations of known texts. Since prayers are well-known in many cultures, they provide fertile ground for parody.¹ Perhaps most significant is their origin. Like John and Stibbe’s, parodic prayers often arise from within the church; they are meant not to deride Christian spirituality, but to make Christianity more attractive. These factors invite us to read parodic prayers not only as literary diversions, but also as part, even a salutary part, of the Christian spiritual tradition.

To take up this invitation, we do well to acknowledge that parodic prayers confront us with a striking incongruity. They bring together humour and religious earnestness in a combination that is not especially familiar in contemporary Christianity. That incongruity is all the more jarring when brought into what is arguably at the heart of Christian spirituality, namely the practice of prayer, in which humanity seeks a transformational encounter with the divine. To make sense of the incongruity, this article will begin with the recognition that both humour and spirituality are inherently relational. Humour is a complex

1 Bayless (2016:6) notes: “William Hone, a London publisher and bookseller tried in 1817 for selling parodies of religious texts, successfully employed the defense that the objects of parody had been chosen solely on account of their familiarity and not out of disrespect. See William Hone, *The Three Trials of William Hone*, with introduction and notes by W. Tegg (London, 1876), 19, 119, 162”.

phenomenon that arises within, expresses, and shapes relationships. Similarly, as Waaijman (2006:14) observes, “Spirituality is a relational process which constitutes an original whole in which God and man are reciprocally related”. Thus, medieval or modern parodic prayers suggest that humour can contribute to Christian spirituality. If prayer is central to spirituality, then perhaps parodic prayer deserves at least a place on spirituality’s periphery.

2. A COMMUNITY OF AMUSEMENT: PARODY AND THE RELATIONALITY OF HUMOUR

Parody, at its most basic, is imitation, usually of a well-known text, and it can express varied intents and exhibit a wide range of tones. Dentith (2000:6) surveys the territory:

The relevant range of cultural practices could conveniently be arranged as a spectrum, according to the evaluations that differing forms make of the texts that they cite, with reverential citation at one end of the scale (‘My text today is taken from ...’), to hostile parody at the other end, and passing through a multitude of cultural forms on the way.

That said, most parody traffics in humour. In fact, parody proper is sometimes distinguished from related genres such as travesty by its playful spirit (Dentith 2000:11). The appeal of most contemporary parodic prayers – certainly prayers included in a book named *A box of delights* – lies in their being perceived as humorous. As a result, understanding parody requires an understanding of humour.

To start, the relationship between laughter and humour deserves a brief note. Laughter is not limited to humour; laughter can express joy, surprise, affection, disdain, despair, embarrassment, and much more beside. As a result of its wide range of meanings, laughter is notoriously ambiguous, and those who hear it often cannot be sure of its meaning. Moreover, laughter is known for its ability to shift tones, as Calvin observed when he warned that “it is exceedingly difficult to be witty without becoming biting” (*Commentary on Ephesians* 5:4, quoted in Blais 1993:2). Laughter is also hard to control: Homer (*Iliad* I.599) famously showed that it overwhelms even the gods. Finally, laughter typically embraces every expression of amusement, from a slight smile to an uncontrollable guffaw, so it engages the often-fraught cultural and religious views concerning the body. Thus, in the words of Halliwell (1991:279), author of a magisterial history of Greek laughter, laughter offers a “convenient synecdoche” for a range of responses. While laughter is not limited to humour, humour always seeks some form of laughter, some expression of amusement. Niebuhr (1986), author of arguably the most important treatment of humour

in Christian theology, thoroughly interweaves the two, using laughter as the visible sign of humour and its near-synonym. For our purposes, this conjunction of laughter and humour is not merely semantic. As humour and laughter are often treated together, their fortunes have often risen or fallen together. Those suspicious of laughter, with its ambiguity, lability, and embodiment, also tend to be suspicious of humour – and may, as a result, be suspicious of parody. While this article deals mostly with humour, the role of laughter will often be relevant and worth noting.

Another testimony to the persistent connection between the two is that the three main theories of laughter are sometimes referred to as the three main theories of humour. Theorists have tried to explain humour and laughter at least since Plato, and their efforts have settled into three main schools, viewing laughter as an expression of superiority; an experience of release (particularly, in Freud, a release from energy required to follow social taboos); or the perception of incongruity, with variations of the incongruity theory being by far the most prominent at present.² While some persist in the search for a universal theory of humour and laughter, many acknowledge that no one theory is likely to be possible. In the case of parody, for instance, it seems clear that incongruity is at play: humour expresses a disjunction between the source text (for instance, a prayer) and the language into which it is translated (for instance, detailed descriptions of beer-drinking or shopping). Thus, in religious parody, “[t]he greater the esteem in which certain mores are held, the more pleasurable is the comic relief” (Green 1958:13). But the tone and uses of that incongruity are not easily discerned. Kynes (2011:278) observes:

As examples spanning literary history from Jonah to James Joyce will suggest, the incongruity at the heart of parody need not indicate humor, and the antithesis between texts need not indicate antipathy. Instead, parodies may be serious, and they may even appeal respectfully to earlier texts as ideals standing in judgment over the situation the parody depicts.

So incongruity alone cannot explain the humour of religious parody.

While these theories can be useful, none can explain all laughter and humour because humour and laughter, like parody, depend thoroughly on relationship. Nothing is funny in itself. We can confirm this easily by telling an in-joke to those who are not part of the in-group, or by trying an otherwise apt quip in the presence of fresh grief. Humour is the complex and polyvalent product of a community, an act of creativity that expresses and shapes relationship. It can affirm or invite affiliation; it can deride and separate; it can affiliate with one group, while excluding another.

2 For an overview, see Morreall (2020).

Understanding humour, including parody, thus requires us not simply to pinpoint an incongruity (between, say, prayer and beer-drinking) or an act of derision (against, say, prayer or beer-drinking). Instead, it requires us to attend to at least five contributing factors, of which the most obvious are the source or teller (in our case, two Anglican pastors) and the audience (the readers of John & Stibbe’s book). But laughter’s relational context also includes the topic or target of humour, and that is not always easy to define. What Dentith (2000: 27-28) writes of parody in general is surely true of parodic humour:

We have to recognise, in other words, that parody’s direction of attack cannot be decided upon in abstraction from the particular social and historical circumstances in which the parodic act is performed, and therefore that no single social or political meaning can be attached to it.

Thus, for the Vice President of the Prayer Book Society, the parodies may seem to target the church, perhaps even the Lord it addresses in worship, while for John and Stibbe, they may instead target the vice that values beer or fashion more than God. Moreover, much humour, rather than deriding a target, simply plays with a topic. “What do Alexander the Great and Winnie the Pooh have in common?” is not a joke that derides; it simply invites the mind to play as it seeks – and then makes sense of – the answer: “Same middle name.” Not all humour mocks.

This triad of teller, audience, and target or topic interacts within an immediate social context: the publication of a book, a news story on the internet, theological differences within the Church of England. Moreover, that immediate context is set within a wider cultural context. Much humour requires a fairly ample understanding of this last factor since humour draws on shared cultural knowledge. For instance, to understand John and Stibbe’s parodies, we need to know the text of the Lord’s Prayer, a fair amount of terminology related to beer and retail, and something about gender assumptions in the UK in the early 21st century. Jokes may also draw on other sources of shared background knowledge, embedded perhaps in the particular relationship between the teller, source, target or topic, and immediate social context. Together, this shared body of knowledge creates the potential for humour. Parody is a form of humour that draws on a significant amount of shared knowledge. It requires both knowledge of a source text and knowledge of another cultural realm into which the source text is translated. A parody is essentially a text built of wall-to-wall in-jokes.

For philosopher Ted Cohen (1999:40), the revelation of shared knowledge creates a relationship between the teller and their audience. This relationship is expressed, if all goes well, in affirming laughter:

When you offer your joke, you solicit their knowledge, you elicit it, in fact, virtually against their will, and they find themselves contributing the background that will make the joke work. Thus they join you. And then they join you again, if the joke works, in their response, and the two of you find yourself as a community, a community of amusement. This is what I call the *intimacy* of joking.

What Cohen says of jokes also applies to other forms of humour, in that shared background knowledge makes the humour work. In short, every successful joke is, to some extent, an in-joke. That point was the impetus of John and Stibbe's (2001:7) book, which was originally intended for preachers:

one of [Jesus's] main priorities was to communicate about the kingdom of God in a relevant way ... He spoke in an idiom that everyone understood.

At the same time, humour expresses and shapes relationship. If I respond by laughing, the humour reinforces an affiliative, or in Cohen's terms "intimate", community. If I do not get the joke, our relationship now includes a new knowledge of difference. And if I withhold laughter, perhaps because I find the joke offensive, the attempt at humour shifts our relationship, potentially even breaking it.

Because humour requires a relational response to succeed, it requires not only shared background knowledge, but also shared attitudes toward that knowledge – in this instance, most importantly, a willingness to include humour within Christianity. On that score, Christianity's record is decidedly mixed. The standard narrative (see, for example, Morreall 2020) is that Christianity has generally condemned humour and laughter, mainly on "[t]he assumption that humour must be subversive and hence inimical to religion" (Bayless 1996:197). Famously, the canonical gospels testify that Jesus wept; they omit any mention of his laughter. The spurious but influential Letter of Lentulus, which purported to be an eyewitness description of Jesus, went further, insisting that "[a]t times he has wept, but he never laughed" (Lutz 1975:93). The Lukan Beatitudes, homilies of Chrysostom, and the Rule of St Benedict are among texts that testify to a longstanding Christian wariness about humour and laughter.³

But Christianity has also tolerated, hosted, even created humour and laughter. The Bible shows laughter in its widely varied forms, from the divine derision of Psalm 2 to the laughter Luke (6:21) uses to envision the reign of God ("Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh"), from Sarah's ambiguous and apparently blameworthy laughter when visitors announce her

3 For an overview of Christian monastic attitudes toward laughter, see Gilhus (1997: Chapter 4).

pregnancy (Gen. 12:12-15) to Sarah’s joyful and apparently obedient laughter when her son is named Isaac (“laughter”, Gen. 21:3-6) – and later, for Clement of Alexandria, Isaac’s playing with Rebecca encourages the faithful toward “rejoicing and laughing over our salvation, just as Isaac did” (*Paedagogus* I.5.22.1, quoted in Rahner 1965:42-45, 49). Many biblical scholars interpret Job 7:17 as a darkly humorous parody of Psalm 8:5 (Kynes 2011),⁴ and Jesus’ sayings have been analysed as humorous texts (for example, Jonsson 1965; Arbuckle 2008; Donnelly 1992; Trueblood 1975). Several early noncanonical texts, among them the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Apocalypse of Peter, and the 4th-century *Vision of Dorotheos* (Papyrus Bodmer XXIX) show Jesus laughing; even Lentulus describes him as “cheerful” (Lutz 1975:93). Centuries later, Chesterton heard Jesus laughing in solitude⁵ (Gardner 1999:242). Human laughter has occasionally been a symbol of heavenly joy, from St Sabina (Screech 1997:50)⁶ to Dante (*Paradiso* IX.98-99),⁷ from Mechtild (Rahner 1965:62)⁸ to Dinesen’s “The deluge at Noderney” (1934:240). Perhaps Niebuhr most clearly encapsulates the tension within Christianity’s view of humour and laughter. Niebuhr (1987 [1946]:49) embraced humour as the appropriate response to the daily incongruities of humanity. He even acknowledged that “a perfect personality” would have to include a sense of humour, hinting that the claim would apply not only to Jesus but to the God of the Psalms. But Niebuhr (1987 [1946]:49) also argued that, when human beings face the “ultimate incongruities” of their existence – when they confront

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- 4 In Kynes’ (2011:303-304) discussion, Psalm 8:5 reads: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, / mortals that you care for them?,” and “Job, however, twists the psalmist’s words to express his anguish at God’s domineering attention, as he laments: What are human beings that you make so much of them, / that you set your mind on them, / visit them every morning, / test them every moment? (Job 7:17-18)”. Kynes’ (2011:306) analysis concludes that Job is not mocking the psalm: “the broader context of the dialogue suggests that his parody is intended to be a weapon to satirize God’s behavior toward him”.
- 5 “But mirth is sacred: when from all his own / He sundered, going up a mount to pray / Under the terrible stars in stern array / Upon the lonely peak he laughed alone.”
- 6 We hear this laughter in a legend told about the blessed Sabina: “... when, asked by the temple-warden at Smyrna and his guards why she was laughing, she replied: ‘It pleases God. For we are Christians, and they who are in Christ with a firm and constant faith will laugh with everlasting laughter.’ She was bending her thoughts to the fact that after this life Christian hilaritas (joy or merriment) will be everlasting: in this life, the firmer the faith the greater the laughter.” Screech (1997:50) cites Vossius’ version, ca. 1700.
- 7 “For, in that upper clime, effulgence comes / Of gladness, as here laughter,” *Paradiso* Canto IX:71, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/8799/8799-h/8799-h.htm> (2004). As is common, some translations, like Singleton’s, prefer “smile” for “riso” (1991:98-99).
- 8 “Here too the Spirit shafts / Such heavenly floods of light / On all the Blest that they, / Filled and enchanted, sing / For joy, and laugh and leap / In ordered dance” (7.1, cited in Rahner [1965:62]).

the coexistence of their fallibility and mortality with their transcendence – humour must yield to faith:

Humour is, in fact, a prelude to faith; and laughter is the beginning of prayer. Laughter must be heard in the outer courts of religion; and the echoes of it should resound in the sanctuary; but there is no laughter in the holy of holies. There laughter is swallowed up in prayer and humour is fulfilled in faith.

Some critics of Christianity view Christianity's ambivalent attitude toward humour as a problem. For instance, in *Christianity and the triumph of humor: From Dante to David Javerbaum*, Schweizer (2020) critiques Christian theology that aims to limit laughter to gentle, affirming tones and doctrinally safe topics. Christianity is wrong, he writes, to resist the salutary work of derisive laughter, particularly about the foundations of belief – for instance,

jokes about the contradictory nature of many scriptural passages, or the 'character flaws' of a jealous and violent God. In such cases, humor precipitates a questioning of faith, shifting perspectives by revealing how doctrines may be based on artificially constructed boundaries (Schweizer 2020:n.p.).

The argument could certainly apply to some strands of Christianity, especially those that discourage any questioning of doctrine, humorous or not. In most instances, though, Schweizer's view credits humour with too much power, and Christian spirituality with too little insight. Overall, Christianity's ambivalent attitude toward humour and laughter is not a problem. Instead, it is a perfectly apt response to humour's complexities, with its ambiguity, lability, and embodiment, and above all its embeddedness in human and divine relationships.

As will be observed in the case of parodic prayers, much joking about religion arises from within the tradition, not as attacks on religion from the outside. As always with humour, we need to ask about context. How do parodic prayers function in their social and spiritual locations? While some may read parodic prayers as targeting prayer, many parodies use their source (or precursor) text, not as a target, but as a weapon, as Kynes (2011:292) notes in his incisive study of parody in the Bible:

parodies may be intended to ridicule their precursors by subverting their authority, but this is not necessarily the case. They may instead respectfully use the precursor as a weapon to attack some aspect of the world depicted in the parodying text. Thus, the authority may lie with either the parody or its precursor.

Thus, parodic prayer may be part of the language of spirituality, not only a weapon used by spirituality’s detractors.

3. “FATHER BACCHUS WHO ARE IN CUPS”: MIEVEAL PARODIC PRAYER

The lens of humour studies can help us situate parodic prayers within the realm of Christian spirituality, but we also need the lens of Christian history. The historical tradition of parodic prayer is best known in France, where it flourished especially from the 11th to the 13th centuries in both Latin and French. It also appeared elsewhere, including in England, where, as Kitchin (1931:2-3) puts it, “[i]n short there was no language too sacred for the monkish parodist to define, no ritual too solemn.” Medieval parodies typically recast prayers, sometimes the entire Mass, in terms of worldly desiderata – drinking, gambling, sex – but also took on political issues (Bayless 1996:116, 120). The Catholic tradition fell into disuse by the 16th century, although the Reformation revived it (Monteiro 1964:45).⁹

Along with other humorous practices in medieval Christian culture such as the Feast of Fools and the joking at Easter liturgies known as *risus paschalis*, parodies were sometimes condemned and sometimes constrained. They were, after all, often viewed, as Newman (2012:1-2) puts it,

as ‘daring’ or ‘audacious,’ ... a progressive ideological force that challenges corrupt institutions, ridicules absurd beliefs, and pokes holes in the pious and the pompous.

Such readings of the texts often assume that the authors – often known as goliards – were outsiders, entertainers who took the church as their target. Bayless, author of an extensive study of the Latin texts, is among those who argue that the authors were most likely young clerics. Despite their apparent rowdiness, their mastery of Latin and intimate knowledge of Mass texts mark the authors as part of the church. For instance, drinkers’ masses used puns to translate liturgical texts into the language of drinking and gambling. Just as John and Stibbe’s prayers end with “Barmen” or “Amex”, the parodic masses might replace “Oremus” (“let us pray”) with “Potemus” (“let us drink”) (Bayless 1996:102). Prayers in the drinkers’ masses often address the Roman god of wine, Bacchus, as in this Lord’s Prayer from the *Missa potatorum*, a fragmentary mass from the 13th or 14th century (Bayless 1996:99):

9 “Evidently it was not blasphemous to pray in the midst of a sermon at Paul’s Cross: ‘Our Pope, who are in Rome, cursed be thy name.’” A. S. Martin, *On Parody* (New York, 1896), quoted in Monteiro 1964:45.

Father Bacchus who are in cups,
 increased be thy wine.
 Thy turmoil be done
 in the Die [plural of dice] as it is in the tavern.
 Give us this day good wine to drink,
 and send forth our cups
 to us as we send forth to our fellow drinkers.
 And lead us not into sobriety, but deliver us from vomit. (Bayless
 1996:115-116).¹⁰

These texts can seem disruptive or mocking, but they also reveal something we can recognise as spirituality, arising from within the Christian community to speak about that community's life with God. Bayless points to a salutary theme in the parodic Masses, one hinted at, in this instance, in the last words:

that the drinkers, although dedicated to their vice and longing for the tavern, never derive actual happiness from their mock religion.

Instead, they find themselves painfully bound to the temptations of drink and dice:

Like sinners in the real world, the inhabitants of the drink-world are constantly tempted, and much misery ensues as a result; but whereas in the Christian world God strengthens sinners against temptation, in the drink-world Bacchus weakens their virtuous resolve. (Bayless 1996:102).

The texts themselves reveal their place in the church. The parodist is not targeting the prayer that gives the parody its form, the source text; instead, the parodist targets the vice that gives the parody its content, the language of the translation. After all, as Bayless (1996:201) concludes of a similar prayer about money, "[i]t is not the satirist but the earthly world which substitutes money for God". Bayless (1996:211) argues that the parodies aimed to make the participants see themselves anew: "the recognition of their own habits makes the humor more immediate". This ribald parody is insider humour, depending on the participation of all those – tellers, audience, targets – who share the cultural knowledge it relies on. The appealing fun and relational potency of humour invited sinners back into the pilgrim fold.

An example of the French tradition comes from a collection assembled by Eero Ilvonen. In "La Patrenostre de Lombardie", dated to Paris in 1379, ninety

10 Pater Bache qui es in ciphis, multiplicetur vinum tuum. Fiat tempestas tua sicut in Decio et in taberna. Vinum bonum at Bibendum da nobis hodie, et dimitte nobis pocula nostra sicut et nos dimittimus potatoribus nostris. Et ne nos inducas in sobrietatem, sed libera nos a vomitu (Bayless 1996:115).

lines of rhyming text (poorly rhyming text, according to Ilvonen) interweave the Latin prayer text (in bold below) with French commentary. The invocation, “Our father, you are not insane”, can seem audacious. But the prayer soon reveals that, far from taunting God, it is lamenting that human beings do not honour God enough:

Our father, you are not insane,
 For you have taken great repose,
[You] who are mounted high **in the heavens**:
 Because at present in this country
 There is no one who **would be made holy**
 Nor anyone who thinks about the future
 Nor who values **your name**;
 In all the land one sees it.
 Yet you hold yourself thus up there without anger
 And preserve well **your kingdom**
 In which there is no tribulation (Ilvonen 1914:162).¹¹

The social context of the prayer confirms its plaintive tone. Ilvonen takes this particular parody as a commentary on the Hundred Years War, but he also notes that “lombardie” can refer to “all who exploited and oppressed people” (*tous ceux qui exploitaient et opprimaient le peuple* [Ilvonen 1914:161]). Instead of targeting prayer or the divine, the author speaks from the position of an intimate relationship with God. The dark humour that results is insider humour, its target not God but the world that rejects God. It is a spiritual stance that would be familiar to the Psalmist.

Given the ambiguity of humour, not all critics see parodic prayers as quite so spiritually salutary. In his *God mocks: A history of religious satire from the Hebrew prophets to Stephen Colbert*, Lindvall provides a structure that recalls well the ambiguity of laughter. Lindvall maps the terrain of Christian satire on two axes, morality and wit. On the x-axis, ranging from “ridicule” at the left to “moral purpose” on the right, he graphs the author’s intent, whether to improve

11 My thanks to Sarah L. Noonan for her translation.

Pater noster, tu n'ies pas foulz,
 Quar tu t'ies mis en grant repos,
Qui es montés haut in celis:
 Quar dès or mais en ce pays
 Nulz n'est qui *sanctificetur*
 Ne qui riens pense au temps futur
 Ne qui prise *nomen tuum*;
 En toutes terres le voit on.
 Or te tien dont lassus sans ire
 Et garde bien *regnum tuum*
 Qu'il n'y ait tribulation.

his/her audience or just to mock them. On the y-axis, he graphs “the affective nature of the discourse, from anger and rage [at the bottom] to a sanguine use of humor” (Lindvall 2015:8). Lindvall judges the goliards to be high in humour – good-natured rather than angry – and low in moral purpose (Lindvall 2015:56). In his scheme, their songs of wine, dice, and women, though shaped by liturgical models, aimed at mere play, nothing more beneficial but also nothing more destructive. Their “mischief neglected any hope of reform” (Lindvall 2015:56).

Lindvall is likely right that the act of religious parody typically aims at fun. But since humour is inherently relational, even fun can have spiritual value. After all, as Aquinas argued, wit can be virtuous, because it both gives rest from work and adds joy to community. Indeed, those who lack the virtue of good humour, which Aquinas, following Aristotle, calls *eutrapelia*, detract from community and can be regarded as sinful:

Now a man who is without mirth, not only is lacking in playful speech, but is also burdensome to others, since he is deaf to the moderate mirth of others. Consequently they are vicious, and are said to be boorish or rude, as the Philosopher states (Ethic. iv, 8) (*Summa Theologiae* II.ii.168, Article 4; 2016).

Moreover, among humour’s functions in medieval texts, many have highlighted one that John and Stibbe also cite, namely humour’s ability to reach out to those on the margins and “to make their religious medicine palatable” (Bayless 1996:185). Thus, the humorous tone of parodies does not discount their spiritual value but reminds us of the many forms that spirituality can take. The biblical scholar Meggitt (1996:10) argues that studying humour is an important way to do spirituality “from below”, since practices such as carnival and joke-telling tend to be at least as much the province of ordinary people as of the powerful. Rather than dismissing the community of prayer, parodic prayer aims to encourage it.

This goliardic laughter is one voice making up the laughter of the church. Alberti writes:

Far from constituting a subversive or marginal phenomenon like carnival, the parody of the sacred is rooted in the very heart of the religious culture, [where it expressed what she calls a] troubling coexistence of the sacred and the profane, of the high and the low, of the serious and the comic.¹²

12 “De nombreux documents attestent les renversements parodiques des textes sacrés, le détournement comique des prières et des rituels de la liturgie. Loin de constituer un phénomène subversif ou marginal, comme le carnaval, la parodie de sacré est enracinée au sein même de la culture religieuse. Cette coexistence troublante du sacré et du profane, du haut et du bas, du

In short, medieval laughter inhabited the very words and space of prayer because the medieval mindset was, overall, comfortable having it there. Bayless, Ilvonen, Alberti, Kolve, and Lindvall agree that the medieval church, or at least vocal and visible parts thereof, not only tolerated laughter in the realms of religion, but also interwove laughter into its practice: “believers were repeatedly exposed to humor during homilies, public sermons and sacred representations” (Alberti 2014:161). After all, Kolve (1966:139-140) notes of other medieval texts, laughter *at* evil – often Satan, but also human vice – can be laughter *with* God, and a sign of holiness. Thus, the church took advantage of laughter’s varied tones and targets and deployed humour for multiple purposes. Bayless (1996:208) observes:

To sum up, humor and religion occurred in a variety of configurations in medieval culture. In didactic contexts, such as religious drama, humor sharpened the point of the lesson. In other contexts it might be blasphemous; or it might serve an affective function, drawing humans closer to the divine by giving a foretaste of divine joy and establishing an intimacy in which they could assume their true relationship with God. And finally, humor could be entirely amoral, an irreducible force indulged in for its own sake and bearing no relation to the religious or moral order. To impose a monofactorial scheme on these disparate phenomena is to deprive medieval culture of its full richness and diversity.

Parodic prayer may have served many of these purposes, and different purposes in different contexts. But one, in particular, draws our attention. Bayless proposes that humour, in all its relationality, gives parodic prayer the potential for

drawing humans closer to the divine by giving a foretaste of divine joy and establishing an intimacy in which they could assume their true relationship with God.

The implication is clear: Cannot the judge of all the earth get a joke?¹³

4. “AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO DRINK COKE”: CONTEMPORARY PARODIC PRAYER

Overall, scholars of medieval religious humour view parodic prayer as a singular creature of medieval Christianity. For instance, Bayless (1996:196) concludes that “[m]edieval culture clearly considered many combinations and

sérieux et du comique, s’est exprimée dans les décorations des manuscrits enluminés” (Alberti 2015:63).

13 See Genesis 18:25.

juxtapositions unexceptional that we now think extraordinary". In fact, she argues that parodic prayers demonstrate

the aspect of medieval culture that is most alien from our own, the association of levity or flippancy with ideas we regard as inherently solemn (Bayless 1996:194).

Alberti (2014:64) proposes that "the complementarity of the comic and the tragic, the ridiculous and the sublime" is possible only where "religious sentiment is powerful and lively enough" that it can tolerate humour without risk.¹⁴ Ilvonen agrees. In the medieval context, the world of the church had to encompass both serious and playful, because there was no world outside the church. Thus, what was to medieval parodists an expression of "jovial bonhomie"¹⁵ can seem to modern eyes like blasphemy (Ilvonen 1914:6). In a cultural context that's single and stable, they suggest, humour can play with religious targets. Medieval spirituality could absorb laughter's ambiguities and even speak through them.

A question for contemporary spirituality, then, is whether that confluence of humour and faith is possible, and potentially salutary, today. The world beyond the church is wider now. More importantly, perhaps, the world within the church is no longer fluent in the language of religious laughter. Not surprisingly, then, contemporary parodic prayer does not always follow the goliardic model, in which Christians modify prayer texts to create in-jokes to entertain and improve their fellow Christians. Instead, there is variety in the authors, audiences, targets, and tones of parodic prayers.

Contemporary parodic prayers often trade on prayers as cultural artifacts rather than spiritual ones. Some prayer texts are so well known that parodists can easily use them for non-religious audiences, translating them into the language of a particular "community of amusement", to borrow Cohen's phrase. In essence, they use prayers as scaffolding for non-religious creations. That practice is amply attested to in Cerbelaud's (2010) impressive collection of parodic versions of the *Pater Noster* in contemporary French literature, including drinkers' prayers that sound quite similar to the goliards' and those in *A box of delights*: "And forgive us our hangovers/ As we forgive those who drink Coke.". Other versions speak in the voice of office workers and players

14 "La complémentarité du comique et du tragique, du ridicule et du sublime, ne s'explique qu'au sein d'une société où le sentiment religieux est tellement puissant et vivace qu'il peut être tourné en ridicule sans risque" (Alberti 2015:64).

15 "Les blasphèmes apparents ne sont en réalité que l'expression d'une sorte du bonhomie joviale or d'une malice naïve" (Ilvonen 1914:6).

of *pétanque* (Cerbelaud 2010:89).¹⁶ Parodists in both French and English have riffed on public transportation maps, like Dury in his "Bus driver's prayer": "Our father, / who art in Hendon / Harrow Road be Thy name" (Vickery 2017). Folklorist George Monteiro (1964:45) catalogued many short pieces found in the small US state of Rhode Island, most of them filling the form of prayer with quotidian secular content: "Hail Mary, full of grace, / I've got a king, who's got an Ace?". Other prayers ignore the divine realm altogether, relying more on the rhythms of prayer than on the words. Britain's venerable *The Spectator* has held contests inviting versions of "a Lord's Prayer for the 21st century", and winners have addressed, among many others, "Our Dawkins, who art in Oxford" and "*My phone, which is at hand*" (Vickery 2017). A thoroughly humourless version created by the leadership of Venezuela's Socialist Party solemnly invokes deceased President Hugo Chavez, asking, "Give us this day your light so that it guides us every day" (Reuters and Foreign Staff of the *Telegraph* 2014).¹⁷ All in all, Monteiro (1964:45) seems justified in concluding that "religious parody, having virtually disappeared as a literary form, nevertheless maintains an active folk life".

Other contemporary parodic prayers do seem to have religious intent, and to address primarily religious audiences. Many of these inhabit the satirical edges of the genre, Lindvall's ungentle lower quadrant of rage and ridicule, where secularism mocks religion. Some explicitly address a God unlikely to hear or even to exist, expressing varying degrees of wistfulness or derision. Cerbelaud (2010:58-59) notes a 1946 poem, still in circulation, that uses the Lord's Prayer "as a pretext for an anti-religious diatribe", inviting God to stay in heaven, while mortals enjoy the pleasant "mysteries" of the earth, which the poet lists with fondness.¹⁸ Another entry in *The Spectator's* contest begins, "To whom it may concern / (Allegedly residing in the conceptual space known as

16 "Notre bière qui êtes au frais / Que notre demi soit versé / Que notre volonté soit faite / Au bar comme au compotoire."

17 "Our Chavez, who art in heaven, on earth, in the sea and in us the representatives, / hallowed by thy name. / ... / Give us this day your light so it guides us every day, / Lead us not into the temptation [*sic*] of capitalism ...". The article notes: "Chavez's successor Nicolas Maduro, who has endorsed the prayer, has claimed to see apparitions of Chavez, whom he has called Christ, redeemer of the poor." (Reuters and Foreign Staff of the *Telegraph* 2014).

18 Notre Père qui êtes aux cieux
Restez-y
Et nous nous resterons sur la terre
Qui est quelque fois si jolie
Avec ses mystères de New York
Et puis ses mystères de Paris
Qui valent bien celui de la Trinité ...
Cerbelaud credits "J. Prévert, «Pater Noster» dans Paroles, Paris, Gallimard (coll. « Folio »), 2003, p. 58-59 [Première édition: 1946]."

‘Heaven’)” (Vickery 2017). As with medieval parodies, it is tempting to simply categorise these as anti-religious, but it is better to ask about the particular topic or target. Does a piece mock religion itself, perhaps for its undue and unhelpful influence on pluralist society; or religious practitioners, for their hypocrisy or other foibles; or the God religions purport to worship?

Just as secular parodists often use prayer texts as precursors, many contemporary Christian parodists commandeer secular texts. Examples include the innumerable pop songs rewritten by Christian musicians with evangelical sincerity and varying degrees of awkwardness. Carey wryly summarises their efforts in “The definitive ranking of Christian parody music videos” on the Christian young-adult website *Relevant*:

We believe it was St. Francis Assisi who first said, ‘Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use a parody music video of a Nicki Minaj song’ (Carey 2015:n.p.)

We noted earlier that humour cannot be explained by any one theory. But it is likely that humour is more effective, or at least more attention-getting, when incongruity is present, as it is when religious intent occupies secular texts, or secular intent appropriates religious texts. That incongruity may not have been operative in medieval parodic prayers, if Bayless, Alberti, and Ilvonen are right. But it animates them now.

Among contemporary parodies, then, John and Stibbe’s are unusual in using prayer texts for both humorous and religious purposes. John, in particular, is a renowned evangelist, and his efforts at humour serve an evangelist’s purposes:

They are excellent parodies ... The point we were making in including them is that most people in this country say the Lord’s Prayer from time to time but they don’t live it. Most people don’t go to church. Those are the type of people I am trying to reach out to (Petre & Capon 2001).

The secular language in these parodies may seem out of place in a prayer text, but it is far from out of place in the world of evangelisation. Evangelisation, after all, reaches toward those on the church’s margins, in this case those who know well the lexicons of drinking and shopping.

Other examples of contemporary Christian prayer parodies show the range that humour, and with it parody, can occupy. In speaking to a Christian audience of a certain positive-thinking mindset, the popular nondenominational website *beliefnet*¹⁹ might come as close as we now can to the more-or-less religiously

19 The site identifies itself as “the leading lifestyle site dedicated to faith and inspiration”, “to help people find and walk a spiritual path that instills comfort, hope, strength and happiness. It is

homogeneous space in which the goliards performed. Some of these parodic offerings fit a popular Christian tradition of gently self-deprecating humour addressed to a like-minded “community of amusement”, a safe example of the eutrapelic fun that may have been among the goliards’ goals. Their topics are often common vices, but their tones are varied. Some seem to show a smiling tolerance for common foibles such as vanity:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my shape to keep.
Please no wrinkles
Please no bags
And please lift my backside
Before it sags (“Prayer Parodies” 2022).

Others hint at the complexities of spirituality, the challenges of trying to live an authentically Christian life – however that is defined – in the secular world. Some of these sound like a serious examination of conscience made more palatable (or potable) by the author’s incongruous creativity. An example attributed to Kevin Phillips comes from the back of a wine bottle:

I’m inflated with pride, near-bursting inside,
A self-centered repenter, Vanitys’ [*sic*] bride.
Oh Lord, forgive me my Zins (“Prayer Parodies” 2022).

Other examples of Christian parody reach beyond the boundaries of in-house Christian entertainment. Since roughly 2015, American comic Rita Brent, who identifies herself as part of the Baptist tradition, has addressed contemporary issues in American culture in popular videos that follow the formulae of spontaneous petitionary prayer. She appears with bowed head and hands together, offers an invocation that signals her topic and her left-wing politics (for example, “Dear Heavenly Father and Mask Mandate Jesus”), and structures each prayer with a set of topical petitions (for example, Brent 2020).²⁰ Brent’s parodies draw on in-group knowledge and attitudes, not only

through this discovery that our readers are empowered to live a more meaningful life.” (“About Us”, <https://www.beliefnet.com/about-us/about-beliefnet.aspx>).

- 20 These include “Lord, I come to you today”, “Lord, we need you to send down your angels”, “Jesus, be a fence around”, and “I pray all these things in Jesus’ name” – with topical modifiers interwoven. Brent’s website credits her Southern Baptist upbringing, and her other videos include renditions of Christian songs. Brent’s religious sincerity is also evident in the topics of her complaints, which may include substantive reflection on hypocrisy, cussing, judgmentalism, and other classic religious topics. The targets are often political (especially Donald Trump and his awkward use of the Bible) but may be a heat wave (“Dear Heavenly Father and Ice-Cold Jesus. Lord, we come to you asking for mercy, Lord, mercy from this hell-like weather, Jesus. Even the devil say he hot. He put it up on his Facebook status and said, ‘Feelin’ spicy.’

of prayer structure but also of contemporary American politics and pop culture, especially in the experience of Black Americans. But even those who lack this insider knowledge can likely join her as she closes each prayer with a joke on the fraught question of how to pronounce “Amen” in American English (“Ay-men. Ah-men. Ay-men. Hmmm”). Parody also inhabits the opposite side of the political spectrum, as when “entertainer, graphic designer, and Presbyterian” Simon Camilleri begins his “The Lord’s Prayer – Woke Edition” with “Our [god, free of all gendered imagery], / Hallowed be your name [not that you care about all that stuff]” and concludes “Amen [also Awomen and Athose who don’t identify by any gender]” (Camilleri 2020, brackets in original). John and Stibbe’s collection includes other prayers in this vein, including one attributed to an American teen that juxtaposes the secularism of the USA with the horror of school shootings:

Now I sit me down in school
Where praying is against the rule
...
So, Lord, this silent plea I make:
Should I be shot, my soul please take! (John & Stibbe 2001:220).

Since humour and laughter not only express but also shape relationships, these Christian creations may both reinforce a sense of in-group camaraderie and engage morally with the wider world, as Christian spirituality is called to do. In this sense, the question to ask about parodic prayer is not primarily about the source text: Can spirituality embrace humour about prayer? Instead, the focus should be on the cultural realms that parody translates into: Can spirituality embrace humour about perceived evil?

5. CHRISTIAN PARODIC PRAYER IN A WORLD OF PLURALITIES

Once we put contemporary parodic prayers in their historical context and view them through the lens of humour’s ambiguity, we can more easily adjudicate their role in spirituality. For Alberti, Ilvonen, and others, medieval parodic prayer is the product of cultural congruity, playfulness made possible by a largely homogeneous religious world. Contemporary religious parody, by contrast, arises in a world of pluralities, a world in which prayer texts may still be known, but are less likely to be revered. In that realm, some parodies certainly mock religion. But even those that do are likely to be penned by the

Lord, we ask that you just blow your nose on us, Lord. Send your son Jesus to be a box fan, Lord.” <https://www.facebook.com/ritabrentcomedy/videos/834512789990043>.

“About Rita”, Rita Brent, <https://www.ritabrent.com/about>.

faithful themselves. When religious authors deploy parody, the result may be a new kind of congruity, an assertion that, from a spiritual vantage, nothing is secular. The terrain of contemporary life, even with all its pluralities, and definitely including its capacity for humour, remains the world God created and entrusted to human beings to steward.

Contemporary parodic prayers also seem to take on the multiple tasks Bayless attributed to medieval religious humour. They can blaspheme, attempting to unmask and upend religious convictions and limit God to an invisible heaven. They can also teach, using satire that spans Lindvall’s range from rage to genial humour. They can broaden the reach of evangelisation and sweeten catechesis, as John and Stibbe hope to do. And they can be, quite simply, fun. Even in that sense, they can have a spiritual purpose, contributing to community and, as for Aquinas, encouraging virtue. In these goals, parodic prayer is doing earthly work. Unlike earnest prayers, parodies have been addressed primarily to human beings, using the language of the wayward lovers of taverns and retail stores, of gambling and illicit romance. If parodic prayer, as I suggested earlier, can have a spot at least on the periphery of spirituality, it is fair to say that it usually turns its gaze not toward the divine centre, but toward the noisy, sinful world outside, where it targets the many idols humanity has enshrined over its many centuries.

Bayless (1996:208) also credits medieval humour with

giving a foretaste of divine joy and establishing an intimacy in which they could assume their true relationship with God.

In an in-group context, parodic humour might create an intimacy hinting at heaven. Christian parodies about winebibbing and waistlines, whether medieval or modern, can offer shared joy in laughing at human cleverness, and also extend warm, winking mercy toward human failings. In a plural society, however, parodic prayer cannot always expect to create a joyful in-group intimacy of laughing believers – if indeed it ever could. Parodic prayer reminds us that, as with all humour, it is right to ask what kind of intimacy these prayers may foster. In Cohen’s terms, who has the background to be in on the joke, and who is excluded? In Lindvall’s, is the tone genial and encouraging, or raging and dismissive?

In parodic prayer, this question is moral, grappling with our relationships on earth; as with any humour, parodic prayer can work for good or ill. But it is also a spiritual question, specifically in grappling with human beings’ relationship with the divine. By taking the form of an address to God, parodic prayers inevitably move beyond mere satire of human foibles. They go further, bringing to mind the God who teaches Christians to pray, whose very model of prayer may be the most parodied of all Christian texts.

When parodic texts invoke God, they have two effects. First, by using the language of prayer, parody can turn mere social satire into prophetic language, whether lament or mobilisation toward justice. Once our imaginations include God in the community of laughter, we can more fully perceive, and then take up, our ethical responsibility to use laughter well. As Wariboko (2018:456) writes: “Those whose thoughts are addressed to God must also address themselves to the concerns and praxis of Christian spirituality.” Whether in “La Patrenostre de Lombardie” or Rita Brent’s prayers for salvation from COVID-19, these creations play with familiar prayer texts, in order to speak for justice. Contemporary parodic prayer has inherited the capacity to take a God’s eye view.

Of course, like every other human endeavour, parodies pursue virtuous ends with only imperfect virtue. John and Stibbe’s prayers, for instance, rely on long-standing gender stereotypes and deride aspects of culture such as restrictions on prayer in public schools that may well seem virtuous. Once we understand the complexities and ambiguities of humour and laughter, we can better understand what these parodies are doing. We can distinguish humour that targets vice from humour that targets people. We can distinguish the tone of derision from the tone of affiliation. But humour studies alone do not tell us what values our humour should express and shape. Those values, for Christian spirituality, need to come from elsewhere.

Secondly, humour’s relational power allows parodic prayers not only to speak to earthly justice, but also to veer toward earnest prayer and the “true relationship with God” Bayless claims for medieval parody. This movement is not in spite of humour, but in part because of it – because, as Bayless (1996:202) writes, “to laugh at God is to relax one’s fear of him”. When that fear is relaxed, the playfulness of parody can flourish. It does so, however, only within the bounds of ethics. Dentith quotes a 1912 passage attributed to Arthur Quiller-Couch:

Now, the first thing to be said about Parody is that it plays with the gods ... It follows then that Parody must be delicate ground, of which the profane and vulgar should be carefully warned. A deeply religious man may indulge a smile at this or that in his religion; as a truly devout lover may rally his mistress on her foibles, since for him they make her the more enchanting...So, or almost so, should it be with the parodist. He must be friends with the gods, and worthy of their company, before taking these pleasant liberties with them (Adam & White 1912, vi, quoted in Dentith 2000:24).

Dentith rightly notes Quiller-Couch’s caution. Like Niebuhr, Quiller-Couch limits the terrain in which laughter can play with religion. Because humour is foundationally relational, always expressing and shaping relationship,

parodic prayers shape some kind of relationship with the divine they invoke. Medieval prayer parodies did not happen behind God’s back, and for Christian spirituality, neither do contemporary ones. Like every other aspect of Christian spirituality, religious humour should foster what Quiller-Couch calls “friendship” with the divine.

The medieval tradition of parodic prayer demonstrates that, as Brehm (2019:3) writes, “Religious worlds are not solely serious.” More than that, it shows that the realm of the spirit can not only tolerate laughter and humour, but even welcome and thrive in them. Contemporary Christian spirituality can learn from that tradition, recover it, revive it. We might, with Niebuhr and Quiller-Couch, bar humour from some precincts. But the fact that humour can do the work of justice means that we cannot do without it. If we want to use it well, we have much to learn from spirituality’s humorous histories. The spiritual potential of laughter may be difficult to see in our own day, but through the lens of the past, we can observe fertile ground that we may have missed earlier. After all, as Meggitt (1996:13) rightly observes,

Every modern spirituality has a past, whether it likes it or not. Nothing, except perhaps everything, is created *ex nihilo*.

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Keywords

Trefwoorde

Spirituality

Spiritualiteit

Humour

Humor

Parodic prayer

Gebedsparodie